THE NOT-SO-CURIOUS CASE OF LOW POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN ROMANIA[*]

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*T*his paper analyzes the insufficiently developed political participation in post-communist Romania, focusing on the pre-requisites of political participation, and on how these are acting as inhibitors for political involvement from the citizens. The prevalence of intolerance, the lack of trust in other people and in the institutions of the state, the absence of points of access to the political system and an insufficiently developed culture of protest are all factors that contribute to determining Romanians to avoid political participation. Data on voting, volunteering, and protesting demonstrate the underdevelopment of political participation in Romania.

Keywords: *political participation, political culture, political mistrust, Romania.*

INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that there are dozens of measures of democracy (Munck, 2009), each focusing on particular aspects of a democratic system, most scholars of democratic systems would agree that Romania is not yet an established democracy (such as France, the US, or England, for instance), but rather a system that managed to successfully complete its transition phase from an authoritarian to a democratic system, and that is currently in the process of consolidation: Romania, in 2014, belongs to the group of consolidating democracies.

I will not discuss in this paper all the components of the democratic consolidation process. I will direct my attention, instead, towards those components that are linked to the citizens and that require an active role from them. Scholars of post-communist transitions have pointed out that democratizing countries need to change not only the political and economic system, but also their social system: "If democracy and capitalism are to take root in the former communist states, it is

necessary not only to create the institutions and processes [...] but also to foster popular attitudes that are accepting and supporting of them" (Mason and Kluegel, 2000: 11). A similar argument pointed out that "constitutional forms are lifeless or irrelevant if they do not have the support of the people" (Rose, Mishler and Haerpfer, 1998: 8). Overall, most scholars agree, following Almond and Verba, that the stability of a democratic political system is dependent on its consistency with the political values of its citizens (Almond and Verba, 1963; Dahl, 1989; di Palma, 1990; Diamond, 1993).

All democracies require the active involvement of citizens (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000), because active citizen participation in the political arena is the "lifeblood of representative democracy" (Norris, 2002: 215). Linz and Stepan (1996: 14) argued that consolidated democracies require the functioning of five inter-dependent arenas: the economic society (the market), the state apparatus (bureaucratic norms), rule of law, political society, and civil society. The functioning of a democratic system requires that all five arenas are working properly, and this proves the importance of citizen participation for the success of the democratic system: a democracy cannot survive without active and informed citizens, just as it cannot survive without the rule of law: all five arenas represent necessary but not sufficient conditions for a democracy to develop to its full potential.

The discussion in this paper focuses on pre-requisites of political participation, because people do not mobilize and decide to join forces in an attempt to achieve their common goals in a vacuum, but within a context that is defined by the values and the attitudes of the population, by the dominant culture. From this perspective, tolerance towards different people and trust in others are considered necessary conditions for successful mobilization. In addition to these individual-level factors, a third necessary condition for political participation is the existence of sufficient access points to the political system. In the absence of such access points, mobilization is still possible, but the dominant mode in this case will more likely be not cooperation but confrontation with the state and its institutions. Finally, the fourth necessary condition is the existence of a culture of participation.

The paper continues by moving from the pre-requisites of participation to discussing political participation. I measure political participation using a set of indicators intended to capture its different dimensions: interest in politics, as a process of obtaining information about the political system and discussing about politics; voting, as the main element of participation in the political life of the community; volunteering, as a cooperative form of political participation; protesting, as conflictual political participation; and the use of new forms of participation (for a more detailed discussion of political participation, see Barnes and Kasse, 1979). The last section of the paper will summarize the main arguments presented in the paper.

PRE-REQUISITES OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Political participation, which I define, via Verba et al., as "activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action" (1995: 38), is an action that requires significant resources, but it is also an action that can bring significant benefits to those who manage to mobilize the resources it needs. Since Olson's book (1965), one of the basic positions of those trying to explain collective action was that the decision to act rather than passively sit on the side is a decision that cannot be taken for granted and has to be explained. In this section of the paper I argue that there are four conditions that can influence an individual's decision to act for a certain cause: tolerance, trust, the availability of access points to the political system, and a culture of participation.
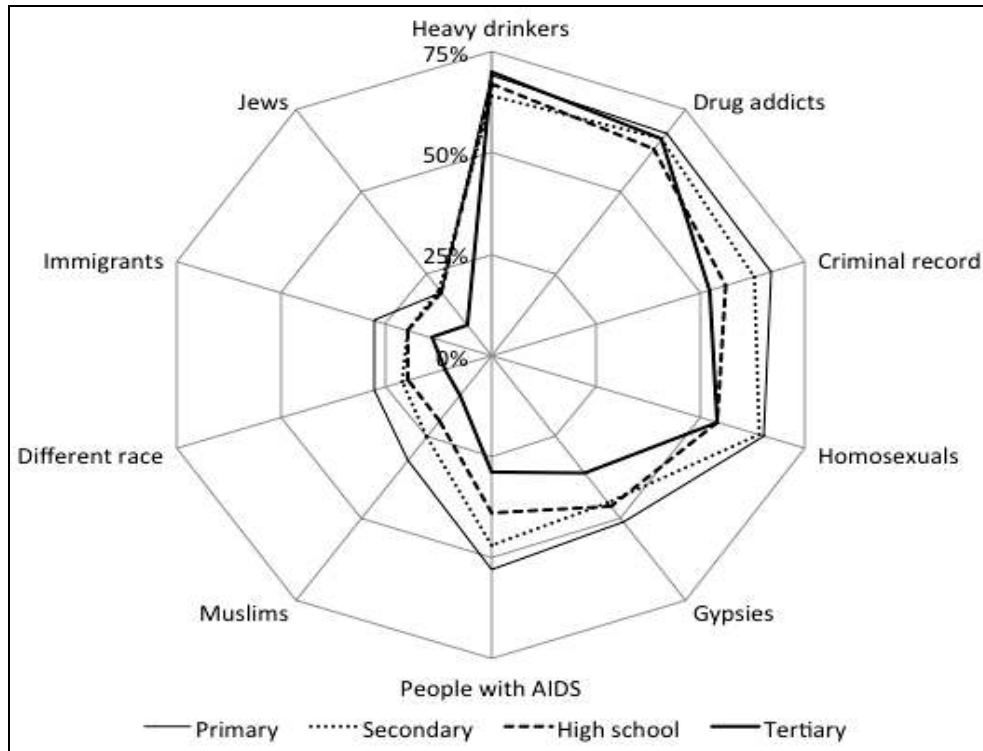
Tolerance

Tolerance is one of the main pre-requisites for political participation. While political participation can also occur in contexts characterized by intolerance, it is the type of participation that does not attempt to create bridges from one group to another, that does not attempt to understand and accept the "other", regardless of its definition. Participation in intolerant contexts is participation within one's defining group, it is participation behind closed doors, it is participation that eliminates any potential for additional, more developed participation and that, eventually, ends up by fragmenting the society or the community. Participation in contexts characterized by high levels of tolerance, however, is the type of participation that opens the doors for the possibility of more participation. The "other" (again, regardless of the definition that is used) is accepted as a valid interlocutor, as an acceptable (if not valued or trusted) partner. Moreover, this type of participation brings together people from different groups and, by putting them into contact, it increases inter-group tolerance and the chances of future cooperation among groups.

While there is not a single, generally accepted measure of tolerance, most of the scholars who study this issue use one of three measures (for more details, see Gibson, 2013). The data are based on one of these three measures, which presents a list of groups to the respondents and asks them to indicate whether they would not like to have them as neighbors. The higher the proportion of people that indicate a group, the higher the level of intolerance towards that group.

The available data show that Romanians are not a particularly tolerant population, and, when it comes to particular groups, it can be argued that the majority of the population is characterized by intolerance rather than tolerance. Data in *Figure 1* and in *Table no. 1* present the level of intolerance among the Romanian adult population for ten different groups, differentiated by a series of socio-economic and demographic variables that may be associated with the level of intolerance.

Intolerance among Romanian adult population by education, 2008

Data source: EVS, 2008.

The highest level of intolerance among the Romanian adult population is recorded for three groups that can be seen as possible threats to the respondent: heavy drinkers, drug addicts, and people with a criminal record. For each of these three groups, the percentage of the population that would not like having them as neighbors is 60% or higher. This type of intolerance, however, can be explained: all three groups are composed of people that seem to have a higher propensity to engage in violent (or, at least, disturbing acts), acts that can be interpreted as a personal threat and all previous literature has identified the perception of threat as one of the most important predictors of intolerance (see Gibson, 2006).

The fourth group that is also rejected by a majority of the population (59%) is represented by homosexuals. In this case, the explanation resides in a different type of threat, a threat to the Romanian „way of life". In a highly traditional and religious society, such as the Romanian one, homosexuality is seen as too altering to be acceptable, even though one would be hard-pressed to find any real threat coming from this group. Gypsies represent the first group for which the data show

a high level of intolerance that is based on prejudice: 46% of the adult population of Romania would not like to have gypsy neighbors, more than double than the percentage of people who would reject any different neighbor, be him/her Muslim (23%), of a different race (21%), immigrant (21%) or Jewish (19%).

Table no. 1

Targets of intolerance among the Romanian adult population, 2008

	Heavy drinkers	Drug addicts	Criminal record	Homosexuals	Gypsies	People with AIDS	Muslims	Different race	Immigrants	Jews
Gender										
Male	62%	64%	58%	60%	47%	43%	22%	21%	21%	18%
Female	70%	66%	61%	59%	45%	43%	24%	20%	21%	19%
Age										
18–49 years old	66%	63%	57%	56%	44%	42%	21%	22%	21%	20%
50–64 years old	65%	67%	60%	60%	47%	42%	22%	18%	20%	18%
65 and over	73%	69%	68%	68%	49%	50%	28%	22%	21%	17%
Education										
Primary	69%	68%	67%	65%	51%	53%	32%	28%	28%	19%
Secondary	64%	66%	63%	64%	45%	47%	25%	21%	20%	20%
High school	67%	63%	56%	54%	46%	39%	20%	20%	20%	19%
Tertiary	70%	66%	52%	54%	36%	29%	12%	11%	14%	9%
Size of community										
Under 5k	67%	69%	64%	66%	48%	48%	29%	29%	27%	25%
5k–20k	64%	60%	61%	58%	41%	49%	25%	18%	19%	18%
20k–100k	64%	66%	51%	60%	42%	37%	17%	17%	17%	18%
100k–500k	70%	62%	61%	52%	52%	36%	20%	17%	19%	11%
Over 500k	67%	71%	53%	55%	39%	38%	13%	12%	14%	15%
TOTAL	**67%**	**65%**	**60%**	**59%**	**46%**	**43%**	**23%**	**21%**	**21%**	**19%**

Notes: (1) Data source: *European Values Study*, 2008. (2) Data in cells represent % of the population who would not like the corresponding group as neighbors.

Overall, the data show that certain groups elicit an almost automated, highly intolerant response, coupled with a rather high (about 20%) base intolerance level. A fifth of the Romanians reject difference and are not comfortable living in the same area with those who are different. The data in *Figure 1* show differences in intolerance by education level, while the data in *Table no. 1* show differences in intolerance by other socio-demographic variables. With the exception of heavy drinkers and drug addicts, for all other groups taken into account there is a strong relationship between the level of intolerance and education. Education acts as an instrument that promotes tolerance towards the other. As I was indicating above,

Romania is a highly traditional and religious country, both characteristics that do not promote tolerance. By comparison to other EU countries, Romania is also less educated on the average, and this is a third factor that might explain the high levels of intolerance observed in Romania.

Special attention should be given to the evolution of intolerance towards the gypsies, especially because education does not seem to always reduce intolerance towards this particular group. Gypsies are not only the most rejected group, they are also associated with a series of negative stereotypes that fuel this rejection. Moreover, gypsies are a group that can be easily identified based on external markers, making them more visible and more likely to be compared against the standard of the majority. Overall, it can be argued that Romania has a level of intolerance that is not conducive, and that may actually be damaging, to political participation.

Trust

Tolerance towards the presence of "other" is necessary but not sufficient for political participation. Tolerance just assures that a meeting between two different strangers has a chance of happening. Trust, the second pre-requisite, is needed for this possible meeting to actually take place and lead to a possible future cooperation.

When discussing about trust one has to distinguish between two different types of trust. The first one is the interpersonal trust – trust in others, where the others can be defined in different ways. This type of trust is presented in *Table no. 2*. The second type of trust is institutional trust – trust in institutions. This type of trust is presented in *Figure 2* and *Table no. 3*, which focus only on trust in the main institutions of the political system.

The data for interpersonal trust show the existence of a series of circles of trust. The inner most circle is represented by family members, which are considered as trustworthy by almost all respondents (97%). A second circle of trust is represented by people that the respondent knows – for more than half of the population (55%) these people are considered to be trustworthy. A third circle of trust is represented by neighborhood people, which are less trusted than known people. Finally, a fourth circle of trust is represented by "generalized others" that differ somehow, by religion or nationality, from the respondent, or by people that the respondent meets for the first time. Since the three categories should be rather equivalent, the data suggest that only between 10% and 20% of the respondents have trust in complete strangers.

The high level of trust in family members does not have any effect on political participation, however, because political participation is directed towards solving a problem of a group of people (community, society), and not the problems of a particular family. The type of trust that is really needed for political participation to flourish is exactly trust in generalized others, the type of trust that has the lowest

levels among the Romanians. We've seen in the case of tolerance that a fifth of the adult population is intolerant to others. Now, in the case of interpersonal trust, we see that a similar proportion, about 20% has trust in others. This means that the remaining proportion, 80%, has low to no trust in people of other nationality or of other religion, a percentage that does not lead one towards an optimistic conclusion with respect to political participation.

Table no. 2

Trust in different categories of people, 2012 (% Trust)

|	Family	People you know	Neighbors	People of other religion	People of other nationality	People you meet the first time
Gender						
Male	97%	60%	47%	24%	26%	8%
Female	97%	51%	41%	21%	20%	8%
Age						
18–49 years old	98%	53%	36%	19%	18%	5%
50–64 years old	97%	55%	46%	24%	26%	9%
65 and over	94%	59%	60%	28%	28%	14%
Education						
Primary	95%	47%	53%	24%	20%	13%
Secondary	98%	50%	42%	21%	20%	8%
High school	97%	55%	41%	22%	23%	6%
Tertiary	98%	69%	43%	29%	30%	7%
Size of community						
Under 5k	98%	51%	51%	21%	23%	10%
5k–20k	97%	58%	50%	21%	21%	8%
20k–100k	97%	58%	39%	18%	18%	3%
100k–500k	98%	56%	34%	29%	27%	8%
Over 500k	95%	50%	34%	21%	21%	8%
Class						
Upper middle	97%	64%	41%	27%	28%	7%
Lower middle	98%	61%	47%	24%	26%	10%
Working class	97%	48%	43%	21%	19%	7%
Lower class	95%	49%	40%	14%	14%	5%
TOTAL	**97%**	**55%**	**43%**	**22%**	**22%**	**8%**

Notes: (1) Data source: *WVS*, 2012. (2) Data in cells represent % of respondents answering either "trust completely" or "trust somewhat".

Institutional trust is also required for successful mobilization for political participation. The main argument for the necessity of people having at least some trust (some authors refer to this as having cautious trust) in the institutions of the state is that most of the demands of political participation take place through

interactions with the state's institutions, be they central, regional, or local. If people do not trust these institutions then they do not have any reason for interacting with them and the result is a civil society that is separated from the state and in a conflictual rather than a cooperative relationship.

Figure 2

Trust in institutions of political system, 1990–2014
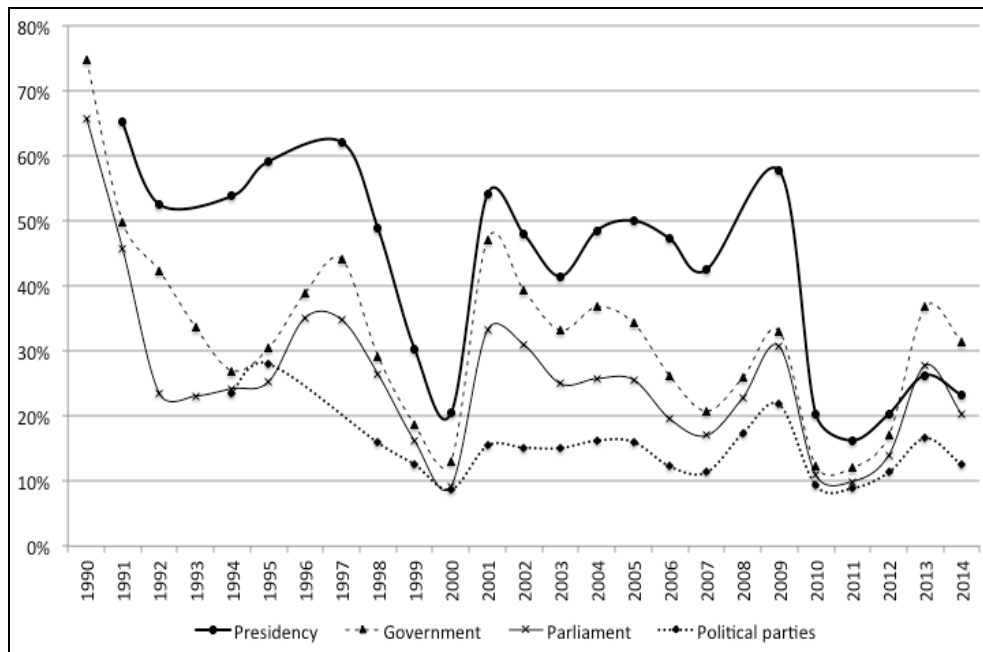
Data source: Tufiş, 2012, updated.

Figure 2 presents the evolution of institutional trust in Romania from 1990 to 2014 (for institutional trust by socio-demographic characteristics, see *Table no. 3*). I have chosen to present the time series because the level of institutional trust in Romania is highly dependent on the particular moment of the electoral cycle when the measurement was done.

Given the rather unusual events on the political scene in the last three years, the patterns are not as clear as they were in previous electoral cycles, but they still show decreasing levels of institutional trust towards what seems to be the baseline level of institutional trust: about 30% of the people have trust in the Government, with large year-to-year variations, about 20% have trust in the Parliament (again, with large year-to-year variations) and in the Presidency (the last five years show a significant drop from the levels recorded in the 2000s), and about 15% have trust in political parties (with only moderate to low year-to-year variations).

Table no. 3

Trust in institutions of political system, 2012 (% Trust)

	Government	Parliament	Political parties
Gender			
Male	20%	17%	13%
Female	19%	14%	11%
Age			
18–49 years old	14%	11%	8%
50–64 years old	22%	18%	14%
65 and over	31%	23%	20%
Education			
Primary	27%	23%	20%
Secondary	21%	16%	15%
High school	14%	12%	8%
Tertiary	21%	18%	8%
Size of community			
Under 5k	23%	18%	16%
5k–20k	18%	13%	12%
20k–100k	17%	16%	10%
100k–500k	16%	13%	8%
Over 500k	22%	18%	10%
Class			
Upper middle	19%	18%	14%
Lower middle	22%	17%	13%
Working class	18%	13%	10%
Lower class	18%	14%	13%
TOTAL	19%	16%	12%

Notes: (1) Data source: *WVS*, 2012. (2) Data in cells represent % of respondents answering either "trust completely" or "trust somewhat".

Since these levels seem to represent the baseline levels for the main institutions of the political system, the fact that at most a third of the respondents have institutional trust suggests that citizens do not have any reasons to believe that the political system is going to respond in an adequate way to their demands, that may take the form of political participation. If this is true, then people are going to have fewer incentives to use political participation as a tool to achieve their goals and might opt to use other strategies that may be more effective under these circumstances. Corruption or extreme litigiousness are, for instance, such strategies that tend to replace political participation in contexts characterized by low levels of trust (for more details, see Sztompka, 1999).

Access points to the political system

The third pre-requisite of political participation is the existence of sufficient access points to the political system. With the exception of those instances of political participation devoted to intra-community help, most of all other forms of

participation require identifying points of access to the political system and using them in order to put forward their demands.

Although there are different types of access points to the political system, they can all be grouped into two main categories. The first category includes all those access points that belong to different state institutions that have clear attributions in specific domains. These institutions are highly specialized (in the sense that they deal only with specific problems, such as employment, or higher education, or child protection, for instance), which makes them easily identifiable. The access points offered by these institutions are (or should be) open to everyone. The way these access points perform in their dealing with the demands coming from the citizens depends not only on the institutional setup, but also on the institutional culture these institutions have created over time and on the incumbents.

While difficult to generalize, it is fair to assume that bad interactions with the state's institutions have a higher probability of being described and remembered, both by mass media, and by the actors who had the experiences, whereas good interactions remain only in the memory of the actors, but with less chances of being told. If this assumption holds, then the result is that people will tend to have a more negative image about the performance of these access points than the image that should be created by the whole set of interactions with these institutions. This will, instead, lead to fewer attempts to access the political system via these points, which might actually reduce participation in the long run.

The solution to this problem is twofold: first, the state institutions should improve the way they respond to people who interact with them and have demands from them. Second, both the institutions and the people who contact them should do a better job at telling "success" stories because they are not only examples that show that the system works, but also educational examples that might show some people how they can solve similar problems, and empowering examples for those group that need encouragement in order to mobilize.

The second category of access points is composed of less formalized access, via political actors, via incumbents of specific offices, via a certain form of networking. Unlike the first type, these access points have the potential to solve a problem faster, but, at the same time, they are not open to all individuals that might have the same problem and they are more costly to access. Moreover, in the absence of lobbying legislation, which would formalize interactions through these access points, any such interaction has the potential of being interpreted with suspicion, as just another instance of corruption. On the other hand, even if lobbying legislation would exist, the high costs associated with access to the political system through these points would make them inaccessible to most of those who would need them, increasing thus inequalities in this area. The most important institutional actor in this case is represented by political parties.

As anyone might suspect, access to the political system via political parties is open only to those mobilizing actors that are close to a political partie, and may

lead, in time, to the annexation of the mobilizing actors by the political parties. Such examples abound in the Romanian context, political parties assimilating trade unions and non-governmental organizations quite often. When the assimilation strategy is not working at the level of the whole organization, the solution of choice is to attract the leadership of these organizations by offering them an office (we should not forget, for instance, that Romania had a president coming from the ranks of civil society and a prime-minister which became a public figure as the leader of a trade union).

Culture of participation

Participation has a higher chance of occurring in settings that are characterized by a culture of participation. Even the forms of participation that are selected depend on their history and on familiarity with them. Innovation in the field of participation is possible, but, more often than not, people prefer to take the known path and to choose strategies that have proven to be effective in previous cases.

Unfortunately, Romania does not have a culture of participation, a culture of protesting that could be used as the basis for promoting participation in present time (for a more detailed discussion of participation in Romania earlier in the transition, see Mărginean, 1997; Precupețu, Mărginean, and Precupețu, 2005). There are various reasons for the absence of such a culture of participation. Suffice it to say that when the whole Hungary was fighting the Russian occupation in 1956, the Romanian fight against the communist regime took the form of more or less spontaneous and defensive armed resistance in the mountains, which proved to be nothing more than a nuisance for the regime (Onișoru, 2001). When Czechoslovakia was supporting the cultural elites that signed the founding document of Charta 77, in Romania Paul Goma did not find enough people to sign a letter of support for the Czechoslovak movement. When Poland was creating the Solidarity movement, protesting against the limits imposed by the communist regime and, eventually, negotiating for a peaceful transition, in Romania the protest took the form of a letter signed by six middle-rank members of the communist regime.

The "default" form of protest in the Romanian society seems to be based on the individual rather than the group. When something does not work as it should, it seems that the first solution is always a verbal one, expressed as a criticism or a complaint. It also seems that, usually, this initial reaction is not directed towards a specific target, and certainly not towards the person or the institution that is responsible for the situation. It is, rather, a statement of a fact, a declaration that a malfunction in the social fabric has been observed. Quite often, the malfunction is used as input in an argument that reaches one or more of a set of standard conclusions: "things are worse than they used to be"; "no one is doing his or her job anymore"; "all politicians are the same, they look only for their own interest".

In short, venting seems to be the standard form of protest. As the name suggests, this form of protest acts as a safety valve that releases the pressure the individual feels when faced with a problem and, in doing so, it reduces the chances that the individual will actually attempt to solve the problem rather than just observe it.

Of course, this does not mean that Romanians do not mobilize themselves and do not act together in order to achieve their goals; the available evidence would easily contradict such an argument. It means, however, that this type of participation is less common in the Romanian society and that, in order to increase active participation, people need to be taught how to avoid the standard solution and choose the more effective one, group participation.

Summary

The data presented so far paint a rather bleak image of a context that is not at all conducive to easy participation. Political participation requires cooperation among people who do not know each other, and that may be different from each other on any number of characteristics, their common interest being the only thing that might bring them together. Chances are, however, that getting together might be much more difficult than it should be, since a significant part of the Romanian population is characterized by intolerance and by a tendency to not trust in others.

The following section will move the focus from these pre-requisites of participation to analyzing actual instances of political participation, in an attempt to identify factors that might explain how the coagulation of interests and the mobilization for action have been achieved.

FORMS OF PARTICIPATION

This section centers the discussion on the main forms of political participation (interest in politics, voting, volunteering, protesting, and new forms of participation).

Interest in politics

Being interested in politics, following the news, discussing about politics and about everything that affects the life of the community are minimal requirements for citizenship. In the absence of this interest, people do not have enough information to make the informed decisions that are required of citizens living in a democracy, from the simple act of voting to the more complex activities of correctly identifying a problem, the person or the institution that is responsible of that particular problem, and the correct procedure for convincing the person/institution to solve the problem.

The data in *Table no. 4* show that only about 40% of the Romanians are interested in politics and that politics is considered an important aspect of their lives by only about 20% of the population. The data show significant associations

between interest in politics and socio-demographic variables. There is an important gender gap in all things related to politics, from interest in politics to the number of seats in the Parliament or in the Government. In this particular case, only 30% of the women are interested in politics, compared to 45% of the men. Age is also related to politics, with interest for politics peaking among the middle-aged, the young people and the elderly being less interested in politics. Education is a strong predictor of interest in politics, the difference between the least educated group and those with college degree being of almost 20%. Both class and the size of community are also positively related to interest in politics. It should be noted, however, that in all the groups that are defined by the socio-demographic variables included in the analysis less than half of the group is interested in politics.

Table no. 4

Interest in politics and importance of politics, 2012

	Importance of politics	**Interest in politics**
Gender		
Male	29%	45%
Female	20%	30%
Age		
18–49 years old	17%	34%
50–64 years old	29%	41%
65 and over	32%	38%
Education		
Primary	26%	28%
Secondary	25%	36%
High school	20%	37%
Tertiary	24%	47%
Size of community		
Under 5k	26%	34%
5k–20k	21%	33%
20k–100k	23%	37%
100k–500k	21%	40%
Over 500k	28%	47%
Class		
Upper middle	22%	43%
Lower middle	27%	39%
Working class	23%	37%
Lower class	22%	24%
TOTAL	**23%**	**37%**

Data source: *WVS*, 2012.

What is the meaning of these results? First, while it is not necessary that people consider politics important for them, the percentage of the population that is interested in politics is rather low and it is a first sign of a tendency, characteristic

for a significant part of the population, to ignore the political sphere and to try to live a life separate from it. Second, the rather low interest in politics indicated by these results has to be interpreted alongside mass-media consumption. There are five relevant trends here: (1) the decrease in newspaper readership, (2) the increased reliance on TV as main source of information, (3) the increasing concentration of mass-media under the control of a limited number of owners, (4) the close relationships between some of the mass media owners and the political sphere, and (5) the decrease in the objectivity of the mass-media. All these factors have similar consequences when it comes to informing those who are interested in politics: the information provided by mass-media is more likely to be inaccurate and subjective, which imposes additional costs (searching multiple sources of information, comparing them, and, eventually, deciding which information is correct and which is not) for those who want to be informed about any subject of interest for the community or for the society at large. As the costs of obtaining information increases, the proportion of those who are still going to look for that information is likely to decrease, leading to a less informed population.

Third, the data also show that the more advantaged groups are more likely to be more interested in politics: people with college degrees, people who consider themselves to belong to the upper middle class, people who have a job, people who live in very large cities are more likely to be interested in politics. At the same time, vulnerable groups (the elderly, the less educated, people living in rural areas) are less likely to be interested in politics and this should not be a surprise given that obtaining information about politics requires resources that vulnerable groups might not have. With the exception of TV access, which seems to be almost universal in Romania, all other sources of information (newspapers, internet, discussions with friends or colleagues) require some access costs.
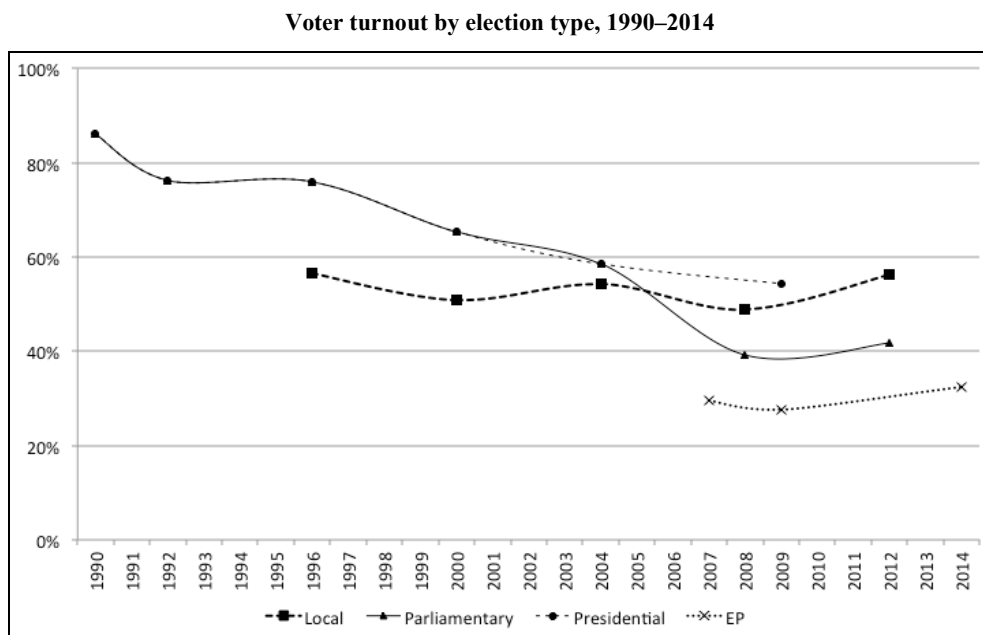
Voting

In addition to being interested in politics, voting is the second form of participation that does not impose very high costs on the individual willing to vote. In most cases, the only costs associated to voting are information costs (obtaining sufficient relevant information about the candidates in order to cast an informed vote) and the very low cost of casting the vote (in most cases, this is an activity that should not take more than 30 minutes per election).

Figure 3 presents the evolution of turnout for different types of elections (first round of presidential elections, parliamentary elections for the lower chamber, local elections, and elections for the European Parliament) from 1990 to 2014. In the case of presidential and parliamentary elections the data show a decreasing trend, while for the local and European elections the data show a stationary trend. Since 2004, turnout in the presidential and in the local elections seems to be at similar levels, perhaps as a result of the fact that both the president

and the mayor are people that are highly visible for any voter, while the MPs and the EMPs are more distanced from the voter. With the exception of the elections for the European Parliament, which have a different character, turnout in the last ten years has ranged between 40% and 60%, regardless of the type of elections, suggesting a certain level of stability in voting behavior at the population level.

Figure 3

**Voter turnout by election type, 1990–2014**

Data source: ROAEP.

It should be noted, however, that the decrease in turnout cannot be interpreted only as an indicator of a lack of interest in participation. Part of the decline resides in the fact that a large proportion of the voting age population has left the country (neither quite temporary, not quite permanently) to work in other European Union countries (especially Spain and Italy, but also Germany, France or the United Kingdom). Although the approximately two million Romanians who work abroad are still eligible to vote, the state does not offer them the same chance of voting, imposing additional costs (sometimes hundreds of kilometers, time, and money). As a result, the proportion of voters among this group is very small (Comşa, 2012; Rotariu, 2012). At the last parliamentary elections only 61000 votes were cast abroad, the equivalent of a turnout of approximately 2%–3%.

In addition to the two and a half million people who work abroad and who are, practically, refused the right to vote, there are another five to five and a half million voters who have chosen not to use their right to vote. This is an

approximation of the number of people who have not voted in the last ten years or so, an approximation for the absent electorate, the reason for their abstention being, most likely, disappointment with the functioning of the political system, coupled with the feeling they do not have an adequate choice at the polls. As a result, about eight million Romanians either cannot vote or choose not to vote, with the remaining ten million people who have the right to vote using it in most elections.

Figure 4

Voter turnout by municipality, parliamentary elections, 2012
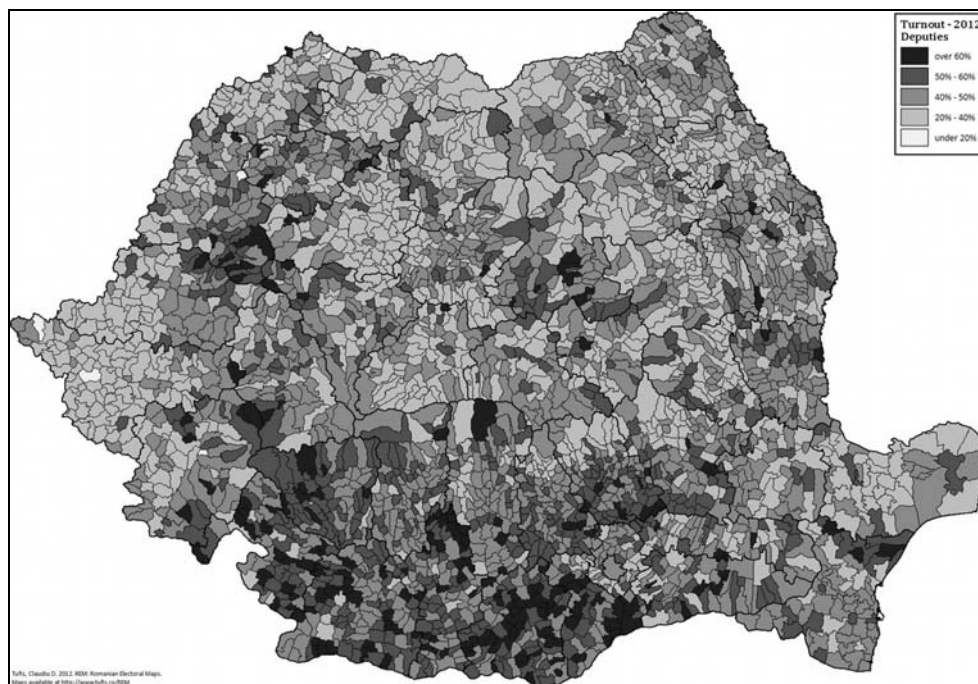
Data source: ROAEP.

Figure 4 presents voter turnout by municipality at the 2012 parliamentary elections. The darkest shade indicates the highest level of turnout, over 60% of the voters in the corresponding municipality, while the lightest shade indicates the lowest turnout, less than 20% of the voters, in the corresponding municipality. The map shows certain areas of higher than average turnout, the most prominent being two southern regions: South-Muntenia and South-West Oltenia. Not surprisingly, these two regions are among the poorest and the least developed regions in Romania, the high turnout in these regions being usually explained as the result of unfair practices of politicians who buy votes (anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that there might be some truth to this explanation).

Exit-poll data suggest a strong association between turnout and age. According to CCSB data (for additional details see www.contributors.ro/administratie/etapele-vietii-reflectate-in-participarea-la-vot-in-romania/), there are four different age groups that have specific voting patterns: those under 40 tend to have a lower turnout than the national average, those between 40 and 55 years old have a slightly higher turnout than the national average, the highest level of turnout is recorded among those between 55 and 70 years old, while the eldest group, those 70 years and older, has a lower than average turnout. The highest turnout belongs, then, to a group that is usually labeled as vulnerable: those approaching retirement or recently retired people.

Volunteering

If the previous two forms of participation, interest in politics and voting, are low-cost, volunteering is already a form of participation that requires significant efforts (measured in time or money) from the population. This is, however, the main form of participation, the one that has the highest chances of solving a common problem, of achieving a common goal, while also fostering cooperation and increasing trust in other people.

Despite the advantages of volunteering, the factors discussed in the section devoted to pre-requisites of participation, coupled with the significant costs associated with volunteering, ensure that this is not a very common form of participation in Romania. *Table no. 5* shows how many Romanians belong (as active or inactive members) to ten different types of organizations.

The most popular type of organization, and this should not come as a surprise since Romania is one of the most religious countries in the European Union, is composed of religious organizations: 20% of the Romanians declare they belong to a religious organization. Trade unions are the second most popular organization (although in their case we cannot always interpret membership as voluntary participation), 9% of the population being members in trade unions. Political parties and sport organizations are equally attractive, each having as members about 8% of the population. The remaining types of organizations (professional, environmental, charitable, self help, or consumer organizations), including "altruistic" organizations, devoted to helping others and not to benefitting their members do not manage to attract more than 5% of the population.

The distributions by socio-demographic variables show significant differences in volunteering patterns. Women tend to join religious organizations in a higher proportion than men (22% versus 16%), while men are more likely to join trade unions, political parties, or sports organizations (10%, compared to only 7% in the case of women). Age is also an important factor, indicating that the elders are significantly more likely than younger people to join religious organizations (28%) The only other organization that manages to attract a significant number of people 65 and over is represented by political parties (6%).

Membership (active or inactive) in voluntary organizations, 2012

|	Church	Labor union	Political party	Sport	Cultural	Professional	Environment	Charitable	Self Help	Consumer
Gender										
Male	16%	10%	10%	10%	7%	6%	5%	5%	5%	3%
Female	22%	7%	6%	7%	7%	5%	3%	4%	4%	2%
Age										
18–49 years old	18%	10%	8%	13%	10%	5%	6%	5%	5%	4%
50–64 years old	17%	8%	7%	5%	5%	6%	3%	4%	5%	2%
65 and over	28%	4%	6%	2%	2%	3%	1%	3%	2%	1%
Education										
Primary	32%	5%	7%	6%	3%	4%	3%	5%	9%	5%
Secondary	22%	6%	8%	7%	6%	4%	4%	5%	5%	3%
High school	16%	8%	7%	11%	8%	5%	4%	3%	4%	2%
Tertiary	12%	18%	9%	8%	11%	11%	4%	5%	1%	0%
Size of community										
Under 5k	24%	7%	9%	7%	5%	3%	4%	4%	4%	3%
5k–20k	27%	9%	7%	8%	8%	5%	3%	5%	4%	3%
20k–100k	14%	8%	8%	7%	6%	2%	1%	1%	1%	0%
100k–500k	14%	13%	8%	11%	9%	9%	6%	5%	6%	5%
Over 500k	7%	7%	4%	6%	5%	7%	2%	5%	5%	2%
Class										
Upper middle	18%	13%	9%	12%	11%	9%	6%	7%	5%	4%
Lower middle	16%	9%	9%	8%	6%	5%	3%	4%	3%	2%
Working class	21%	8%	6%	8%	6%	4%	3%	4%	4%	3%
Lower class	20%	0%	5%	2%	2%	0%	0%	1%	3%	0%
TOTAL	**20%**	**9%**	**8%**	**8%**	**7%**	**5%**	**4%**	**4%**	**4%**	**3%**

Notes: (1) Data source: *WVS*, 2012. (2) Data in cells represent % of respondents who are members (active or inactive) of the corresponding organization.

Low levels of education are associated with increased participation in religious organizations (32%) and in self-help groups (9%, this category including financial self-help organizations). College educated people are more likely to join trade unions (18%), cultural or professional associations (11%), but less likely to get involved with religious organizations (only 12%).

The association with the size of the community indicates three regularities: (1) the smaller the locality, the higher the proportion of people joining religious organizations, (2) the most varied participation seems to be observed in cities with population between 100 000 and 500 000 inhabitants, and (3) participation in very large cities, with population over 500 000 inhabitants, is significantly reduced by comparison to other types of cities.

Figure 5

Volunteering by number of organizations, membership, and education, 2012

Data source: *WVS*, 2012.
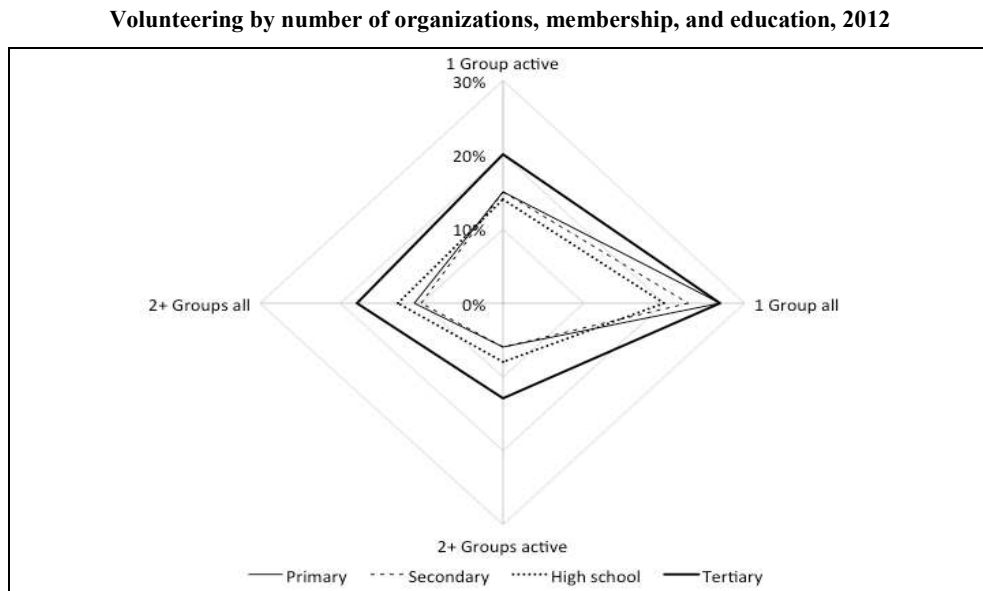
Class also indicates a strong association with volunteering behavior: people who consider themselves to belong to the upper middle class have a higher propensity to join organizations (membership in the first six types of organizations is 9% or more). At the same time, people who consider they belong to the lower class tend to join only religious organizations (20%) and, eventually, political parties (5%). Membership in the remaining types of organizations is either very low (under 3%) or inexistent.

The results in *Figure 5* and in *Table no. 6* show the information restructured to present the type of membership (active or inactive) and the number of organizations in which the respondent is a member (one versus two or more). If we take into account only active membership, then 78% of the population does not do any volunteering as measured by this instrument, 15% of the population is volunteering in one organization (religious organizations are the dominant ones), and the remaining 7% are members in two or more organizations.

If we take into account both active and inactive memberships (where inactive can mean either paying some dues, or just being listed on a member list), then 65% of the population is not involved in any organizations, 23% of the population is belonging to one organization and the remaining 12% are members in at least two organizations. The two sets of results indicate, basically, the current limits of volunteering in Romania: 22% of the population is actively engaged in volunteering, while the potential for volunteering in the population is a bit higher, including inactive members, up to 35% of the population.

Membership (active or inactive) in voluntary organizations, 2012

	Active membership		Active or inactive membership	
	One group	**Two+ groups**	**One group**	**Two+ groups**
Gender				
Male	16%	8%	23%	14%
Female	15%	7%	23%	11%
Age				
18–49 years old	15%	10%	21%	16%
50–64 years old	15%	5%	25%	8%
65 and over	17%	4%	26%	9%
Education				
Primary	15%	6%	27%	11%
Secondary	15%	6%	23%	10%
High school	14%	8%	20%	13%
Tertiary	20%	13%	27%	18%
Size of community				
Under 5k	19%	7%	24%	13%
5k–20k	13%	6%	27%	12%
20k–100k	18%	7%	28%	10%
100k–500k	14%	9%	16%	15%
Over 500k	12%	7%	19%	9%
Class				
Upper middle	15%	12%	20%	19%
Lower middle	14%	7%	24%	12%
Working class	17%	5%	23%	10%
Lower class	12%	4%	24%	4%
TOTAL	**15%**	**7%**	**23%**	**12%**

Notes: (1) Data source: *WVS*, 2012. (2) Data in cells represent % of respondents who are members (active or either active or inactive) in the corresponding number of groups.

Some of the differences related to socio-demographic characteristics are interesting. People over 65 are more likely to be members in an organization, by comparison to the population average, and in most cases this organization is a religious organization. People under 50 are twice as likely to be members in two or more organizations. Of course, chances are that the most common combination is membership in a religious organization and membership in a trade union. Education, as indicated in *Figure 5* is a very strong predictor for volunteering. The most important difference can be observed for college graduates. This group seems to have both the interest and the required resources to participate to a higher degree than other groups: 33% are active members in voluntary organizations, and the percentage increases to 45%, if inactive memberships are also counted.
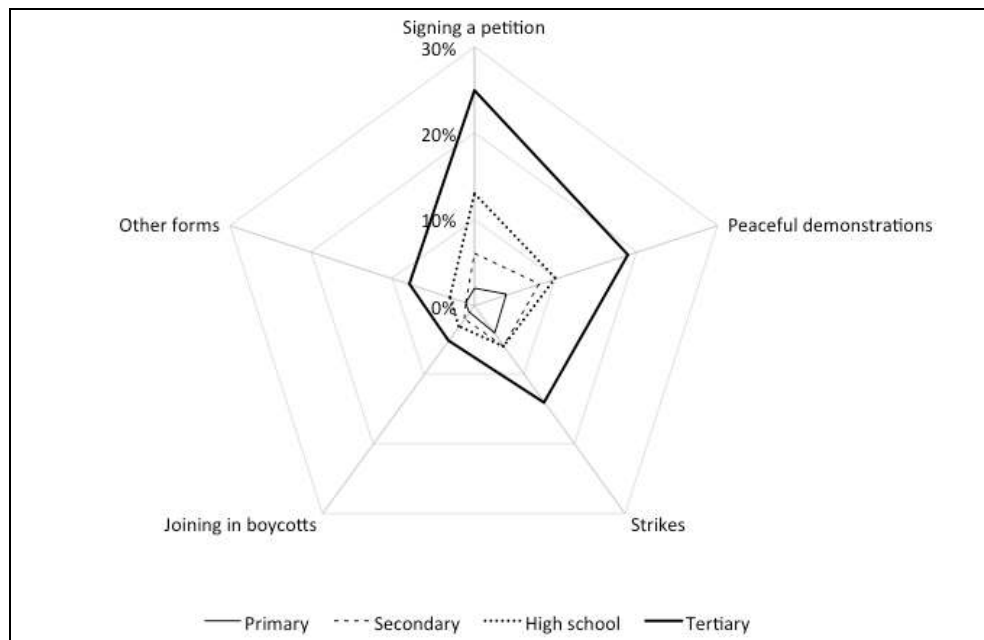
Protesting

If volunteering is a form of participation based on cooperation with the state and its institutions in order to achieve a common goal of those who participate,

protesting is also a form of participation, of collective action, but one that is based on confrontation with the state and its institutions (in those cases, in which the state is the target of the protest activities). The mechanisms that make people protest should not be very different from those that make people volunteer – we are talking, after all, about a similar decision in both cases, the decision to join others in pursuing a common goal. What differs is the way people try to achieve their goal. Membership in the two groups, volunteers versus protesters, while overlapping is not perfectly identical.

It should be noted that just as Romania does not have a long tradition of volunteering, it also does not have a long, established tradition of protesting. These behaviors have had to be rebuilt from scratch after the fall of the communist regime. Moreover, while volunteering is usually framed as a good form of participation, its confrontational cousin, protesting, is more likely to not be accepted as a valid form of participation, especially by people that have a tendency to conform rather than confront the authorities. Given this difference between the two forms of participation it should not be surprising that the low levels of participation through volunteering we identified in the previous section are actually quite high, by comparison to the levels of participation through protesting presented in *Figure 6* and in *Table no. 7*.

Figure 6

Protests by type of protest and education, 2012

Data source: *WVS*, 2012.

At the level of the whole population, signing a petition is the most widely used form of protesting: 11% of the population has signed a petition for or against something. Only 10% of Romanians have actually participated in a peaceful demonstration, and only 7% have joined a strike. Other forms of protesting were mentioned by only 3% of the respondents. Overall, however, and despite the image that seems to be created by the mass-media, protesting is not a very common form of participating or, if it is, it does not manage to attract large numbers of protesters.

A caveat is in order here: the data I presented here were collected in 2012. However, 2012 and 2013, have been two years with a significant number of protests, which means that the figures presented here might slightly underestimate the current proportion of the population who engaged in protest activities. Yet, I do not expect the events of the last two years, to change the interpretation in any significant way: 12% participation in peaceful demonstrations would be in no way other than mathematical a higher rate of participation than the 10% recorded in 2012.

Table no. 7

Participation in different types of protest, 2012

	Signing a petition	Peaceful protests	Strikes	Joining in boycotts	Other forms
Gender					
Male	12%	14%	8%	3%	4%
Female	10%	6%	7%	2%	2%
Age					
18–49 years old	13%	8%	7%	3%	4%
50–64 years old	11%	14%	10%	2%	2%
65 and over	5%	9%	3%	2%	1%
Education					
Primary	2%	4%	4%	1%	1%
Secondary	6%	8%	6%	2%	1%
High school	13%	10%	6%	3%	3%
Tertiary	25%	19%	14%	5%	8%
Size of community					
Under 5k	7%	7%	5%	3%	2%
5k–20k	7%	4%	5%	2%	2%
20k–100k	11%	14%	10%	3%	4%
100k–500k	17%	13%	11%	1%	3%
Over 500k	16%	18%	7%	3%	5%
Class					
Upper middle	18%	13%	8%	4%	5%
Lower middle	13%	13%	8%	2%	4%
Working class	8%	7%	7%	2%	2%
Lower class	3%	4%	4%	3%	0%
TOTAL	**11%**	**10%**	**7%**	**3%**	**3%**

Notes: (1) Data source: *WVS*, 2012. (2) Data in cells represent % of respondents who participated at least once in the corresponding type of protest.

There are some interesting differences associated with socio-demographic variables. Men are slightly more likely than women to get involved in protests of any kind, whereas in the case of volunteering there were no significant gender differences. People with the age between 50 and 64 years old are more likely than the others to protest through peaceful demonstrations or strikes, while people 65 and over are less likely to get involved in protest activities. Education (see *Figure 6*) shows that protesting is, by far, more popular as a form of participation among the college educated than among the other education groups. By comparison to a high school graduate, a college graduate is about twice as likely to join any of the five forms of protest included in the analysis: 25% have signed a petition, 19% have joined a peaceful demonstration, 14% have joined a strike, 5% have joined a boycott, and 8% have protested in some other forms. Protesting is almost inexistent in rural areas and in small towns with less than 20 000 inhabitants, and is more prevalent in urban areas.

New forms of participation

In addition to the forms of participation discussed until now, the technological developments of the last 20 years have opened the way towards new forms of participation, forms that either occur in a virtual space or combine the online presence and the on-the-street activities. Most of the instruments that are used online as tools for participation, however, are even newer.

It should be remembered that *Facebook,* for instance, the most widespread social network at the moment (about one billion users) was founded only in 2004, and it became open to all people over 13 years old only in 2006, meaning that it is only eight years old. *Twitter*, another social network service, is also only eight years old. And yet, despite their early age, they have played an instrumental role in organizing protests all over the world, from the anti-fracking movement in Romania, for instance, to the Arab Spring protests of 2011 or the Twitter revolution on 2009 in the Republic of Moldova.

While these new forms of participation have the potential to expand the number of active citizens and to encourage participation, especially in contexts in which mobilization was difficult before, it should also be mentioned that they have significant access costs that may be too high for some groups in the population. The first cost is an infrastructure cost – in order to be able to access the Internet and participate online, the net infrastructure has to be available to those who want to access it. This is not really a barrier in the Romanian context, except, perhaps, in the most remote areas. The second cost is a monetary one – in order to be able to access the Internet and participate online people need to have a computer and an internet connection. This may be a significant cost in the Romanian context. Finally, the third cost is an educational one – even if a person has access to a computer and to an Internet connection, the person still needs to be computer-

literate in order to be able to access the Internet and participate online. This is not necessarily a problem for the younger generations, but it might be an insurmountable obstacle for at least some of the elderly population in rural areas, especially if they have never used a computer.

Thus, despite the fact that these new forms of participation seem to open up new possibilities of getting involved, for becoming active, and for participating more, this potential is not the same for everyone and everywhere; it has costs that some may find acceptable, while others may find impossible to pay.

CONCLUSIONS

The main purpose of this paper has been to indicate some of the factors which I consider to be responsible for the low levels of political participation in Romania and to present recent data related to the most common forms of participation in Romania: interest in politics, voting, volunteering, and protesting. I have opted for a descriptive, rather than an explanatory framework, because I believe that, before trying to explain a phenomenon such as political participation, one has to make sure that all the relevant dimensions and components of the phenomenon that will eventually be explained are observed and taken into account.

As I have shown, political participation in Romania is maintained at very low levels because the main pre-requisites of participation are underdeveloped. Low levels of tolerance to others and low levels of trust in other people make sure that contacts with different people are difficult to create and maintain. The effects of these individual-level characteristics are compounded by contextual level effects. The Romanian political system is a very close one, without many access points that could be used by people to transmit their demands to the political system. Most of the existing access points are either inefficient, or they have been taken over by political parties and politicians. Moreover, access to the political system via the formation of a new political party is restricted by the existence of requirements that are difficult to fulfill by new political actors. Finally, Romanians do not have a culture of participation, of any kind, making it difficult for those who might be interested in becoming active to have a ready-made model of participation.

As a result of these barriers to political participation, it should not be surprising that participation of any kind is at rather low levels: Romanians are not very interested in politics, they have to pay increasingly higher costs for staying informed, they become less and less interested in voting in a system that does not offer them a significant choice. All these lead to a large proportion of people retreating from the public sphere to live their lives in increasingly smaller private spheres. Unless something exceptional manages to move them towards activity, most prefer to avoid volunteering and to avoid political participation.

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Acest articol analizează încă insuficient dezvoltata participare politică în România postcomunistă, centrându-se pe condiţiile iniţiale ale participării politice şi asupra modului în care acestea se comportă ca inhibitori pentru implicarea politică a cetăţenilor. Prevalenţa intoleranţei, lipsa de încredere în ceilalţi oameni şi în instituţiile statului, absenţa punctelor de acces către sistemul politic şi o insuficient dezvoltată cultură a protestului reprezintă factori care contribuie la a-i determina pe români să evite participarea politică. Datele existente despre vot, voluntariat şi protest demonstrează subdezvoltarea participării politice în România.

Cuvinte-cheie: *participare politică, cultură politică, neîncredere în politică, România.*