Young People and Political Activism in Moldova: Why Online Mobilization is Not Enough for Democratic Consolidation

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Abstract

The election of a socialist and pro-Russian candidate in December 2016 as president of Moldova marked a new turn in Moldovan politics. This election contrasts with the pro-Western attitudes of the previous government. Governing instability in Moldova and changing international orientations of many prominent political actors, as emphasized by this article, are partly due to political alternative victories of parties supported by different social groups. Focusing on young people activism, this article underlines the differentiation between the political success of pro-Western parties, made possible by the street protests of April 2009, and the political failure of December 2016. The findings of this research may add a new explanation to Moldova's permanent instability. The factor we emphasize here is the change in political values, attitudes and actions due to profound generational transformations. Since democracy is a life-long learning process, a continuous updating, changing of beliefs and action strategies responding to the varying political environment, different generations rely not only on different past experiences, but on different adapting capacities, on different meanings given to rights and freedoms, social standards and economic conditions.

Keywords: Moldova, street protests, elections, young people, democratization.

Introduction

Moldova has found itself for many years at the crossroad between European integration and democratization and more authoritarian and non-

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democratic regimes specific to some post-communist countries in the region, especially to Russia and Belarus. The fragile balance between timid democratization and an undemocratic oligarchical regime is a key figure, which makes Moldova an unconsolidated, unstable, and partial democracy. The aim of this article is to shed light on the causes of the fragile balance, and more specifically on the social forces that shape the timid democratization. It intends to address the issue of young people's activism and to assess its importance for the fragile democratization in Moldova, where successive efforts for democratic consolidation have been undermined by more authoritarian episodes, and pro-European association measures are quickly counterbalanced by pro-Russian attitudes and policies. Focusing on young people, the article underlines the contrast between their strong activism using social media channels and their inconsistent off-line mobilization when it comes to voting, as well as their scant voluntary engagement.

The argument this article puts forward is that the weakness of the democratization process is explained by the opposition, on one hand between groups of young people, which become more and more politically active and visible, and on the other hand the rest of the population, which constitutes a more nostalgic electorate for the good old days of past socialism. The tension between a more westernized and civically active youth and more nostalgic pro-communist older people seems to heavily influence the Moldovan political regime. Whereas the former are more visible in street protests and have proved capable to overthrow the Communist Party rule in April 2009, the latter express their political opinions at the polls. Merely visible, the latter form the bulk of an electorate sensible to social and economic issues, voting for the Communist party as the expression of the reminder of Soviet socialist times. The opposition between those two kinds of electorate is not accidental. As shown by solid survey data, the political split between the Communist party in power in 2009, and the young activists mobilized using the new social media, is by and large due to solid discrepancies between shared social and political values. In other words, the crucial protest outburst against the Communist party rule during the spring of 2009 is triggered by profound structural tensions.

At the same time, the successful protest on the 5th of April 2009 was not necessarily the turning point in Moldovan politics, but more a significant oscillation in regime type characteristics and stability, as it has been shown by the election of a Communist candidate as president in 2016. By focusing on the social forces that manifested during those days and on the social changes taking place since then, the current research may offer a more profound knowledge of the ongoing tensions and of the more recent configuration of the Moldovan political space. The online mobilization continues to be effective on the ground following the events in spring 2009, with young people supporting various candidates, including the Communist party candidates. However, the weak electoral participation of politically Western oriented young people undermines the chances of pro-Western political parties. This is in contrast with the

Communist party, which did not rely heavily on this kind of activists, and which is electorally supported by more conservative, especially less young nostalgic people. The conclusion is that young people, active on social media and fighting for a regime change, have to get engaged in politics on the ground, to be active in secondary organizations, which would impact the overall political culture on the long-run. Finally, they have to be electorally active, and thus be part of the general process of learning that democracy implies.

Regime Transformation and Post-Communist Democratization

During post-communism, transition outcomes are unpredictable. On the one hand, the political competition between elites and the distribution of power between the former communist and the new democratic elites would decide the path, with either non-democratic or democratic outcomes when the power is unequally distributed, and with unstable, unconsolidated, partial democracy, when the equal distribution of power between the old regime elites and its challengers occurs.[1] On the other hand, not all citizens desire that their country turns into a complete democracy, fearing social costs that would exceed all political benefits. In other words, two logics are intertwined during transition, a political competition between actors, and long-lasting economic and social structures working as a constraining path dependency.[2] Democratization, seen as a process that offers a predictable outcome should, therefore, be replaced by "regime transformation", since the final outcome of this transformation is not known.[3] This is especially true for the early stages of transition, when the competition between competing elites is not yet decided and when citizens have no clear idea about the process and its plausible outcomes. In Central and Eastern Europe, the regime transformation has mostly lead to consolidated democratic states, while in the former Soviet area most of the new regimes that emerged are partial and unstable democracies, in fact hybrid regimes that combine democratic and non-democratic features, with formally democratic institutions as multiparty elections set up in order to cover a profoundly authoritarian domination, which disregards human rights and abuses civil liberties.[4]

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[1] Michael McFaul, "The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship: Noncooperative Transitions in the Postcommunist World," *World Politics* 54, no. 2 (2002): 212-244.

[2] Grigore Pop-Eleches, "Historical Legacies and Post-Communist Regime Change," *The Journal of Politics* 69, no. 4 (2007): 908-926.

[3] William Mishler and Richard Rose, "Political Support for Incomplete Democracies: Realist vs. Idealist Theories and Measures," *International Political Science Review* 22, no. 4 (2001): 303-320, 304.

[4] Joakim Ekman, "Political Participation and Regime Stability: A Framework for Analysing Hybrid Regimes," *International Political Science Review* 30, no. 1 (2009): 7-31.

From a perspective that takes complex processes into account, we emphasize the importance of citizens' support for democracy. We acknowledge that a democratic transition is more complex than initially assumed, combining a large array of internal and external factors that shape the regime transformation. Without disregarding external factors, we focus here on citizens' democratic values as a crucial asset for democratization.[5] On the one hand, it is necessary that several generations assimilate and practice democracy in order to have a consolidated democratic regime. On the other hand, it is by no means necessary that all particular transitions end in full democratic settings, meaning that full democratization might not be the final point of the transition between political regimes. Depending on the democratic lessons learned and on competing incentives, the new democratic regime might not be at all as permanent, stable or stationary as one might expect. This is to say that citizens may offer their support for the new democratic regime by continuously updating, modifying and balancing their initial beliefs, through a large series of successive experiences during the whole transition period.[6] This type of evaluation is quite opposite to an idealistic definition of democracy, meaning that citizens make their mind by actually comparing real, vivid regimes, by comparing the existing democracy with the previous non-democratic regime. This may eventually impact on the definition they give to democracy itself, since the label of democracy may cover not only democratic values and procedures, civil rights and political freedoms, but also economic and social rights that have been emphasized by the former socialist regime.[7] Returning to the previous regime or supporting another type of non-democratic regime (a strong leader or a military rule) is not at all a fiction, but the outcome of competing support strategies for regimes that have been already experienced by the people from a particular region.

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[5]   Christian Welzel, "Are Levels of Democracy Affected by Mass Attitudes? Testing Attainment and Sustainment Effects on Democracy," *International Political Science Review* 28, no. 4 (2007): 397-424.

[6]   Richard Rose, William Mishler and Christian W. Haerpfer, *Democracy and Its Alternatives: Understanding Post-Communist Societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998).

[7]   Richard I. Hofferbert and Hans-Dieter Klingemann, "Remembering the bad old days: human rights, economic conditions, and democratic performance in transitional regimes," *European Journal of Political Research* 36, no. 2 (1999): 155-174; Richard I. Hofferbert and Hans-Dieter Klingemann, "Democracy and Its Discontents in Post-Wall Germany," *International Political Science Review* 22, no. 4 (2001): 363-378; Daniel Stockemer and Greg Elder, "Germans 25 years after reunification – How much to they know about the German Democratic Republic and what is their value judgment of the socialist regime," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 48, nos. 2-3 (2015): 113-122.

Moldova between East and West

Like other countries from the former Soviet area, Moldova experienced a mixed transition, where steps towards Western styled democratic regime transformation were soon followed by decisive setbacks, turning Moldova into an unstable, democratically unconsolidated, hybrid regime. As it was the case in Ukraine,[8] citizens and political elites are undecided, balancing between post-Soviet semi-authoritarianism and democratic openness, between Soviet nostalgia and the faith in Western integration.[9] This balance that keeps Moldova in an uncertain state may polarize society and fuel diverging political solutions, especially when one notices the rather complicated geopolitical situation that severely impacts on Moldova's statehood, with Transnistria turning into a *de-facto* state.[10]

The balance between Western integration and Soviet nostalgia is fueled by political uncertainty and social deprivation. It is worth mentioning that former Soviet citizens evaluate the legacy of communism and the benefits of post-communist transition differently, making the decision to head towards East or West much more difficult than it was for citizens of former communist states from Central and Eastern Europe.[11] This is especially true today, when Russia itself managed to find a way to overcome the former communist regime settings and continue modernization under new circumstances, while keeping the memory of good old days alive.[12] The current Russian modernization, being far away from the model of liberalization of market economy and full democratization, conceived as the revival of a great power based on its own political culture,[13] is today an alternative to the more classical post-communist transition experienced by Central and Eastern European countries. Based on a different paradigm than the Western democratic model, Russian modernization

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[8] Neil Munro, "Which Way Does Ukraine Face? Popular Orientations Toward Russia and Western Europe," *Problems of Post-Communism* 54, no. 6 (2007): 43-58.

[9] Theodor Tudoroiu, "Structural factors vs. regime change: Moldova's difficult quest for democracy," *Democratization* 18, no. 1 (2011): 236-264.

[10] Oleh Protsyk, "Federalism and Democracy in Moldova," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 21, no. 1 (2005): 72-90; Oleh Protsyk, "Secession and hybrid regime politics in Transnistria," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 45, no. 1-2 (2012): 175-182; Theodor Tudoroiu, "The European Union, Russia, and the Future of the Transnistrian Frozen Conflict," *East European Politics and Societies* 26, no. 1 (2012): 135-161.

[11] Vladimir Gel'man, "Out of the Frying Pan, into the Fire? Post-Soviet Regime Changes in Comparative Perspective," *International Political Science Review* 29, no. 2 (2008): 157-180.

[12] Karen Dawisha, "Communism as a Lived System of Ideas in Contemporary Russia," *East European Politics and Societies* 19, no. 3 (2005): 463-493.

[13] Markku Kivinen and Terry Cox, "Russian Modernisation – a New Paradigm," *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 1 (2016): 1-19.

is taken into account by citizens from other post-Soviet republics, excluding the Baltic States, which already have chosen the exit from state socialism, integrating the political and economic Western system.[14]

The impact of social transformations during transition on persistent Soviet nostalgia should not be underestimated.[15] As mentioned above, the evaluation of democracy by ordinary people means not only subjectively measuring its performance, but comparing it with alternative regimes. From this perspective, Moldovan citizens not only have the opportunity to compare their post-communist transition with the past Soviet performance, but with the current Russian performance as well. From the first years of the post-communist transition, the support for the new democratic regime in Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States was marked by a downward trend, which was consistent during the first decade of regime transformation.[16] This was mainly due to citizens' dissatisfaction with the economy and the performance of state institutions. Compared with the micro-economy of the households and the macro-economy of the socialist states which were fully engaged in modernization processes, the post-communist social and economic situation is contrasting by the erosion of the social safety net, the strong decline of living standards and the social shock brought in by permanent unemployment and severe poverty.[17] Moreover, these more personal threats to living standards have been accompanied by deep transformations at a more general, societal level. The first decade of transition has brought in an outburst in corruption and state-capture,[18] with a serious increase in both ordinary crime and organized crime.[19]

In Moldova, the alternative to the democratic transition, as it was experienced during the first years of post-communism, is therefore appealing.

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[14]   Rainer Kattel and Ringa Raudla, "The Baltic Republics and the Crisis of 2008-2011," *Europe-Asia Studies* 65, no. 3 (2013): 426-449.

[15]   Liudmila Mazur, "Golden age mythology and the nostalgia of catastrophes in post-Soviet Russia," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 57, no. 3-4 (2015): 213-238.

[16]   Christian W. Haerpfer, "Support for Democracy and Autocracy in Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States, 1992-2002," *International Political Science Review* 29, no. 4 (2008): 411-432.

[17]   Pamela Abbott, "Cultural Trauma and Social Quality in Post-Soviet Moldova and Belarus," *East European Politics and Societies* 21, no. 2 (2007): 219-258; Ivan T. Berend, "Social shock in transforming Central and Eastern Europe," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 40, no. 3 (2007): 269-280.

[18]   Vladimir Shlapentokh, "Corruption, the power of state and big business in Soviet and post-Soviet regimes," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 46, no. 1 (2013): 147-158.

[19]   Ichiro Iwasaki and Taku Suzuki, "Transition strategy, corporate exploitation, and state capture: An empirical analysis of the former Soviet states," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 40, no. 3 (2007): 393-422; Leslie Holmes, "Crime, organised crime and corruption in post-communist Europe and the CIS," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 42, no. 2 (2009): 265-287.

Russia managed to improve its status of great power, following decades of setbacks, and has the opportunity to propose its own economic and social model today. Russia not only managed to avoid political trouble, as experienced by other former Soviet republics in the aftermath of "colored revolutions",[20] but it successfully managed to prevent or destabilize countries,[21] for example Georgia and the Ukraine, where such revolutions have occurred.[22] Moreover, Russia currently offers the former Soviet republics the promise of a new political space, defined by special economic and cultural ties under the large umbrella of an Eurasian Union.[23] We therefore understand the competitive definition of democracy[24] as an open game between at least two major regime proposals, between democracy and its alternatives, a dictatorship, a military rule or a technocratic regime, or a combination of them, under the form of a revived Soviet-style regime.

Age Groups and Types of Political Activism

Despite its feeble civil society, weak democratic institutions, important social problems and structural development obstacles, Moldova did not turn into an authoritarian regime following its independence in 1991. By the contrary, Moldova is more pluralistic than many post-Soviet states. Against all odds, Moldova is a case of pluralism "by default",[25] where the political competition is mainly due to government polarization and state incapacity of monopolizing political control. As a failed authoritarian regime, Moldova is at the same time an unstable, undemocratic, hybrid regime. The balance between democratic progress and authoritarian consolidation is due to a series of factors, ranging

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[20] Taras Kuzio, "Regime type and politics in Ukraine under Kuchma," *Communist and Post Communist Studies* 38, no. 2 (2005): 167-190.

[21] Nicolay Petrov, Maria Lipman and Henry E. Hale, "Three dilemmas of hybrid regime governance: Russia from Putin to Putin," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 30, no. 1 (2014): 1-26; Robert Horvath, "Putin's 'Preventing Counter-Revolution': Post-Soviet Authoritarianism and the Spectre of Velvet Revolution," *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no. 1 (2011): 1-25; Ammon Cheskin and Luke March, "State-society relations in contemporary Russia: new forms of political and social contention," *East European Politics* 31, no. 3 (2015): 261-273.

[22] Valery Silitsky, "'Survival of the fittest': Domestic and international dimensions of the authoritarian reaction in the former Soviet Union following the colored revolutions," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 43, no. 3 (2010): 339-350.

[23] Michal Wawrzonek, "Ukraine in the 'Grey Zone' Between the 'Russkiy Mir'and Europe," *East European Politics and Societies* 28, no. 4 (2014): 758-770; Mitchell A. Orenstein, "Geopolitics of a Divided Europe," *East European Politics and Societies* 29, no. 2 (2015): 531-540.

[24] Rose, Mishler and Haerpfer, *Democracy and Its Alternatives.*

[25] Lucan A. Way, "Weak States and Pluralism: The Case of Moldova," *East European Politics and Societies* 17, no. 3 (2003): 454-482.

from ethnic divisions,[26] to elite antagonism and individualism, in the context of the quest for political and national identity.[27] The factor we emphasize here is the change in political values, attitudes and actions due to profound generational transformations. In other words, democracy is a life-long learning process, a continuous updating, changing of beliefs and action strategies responding to the varying political environment. In the process, different generations rely not only on different past experiences, but on different adapting capacities, on different meanings given to rights and freedoms, social standards and economic conditions. Therefore, it is by no means surprising that their political action would vary accordingly, including their support for the new democratic regime or for a non-democratic alternative.

In the context of democratic transition in post-communist Europe, young people have not been at the heart of the scholarly investigation from the very beginning. It is true, they have not been a priority for parties and governments either. Young people continue to be seen, in modern democracies, as ambivalent when it comes to set up their political engagement profile. On the one hand, they are seen as more reluctant to participate in politics, as less engaged that their predecessors, as less interested in political matters. On the other hand, their essential involvement into more recent democratic or "color revolutions" made them a key element in both opposition and government political strategies.[28] Young people are either an important asset for democracy, or potentially harmful contesters who could undermine authoritarian political regimes and who have to be seriously contained.[29] As their Western counterparts, they are either seen as disengaged and disenfranchised,[30] or engaged into more sophisticated new forms of political participation.[31]

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[26] Federica Prina, "Linguistic Justice, Soviet Legacies and Post-Soviet Realpolitik: The Ethnolinguistic Cleavage in Moldova," *Ethnopolitics* 14, no. 1 (2015): 52-71.

[27] Julien Danero Iglesias, "An Ad Hoc Nation: An Analysis of Moldovan Election Campaign Clips," *East European Politics and Societies* 29, no. 4 (2015): 850-870.

[28] Taras Kuzio, "Civil society, youth and societal mobilization in democratic revolutions," *Communist and Post Communist Studies* 39, no. 3 (2006): 365-386.

[29] Maya Atwal, "Evaluating *Nashi*'s Sustainability: Autonomy, Agency and Activism," *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 5 (2009): 743-758; Julie Hemment, "Soviet-Style Neoliberalism? Nashi, Youth Voluntarism, and the Restructuring of Social Welfare in Russia," *Problems of Post-Communism* 56, no. 6 (2009): 36-50; Maya Atwal and Edwin Bacon, "The youth movement *Nashi*: contentious politics, civil society, and party politics," *East European Politics* 28, no. 3 (2012): 256-266.

[30] Shakuntala Banaji, "The trouble with the civic: a snapshot of young people's civic and political engagements in twenty-first-century democracies," *Journal of Youth Studies* 11, no. 5 (2008): 543-560.

[31] Yaojun Li and David Marsh, "New Forms of Political Participation: Searching for Expert Citizens and Everyday Makers," *British Journal of Political Science* 38, no. 2 (2008): 247-272; Jeffrey Scott Juris and Geoffrey Henri Pleyers, "Alter-activism: emerging cultures of participation among young global justice activists," *Journal of Youth Studies* 12, no. 1 (2009): 57-75.

Judging by their political action, young people in post-communist Europe seem to differ from their predecessors. They seem to engage less in conventional action and to favor a more unconventional political action, such as mass rallies, boycotts and street protests, by using new, unconventional communication channels. In a very narrow span of time, they practically seem to have condensed the Western experience of changing patterns of political action. It is worth noticing that it took rather long time to Western citizens to move from the classical types of political action (voting and party membership) to unconventional participation.[32] And this is not specific to post-communist countries. It has been well documented, that people who engage in civic and political activities, in both developed and developing countries, are frequent users of social media. The means by which social media can influence collective actions are providing mobilization information and news not available in other media, facilitating the coordination of demonstrations, allowing users to join political causes, and creating opportunities to exchange opinions with other people.[33]

However, the distinction between conventional and unconventional participation, especially that driven by on-line mobilization, should be regarded with caution. On the one hand, the rapid expansion of political activities forces the re-evaluation of the way political participation is defined. In this context, neither nominal, nor deductive analyses seem to help evaluate the modes of participation, pushing toward the extensive use of purely subjective definitions. That is why scholars make efforts to revise and refine conceptual problems, by providing systematic criteria in order to establish valid measures.[34] Despite this effort, doubt persists about some forms of participation, especially regarding digitally network participation and its political or non-political character. Defining political participation thus remains a task of pinpointing an elusive target.[35] On the other hand, the values, motivations and political resources of young people change in a way that makes clear distinctions less effective. The motivation of protesters in the streets of Chișinău might be related to deep frustration regarding the inertia of the political system and the lagging in adopting more democratic measures. At the same time, young people in

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[32] Samuel H. Barnes, Max Kaase et al., *Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies* (London: Sage, 1979); Pippa Norris, Stefaan Walgrave and Peter van Aelst, "Who demonstrates: anti-state rebels, or conventional participants? Or everyone?" *Comparative Politics* 37, no. 2 (2005): 251-275.

[33] Sebastian Valenzuela, "Unpacking the Use of Social Media for Protest Behavior: The Roles of Information, Opinion Expression, and Activism," *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 7 (2013): 920-942.

[34] Jan van Deth, "A conceptual map of political participation," *Acta Politica* 49, no. 3 (2014): 349-367.

[35] Marc Hooghe, "Defining political participation: How to pinpoint an elusive target?," *Acta Politica* 49, no. 3 (2014): 338-341.

Moldova might also experience disaffection with institutions and actors of representative democracy, making them more likely to favor political decision-makers over elected representatives.[36] Therefore, they would emphasize decision-making by citizens and thereby display a preference for participation in referendums, public consultations or street protests. Although the mobilization thesis argues that access to digital technologies has the capacity to draw new participants to the social life, especially younger citizens, studies offer mixed results, regarding technologies facilitating reinforcement and mobilization of only particular user groups.[37]

The move made by young people in Moldova is in contrast with the generally low civic and political engagement, as it was recorded all over Central and Eastern Europe.[38] Therefore, their engagement in the contentious politics of "color revolutions" and the means they use to get mobilized mark a serious split between political generations. What we notice today is the gap between values and repertories of action of different age groups, based on different socializing conditions. This split is visible in political matters, with younger generations rather inclined toward Western democratic procedures and values and older generations, rather inclined toward Soviet nostalgia, which is regarded as the revival of a political system, which was capable of providing consistent social and economic benefits. But the split is also visible in proper terms, meaning that the public visibility and social influence of age groups vary according to the repertoires of action. The more vocal, radical protest manifestations turned young people into a group that counts in politics. Their ability to mobilize through social media channels, by avoiding classical mass-media channels often controlled by the government, compensates their numbers, making them to apparently dominate the public space. Their protest may change the political agenda, or at least focus the public attention on the issues they support, making them visible in the public space in countries from the region.[39] But when it comes to the classical forms of political action, especially voting, they are outnumbered. Thus they fail to impose their political views, having to respond to the new political settings generated by elections, by engaging in a new

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[36]   Sergiu Gherghina and Brigitte Geissel, "Linking Democratic Preferences and Political Participation: Evidence from Germany," *Political Studies* 65, no. 1, (2017 special supplementary issue): 24-42.

[37]   Florian Hartleb, "Political participation today: a radical shift, but with positive or negative outcome?," *European View* 16, no. 2 (2017): 303-311.

[38]   Marc M. Howard, *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Gabriel Bădescu, Paul E. Sum and Eric M. Uslaner, "Civil Society and Democratic Values in Romania and Moldova," *East European Politics and Societies* 18, no. 2 (2004): 316-341.

[39]   Toma Burean and Gabriel Bădescu, "Voices of discontent: Student protest participation in Romania," *Communist and Post Communist Studies* 47, nos. 3-4 (2014): 385-397.

succession of protests.[40] This is the apparent mechanism we emphasize here, a deep contradiction between political outcomes of different action strategies, embraced by people from different generations. Finally, this might explain the frustration and disappointment of young people in Moldova, who are reluctant to vote, but who are still politically active on the unconventional realm of politics. With no significant electoral victory, their protests only add to Moldova's political and social instability, since the protests of young people have no force to permanently lead the country towards the West.

It is not implied that all young people are Western oriented, as they bear completely distinct values from their predecessors. As shown in the data analysis below, the difference between age groups differs in respect to the political issue described by the items from the questionnaires. The difference is bigger when it comes to critically assess the performance and prestige of the former type of communist rule than it is when the political activism is measured. The same applies to the comparison of the sources of political information, with young people using the internet for getting informed about politics and older generations using rather newspapers and television as the main political information source. Knowing this, it is not surprising to notice that there are large shares of conservative oriented and Soviet nostalgic young people in Moldova, and that there are many young people getting mobilized in support of the Communist candidates.

However, the evolution of Moldova's situation seems to confirm the mechanism of differentiation between young people and other categories, especially taking into account their propensity for unconventional forms of political participation and the new style of political mobilization. Whereas young people do not vote in large shares and do not participate in voluntary associations,[41] including political parties, they engage in politics in the form of street protests. By their political action, they even managed to turn down the results of the elections held on the 5th of April 2009, won by the Communist Party (Partidul Comuniștilor din Republica Moldova – PCRM) and to force new elections on the 29th of July the same year. Their protest from the 6th and 7th of April, directed against the PCRM's victory with almost 50% of the casted votes, is similar with other anti-system demonstrations in the region and often called a "Twitter revolution", due to large mobilization through SMS sent by cellphones and through social-media channels,[42] in order to avoid state-owned mass media controlled by PCRM. What PCRM has initially expected, namely another comfortable electoral victory following the previous 2001 and 2005 elections,[43]

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[40] Olga Onuch and Gwendolyn Sasse, "The Maidan in Movement: Diversity and the Cycles of Protest," *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 4 (2016): 556-687.
[41] Bădescu, Sum and Eric M. Uslaner, "Civil Society and Democratic Values."
[42] Danero Iglesias, "An Ad Hoc Nation," 854.
[43] Luke March, "Power and Opposition in the Former Soviet Union: The Communist Parties of Moldova and Russia," *Party Politics* 12, no. 3 (2006): 341-365; Luke March and

which transformed their shares of votes into a solid majority of parliamentary mandates, turned into a political defeat when confronted with thousands of young people gathered in the central square of the capital Chişinău to protest against the alleged electoral fraud.

In 2009, it was not only the parliamentary majority necessary to support the government at stake, but a special majority required to elect the president, namely three fifths of the deputies, 61 of the 101 parliamentary seats. Since PCRM won only 60 seats, it failed to automatically appoint its own candidate. However, the emotion triggered by the protest that took place following the elections lead to a long period of uncertainty, failed presidential elections, snap parliamentary elections, unstable parliamentary majorities, three successive interim presidents from 2009 to 2012, and to the election of a non-affiliated president between 2012 and 2016. When the popular election of the president was put in place in October 2016, PCRM candidate Igor Dodon won the second round of the elections with more than 52% against Maia Sandu, the candidate of the Alliance for European Integration (Alianța pentru Integrare Europeană – AIE), a broad alliance of parties opposing to PCRM.

The electoral strength of the Socialist Party, the PCRM successor, was decisive, and the foreign policy of Moldova shifted once again, with a renewed interest for close collaboration with the Russian Federation, adding a new switch to Moldova's indefinite balance between East and West. The success of the PCRM candidate was due, among other factors, to a mobilization of young people, grouped under the umbrella of a youth association called the "Young Guard". They were active in many social, cultural and educational projects and worked as a youth branch of the party. Following the 2016 presidential elections, the political landscape has fragmented, with the governing Democrat Party (Partidul Democrat din Moldova – PDM) distancing itself from its previous allies from the AIE and forming in 2108, with the help of several former PCRM MPs, the biggest party group in parliament. Following the February 2019 parliamentary elections, PDM won a third of the parliamentary mandates and started negotiations for a new governing coalition.

Methods and Data

Are young people really different from older generations? Do they differ by their shared values, or by the repertoires of political action? How do they assess the Soviet past? In the context of the 6th and 7th April 2009 protests, how did they get mobilized and how do they evaluate the political crisis? A valuable series of surveys (Public Opinion Barometers – POB) conducted in Moldova at the request of the Institute for Public Policy (IPP) will be used for this purpose.

Graeme P. Herd, "Moldova Between Europe and Russia: Inoculating Against the Colored Contagion?," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 22, no. 4 (2006): 349-379.

It is not easy to evaluate all those research items in a comprehensive manner, but in this case, all those aspects have been gathered in two separate surveys, which measure their evolution in time. The first survey was conducted in November 2009 by the Institute of Marketing and Surveys from Chișinău, using a representative sample for the electoral population of 1118 respondents.[44] The second survey was conducted in October 2016, before the presidential elections, by the Center for Social Investigations and Marketing CBS-AXA, on a representative sample for the electoral population in Moldova counting 1109 respondents.[45]

Generational Differences and Regime Support

The alternatives to democracy underlined by Rose, Mishler and Haerpfer[46] are a strong leader, who does not bother too much with political parties and elections, the rule of the military, and a technocratic regime, formed by specialists who decide about public issues.[47] Although the support for the last option, namely the technocratic government, may cover the public need for efficiency and the sincere hope for fairness, it is a non-democratic alternative still, because it avoids confronting with citizens' opinions and preferences. As mentioned above, those alternatives form the counter-definition of democracy, imagined as a competitive regime. All those alternatives are not only plausible, but already experienced in various degrees and forms by citizens from post-communist societies. Those non-democratic alternatives have been used by the New Democracies Barometer (NDB) in the early 1990s,[48] and replicated in numerous other surveys conducted in various countries from East Central Europe.[49]

Another alternative is plausible in Moldova, which has not been mentioned by NDB, namely the revival of the Soviet Union. This alternative is possible under the political configuration of the current Russia-Belarus-

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[44] Institutul de Politici Publice Chișinău, Barometrul Opiniei Publice – noiembrie 2009, accessed February 8, 2017, http://ipp.md/old/libview.php?l=ro&idc=156&id=450.

[45] Institutul de Politici Publice Chișinău, Barometrul Opiniei Publice – octombrie 2016, accessed February 8, 2017, http://ipp.md/old/libview.php?l=ro&idc=156&id=804.

[46] Rose, Mishler and Haerpfer, *Democracy and Its Alternatives.*

[47] Ibid.

[48] William Mishler and Richard Rose, "Trajectories of Fear and Hope: Support for Democracy in Post-Communist Europe," *Comparative Political Studies* 28, no. 4 (1996): 553-581.

[49] Neil Munro, "Russia's Persistent Communist Legacy: Nostalgia, Reaction, and Reactionary Expectations," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 22, no. 4 (2006): 289-313; Piret Ehin, "Political support in the Baltic states," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 38, no. 1 (2007): 1-20; Dragoș Dragoman, "The origins of political support for democratic governance in post-communist Romania. Testing the social capital hypothesis," *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review* XII, no. 4 (2012): 637-656.

Kazakhstan Union or in another format. It is meant here, that the return to a revived Soviet Union and a socialist state is by far more plausible in Moldova that it is in other post-communist countries from Central and Eastern Europe. As already mentioned, Soviet nostalgia mainly relates to the social benefits and the economic conditions provided by the regime, ranging from specific housing conditions, food supply, and the medical assistance to the educational system, the pension system or the job availability, by including more general conditions as public order or living standards. Therefore, many Moldovan citizens regret the breakdown of the past Soviet regime. They support the return to the previous regime and to state socialism and, if given the chance, even cast a vote in a referendum for the inclusion of Moldova in a revived Soviet Union (see Table 1).

The revival of the former Soviet Union, seen as a non-democratic alternative, is supported by citizens in accordance to political attitudes, economic influences and human capital. Unsurprisingly, Moldovan citizens willing to return to the previous Soviet-style regime are especially those who really experienced this political regime. In this respect, supporting the non-democratic alternative is very much a remembrance of "good old days". The consistency of the support in time, when we compare the 2009 and the 2016 surveys, is also remarkable. The regret for the breakdown of the Soviet Union is constant, as is the willingness to cast a vote in a referendum for including Moldova into a revived Soviet Union.

What seems to count is not only the generational differences, which are not a surprise,[50] but their transposition into political preferences and forms of political action. Alongside Soviet nostalgia, another political attitude is the expectation for Moldova's position in the international arena, with the competing prospects for either EU integration, or the membership in a political union lead by Russia. Those external choices turn into political preferences, with Soviet nostalgic people voting with PCRM and the supporters of the EU integration voting mainly with AIE.

As mentioned above, Soviet nostalgia is strengthened by the current social and economic situation, marked by deprivation and uncertainty. Therefore, the subjective evaluation of the current household situation, as well as the estimation for future living standards could influence the support for this alternative. Finally, human capital is important in shaping attitudes toward political regimes since it could be seen as resources people can use in the social environment, resources that can be exchanged for economic resources. Education, gender, age and ethnicity are important for the way people conceive and relate to political regimes. This set of factors is tested for evaluating the

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[50] Richard Rose and Ellen Carnaghan, "Generational Effects on Attitudes to Communist Regimes: A Comparative Analysis," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 11, no. 1 (1995): 28-56.

support for the return of the Soviet Union on the basis of the 2009 and 2016 surveys (see Table 2).

The revival of the former Soviet Union, as plausible non-democratic attitude, is supported by citizens with clear political attitudes, those who observe how things in Moldova head in a wrong direction and those who vote with PCRM. Regarding their economic evaluations and their resources, they are not the winners of the post-communist transition. On the contrary, those who would like to see the Soviet Union back again are exactly those people who experienced the difficulties of transition and are the least satisfied with their living standards (see Table 2). They are the least fitted to win the social competition, because they lack personal resources that could be exchanged, namely they are undereducated, older people and less integrated into the national framework, being part of ethnic minority groups. It is worth mentioning that Moldova still experiences a more complex transition that other former communist countries, since nationhood and state-building have been added as new challenges to the more classical political and economic transition, encompassing democratic institutional design and free market regulations.[51] Moreover, Moldova still has to define nationhood by solving the difficult issue of ethnic identification with ethnic Romanians and the existence of a separate Moldovan nation, in a context marked by the secessionist de-facto state of Transnistria, which works forging a separate identity.[52] Those who desire the revival of the Soviet Union and state socialism are therefore those who least benefitted from Moldova's independence, national identity building and market oriented economy.

Political Preferences and Political Action

With generational differences in evaluating the current democracy and the past communist regime, it is not surprising to see that political evaluations are expressed by different forms of political action and by different political preferences. Young people, defined by the sampling stratification of both surveys as people aged 18-29 years old, are still interested in politics, with no significant differences between youngsters and the elderly. What differs a lot are the communication channels that make the political information available.

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[51] Taras Kuzio, "Transition in post-communist states: triple or quadruple," *Politics* 21, no. 3 (2001): 168-177.

[52] Vladimir Solonari, "Narrative, Identity, State: History Teaching in Moldova," *East European Politics and Societies* 16, no. 2 (2002): 414-445; Magdalena Dembinska and Julien Danero Iglesias, "The Making of an Empty Moldovan Category within a Multiethnic Transnistrian Nation," *East European Politics and Societies* 27, no. 3 (2013): 413-428.

Whereas in 2009 television was the most important source of information for almost everybody, the expansion of internet in Moldova made young people largely rely on it when it comes to inform themselves about politics. This is not surprising, since the internet has become the main source of information for any given aspect of life, including social and political matters. In 2009, according to the first survey used in this paper, 22% of young people declared the internet as the most important source of information, compared with very few older people relying on internet for getting informed. In 2016, according to the other survey we use here, almost 50% of young people indicated the internet as the most important source. Using the serial data collected by the Public Opinion Barometers (two surveys every year), it is to be noticed that the daily use of internet, for all age groups combined, increased from 24% (POB – May 2010) to 50% (POB – April 2016). At the same time, television remained the most important information source that ordinary people, all age groups combined, rely on. Accessing TV for political information displays a maximum of 91% during the electoral campaign in 2009 (POB – March 2009) and a minimum of 78% before the electoral campaign in 2016 (POB – November 2016). However, the importance assigned to this information channel changed dramatically for young people, who dropped TV as the main information channel (66.9%, POB – November 2009, to 36.1%, POB – October 2016). Young people turned to internet instead not only to get connected, but to get informed as well, as shown in the Table 3.

The internet use is strongly related to the age of users, in part because of their ability to use new devices and to connect them to the internet. This technical and cultural aspect also translates into a differentiation in content access and, finally, into political preferences. When asked in November 2009 about the political neutrality of the state-run Radio and TV broadcasting company, only 28% of young people agreed with it, compared with 40% of people aged 60 years old or more. At the same time, 35% of the young people questioned indicated that PCRM benefited of preferential news exposure, compared with only 7% of people aged 60 years old or more. The same difference can be stated when it comes to assess political parties' access to Moldova 1, the main state TV channel. Almost 27% of young people mentioned that the access was strictly permitted only for PCRM, with only 8.5% of people aged 60 years old or more agreeing with the statement.

The exposure to different informational content by the use of different information channels, therefore getting access to unrestricted news and political opinions, only increased young people's feelings that elections, in general, are not at all free and fair. In fact, 55% of young people questioned in November 2009 agreed with this, compared with only 28% of people aged 60 years old or more. This might explain why young people contested in the streets the elections held in early April 2009 and why they mobilized to protest by means

of new media, which were not supervised by any government agency. As in other contentious movements in the region, social media and various internet sites at least favored the activation and facilitated the role of already constituted social networks during effective mobilization, by diffusing information and framing protest claims.[53] In this respect, the protest mobilization in Moldova can easily be labelled as a "Twitter revolution", due to the large scale use of social media in covering the events and helping mobilizing young people.[54] Not surprisingly, young people and older people point towards different political forces in charge of the political turmoil triggered by mass protests in April 2009, with almost 40% of young people blaming PCRM and almost 28% of people aged 60 years old or more blaming AIE in response.

However, the succession of several ad-interim presidents, as well as the election of a non-affiliated president between 2012 and 2016, somewhat eroded the differences between age groups regarding the evaluation of free and fair elections. In 2016, a share of 79.8% of young people and 73.2% of people aged 60 years old or more labelled Moldovan elections as unfair. The repertoires of political action however have not changed. As already acknowledged, the use of internet among young people may strongly facilitate protest mobilization.[55] In turn, protest as a new form of political activism is embraced especially by young people. This biased selection of protesters by special internet exposure strengthens the differences in public visibility. Whereas older people express themselves mainly by conventional forms of participation, young people politically engage rather through new forms of political action. Whereas the latter seem to be the first to burn stages in political learning and expression during transition,[56] the former are still attached to forms of participation that have been prohibited during communist times. This is by no means limited to Moldova, but a common figure in post-communist countries.

Quick on-line protest mobilization of young people tends to collide with more conventional voting and party membership of older people, in a general context marked by low levels of participation.[57] Protest activism was measured by the 2016 Moldovan survey as an aggregated scale of six distinct activities, namely signing a petition, taking part in legal street rallies and strikes, taking part in illegal street demonstrations and strikes, occupying public buildings or

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[53] Dan Mercea, "Towards a Conceptualization of Casual Protest Participation: Parsing a Case from the Save Roşia Montană Campaign," *East European Politics and Societies* 28, no. 2 (2014): 386-410; Olga Onuch, "EuroMaidan Protests in Ukraine: Social Media Versus Social Networks", *Problems of Post-Communism* 62, no. 4 (2015): 217-235.

[54] Danero Iglesias, "An Ad Hoc Nation."

[55] Valenzuela, "Unpacking the Use."

[56] Samuel H. Barnes, "The Changing political participation of postcommunist citizens," *International Journal of Sociology* 36, no. 2 (2006): 76-98.

[57] Jeffrey A. Karp and Caitlin Milazzo, "Democratic Scepticism and Political Participation in Europe," *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 25, no. 1 (2015): 97-110.

factories, blocking streets, and finally, going on a hunger strike. The protest scale is correlated, in the Moldovan survey, to the use of internet sites as main source of information (Pearson R = .099, p < .001, N = 1093). This only confirms why and how young people manage to overpass state-media, very often controlled by the government, by relying on an alternative information channel. Protest could be influenced, therefore, by political preferences, attitudes regarding the personal welfare and by rather structural, heavy factors, as education, gender, residence, ethnicity or age (see Table 4).

As shown in the Table 4, political attitudes are essential in shaping protest activism. Those who protest do not vote with the Communist party and they reject the revival of the former USSR and of state socialism. They are more educated, and mostly live in cities. Since education is generally related to urbanization, when the urban residence predictor is removed from the statistical model, education becomes a salient issue in making a difference between those who protest and those who don't. The findings fit in the broader picture of young activists who protest. This type of activism tends to replace the more classical forms of political action, under the general influence of new communication patterns and specific information exposure.

Conclusion

Young people's sudden outburst in condition of political stress, street protest and overt government contestation may be in contradiction with the electoral legitimacy acquired by political parties through fair or less fair elections. This issue only adds to the political instability in Moldova, where more visible, active and highly vocal young people managed to contest parliamentary elections in April 2009 in order to force the indirect election of a pro-European president (by the parliament), only to be once again defeated at polls in 2016, with the Socialist Party (former PCRM) victorious presidential candidate largely voted by older people. This permanent instability not only undermines clear cut foreign affairs options, but democratic consolidation as well. In fact, regime choice and foreign political orientations are closely related in Moldova. The non-democratic alternative to incipient democracy is by no means a theoretical possibility, but a living political regime, under the form of a revived Soviet Union. The possibility of such a revival is closer to reality today than it was after the breakdown of the Soviet Union, due to Russia's efforts to modernize, and to restore its regional influence and its global status of a super-power.

The return of a Socialist president to power in 2016 highlights the uncertain democratization and the fragile change made by street protests back in 2009. Despite some political advances towards democratic stability and pro-

European commitments, despite stronger political and economic ties with the European Union set up under more favorable circumstances by the pro-European governments, the election of Igor Dodon as president marks a new turn in Moldovan politics. The favorable circumstances generated by street protests have been overturned by solid structural factors. One of these factors is the generational gap. As underlined in this article, the differences in regime support are due to different political options. Different political options are connected with different styles and repertoires of political action. Young people not only display different attitudes, but they get politically mobilized by different agencies. Street protests make their voice heard, but this is not enough. Although mass rallies make young people seem a political force that has to be taken into account, their reluctance to get engaged in more conventional forms of participation is a serious weakness. There is no surprise that they are outnumbered at polls. It is true, their electoral fragility is due to a large series of structural factors pertaining to ageing and migration, yet their lack of involvement in conventional political action is a serious obstacle for democratization. Besides protesting, which is largely contextual and intermittent, young people have to be involved in secondary organizations, which could turn to "schools of democracy"[58] in the long run. In Moldova, however, participation to voluntary associations is scant.[59] A stronger civil society would help consolidate democracy, by making young people and other citizens engaged in collective actions that could overpass internal divisions in Moldova. Moreover, a stronger civil society could, on the long run, decisively turn Moldova from appealing non-democratic alternatives. With young people only contextually mobilized in mass rallies, and for short periods of time, democracy in Moldova will continue to remain fragile. Their sudden outburst in street protests will only add to the general instability, keeping Moldova in a permanent state of unconsolidated, partial democracy.

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[58] Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[59] Gabriel Bădescu, Paul E. Sum and Eric M. Uslaner, "Civil Society and Democratic Values," 340.

Annexes

Table 1. Attitudes toward the former Soviet Union: Percentage of responses

Year / age groups	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+	
2009					
Regret the Soviet Union breakdown	25.1	50.5	57.3	60.7	Eta = .221 p < .001 N = 1118
Desire the revival of USSR and of state socialism	22.5	41.9	44.5	52.6	Eta = .137 p < .001 N = 1118
Would vote in favor of a new Soviet Union	25.2	43.0	50.3	56.1	Eta = .143 p < .001 N = 1117
2016					
Regret the Soviet Union breakdown	26.1	56.9	69.8	68.9	Eta = .343 p < .001 N = 1107
Desire the revival of USSR and of state socialism	29.8	45.5	59.5	54.2	Eta = .196 p < .001 N = 1107
Would vote in favor of a new Soviet Union	32.4	48.2	56.4	55.5	Eta = .141 p < .001 N = 1107

Source: This table was made by the authors based on the analyzed collected data.

Table 2. Regression models for the revival of USSR and of state socialism (only standardized coefficients Beta are shown)

	2009	2016
	Beta	**Beta**
Things in the country head in a wrong direction	.123**	.082*
Votes PCRM	.415***	.336***
Satisfaction with the living standard	-.156***	-.039
Expectation for future living standard	-.065	-.065
Sex (M)	-.036	-.029
Education level	-.188***	-.152***

Ethnicity (Romanian/Moldovan)	-.009	-.092*
Age groups	.070	.091*
R square	**.453**	**.218**

*** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05.
Source: This table was made by the authors based on the analyzed collected data.

Table 3. Attitudes toward information sources in 2016: Percentage of responses

Age groups	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+	
TV is the main source of information	36.1	59.2	72.7	78.7	Eta = .165 p < .001 N = 1108
Internet is the main source of information	49.6	23.3	13.0	1.2	
Access news from internet news sites	39.7	23.2	10.7	2.8	Eta = .343 p < .001 N = 1108
Access news from social media channels	25.0	12.9	7.9	.8	Eta = .265 p < .001 N = 1107

Source: This table was made by the authors based on the analyzed collected data.

Table 4. Regression models for protest activism in 2016 (only standardized coefficients Beta are shown)

	Model 1	Model 2
	Beta	Beta
Votes PCRM	-.142**	-.136**
Desire the revival of USSR and of state socialism	-.099*	-.144*
Satisfaction with the living standard	-.037	-.037
Expectation for future living standard	-.030	-.027
Sex (M)	.044	.034
Ethnicity (Romanian/Moldovan)	-.002	-.022
Education level	.068	.091*
Age groups	-.021	-.037
Urban residence	.132**	
R square	**.075**	**.059**

*** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05.
Source: This table was made by the authors based on the analyzed collected data.