

The Mobilization of the Romanian Diaspora: An Overview of a Transnational Community Connected during the 2014 Presidential Elections in Romania

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I. Introduction

Since 2007, with the accession of Romania to the European Union, we witness a significant migration of Romanian nationals to the countries of the European Union and, more particularly, to countries such as Spain, Italy, the United Kingdom, Germany, France etc. This migration has greatly intensified in recent years so that, according to the data for 2019, the number of Romanian citizens living outside the country amounts to 9.7 million, of which 5.6 million are in the diaspora³. We are, therefore, witnessing a massive migration of the Romanian population to Europe⁴, but also to other continents. According to the UN statistics based on data collected for 2017, Romania ranked second after Syria in terms of

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³ Radio Europa Liberă Română, “Ministrul pentru românii de pretutindeni : 9,7 milioane de români traiesc în afara granițelor țării, iar 5,6 milioane sunt în diaspora” [The Minister for Romanians worldwide.: 9,7 milion Romanians live abroad and 5,6 are part of the Diaspora] (2019, July 24), <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/ministrul-pentru-diaspora-9-7-milioane-de-romani-traiesc-in-afara-granitelor-tarii-iar-mai-mult-de-jumatate-sunt-in-diaspora/30073056.html> (accessed May 10, 2020).

⁴ Protv. *Romania – tara din care au migrat cei mai multi oameni după Siria* [Romania – the country with the most migrants after Syria] <https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/social/romania-tara-din-care-au-migrat-cei-mai-multi-oameni-dupa-siria-raport-ingrijorator-al-onu.html> (accessed Septembrie 6, 2016).

the number of migrants, so that 17% of the population of Romania has left the country, or about 4 million people⁵.

Diaspora studies have highlighted the conceptual complexity of the notion of diaspora, its difficulties in theorizing, and the complexity of categorization. William Berthomière and Lisa Anteby-Yemini⁶ point out that, in the 1990s, several typologies were advanced to understand and describe diasporas. With this in mind, Michel Bruneau emphasizes in his study that diasporic typology must take into account three structuring poles: entrepreneurship, religion, and politic⁷.

Several authors have highlighted the transnational dimension of the diasporic communities such as Stefaan Verhulst⁸, Myria Georgiou⁹, and Dumitru Sandu, 2018¹⁰. The concept of a transnational community refers to “communities made up of individuals or groups established in different national societies, which act on the basis of common interests and references (territorial, religious, linguistic), and which rely on transnational networks to strengthen their solidarity across national borders”¹¹. The term diaspora now includes a broad social reality. As Stéphane Dufoix points out, this term was used initially to refer to “religious groups spatially dispersed and living in a minority among other peoples”¹².

Thus, theoretical approaches that deal with the phenomenon of migration, globalization, cosmopolitan democracy, trans-nationalism, media and new media highlight the fact that the diaspora can no longer be analysed solely as a community in a dispersed space. At present, the

⁵ Cf. *Diaspora romana* [Romanian diaspora], wikipedia.org/wiki/Diaspora_rom%C3%A2n%C4%83 (accessed September 27, 2020).

⁶ Lisa Anteby-Yemi, William Berthomière and Gabriel Scheffer, *Les diasporas 2000 ans d'histoire* (Rennes: Presses Universitaire de Rennes, 2005).

⁷ M. Bruneau, *Diaspora et espaces transnationaux* (Bucharest: Economica, 2004).

⁸ S. Verhulst. “Diasporic and Transnational Communication: Technologies, policies and regulation”. In *The Public*, 6, no.1 (1999): 29-36.

⁹ M. Georgiou, “Identity, Space and the Media Thinking Through in Diaspora,” in *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales* 26:1 (2010): 17-35.

¹⁰ Dumitru Sandu, “Drumurile noilor diaspore românești: între aici și acolo” [The roads of the new Romanian diaspora: between here and there], in the conference “*Conferința interdisciplinară Romania Mare 2.0. De la insula de latinitate la arhipelagul global*” (Bucharest, November 23-24, 2018).

¹¹ R. Kastoriano, “Immigration, communautés transnationales et citoyenneté”, in *Revue Internationale des Sciences Sociales*, 165 (2000): 353.

¹² S. Dufoix, *Les diasporas, Que sais-je?* (Paris: PUF, 2003).

term diaspora should be considered in a broader sense in the context of globalization, transnational mobility, as well as in the context of the generalization of new media. According to Camelia Beciu,¹³ diaspora refers to communities and individuals who are temporarily on the territory of another country in professional, economic, cultural mobility, etc., who create networks and affiliations in that country, but remain in constant contact with the country of origin.

Recent developments in the migration phenomenon have highlighted the fact that the journey of migrants, above all, crosses the territory of digital. As Dana Diminescu points out¹⁴, this change calls for a change in the epistemological approach and thus the theoretical and methodological procedure must be reconsidered and confronted with this new migratory situation.

Digital diasporic communities or e-diaspora¹⁵ is the generic term that brings together, through the web and, more particularly, through the social networks, diaspora communities present in the digital domain. Via Website, the information is shared and disseminated in a quick and effective way between dispersed groups. Such communication leads to a form of transnational connection that is instant, less constrained, more intense and more efficacious. These connections have led, in many cases, to the construction of new diaspora identities or, in some cases, virtual, as well as to a number of reconfigurations of existing identities.

From this perspective, our study intends to lay the foundation for a methodological framework for an analysis of the Romanian diasporic communities¹⁶ through this territory of digital by highlighting new diasporic identities as well as the reconfiguration of existing identities. Our questions focus on the prominent role played by these communities in mobilizing the Romanian people in the 2014 presidential elections. Our initial hypothesis is that the formation of these digital communities,

¹³ C. Beciu, "Reprezentarea mediatică a diasporei în context electoral: identități discursive și forme de angajament" [Media representation of the diaspora in an electoral context: discursive identities and forms of engagement], *Revista Română de Sociologie* [Romanian Journal of Sociology] 23:1-2 (2012): 49-66.

¹⁴ D. Diminescu, "Genèse d'une figure de migrant", *Cosmopolitiques* 11 (2006): 63-73.

¹⁵ D. Diminescu, "Les migrants connectés", *TIC, Mobilités et migrations, Réseaux* 159:1 (2010): 9-13.

¹⁶ This analysis of the Romanian diasporic communities will be the subject of two articles that will be published in the near future.

especially those formed through the social networks Facebook or Twitter, has allowed the creation of new forms of media coverage.

II. The Mobilization of the Romanian Diaspora in the Presidential Elections

Thus, our approach deals with the process of mobilizing the Romanian diaspora via social networks during the 2014 presidential elections in Romania.

In an interview for the newspaper *Contributors.ro* at the time of the presidential elections, Dumitru Sandu highlighted the fact that Romanian citizens communicated with their relatives and families in the diaspora and that, during these exchanges, they reciprocally transmitted themes of the public agenda as well as cultural models of voting¹⁷.

In order to understand what determined the mobilization of the Romanian diaspora and how it influenced the Romanian citizens' decision to cast their vote, we will briefly re-contextualize the format of the presidential elections.

The presidential elections of 2014 were structured in accordance with the following timetable: on November 2nd, the first round, and on November 16th, the second round. While for the first round, 14 candidates¹⁸ were in the race, for the second round, only two candidates remained, the incumbent Prime Minister, Victor Ponta (Alliance of PSD-UNPR-PC), with 40% of votes, and the mayor of the city of Sibiu at the time, Klaus Iohannis (ACL), with 30.37%. For the second ballot, the participation to the vote experienced an increase of 10%, which enabled Klaus Iohannis to win the elections.

Statistics reveal that the rate of participation of Romanian citizens in the presidential elections was very low in Romania, but considerably higher with Romanian citizens living abroad compared to the 2009 elections. Thus, the rate of participation in the first round of 2009

¹⁷ Dumitru Sandu, "Două Români și o diasporă?" [Two Romanians and one diaspora], *Contributors.ro* (November 10, 2014). <https://www.contributors.ro/doua-romanii-%C8%99i-o-diaspora/> (accessed March 2, 2020).

¹⁸ Victor Ponta - PSD, Klaus Iohannis - PNL, Elena Udrea - PMP, Monica Macovei - independent, Calin Popescu-Tariceanu - independent candidate, Teodor Melescanu - independent candidate, Hunor Kelemen - UDMR, Dan Diaconescu - PP-DD, Corneliu Vadim Tudor - PRM, Gheorghe Funar - independent candidate, Wiliam Branza - PER, Zsolt Szilagyi - PPMT, Constantin Rotaru - PAS, Mirel Mircea Amaritei - Prodemo.

presidential elections was 53.52%¹⁹ and 56.99%, respectively. For the 2014 elections, however, the participation rate recorded by the OCI was 52.31%²⁰ for the first round and 62.04%²¹ for the second. Regarding the rate of participation of Romanian citizens abroad, there was a very significant development: in 2009, the number of votes was 147,754²² in the second round, while the number of votes in 2014 was 362,692²³.

It is essential to clarify that, among the determining factors in the voting decision and in the mobilization of the Romanian diaspora community — which created a lot of controversy in the country, but also abroad —, it was highly impossible for the Romanian migrants to be able to exercise their right to vote in the first round of the presidential elections. The Romanian government decided not to open more polling stations, on the contrary to close all polling stations from abroad at 9:00

¹⁹ Biroul Electoral Central, Pentru alegerea Președintelui României din anul 2009. *Comunicat privind participarea populației la vot pentru alegerea președintelui României, noiembrie 2009* [Communication regarding the participation of the population in the vote for the election of the President of Romania, November, 2009]. www.bec2009p.ro/Documente%20PDF/Statistici/Prezentla%20la%20vot/ora%2021/comunicat_rn_21.pdf (accessed September 6, 2016).

²⁰ Biroul Electoral Central, Pentru alegerea Președintelui României din anul 2014. *Comunicat privind participarea populației la vot pentru alegerea președintelui României, 2 noiembrie 2014* [Communication regarding the participation of the population in the vote for the election of the President of Romania, November 2, 2014]. www.bec2014.ro/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/ComunicatOra21.pdf (accessed September 6, 2016).

²¹ Biroul Electoral Central, Pentru alegerea președintelui României din anul 2014. *Comunicat privind participarea populației la vot pentru alegerea președintelui României, 16 noiembrie 2014* [Communication regarding the participation of the population in the vote for the election of the President of Romania, November 16, 2014]. www.bec2014.ro/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/ComunicatOra21.tif (accessed September 7, 2016).

²² Biroul Electoral Central, Pentru alegerea președintelui României, turul II, 06 decembrie 2009, *Rezultatele alegerilor pentru președintele României din data de 6 decembrie 2009, pe județe, localități și secții de votare* [The results of the elections for the President of Romania on December 6, 2009, by counties, localities and polling stations]. www.bec2009p.ro/Documente%20PDF/Rezultate/Rezultate%20finale%20turul%20II/tur2_strainatate.txt (accessed September 7, 2016).

²³ Biroul Electoral Central, Pentru alegerea Președintelui României din anul 2014, *Comunicat privind participarea populației la vot din secțiile de votare din străinătate pentru alegerea Președintelui României, 16 noiembrie, ora 23 :00* [Communiqué regarding the participation of the population in the vote from polling stations abroad, for the election of the President of Romania, November 16, 11 p.m.]. www.bec2014.ro/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/ComunicatOra231.pdf (accessed September 5, 2015).

p.m.²⁴ Those incidents produced a strong mobilization of the Romanian diaspora, who organized demonstrations in front of embassies and consulates of Romania abroad. In this context, after the publication of the results of the first round, the support for the candidate of the Opposition, Klaus Iohannis, given by the Romanian diaspora was clearly made known: he obtained 89.73% of the votes from abroad. The diaspora and a majority of the population blamed the then Prime Minister, Victor Ponta, and his government, for the situation created abroad, saying that he and the ministers of his cabinet deliberately prevented them from voting in the first round.

Therefore, long queues outside polling stations abroad were formed, but unable to vote until the 10:00 p.m. deadline. Reactions of the Romanian diaspora were highly publicized on social networks, especially on Facebook and Twitter²⁵. Thanks to the information mediated by the Romanian diaspora, the Romanian media were able to broadcast the voting process at most stations at all times.

III. The Role of the Connected Romanian Diasporic Communities: Reconfiguration of the Forms of Media Coverage

We have chosen the topic of the 2014 presidential elections because the significant mobilization of the Romanian diaspora produced several upheavals as well as the awareness about the involvement of the media and the new media in the context of the elections.

On the subject of the Romanian diaspora and its role in the 2014 presidential elections, Mihai Covaci, in a study published in “Sfera Politicii”, questioned the stakes of that campaign: “Was there anything

²⁴ Costin Ionescu, “Thousands of Romanians form queues of hundreds of meters at polling stations abroad in defiant vote in key presidential elections”, *Hotnews* (November 16, 2014). http://english.hotnews.ro/stiri-top_news-18575670-romanians-form-queues-hundreds-meters-defiant-vote-key-presidential-elections.htm (accessed September 10, 2016).

²⁵ R.P. “Alegeri prezidentiale 2014. Imagini care vor face istorie: Romanii au facut cozi fara precedent la sectiile de votare din Brescia Firenze, Reus, Dublin, Barcelona, Bilbao, Roma, Madrid” [2014 Presidential Elections. Images that will make history: Romanians have formed unprecedented queues at polling stations in Brescia Florence, Reus, Dublin, Barcelona, Bilbao, Rome, Madrid], *Hotnews* (November 16, 2014). www.hotnews.ro/stiri-politic-18573763-foto-imagini-care-vor-face-istorie-romanii-facut-cozi-fara-precedent-sectiile-votare-din-viena-munchen-tivoli-dublin-hamburg-torino.htm, (accessed May 5, 2020).

in the personality of the candidate Klaus Iohannis that led potential voters in the country and in the diaspora to mobilize, or the aggressive and negative campaign carried out by the candidate Victor Ponta was the decisive factor for the winner of the presidential elections in November 2014? The socio-political consciousness of the Romanians has reached a degree of maturity, and this fact, accompanied by the fulfilment of the main needs, had the effect of transforming certain desires, the birth of political choices, the nutrition of aspirations for another type of future that is somehow freed from communism's darkness. We can see, in the diaspora vote, an imminent desire to express freedom (learned by comparison with other peoples) in a timely and peaceful manner. We can see a diaspora that has learned what civic freedom means and how it can be expressed"²⁶.

Referring to the space of discursivity offered by social networks and to the fact that different uses can appear within these connected communities, Sarah Rakotoary highlighted the fact that "Facebook becomes both a relay of information, a source of information through the sharing of news about the group, but also a vector of mobilization around solidarity actions or physical encounters"²⁷.

The social network Facebook has been a key factor in the mobilization of Romanian diasporic communities and in the mobilization of the Romanian population in general. In Romania, social networks began to develop in 2011, when there were more than 2 million Facebook accounts²⁸. It is the most popular social network in Romania and the number of users has increased enormously in the past years. In 2015, according to a study published by Facebrands.ro²⁹, there were 7.6

²⁶ M. Covaci. "Factorul Facebook în alegerile prezidențiale din 2014" [The Facebook factor in the 2014 presidential election], *Sfera politicii* 183:1 (2015): 86.

²⁷ S. Rakotoary. "Reconfigurations de formes médiatiques des usagers du réseau socionumérique Facebook: le cas de la diaspora connectée malgache de France Metropolitaine", in *REFSICOM. Médias et migration/immigration : représentations, communautés et réseaux numériques* (December 30, 2019). <http://www.refsicom.org//655> (accessed March 27, 2020).

²⁸ Cătălin Ionascu. "Campania electorală social media – un must nu un moft", *Romanian Copywriter* (February 15, 2015), <https://romaniancopywriter.ro/campania-electoral-social-media> (accessed May 5, 2020).

²⁹ Facebrands.ro. *FaceBrands Report: Comunicate, analize si statistici despre Facebook, noutati* (January 14, 2015). <http://www.facebrands.ro/blog/2015/01/7-6-m-conturi-utilizatori-facebook-romania> (accessed May 10, 2020).

million users of Facebook in Romania. We would like to point out that very few analyses took into account, at the beginning of 2014, the possibility of Facebook's involvement in the mobilization of voters, let alone those of the diasporic communities. In the context of a significant increase in the number of accounts of Facebook users during the presidential elections, we were faced with a reconfiguration of media practices of diasporic communities on Facebook. This network, thus, has become a powerful relay of information, but also a vector for mobilizing the electorate.

The organization of demonstrations between the two rounds of presidential elections in Bucharest, Timisoara, Craiova, etc., infused and orchestrated very often by the diasporic communities, were announced and organized on Facebook. Following this initiative on Facebook, almost 10,000 people took to the streets in support of the Romanian diaspora prevented from voting in the first round of the presidential elections. The next day, it was the turn of the diaspora to mobilize in the large urban areas where the Romanian diaspora was very large, like Paris, Vienna, London, and Milan. In order to get to the vote, the Romanian diaspora mobilized on Facebook groups³⁰, to arrange the trip by carpool or bus to the polling stations.

It is essential to point out that most of the information disseminated by the traditional media came from the Romanian diaspora via Facebook. The testimonies of the voters, the way the voting process took place in the 294 polling stations abroad were also the object of the many posts.

Several coordinated mobilization campaigns via Facebook were initiated, such as the mobilization campaign to get to the "We are making ourselves heard" vote were followed by a few million Romanians on the Prima TV channel and on Facebook.

The methodological framework that we have developed to analyze and understand the forms of the media coverage used by the Romanian diasporic community and more specifically via social networks during the 2014 presidential elections is quite broad and will be the subject of another study. Therefore, we employ a mixed methodological apparatus that combines both a quantitative (a questionnaire survey, analysis of several post-election studies) and a qualitative (focus group and discursive analysis) methodology.

³⁰ Cf. to the information gathered by our questionnaire the organisation of trips between members of the Romanian diaspora is set up via Facebook groups.

The questionnaire survey was carried out between May 2018 and July 2020 with 1,200 nationals of the Romanian diaspora living permanently or temporarily in countries such as Germany, Austria, Belgium, France, Spain, Italy, Great Britain, or more distant countries such as Australia, the United States of America, etc., in order to understand their presence and participation via the territory digital of social networks.

On the other hand, in order to understand the set of factors (psychological, social, economic, etc.) that helped mobilize the Romanian diaspora as well as the Romanian people to go and vote, we relied on statistics and polls published before, during, and after the presidential elections.

The post-election study carried out by the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy on the motivations and factors of influence on the electorate is significant in understanding the role of connected diasporic communities during these elections. We have considered only the analysis of the issues relevant in relation to the influence of the voting process in the diaspora and the message exchanges with relatives who were part of the diaspora.

The analysis of the post-election studies has been correlated with the three focus groups. In addition to the quantitative data collected by the questionnaire survey method concerning the mobilization of the diasporic community on social networks during the 2014 Romanian presidential elections, we have used the focus group method to collect qualitative data. We organized several group interviews with target groups that included social categories from urban to rural areas, with a common feature: participation in the second round of the 2014 presidential election of parents, friends, and acquaintances in the diaspora.

IV. Conclusion

Using this methodological framework that we have just outlined, we will try on the one hand to understand how the uses and practices of the media coverage employed during this electoral campaign have enabled the Romanian diaspora to continue its mobilization and involvement in public life through social networks, and on the other, to understand and exemplify how this mobilization orchestrated by the Romanian diaspora has continued with other actions that have made it possible to significantly increase the role of the Romanian diaspora such as the

demonstrations of August 10th, 2018 that will remain engraved in the political history of Romania.

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