Young Social Movements and Social Media: Facebook and an Online Romanian Justice Protest that Moved Offline

21 Aprile 2018

Ruxandra Dumitru

Contributo selezionato da Filodiritto tra quelli pubblicati nei Proceedings “4th ACADEMOS Conference 2017”

Per acquistare i Proceedings clicca qui:

Contribution selected by Filodiritto among those published in the Proceedings “4th ACADEMOS Conference 2017”

To buy the Proceedings click here:

Abstract
At the beginning of 2017, Prime-Minister Grindeanu’s social-democrat government elected in December 2016 proposed a law granting amnesty and pardon of those who committed corrupted actions through a Government Emergency Ordinance which was meant to be signed without any public debate in an ordinal daily meeting. A few hours later, hundreds of Social-Democrat Party opponents and members of the civil society mobilized on Facebook to protest against the measure.

Using content analysis of Facebook comments from some of the most active Facebook groups, this study aims to examine how online protests moved offline by focusing on the users’ motivation.

Introduction
The 2016 parliamentarian elections were very predictable – the Social-Democrat Party (PSD) won with a score of 45.5% the Deputies room and with 45.71% the Senate room assuring the budgetary sector of rises in salaries and a better life to retirees.

The political alliance of Romanian parties proposed Sorin Grindeanu as PM and Florin Iordache as Minister of Justice. On 1st February 2017, late in the evening, the Romanian government passed an emergency ordinance (OUG13/2017) which was meant to modify the Penal Code without any public debate. News of the upcoming emergency ordinance was greeted with dismay by large parts of the civil society which strongly opposed the measure. The Government Emergency Ordinance was adopted to effectively decriminalize official misconduct allowing politicians to avoid punishment by imprisonment if the financial damage is less than 50.000 euro.

The Minister of justice presented OUG13 in an arrogant manner parrying any question regarding
corruption. The events which followed the adoption of the legislation were presented on the Facebook page: “Coruptia ucide” (Corruption kills) – a few young people gathered in the night in front of the Government building making live feeds and calling to action anyone who is against corruption and pro justice. Each evening, more and more people from Bucharest or other cities (e.g. students from Cluj) announced their presence in Victoriei square vowing that their number will reach 1 million if the ordinance is not revoked by the PM. At its peak, the protest ended to be the biggest social movement since the end of Ceausescu dictatorship in 1989, reaching approximately 600,000 people countrywide.

In Romania, we can affirm that corruption is like a Giuseppe Sanmarino sculpture. You can notice it even when it is covered by a veil; the same way you can notice the subject of Cristo velato work of art. In this context, we will clarify the concepts found in the comments on various Facebook pages regarding the motivation of the movement’s attenders.

Corruption

As the unfolding of events showed, corruption perception is a very important factor when the discussion reaches the point about tolerance of political acts and depends on how a society understands and complies with the rules. Studying the literature, one definition of corruption could be “the misuse of public office with the purpose of making private gains” [1].

The political situation in Russia is a good example to study perceptions about corruption. Rogov divided the country in two camps: Russia-1 and Russia-2. Russia-1 is formed by people living in large cities, mainly middle class, with a higher education, with access to the Internet and are interested in politics, while Russia-2 is formed by people living in small cities, with low income and level of education, exposed to state television channels and which have little to no access to modern technology.

The principle problem is that Russia-1 constitutes roughly about 50 million persons, while Russia-2 numbers more than 100 million [2]. Something similar came about in Romania, young people who are not exposed to partisan television channels (some owned by persons prosecuted for corruption acts) and have a high digital literacy and a higher level of education firmly opposed to acts of corruption advocating for freedom of speech and democratic change in the country [2].

In Romania, as in Turkey, mainstream media has strong connections with politicians and other power groups. In this type of media environment, journalists act as watchdogs that must report rather than opine [3].

A high tolerance of corruption acts generates a culture of distrust which causes negative effects in the economy; institutional instability deteriorates the relationship among individuals, institutions and states [1]. On the 1st of February 2017, the Romanian Government intended to legalize acts of corruption relying on the fact that the civil society will not have a strong reaction having been satisfied by promised rises in salaries. This strategy of ignoring the potential of an educated mass was an error of the government which later admitted it was a communication problem and claimed that the public did not understand their objectives. The civil society was not influenced by the election promises, but was very motivated to shout in the street its dissatisfaction with the adoption of the ordinance and especially with the 50.000 euro limit.

Online movements and protest motivations

In Romania, contemporary protest mobilizations against corruption were leaderless, digital coordinated by networks of networks and, as Denisova [2] noticed, connective action replaced collective action, based on networked crowds.

Introduction of different media technologies has had substantial impact on individual views and attitudes
The usage of digital media provides mobilizing and opportunity structures that allow social movement organizations (SMO’s) to emerge or renovate and spread their narratives through social media. Social media transformed political activism and SMO’s in terms of action repertoire, spatial scope of action, international exposure and potential social influence. As Gerlach demonstrated on his studies focused on environmental activism in USA, protests had a segmentary, polycentric, and reticulate (SPR) structure. After 2010, we learn that movements changed their polycentric features. Due to digital networks, interpersonal communication becomes more instrumental for the popularization of movements than shared ideologies. Social movements became individualistic and networks help to personalize collective actions. In 1960, we could discuss about polycephalous movements which later became polycentric protests, with many leaders not organized in a hierarchical chain of command. In the digital era, the movements have no centres of leadership and there is no need for charismatic or bureaucratic movement leaders.

Another feature which still remains in online movements is the opposition which helps groups to unite and expand. Opposition creates a sense of solidarity, a “we” against the “they” [5]. Social media provides alternative press and contributes with political mobilization, allows discourses that are not shown in traditional media [6]. During protest, Facebook played a key role by allowing protesters to organize. The participants of the protests articulated slogans or aphorisms. We are facing today to a carnivalisation of protests. Carnivalisation of the expressive practices of dissent led to the production of the Internet memes that served as the verbal and visual expression of the dissenter’s views and values and matched the globally experienced need for alternative repertoires for political expression and mobilization [2]. As the Brazilian researcher noticed, the behavior of users is very liable to be influenced through tags and hashtags. They exposed that the phatic function of the language discovered by Roman Jakobson is very important in online movements and satisfies the need to communicate and to keep in touch with other people in Facebook and Twitter posts [6]. During a movement, protesters constantly use Facebook to check whether others are there and whether they are visible.

During the Romanian February protest, something unusual had happened on the Facebook groups of protests, less people uploaded their status as join the movement than they were, in fact, in Victoriei square. That could be a sign the movement started online, but quickly became very visible offline and was joined by people who normally are not involved in social protests, or by people who are used to not express their grievances.

Internet and digital media allow a space for voice and political mobilization, facilitating communication between geographically dispersed persons and aiding the formation of collective identities (Bennett in [4]). This could explain the reason people from big cities gathered in February in public spaces from different cities (Sibiu, Cluj, Timisoara, etc.) and screamed their discontent with the government attempt to decriminalize corruption.

Another feature of online movements is the transformation of personal power. The 1960 motto ‘think globally, act locally!’ was replaced by its opponent, ‘act locally, think globally’. In February 2017, groups of people said they are standing for European values and they are rejecting corruption in order to have a decent democratic country, not a political system based on the Russian system.

The online movements opposed not only the government actions, but also mainstream media. While television channels firstly ignored the demonstrations and later presented untrue facts about protesters and their reasons to gather in Victoriei square, social media has become an important media presenting an alternative representation of the events, bypassing the mainstream media and its framing of
Mainstream media practices what is called in literature protest paradigm, which means they marginalize, delegitimize or demonize the protesters and they focus on some sensational details, such as violence and drama [3], while social media provide new dynamics for political change and democratization and mobilize civic engagement. However, one must also consider that social media can be as easily manipulated as more traditional channels, an example being the automated posting bots and fake accounts set for a specific goal. In Romania, mainstream media tried to discredit the demonstrations connecting them with Soros’ paid organizations and presented the protesters as hooligans craving for violence. Television channels also abused the innocence and ignorance of their public and presented facts in an implausible and absurd manner relating the actions of protesters as part of a world conspiracy, or worse, as an extra-terrestrial plan.

Methodology

In this study, I analysed the users comments of posts of the main Facebook pages which were involved in organizing the protests, since the moment the “OUG 13” was adopted until the government announced the abrogation of the ordinance. I focused on Coruptia ucide (Corruption kills) and #Rezist (I hold out) pages and the analysis has its limitations.

Discussion

The users tend to react immediately at each post of the two pages. There were especially three themes of posting: the place where the protesters were and their number, posts with slogans and posts with ideas of protesting (e.g. to form a European Union flag by people, to use the flashlights of their smartphones all in the same time, to sing at the same hour and the same time the hymn of the Romanian state, to conduct a march between Victoriei square, University square and the Parliament). Initially, at the first posts, the comments expressed anger against the minister of justice, PM, the social-democrat party leader, and Ombudsman, but after two days of protesting signs of humour started to appear. People composed satirical poems or imagined different situations between corrupted political persons and their meeting as a criminal before the Prosecutor head of National Anticorruption Directorate.

Lots of comments related to ideas of organization had the tendencies to transform in posts and to become materialized in offline protests. Other types of comments which transformed in posts and later became slogans in offline movement were the ones which take part of carnivalization of the protests. Users influenced themselves through hashtags and #Rezist moved from online movements in real life. Comments also ironized the mainstream media, Antena3 and RTV channels, for being owned by convicted criminals who are trying to elude the law and justice with the new emergency ordinance.

To sum up, protests have changed due to the evolution of social media and Romania is facing today the same problem as seen in Russia or Turkey. Mainstream media are not a source of information anymore for young people with a higher level of education from big cities.

REFERENCES

3. Oz, M (2016). Mainstream media’s coverage of the Gezi protests and protesters’ perception of
mainstream media, Global Media and Communication 12(2), pp. 177-192, DOI: 1177/1742766516653164.


TAG: Facebook, proceedings, social media, Diritto dei Paesi dell’UE, Diritto dell’Unione Europea

Avvertenza
La pubblicazione di contributi, approfondimenti, articoli e in genere di tutte le opere dottrinarie e di commento (ivi comprese le news) presenti su Filodiritto è stata concessa (e richiesta) dai rispettivi autori, titolari di tutti i diritti morali e patrimoniali ai sensi della legge sul diritto d'autore e sui diritti connessi (Legge 633/1941). La riproduzione ed ogni altra forma di diffusione al pubblico delle predette opere (anche in parte), in difetto di autorizzazione dell'autore, è punita a norma degli articoli 171, 171-bis, 171-ter, 174-bis e 174-ter della menzionata Legge 633/1941. È consentito scaricare, prendere visione, estrarre copia o stampare i documenti pubblicati su Filodiritto nella sezione Dottrina per ragioni esclusivamente personali, a scopo informativo-culturale e non commerciale, esclusa ogni modifica o alterazione. Sono parimenti consentite le citazioni a titolo di cronaca, studio, critica o recensione, purché accompagnate dal nome dell’autore dell’articolo e dall’indicazione della fonte, ad esempio: Luca Martini, La discrezionalità del sanitario nella qualificazione di reato perseguito d’ufficio ai fini dell’obbligo di referto ex. art 365 cod. pen., in “Filodiritto” (https://www.filodiritto.com), con relativo collegamento ipertestuale. Se l’autore non è altrimenti indicato i diritti sono di Inforomatica S.r.l. e la riproduzione è vietata senza il consenso esplicito della stessa. È sempre gradita la comunicazione del testo, telematico o cartaceo, ove è avvenuta la citazione.

Filodiritto(Filodiritto.com) un marchio di InFORomatica S.r.l