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Iulian STĂNESCU

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THE CURIOUS STORY OF THE 2018 ROMANIAN TRADITIONAL FAMILY REFERENDUM: BUCK-PASSING AND THE FAILURE TO MOBILISE VOTERS

Iulian STĂNESCU¹

Abstract

In 2018, a referendum to revise the Constitution took place in Romania. Just one article was in contention for revision. The goal was to make gay marriage unconstitutional. In the end, the referendum failed due to a low turnout of just 21.1%, below the 30% threshold required for validation. This paper looks into the causes of the low turnout. First, there is an overview of knowns and unknowns, such as lack of exit poll data and issues with the voting population numbers. The bulk of the paper deals with two overlapping narratives about the causes of low turnout - first, a boycott campaign and second, a combination of factors, especially low mobilisation. Using precinct level results, supplemented by pre and post referendum polling data, an examination of evidence for both narratives is put forward. The results provide a case for failure of mobilisation by main political parties and religious organisations, especially the Orthodox Church, despite public statements of support for a “Yes” vote in the referendum. In turn, this was based on a buck-passing strategy by political parties and religious organisations.

Keywords: Romania; religion; same sex marriage; gay marriage; referendum; political parties.

¹ Research Institute for Quality of Life, National Institute for Economic Research “Costin C. Kirişescu”, Romanian Academy, 13 September Road no. 13, District 5, 050711, Bucharest, ROMANIA. E-mail: stanescu.iccv@gmail.com.

Introduction

A referendum to change the Romanian constitution took place on October 6-7, 2018. The aim of the referendum was to revise just one article of the Constitution. In question was article 48, which is entitled the family, but, in fact, deals with marriage. In contention and subject to revision was the wording of the article about the people entering marriage. The intended revision was to replace of the word “spouses” with “man and woman”, so that “family is based on the free choice marriage between spouses...” would be superseded by “family is based on the free choice marriage between a man and a woman...” In essence, the rewording was meant to make gay marriage unconstitutional or rather make unconstitutional a future gay marriage bill or law. Therefore, the referendum was called in the media as the traditional family referendum or the family referendum, thus stressing the difference between traditional and gay or same-sex marriages.

According to official results, 91.6% of valid votes cast in the referendum were in favour of the constitutional revision. However, turnout was just 21.1% of registered voters. As the legal threshold for validation was 30%, the referendum was declared not valid.

There are, of course, many ways of looking into this referendum and its meanings: from philosophy, theology, Constitutional and human rights law, communication science, sociology, political science - all of them legitimate, all of them providing their own insight.

This paper will look into the 2018 referendum from a sociological standpoint on just one issue - the turnout. All other abovementioned perspectives on the referendum remain beyond its scope. The crux of the paper deals with the contradiction between the peculiarities of Romanian society. From them we could mention the clear majority of Romanians that declare themselves against gay marriage in opinion polls by at least a 2 to 1 margin before and after the referendum and Romania’s standing as one of the most religious countries in Europe, on one had, and the low turnout at the referendum, on the other hand. In other words, the paper will seek to provide answers to the following question: how was it possible that a majority of 74% of Romania’s population that, according to opinion polls, was against gay marriage turned itself into a minority of just 19.3% of registered voters that cast a “yes” ballot in the referendum? In simpler terms: how was it possible to diminish the level of opposition to gay marriage, as expressed by turnout for a “yes” vote, from 74% to just 19% of the population?

As with most complex sociological questions, the issue of the 2018 referendum turnout has a multi-causal explanation. In other words, there is no single outstanding cause for the low turnout, no “magic bullet” explanation. Particularly, we will look at two overlapping narratives. First, (1) the boycott campaign against the referendum, and second (2) a combination of causes including lack of real debate in the Romanian society on the issue of the referendum, lack of mobilisation, and

the unusual, even bizarre, wording of the question on the ballot paper, which, together, led to low saliency and confusion.

Methodology and data

The task of scientific analysis of the 2018 family referendum and its low turnout is compounded by the fact that no exit poll was conducted. In addition, reliable public polling is scarce. Therefore, a first step is the review of the knowns and unknowns regarding the referendum. The relevant history of referenda in Romania and the political context in the timeframe of the referendum are presented to the reader. The bulk of the paper deals with these two overlapping narratives about the causes of low turnout and the examination of the best available evidence. The two narratives are, in fact, two cumulative, non-exclusive subsets of causes that are part of a larger multi-causal explanation strategy for the referendum's failure. Investigation of some of these causes falls outside the scope of this paper or is impossible due to the absence of data for scientific analysis. Nevertheless, in light of this multi-causal explanation, key features of the turnout are analyzed. The main source of data comes from the precinct election results, which were aggregated at various levels: locality (communes for rural areas, townships, and municipalities for urban areas), county, and national. This source was supplemented by the available pre and post referendum polling data. The demographics and geography behind the turnout at county level were analyzed using a model based on multiple regression. Further details about the variables and dataset are presented in the part about the model. The last section of the paper deals with the mobilisation effort by parties and religious denominations and bodies. Correlation analysis based on precinct returns aggregated at locality and county level was used for the main religious denominations.

Knowns and unknowns

The first and foremost challenge for any analysis of the 2018 Romanian traditional family referendum is the scarcity of social data. As we shall see, this is due to a lack of reliable, public polling data. Instead, opinion poll data was kept private. Moreover, no exit poll was carried out. Therefore, the social composition of voters will remain forever unknown. As a result, the layer of uncertainty surrounding the referendum and its outcome thickens. Under these circumstances, the common sociological methodological approach of primary and/or secondary data analysis from exit poll and/or opinion poll is no longer a viable option. In terms of data source, we need a plan B, or, in other words, finding the next best thing. Therefore, let us review the major knowns and unknowns concerning the referendum.

Knowns

First, there is ample data regarding overall religious life in Romania, as well as attitudes, opinions, and perceptions of Romanians regarding issues such as homosexuality and gay marriage. Most of this data comes from cross-national surveys carried out through major international research programs, such as the World Values Survey or European Values Survey, but also from national surveys, some with the support of Western donors, such as the George Soros' Open Society Network. The overall picture that comes across from the scholarly work on these subjects reveals Romania as one of the most religious countries in Europe (Şandor and Popescu, 2008), with a strong link between religion and national identity (Flora *et al.*, 2005). Following the collapse of Communism in 1989 and a difficult, even traumatic transition to capitalism (Zamfir, 2004), Romania experienced a religious revival (Voicu & Constantin, 2012). In terms of perceptions about homosexuality and attitudes towards values issues such as gay marriage, Romania comes across as a conservative country. Social perceptions of homosexuality are predominantly negative (Moraru, 2010). Moreover, homosexuality has not become more accepted over time in Romania compared to other parts of the world (McGee, 2016).

The results of a 2015 survey carried out by the prestigious US based Pew Foundation are highly relevant, since these were the most recent survey data from a cross-national program prior to the referendum. The full results of the Pew survey were made available two years later (Pew Research Center, 2017). Data for Romania was collected in July-October 2015 by Ipsos. Sample size was 1,361, with interviews conducted by the CAPI method. No further data on sampling base was provided. Most likely, it was random route, since access to electoral rolls is no longer possible in Romania due to administrative issues and data protection regulations.

The overall results from the cross-national survey conducted by Pew Research from 2015-2017 placed Romania as the most religious out of 34 European countries (Evans and Baronavski, 2018). According to an overall index developed by Pew researchers, 55% of adults in Romania are "highly religious". Moreover, Romania ranked 4th in the percentage of people (50%) that say religion is very important, 2nd in the percentage of people (50%) that say they attend worship at least monthly, 3rd in the percentage of people (44%) that say they pray daily, and 4th in the percentage of people (64%) that say they believe in God with absolute certainty.

The 2015 Pew Research survey also delivered results about attitudes, opinions, and perceptions of Romanians regarding homosexuality and gay marriage. Homosexuality was widely seen as morally wrong (82%), as in all Orthodox-majority countries. Three quarters of the population opposed allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally; moreover, two thirds (66%) said they strongly oppose. However, there was a higher acceptance of legal gay marriage among younger adults, as in all other Orthodox majority countries, with 33% who favour/strongly

favour in the 18-34 age bracket as compared to just 23% in the rest of the adult population (Pew Research Center, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2017).

A second known comes from the public positions on the issue of the referendum. In summer and fall of 2018, with one exception, all main Romanian political parties made public their position on the referendum. The reason behind the public endorsement by the main political parties for the revision of the Constitution comes from polling data, which revealed that large majorities of all parties' voters were against gay marriage. 77% for ALDE, according to internal polling (Scutaru, 2018), 96% PSD, 88% PMP, 87% ALDE, 84% PNL, and 69% USR, according to public polling data by Romanian polling company CURS (Eremia, 2018). Note that USR was the only party not to endorse the initiative to revise the constitution and the family referendum. Moreover, the issue was put forward to the public as the reason for parting ways with its founder and first party leader.

A third known deals with polling. The results of the CURS opinion poll (2018), released on October 4, just one day before polling, are highly relevant. This was the only instance of public polling released during the referendum campaign. CURS estimated a turnout of 34%. The data was collected by face-to-face interviews during September 20-October 1. Sample size was 1,067. However, CURS failed to provide information about who paid for the poll, as well as key methodological information regarding sampling and interviewing methods. Even with its shortcomings, this poll remains relevant.

A fourth known comes from the official referendum results, as released by the Central Electoral Bureau (2018), including the dataset with precinct level results. Crucially, this allows for aggregation at county, locality (commune, township, municipality), and national level, including the urban/rural breakdown. Sadly, further data released on the Central Electoral Bureau website about the gender and age breakdown of voters was taken offline and, thus, is all but forever lost. According to the final official results, the referendum was invalidated, since only 21.1% of registered voters took part, as compared with a 30% threshold for validation. 91.6% of those that casted a ballot voted "Yes" (in favour of the revision of the Constitution, and "against" gay marriage), equivalent of 19.3% of registered voters (see full results in *Table 1*).

Table 1. Official referendum results

| | persons | percentage of all ballots | percentage of valid ballots | percentage of registered voters |
|--------------------------------------|------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Registered voters for the referendum | 18,279,011 | | | |
| Voters taking part in the referendum | 3,857,308 | | | 21.1 |
| “Yes” | 3,531,732 | 91.6 | 93.4 | 19.3 |
| “No” | 249,412 | 6.5 | 6.6 | 1.4 |
| Spoiled ballots | 76,111 | 2.0 | | 0.4 |

Source: Central Electoral Bureau (2018)

The fifth and final known category deals with pre and post-referendum polling comparison, as released by IRES (2018). Data collection for the pre-referendum poll was in mid September, while the post-referendum poll was carried out in late October 2018. Both polls were conducted by computer assisted telephone interviews (CATI). The sample volume was 1,300 for the first poll and 1,137 for the second one. The main finding of the IRES polls was that the referendum had no effect on the level of support for gay marriage and the level of tolerance for homosexuality. 82% of respondents said they opposed gay marriage in both polls. In addition, only 12% of respondents said the referendum campaign changed their mind on the issue of gay marriage, one way, or another.

Unknowns

There are three outstanding “known unknowns”, to follow former US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s famous quip.

The first known unknown is the social makeup of the voters. As mentioned above, there was no exit poll on polling day, so we will never know the socio-demographics of those that took part, especially those who voted “yes”. Who were the men and women that took part, what were their political and social attitudes and values? This will be forever unknown. In addition, even the basic official data released on the Central Electoral Bureau website about the gender and age breakdown of voters is no longer available.

The second “known unknown” is the scarcity of opinion poll data, both before and after the referendum. In fact, there is not a single opinion poll dataset, pre- or post-referendum, available for secondary analysis. As a general observation, this scarcity of opinion poll data is not by chance, but rather a main feature, even a trend, of the past decade. In Romania, there is less public, verifiable,

transparent opinion poll data today than compared to the 1990s and most of the 2000s. Following the 2007 EU accession, international foundations that paid for opinion polls and even released the datasets for secondary analysis ended their programs in the country. The George Soros backed Open Society Foundation is the prime example. There has been no follow-up in this role by Romanian NGOs, the business sector, or the media. In this context, the academic community has found little or no interest in funding for domestic research programs of social attitudes, apart from international ones such as World Values Survey or European Values Survey.

The third “known unknown” deals with the size of the voting age population. A peculiar fact about Romania is the ever-growing disparity between the population in the electoral roll and the registered adult population. In other words, in the 1990s and early 2000s the number of registered voters increased over time, while Romania’s (resident) population decreased. This issue has three major root causes.

First, weak administrative capacity (Rotariu & Comşa, 2004, 31-32), which leads to persons being registered in more than one place due to failure to erase from the electoral roll persons changing their residence or the deceased. The main reason is that mayors and local politicians have a stake in keeping the number of inhabitants as high as possible. The number of councillors and the wages of elected officials is determined by the number of inhabitants.

Note that this issue predates the second cause, which is the mass (e) migration of Romanians to Western Europe following the introduction of the visa free regime for the Schengen area in 2002 and, especially, EU accession from 2007. For instance, there were close to 3 million Romanians registered as residents in other European countries as of 2015, which means, according to Rotariu et. al. (2017, 135-136), that the resident population of Romania was somewhere below 19 million in that year, compared to a population by citizenship of 22.24 million at the end of 2015. The total number of registered voters for the referendum was 18,279,011, according to the official results in the open data format (Biroul Electoral Central Referendum național pentru revizuirea Constituției 2018). However, the adult resident population was only 15.85 million as of January 1, 2018 and 15.76 million as of January 1, 2019, according to official statistics (National Statistics Institute, 2019a). Moreover, this total also includes expats, EU national or not, refugees, and other persons that do not have citizenship and thus are ineligible to vote.

Last, but not least, is the issue of people that hold double citizenship, but do not live in Romania. This is especially the case of Republic of Moldova citizens that also hold Romanian citizenship. While their exact number is not recorded in any official statistic and remains unclear, their total seems to be in range of hundreds of thousands. For instance, according to an official reply from the Romanian National Authority for Citizenship to a Moldovan news site (V.A., 2018), 521,025 Moldovan citizens received Romanian citizenship between 2002 and March 30, 2018. However, a large majority of these persons are not also residents of Romania

as they use their dual citizenship for the purpose of visa-free access to Western Europe.

The implication of the voting age population size is obvious and highly relevant: if the voting age population is significantly lower than the official one, than the turnout figures are, in turn, “erroneous”. The bottom line is that the turnout figures for the “real”, resident population of the country could be revised higher. This issue will be examined in detail in subsequent sections of this paper.

Context: history and politics

Context: turnout threshold - a tall mountain to climb

A look at the turnout data for all nationwide Romanian referendums highlights both the scale of the challenge faced by those in favour of the constitutional revision and the extent of the referendum’s failure. Out of 10 national referenda since the Revolution of December 1989, the 2018 family referendum had the lowest turnout of all (Table 2). Some contextual analysis on this point is in order.

During the 1990s, as Romania faced the economic and social turmoil of the transition period, turnout for all types of polls, elections or referenda, declined due to the decrease of public trust in the political process. Another reason for the turnout decline lies in the peculiarity of the increase of the population on the electoral roll despite demographic decline, as explained above. Overall, it became increasingly difficult to get over the 50% turnout threshold required for a referendum to be declared valid. Even referenda called on issues with broad population support at the time, such as EU accession or electoral reform, had serious trouble with the turnout threshold. For instance, the 2003 constitutional revision referendum, required for EU accession, was close to being ruled invalid. Only an unprecedented two-day polling period, supplemented by questionable get-out-the-vote raffles, special precincts, and loose rules against multiple voting, helped that referendum to cross over the turnout threshold. Political elites answered this trend by calling referenda on the same day as other national elections, and thus increasing the saliency of the referendum, the resources, and motivation for voter mobilisation. Higher saliency was particularly achieved if the referendum was called by or about the President of Romania. Those that stood to lose politically from the referendum result countered this trend by boycott. Calling their supporters to stay at home became more politically efficient than mobilisation to the polling station against the referendum. The outcome of the 2007 and 2012 referenda was decided by such boycott calls. The 2009 referendum barely squeaked over the turnout threshold due to being called on the same day with the presidential election, a first order election in Romania, and by avoiding a boycott call from those who stood to lose from it. The bottom line of referenda peculiarities for the

2018 family referendum is that an explanation for its low turnout points requires more than one major cause; it calls for a multi-causal explanation.

Table 2. Turnout at Romanian national referenda since 1990

| Year | National referendum type | Registered voters | Votes cast | Turnout | Polling days |
|------|--|-------------------|------------|---------|--------------|
| 1991 | Constitutional referendum | 16,268,155 | 10,948,468 | 67.30 | 1 |
| 2003 | Constitutional revision referendum | 17,842,103 | 9,938,441 | 55.70 | 2 |
| 2007 | Recall referendum (President of Romania) | 18,301,309 | 8,135,272 | 44.45 | 1 |
| 2007 | Consultative referendum (e) | 18,296,459 | 4,851,470 | 26.52 | 1 |
| 2009 | Consultative referendum ¹ (e) | 18,293,277 | 9,320,240 | 50.95 | 1 |
| 2009 | Consultative referendum ¹ (e) | 18,293,277 | 9,320,240 | 50.95 | 1 |
| 2012 | Recall referendum (President of Romania) | 18,292,464 | 8,459,053 | 46.24 | 1 |
| 2018 | Constitutional revision referendum | 18,279,011 | 3,857,308 | 21.10 | 2 |
| 2019 | Consultative referendum ² (e) | 18,277,511 | 7,923,869 | 43.35 | 1 |
| 2019 | Consultative referendum ² (e) | 18,277,511 | 7,922,591 | 43.35 | 1 |

Sources: Central Electoral Bureau for 2007-2019 referenda (*Autoritatea Electorală Permanentă*), Constitutional Court (2003) decision for 2003 referendum, Nohlen & Stover (2010, 1591, 1598) and Agerpres (2016) for 1991 referendum.

Notes: ¹, ² - held on the same day; (e) – other national election held at the same time, European election in 2007, 2019, presidential election in 2009; up to 2012, referendum threshold was 50%

Context: high social tension and political division

With their binary choice, referenda inherently lead to more division within a community or a society, even if only for a short period. This is particularly relevant for the 2018 Romanian family referendum, for it took place in a society already divided and polarised. As the nation was about to celebrate the centennial of the

end of First World War and its full unification into a modern nation state, a large majority of Romanians (69%) were pessimistic about the state of the country and its future (Table 3).

Table 3. Romania – Direction of the country (2008-2018)

| Year | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 |
|-----------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Right direction | 39 | 16 | 9 | 12 | 26 | 19 | 20 | 38 | 30 | 36 | 24 |
| Wrong track | 34 | 63 | 79 | 71 | 52 | 59 | 61 | 37 | 60 | 54 | 69 |
| Don't know | 27 | 21 | 12 | 17 | 22 | 22 | 19 | 25 | 10 | 10 | 7 |

Source: European Commission Eurobarometer (2008-2018).

Notes: Economic recession during 2009-2010; presidential elections in 2009, 2014.

A higher, but arguably comparable, level of dissatisfaction with the direction of the country and greater political conflict was registered during 2009-2010, when Romania experienced its part in the Great Recession of the late 2000s and early 2010s. In 2018, the economy was in the eight consecutive year of robust growth. This time, it was politics, not the economy, as the main cause of dissatisfaction and division. In a pre-election year, politicians, political parties, the punditry, and their media allies further radicalised their message, leading to even more division and tension.

This high level of political tension is not an accident. Based on earlier work by historian Hans-Christian Maner (1997), Bogdan Bucur sees internal war as a key feature of Romanian political life even prior to the Communist period. According to Bucur (2019, 129), permanent conflict was the mainstay of internal Romanian politics. In this context, internal war means “a state of permanent internal political violence” between the challengers and the holders of power, in which the former “use force or threaten the use of force to change the state leadership or the makeup of the executive.”

The family referendum thus played its part as a general rehearsal or prelude for the two nationwide elections of 2019, European and presidential, and the two elections scheduled for 2020, local and parliamentary. The “internal war” feature of Romanian politics framed the referendum as more about current political issues, such as a growing protest against the party leader of the main governing party, rather than about the issue on the ballot. The tense political context helped fuel not a broad debate about gay marriage and the merits of a constitutional revision, but the insurgent and virulent boycott campaign seen as proxy in the ongoing violent political struggle for control over the state apparatus.

The First Narrative: A Referendum Boycott

The boycott campaign's status as a first order cause of the family referendum failure stems from its presence on the Internet and, especially, on Facebook, which is, by far, the leading form of social media in Romania.

The boycott campaign started in the immediate aftermath of the PSD Executive Committee meeting held on Friday, September 21, two weeks ahead of polling day. It reached its climax in the last week of the referendum campaign. The boycott's strategy was based on, and took aim at the very low favourability rating of the (then) PSD party leader, Liviu Dragnea. Its narrative and messages featured several claims: that the referendum was really about amnesty or pardoning, especially for those in jail for corruption, that the constitutional revision would be a political victory for Dragnea & PSD, that a successful boycott would strengthen the anti-corruption campaign. On top of these, there were other messages, such as anti-religion and anti-established church messages. The propaganda techniques used by the boycott campaign included the false dilemma, name-calling, and pinpointing the enemy.

A prime example of the propaganda used in the boycott campaign is the "Children of the Referendum" ad, produced by Papaya Advertising (2018), which had more than 1 million viewers on Facebook alone. Its tagline was "For evil not to happen, it is sufficient that good people stay at home". The ad featured the face of a "Big Brother" political leader in a dystopian future, which was photoshopped from the faces of Liviu Dragnea, leader of the senior governing party (PSD) and of Calin Popescu Tariceanu, leader of the junior governing party (ALDE).

Notably, the call to boycott was not started by a political party or a leading political or public figure. Rather, it sprang out from social media and the internet media, including op-eds and news websites articles. The boycott campaign surprised with its strength and especially its virulence (Necula, 2018). Due to its scope, tone, and the usage of the Internet and social media as the main mean of communication, it reminded of the 2016 UK Brexit referendum and the 2016 US presidential election. The issue with the boycott campaign lies with its origin and nature: was it organic or rather of the Astroturf, ersatz kind? In other words, we might ask the question: who or what had the organisational capability to design and successfully carry out such an ample Internet-based campaign.

How effective the boycott call was will be forever unknown due to the scarcity of social data, as noted above. The only data source is the CURS opinion poll, which allows only for a broad, rough estimate of the boycott campaign's effect. Data collection for the opinion poll started on September 20th, just one day prior to the PSD Executive Committee meeting and the start of the boycott campaign, and ended on Monday, October 1, in the last week of the campaign and just days before the two polling days of Saturday and Sunday, October 6-7. So, the CURS poll did not cover the last full week of the campaign, when the boycott campaign reached its climax, but rather its first 10 days.

Nevertheless, what we do know from the opinion poll is, first, that one week prior to polling the projected turnout was 34%, just above the referendum validation threshold by the margin the error of the poll. Second, that in the last week of the campaign at least 13% of registered voters took the decision to boycott, i.e. 34% projected turnout versus 21.1% achieved turnout. In terms of the resident population, the share of the population that took the decision to boycott in that timeframe would be around 15%, slightly higher. As explained above, this is due to the Romanian peculiarity of a significantly lower number of “real voters”, i.e. resident adults, than registered voters.

Our hypothesis is that the citizens that decided to boycott were, more likely than not, highly opinionated individuals, with high political awareness, strong partisan choices, with highly negative attitudes and feelings towards PSD and especially its then president Liviu Dragnea, and/or partisan voters of opposition parties. Unfortunately, due to the absence of exit poll data and no data availability for secondary analysis from the post-referendum IERS poll, this hypothesis could not be tested.

The end-result of the boycott campaign was that it depressed the turnout by keeping at home persons that usually vote, especially highly opinionated, partisan voters. In other words, it made the task much harder for those in favour of the constitutional revision against gay marriage. Since a sizeable slice of habitual voters were no longer in the pool of possible voters, reaching and then crossing over the turnout threshold of 30% became dependent on voter mobilisation of individuals who usually do not vote or vote only in first order elections, i.e. presidential elections. In terms of numbers, these individuals were the only ones that could compensate those for those that boycotted the referendum. However, this type of individual is much harder to mobilise than the habitual and/or partisan voters.

The Second Narrative: A Combination of Factors, apart from the boycott, especially lack of debate and lack of mobilisation

The second cause for the family referendum failure lies not in one factor but rather in a combination of factors, out of which lack of information and low mobilisation stand out. The basic argument for the existence of a second cause comes from the need to explain the behaviour of people that (a) did not vote in the referendum and (b) their motivation not to vote was other than (just) the boycott.

The importance of the second narrative comes from the size of this section of the electorate. So, how large was it? If the people that decided in the last week of the campaign to join the boycott are added to those that turned up to vote the sum is about one third of registered voters, a share derived from the turnout of 21.1% plus 13% of registered voters that took the decision to boycott in the last week of the campaign, according to the CURS poll. Therefore, the boycott campaign as sole causal factor leaves two thirds (66%) of registered voters or some 60% of the

resident population that are left unaccounted for their actions. These people could have voted, but did not do so and not necessarily because of the boycott. The sheer size of this share of the population makes clear that while the boycott campaign did increase the chance of low turnout and thus invalidation of the referendum, it was not the single cause of its failure.

These 66% of registered voters or 60% of the resident population could be divided in three subcategories. First are those that took the decision to boycott early on, during September 20 - October 1. Again, we will never know the number of early boycotters due to lack of data. More likely than not, their share could not be higher than the 13% of registered voters persuaded to boycott during the period in which the boycott campaign was on full throttle.

The second subcategory comprises a larger group of people that are apolitical or too disaffected with politics. These people do not vote in any kind of election. Data from past first order elections provides clues regarding their share in the electorate. For instance, in the four presidential elections since 2000, the share of people that did not turn out to vote amounted to at least 37% of registered voters and at least 27% of the adult resident population, respectively. It is safe to say that these people were the most difficult to persuade to turn up and possibly would not have done so regardless of any mobilisation effort. Finally, a third subcategory is formed by people that vote at least in first order (presidential) election, but did not turn out for the family referendum not due the boycott, but due to other causes and motivations. It is these other causes and motivations that we will look into the next section.

A failed campaign and public debate

In three out of four weeks of the campaign period, the media news cycle was dominated by other issues than the referendum, first of which was the PSD “coup”. A power struggle inside the main governing party took place, which ended two weeks before polling day. However, such a peculiarity of the news cycle is only part of a larger picture. The real issue that plagued the family referendum campaign was that Romania lacks the culture of a referendum debate.

A brief comparison with the 2016 UK Brexit referendum is revealing. The British referendum campaign featured two designated lead campaigns groups, one for each side, Leave or Remain, with 7 million GBP spending limit, which included a 600,000 GBP public money grant to cover TV broadcasts, free mailing, and other expenditure. In addition, political parties and other registered referendum campaigners had their own spending limits (The Electoral Commission, 2016). The media, especially TV and radio broadcasters, contributed to a successful public debate in terms of outreach in UK society. It did so by hosting various broadcasts, including high profile debates between public figures from the two lead campaigns. Overall, the broad nature of the debate and the success of the Leave and Remain

campaigns in reaching a wide share of the population with their messages and mobilisation effort led to a high turnout in the referendum.

In comparison, Romania had no such institutional set up. There was no legislation in place for designated campaign lead groups. The de-facto lead campaign for the “yes” vote was the Coalition for the Family. A loose grouping of NGOs, the Coalition for the Family first put up the idea of a Constitutional revision in order to block gay marriage and persuaded the Christian denominations, especially the majority Orthodox Church, to support the gathering of the required number of signatures for the bill to amend the constitution. In comparison with the British lead campaigns, the Coalition for the Family had no public funds available as part of a wider budget allocated for the referendum lead campaigns by the Romanian electoral regulator. Financial support directly from the corporate sector, various front groups, or NGOs with business backing was non-existent. With virtually no budget, the Coalition for the Family ran an insufficient, even amateurish campaign. On the other side of the debate, there was no de facto lead campaign in favour of “no”, but there was a virulent and powerful social media campaign to boycott the referendum, for which no organisation took responsibility or claimed as its own. Although legislation was in place regarding spending by political parties for referendum campaigns, the major political parties all but refrained to campaign officially, despite their public stance in support of the referendum. Major media outlets ignored the referendum as a news issue until two weeks prior to voting day. This editorial decision of news television executives is best understood through the propaganda model developed by Herman and Chomsky (1994, 1-36). With no media and advertising budget for the referendum campaign from lead campaign groups and political parties, the debate around the family referendum made no economic sense to TV executives, as well as the shareholders or oligarchs they report to. Instead, token, low profile debates were aired by the public service broadcaster (with modest ratings) and some news television channels. The overall picture of Romanian ratings for the TV networks saw no change during the campaign compared to the previous month (Obae, 2018).

Another source for the lack of culture in Romania concerning a referendum debate or campaign comes from the political practice of referenda. As we have written in the section about the turnout threshold, referenda were more used as political tool by presidents. By picking an issue for which a high share of the electorate was in favour, i.e. lowering number of MPs, ruling out pardoning or amnesty for corruption offenders, the President could get involved and campaign in other elections or gain more votes for himself in presidential elections. The opposition was left with the choice of ignoring the issue or picking a fight against the president on a populist issue that he owns and thus has the upper hand.

Overall, the complete failure to have a proper campaign or broad debate resulted in low salience for the issue on the referendum ballot, which, in turn, depressed the turnout (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2018).

The unusual question on the ballot

Romania's 1991 constitution was revised only once. In 2003, close to the end of the EU accession negotiations, numerous, albeit minor, revisions were made. In order to simplify things, parliament decided not to put each revision item on the ballot, but rather consolidate all changes through the question: "Do you agree with the Law to revise the Constitution, as voted by Parliament?", with a "Yes" or "No" answer (Law 3/2000, article 7). This provision of the law remained unchanged, as no one foresaw a situation in which just one article of the constitution would be subject to revision. Although legal, this phrasing of the question on the ballot opened the door to the disinformation or fake news campaign. As explained above, the boycott campaign claimed that this unusual, even bizarre wording of the question hid other changes to the constitution, of which the public was not informed. According to these claims, the referendum was not really a vote (just) for the traditional family or against gay marriage, but rather a vote in favour of amnesty and/or pardoning of those jailed or under trial for corruption. This was especially the case, the claims went on, for PSD party leader Liviu Dragnea, who had a suspended sentence and was then under trial for misuse of office.

Turnout analysis based on precinct level data

Due to the complete absence of individual level exit poll data, precinct level results remain the source of last resort for any analysis into the 2018 referendum. According to this data source, turnout was about 25% higher in rural precincts, although it did not cross the turnout threshold for the referendum even in this sub-category (Table 4). Rural voters made up about 50% of the turnout, although the overall electorate breakdown is 45% rural, 55% urban. Why was the urban/rural turnout pattern different from the structure of the electorate? Was it because the urban population was more targeted by the Internet-based boycott campaign? There is no data available to answer this question. But we do know that in March 2018, the share of the population aged 16-74 with internet access at home was about 68.2% in rural areas and 87.3% in urban areas, according to official statistics (National Statistics Institute, 2018, 42).

Table 4. Urban/rural turnout

| | Registered voters | Votes cast | Turnout (%) | Share of votes cast (%) |
|----------------|-------------------|------------|-------------|-------------------------|
| Urban, total | 10,476,887 | 1,829,321 | 17.5 | 47.4 |
| Municipalities | 8,555,072 | 1,460,695 | 17.1 | |
| Townships | 1,921,815 | 368,626 | 19.2 | |
| Rural | 7,802,124 | 1,909,293 | 24.5 | 49.5 |
| Abroad | | 118,694 | | 3.1 |
| Total | 18,279,011 | 3,857,308 | | 100 |

Source: Central Electoral Bureau (2018)

Top and bottom precincts

The peculiarities of the top and bottom by turnout precincts provide further insights into the makeup of the referendum voters and those that stayed at home. 95 out of 100 top precincts by turnout were rural precincts. These 95 precincts fall into three categories.

(1) First, monasteries and resorts. This subgroup includes the top three nationwide precincts. Turnout was from 165% to 450% due to ballots cast by tourists or pilgrims. (2) Second, precincts with high turnout, but in hamlets or small villages. In this subcategory, the turnout ratio was artificially inflated by small numbers of inhabitants. (3) Third, communes with very high turnout, by double digits above the validation threshold, even with an overall turnout in the 60, 70, 80 or even 90 percent categories. The most interesting fact about these communes is that their turnout was an outlier, far higher than the county average. Turning to the 5 urban precincts, these were also from resorts or had a monastery in their area. The one exception was a precinct with turnout ratio artificially inflated by small numbers.

Moreover, looking at the top 45 communes by turnout, only three are from the county with the highest turnout rate. By religious affiliation breakdown, all are majority Orthodox. Only 6 have a significant, double digit neo-protestant minority, but below 30%. In other words, these communes are something like islands in a sea of mediocre turnout. The great majority (34) of these communes had mayors affiliated with PSD, the governing party at the time, while only 6 were affiliated with the main opposition party, PNL at the time; 5 communes had mayors from parties from the junior partners in government with PSD.

The bottom 100 precincts by turnout showed an evenly rural-urban breakdown: 48% urban, 52% rural. With two exceptions, the urban precincts were from the capital, Bucharest, eastern Moldavian cities (Vaslui, Iași, Galați), and from majority Hungarian cities from Transylvania. The precincts with the lower turnout

in the country were those from Bucharest precincts known to have Republic of Moldova citizens that also hold Romanian citizenship. In other words, thousands of people are registered and part of the electoral roll at addresses where they do not live. Since the Moldavian cities of Vaslui, Iași, and Galați are also known to be used by Moldovan citizens to get their dual citizenship, we could only hypothesize that at least part of low turnout precincts are, in fact, the same precincts known as “the phantom precincts”, i.e. the ones with the lowest turnout in any election. This is due to the inclusion in the electoral roll of dual citizenship individuals who do not live, in fact, in Romania.

County level data

In the absence of exit poll data, further insight into the demographics and geography behind the turnout for the 2018 referendum comes from precinct level data aggregated at county level. Figure 1 shows that there is a moderate negative correlation ($r=-0.39$) between the share of a county’s urban population (adjusted by the resident population total, not the electoral roll population) and the turnout.

Another striking finding from Figure 1 is that the turnout was markedly lower, in the low teens, in the two Eastern Transylvanian counties with ethnic Hungarian (Szekely) majorities: Harghita (82.9%) and Covasna (71.6%). However, other counties with significant ethnic Hungarian minorities followed a mixed pattern. Mureș, (36.5% Hungarian) and Satu Mare (32.7%) also featured low turnout, but a bit higher, close to 20%. These two counties were ranked 5th and 6th lowest by turnout, above other counties in South Eastern Romania, where the share of Hungarians is virtually nil. Cluj (15% Hungarian) also featured a low turnout (21.8%), but so did other highly urbanized counties and the Bucharest capital region, where the share of Hungarians is also very low or practically close to zero. Sălaj (22.45% Hungarian) was middle ranked, while Bihor (24%) was in the top five counties by turnout. Why this mixed pattern? Did Hungarians in Bihor or Sălaj turn up to vote more than in other counties? Or did the Romanians in those countries turned up even more than the county average would suggest? Answers to these questions, i.e. the causes for this mixed pattern, could be further investigated by analyzing the precinct data in counties with a significant minority or majority ethnic Hungarian population, aggregated at commune, township, and municipality level in relation to census data on nationality (see Catholic and Reformed section below).

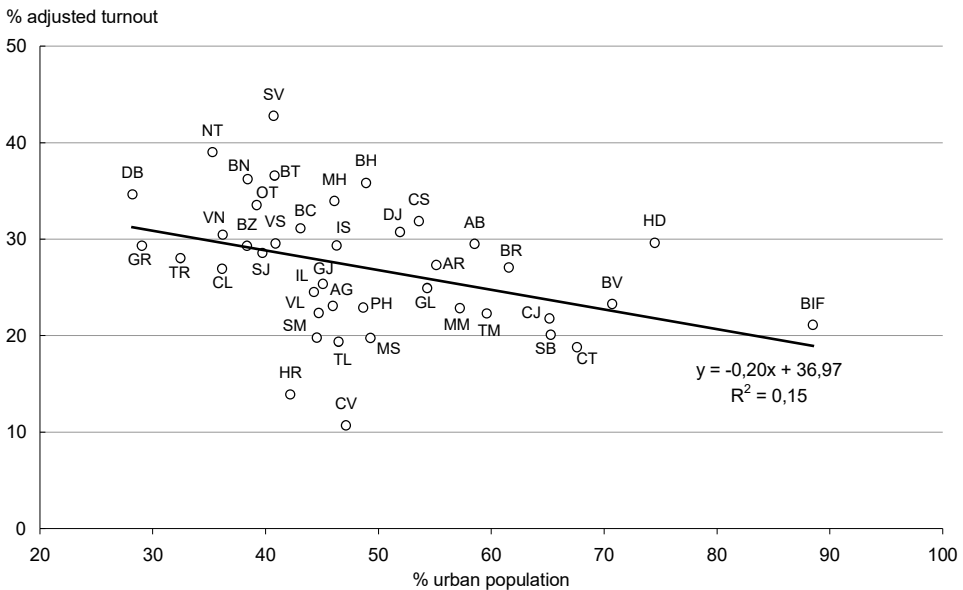


Figure 1. County level turnout by share of urban population

A turnout model at county level

As stated above, in the absence of individual-level exit poll data, the next best source of data regarding the 2018 referendum comes from precinct level results aggregated at different levels. The county level data showcased in Figure 1 pointed to interesting features of the turnout by two socio-demographics: ethnicity and urban/rural residence. Therefore, it would be interesting to expand the analysis by including other variables as well. Another upshot from county level aggregated data comes from more data points and a larger dataset, as compared with the snapshot at national level. Before going on, some methodological issues need to be cleared. The individual level data from exit polls shows that a particular socio-demographic group (by age, wealth, income, ethnicity, gender, and so on) turned up and voted in a particular way. What we are looking for in this analysis is something slightly different, namely that the socio-demographic makeup of a county tells us something relevant about the referendum turnout. For instance, as shown in Figure 1, counties with a higher share of rural population tended to show higher turnout. However, this is a deduction, not an inference. In other words, we have to take into account the limitation from the ecological error stemming from using aggregated (county) level data instead of individual level data.

The regression model

The dependent variable (what we are trying to explain) is the turnout adjusted by the resident population of the 41 counties plus Bucharest municipality (see Table A1 in the annex). The model features six independent variables or, in other words, six factors that could explain the dependent variable, the turnout at the 2018 referendum. Urbanisation is first, measured by the percentage of urban population. We looked at this variable because religious behaviour is perceived as stronger in more traditional, rural areas. In addition, the great majority of Orthodox churches are in rural areas as well (see Orthodox Church section). The second variable is ethnicity, measured by percentage of ethnic Hungarian population. The above section makes clear its relevance. Economic development is measured by GDP per capita index, where 100 is the national average. This variable is linked with urbanisation and a more affluent, secular lifestyle, which would make voting in the referendum less likely. It also brings into the model fact that predominantly rural counties vary by development level. Religion is an obvious choice as an independent variable, but it could only be measured by the share of Orthodox Christians, the only nationwide religious denomination. Education is the fifth variable, measured by the share of the population with higher education. This is yet another variable as a useful proxy for secularisation. Finally, there is age, the share of the population aged 18-34. Again, younger people are less likely to attend religious service and more open to secular values, including gay marriage, and the call to boycott the referendum. The data sources for ethnicity, religion, and education come from the 2011 census, which are available online (National Statistics Institute, 2019b). Data for urbanisation, age and GDP per capita was retrieved from 2018 or 2017 (latest available data for regional GDP) national statistics data from NIS Tempo (2019c) database. The unit of analysis was the county. Due to the strong suburban peculiarity of Ilfov county, which up to 1989 was administratively part of Bucharest municipality and has been experiencing a suburbanisation process (Mihai *et al.*, 2015), Bucharest municipality and Ilfov county were merged into a single data point. This way, the suburban reality behind the 56% rural population of Ilfov county was properly accounted for.

Table 5. Multiple regression summary

| Statistics | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------|-----------|--------|---------|
| Multiple R | 0.77 | | | |
| R Square | 0.59 | | | |
| Adjusted R Square | 0.52 | | | |
| Standard Error | 4.63 | | | |
| Observations | 41 | | | |
| | Coefficients | St. Error | t Stat | P-value |
| Intercept | 81.73 | 21.69 | 3.77 | 0.000 |
| X Variable 1 urbanization | -0.28 | 0.12 | -2.42 | 0.021 |
| X Variable 2 ethnic Hungarian | -0.56 | 0.16 | -3.53 | 0.001 |
| X Variable 3 economic development | -0.18 | 0.07 | -2.47 | 0.019 |
| X Variable 4 Orthodox Christian | -0.37 | 0.16 | -2.34 | 0.025 |
| X Variable 5 higher education | 1.23 | 0.61 | 2.01 | 0.053 |
| X Variable 6 age 18-34 | -0.47 | 0.60 | -0.78 | 0.439 |

The multiple regression results are shown in Table 5. The r-square is .59 and the adjusted r-square is .52, which means that the model's six variables explain more than half of difference in turnout between counties for the 2018 referendum. Three of the variables - urbanisation, economic development, and adherence to Orthodox Christianity - are statistically significant ($p < .05$), and one, Hungarian ethnicity, is strongly significant ($p < .001$). Higher education fell short of being significant (p just above .05). However, the model has its limitations, stemming from the low count of data points. Additionally, there is multicollinearity, which is to be expected from the use of aggregated county level data with natural correlations between some variables, such as urbanisation and economic development (tolerance statistics above 0.2 for just two variables, VIF 10.94).

Table 6. Correlations with the turnout

| | Pearson correlation with adjusted turnout | Sig. (1-tailed) |
|---------------------------------|---|-----------------|
| Variable 1 urbanization | -0.387 | 0.006 |
| Variable 2 ethnic Hungarian | -0.535 | 0.000 |
| Variable 3 economic development | -0.391 | 0.006 |
| Variable 4 Orthodox Christian | 0.477 | 0.001 |
| Variable 5 higher education | -0.304 | 0.027 |
| Variable 6 age 18-34 | -0.158 | 0.163 |

All 6 variables from the model “point” as expected, although the intensity of correlations is moderate at best and, of course, correlation does not mean causation. As a county’s urbanization, GDP per capita, share of population with higher education increased, turnout at the 2018 referendum decreased. Moreover, the share of ethnic Hungarian population depressed turnout the most. On the other hand, the share of Orthodox Christians moderately increased turnout. Last and not least, a county’s share of young people had a very small, statistically insignificant, effect on turnout (Table 6).

Another way to check the model is to compare the predicted turnout and with the actual result. In other words, it’s about how the regression equation predicts the turnout at county level (Table 7). The results are in line with the model’s average explicative power: not great, but not bad either. Only one third of counties had a predicted turnout in the +/- 10 percentage range from the actual turnout result; two thirds of counties were outside this range, and up to 30% were even outside the +/- 20 percentage range. Obviously, these results point to other, major causal factors for the turnout that were left unaccounted for. This is why in the next section we will look at mobilisation, which showcases the combination of factors comprised in the two-abovementioned narratives concerning the failure of the 2018 family referendum.

Table 7. Predicted vs. Actual county level turnout

| County | Actual | Predicted | Diff. p.p. | Diff. (%) | County | Actual | Predicted | Diff. p.p. | Diff. (%) |
|--------|--------|-----------|------------|-----------|--------|--------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| AB | 29.5 | 23.9 | -5.64 | -19.1 | HR | 13.9 | 10.7 | -3.23 | -23.2 |
| AR | 27.3 | 27.4 | 0.12 | 0.5 | HD | 29.6 | 25.5 | -4.11 | -13.9 |
| AG | 23.1 | 28.2 | 5.16 | 22.3 | IL | 24.5 | 26.1 | 1.57 | 6.4 |
| BC | 31.1 | 35.5 | 4.34 | 13.9 | IS | 29.3 | 32.4 | 3.07 | 10.5 |
| BH | 35.8 | 29.6 | -6.19 | -17.3 | MM | 22.8 | 27.7 | 4.86 | 21.3 |
| BN | 36.2 | 31.4 | -4.80 | -13.2 | MH | 33.9 | 30.1 | -3.80 | -11.2 |
| BT | 36.6 | 28.7 | -7.86 | -21.5 | MS | 19.8 | 22.4 | 2.60 | 13.2 |
| BV | 23.3 | 22.7 | -0.62 | -2.7 | NT | 39.0 | 35.1 | -3.95 | -10.1 |
| BR | 27.1 | 24.1 | -2.95 | -10.9 | OT | 33.5 | 28.5 | -5.03 | -15.0 |
| BIF | 21.1 | 15.3 | -5.78 | -27.4 | PH | 22.9 | 26.7 | 3.86 | 16.8 |
| BZ | 29.3 | 29.3 | -0.02 | -0.1 | SM | 19.8 | 25.2 | 5.43 | 27.5 |
| CS | 31.9 | 30.3 | -1.52 | -4.8 | SJ | 28.6 | 27.7 | -0.88 | -3.1 |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|----|------|------|-------|------|----|------|------|--------|-------|
| CL | 26.9 | 28.3 | 1.42 | 5.3 | SB | 20.1 | 23.2 | 3.16 | 15.7 |
| CJ | 21.8 | 22.1 | 0.31 | 1.4 | SV | 42.8 | 32.7 | -10.12 | -23.7 |
| CT | 18.8 | 23.3 | 4.52 | 24.0 | TR | 28.0 | 31.3 | 3.27 | 11.7 |
| CV | 10.7 | 12.9 | 2.21 | 20.7 | TM | 22.3 | 26.9 | 4.65 | 20.8 |
| DB | 34.6 | 31.6 | -2.99 | -8.6 | TL | 19.4 | 27.2 | 7.84 | 40.5 |
| DJ | 30.7 | 29.5 | -1.24 | -4.0 | VS | 29.6 | 30.3 | 0.74 | 2.5 |
| GL | 24.9 | 28.8 | 3.93 | 15.8 | VL | 22.3 | 29.5 | 7.20 | 32.2 |
| GR | 29.3 | 28.2 | -1.12 | -3.8 | VN | 30.5 | 31.7 | 1.26 | 4.1 |
| GJ | 25.4 | 25.7 | 0.33 | 1.3 | | | | | |

Low mobilisation

Mobilisation was even more important in the context of weak public debate and a full-blown campaign to boycott the referendum. As we have seen, 75% of the Romanian adult population opposed gay marriage. To use Zaller's (2006, 50) terms, this survey response could best be described as an "opinion statement" or "attitude report". Turning these into action by a choice on the ballot at the polling station requires mobilisation. Only two types of entities could have mounted a mobilisation effort for the referendum: political parties and religious organisations. This section will look into both.

Mobilisation by political parties

Political parties are, by far, the most relevant institutional actors when it comes to mobilisation. The reason is straightforward. As organisations, one of main social functions performed by political parties is to mobilise voters for any kind of ballot, be it local, parliamentary, presidential or referendum. In real life, there are two kinds of mobilisation by political parties: top down and bottom up.

As the name suggests, top down mobilisation is the result of a political decision taken by the party leadership to use the material and human resources of the party for the mobilisation of voters through all available means. The "air war" features spending for political ads on traditional media, television and radio, as well as the internet, especially social media. In addition, party leaders could campaign through rallies and other events. Local organisations and party activists are instructed how to pursue the ground campaign or so-called "ground war". In the case of the 2018 Romanian family referendum, this kind of mobilisation was not pursued by all major political parties that took a public stance of support for the referendum and delivered the required votes in parliament for the revision of the constitution. For instance, the so-called "information campaign" by the largest political party in terms of membership, electorate, and elected officials, the Social Democrat Party (PSD) was non-existent.

The bottom up mobilisation is best observed at local elections. Mayors, city, commune, or county councillors pursue their own ground campaign, without instructions from party HQ. This is especially the case in rural communities and small towns, where people know each other. Compared to top down mobilisation, this is more of a grassroots, organic effort. Mayors and some local councillors mobilise voters mainly from their status as local notables, rather than party affiliation. In practice, they do this by allocating time to contact voters and spending money to cover the fuel expenses in order to reach rural households. In some cases, they also drive the voters to the polling station.

From the result of the referendum, it is clear that political parties did not mobilise voters. As we shall see below, there were only local, isolated efforts of bottom up mobilisation. The key question is why there was no mobilisation, be it top down or bottom up, despite the public posturing of political parties?

Without hard data, we can only forward two hypotheses. For top down mobilisation, the hypothesis is that the party leadership of the main Romanian political parties faced a contradiction between the preference of their own electorate, i.e. against gay marriage by a large majority, and the stance of the European political parties, which are in favour of gay marriage. This is especially the case for the main governing party at the time of the referendum, the Social Democrat Party, affiliated with the Party of European Socialists. This bargaining approach could explain, for instance, why the PSD did not campaign, but the PSD led government took the unusual step to extend the voting period from one to two days. For bottom up mobilisation, the hypothesis is that if there was no political and economic incentive, then a large majority of local politicians refrained from covering the personal economic cost of mobilisation. In practice, the fuel costs needed to mobilise voters could amount to a full tank of petrol or even more. In communes, especially for counsellors and even some mayors, this is a sizeable household expenditure.

Despite being publicly in favour of the referendum, major Romanian political parties, with one notable exception, failed to engage in voter mobilisation for the referendum. The one exception comes from USR, which openly joined the boycott campaign. Instead, the political parties that endorsed the referendum pursued a pass the buck strategy towards the churches, especially the Romanian Orthodox Church.

Religious organisations and mobilisation

Religious organisations are the second type of actor that could have mounted a mobilisation effort for the referendum. On this issue, their position was markedly different. Political parties were forced to take a stance on the issue by political events, pressure from outside groups under the broad umbrella of the Coalition for the Family, and especially by the broad majority position in the population and in their own electorate against gay marriage. On the other hand, religious organisations

“owned” the issue. In other words, while gay marriage was a low saliency issue for Romanian political parties, the referendum put forward a highly salient issue for religious organisations, key to their teachings, values, and worldview. Moreover, religious organisations, especially the Romanian Orthodox Church, were key actors in making the referendum happen. Without church organisational support and grassroots effort, the gathering of the required number of signatures for the bill to amend the constitution would have been a no hoper. In Europe’s most religious society, according to Pew Research findings, one would expect have the Orthodox Church and the other Christian denominations to have the required organisational resources for a successful mobilisation effort for the referendum. But did they?

In this section, we will look first at the Romanian Orthodox Church, its nationwide infrastructure, and approach regarding the referendum. For small minority denominations - Greek Catholic, Pentecostal, and Muslim - we will look at precinct level data from rural areas to assess the turnout in areas where these denominations are a majority or significant minority in the population. Unfortunately, urban areas could not be taken into analysis due to practical reasons. The very low share in the population of religious minorities in urban areas does not allow for observable trends based on precinct returns.

The Orthodox Church

By far the most important Christian denomination in Romania is the autocephalous Orthodox Church. According to 2011 census data, 81 per cent of the entire population and 93.7 per cent of ethnic Romanians belonged to the Romanian Orthodox Church. At the close of 2014, the orthodox clergy included 1,098 upper level clergy, including bishops, abbots and abbesses, and almost 15,000 priests and deacons. In monasteries, there were more than 8,300 monks and nuns. Other non-clerical staff, mainly parish cantors, amounted to 17,745 individuals. The Orthodox Church had 16,287 places of worship, including 11,369 parish churches (2,212 in urban areas, 9,157 in rural areas) and 552 monastery churches (Patriarhia Română, 2014). All these numbers, especially for priests, deacons, and cantors means that the Orthodox Church has on the ground a ratio of at least two persons per precinct, apart from the Hungarian majority communities. On average, a precinct has some 1,000 voters, with lower totals in small villages and hamlets, and higher, up to 2,000, in large cities. In addition, the Orthodox Church owns and operates its own media operation that includes a TV channel, a nationwide radio, a newspaper, and a press agency.

On paper, the Romanian Orthodox Church looks like a formidable organization with enough manpower for the “ground game” operation required for a mobilisation drive and its own media for the “air war” side of the campaign. Pearson’s correlation coefficient between the share of Orthodox believers and turnout, based on precinct returns aggregated at county level, is a modest 0.46. The nationwide

referendum results show plainly that the Orthodox Church did not pursue an all-out mobilisation for the referendum. The question is: why?

There are two possible explanations. The first hypothesis/explanation is that, largely, the Orthodox Church left voter mobilisation to the political parties that endorsed the referendum and a “yes” vote. In other words, the Church, especially the upper clergy saw voter mobilisation as the job of political parties, but not the job of the Church as a whole. In effect, while the Church provided crucial support for the required number of signatures for the bill to amend the constitution, it stopped short of “owning” the referendum.

The second hypothesis/explanation is that while the Church as a whole did not engage in mobilisation, there were some local mobilisation efforts, especially by rural parish priests. Testing these hypotheses is beyond the scope and means of this paper. In part, they could be tested by qualitative field research in the precincts with the highest and, respectively, the lowest turnout.

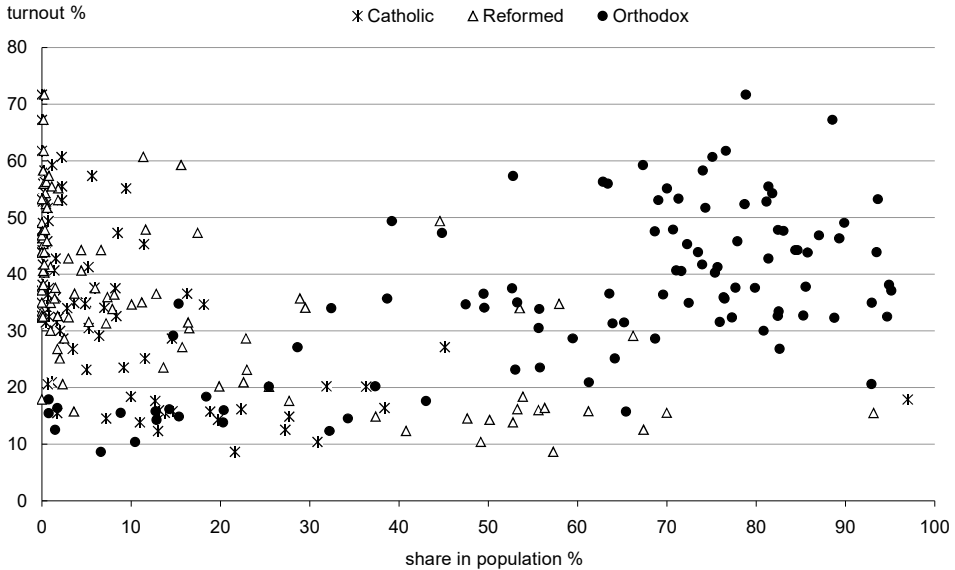
Roman Catholics and Reformed

We looked at these two denominations together due to their ethnic breakdown peculiarities. According to the 2011 census, 91.2% of Hungarians were either Reformed (Calvinist, 45.9%, Unitarian, 4.5%) or Catholic (40.8%). Conversely, Hungarians make up the great majority of these denominations. 91.6% of Roman Catholics, the second largest denomination in Romania (4.3%), but very far apart from Orthodox Christianity, are either Hungarians (57.5%) or Romanians (34.1%). In the three main branches of Reformation Churches in Romania, Hungarians are 93.8% of Calvinists (who are 3.0% in the total population), 96.7% of Unitarians (0.3% in the population), and 61.6% in Lutherans (0.2% in the population).

As observed in the above turnout analysis based on precinct data, areas with ethnic Hungarian majorities or significant minorities, with few exceptions, saw a much lower turnout. As a consequence of the link between ethnicity and religion breakdown, turnout also tended to be lower in areas with majority or significant Catholic or Reformed population. The nationwide Pearson correlation coefficient between the share of Catholics and Reformed (Calvinists, Unitarians, Lutherans included) believers and turnout, based on precinct returns aggregated at county level, is a moderate negative -0.43 for the former and -0.45 for the latter.

An outstanding question (see the turnout data section) is about the counties with significant Hungarian/Catholic and Reformed minorities, but with a turnout around the national average or even higher. Two top performing counties by turnout with a sizeable Catholic minority, Neamț (9.6%) and Bacău (15.7%), is made up of ethnic Romanians. Indeed, these two counties are home to about 48% of ethnic Romanian Catholics. However, the most interesting case is Bihor county, which ranked 5th best in turnout and where the Hungarian and Catholic/Reformed minorities comprise about one quarter of the population and where the Catholics and Reformed are made up almost entirely by Hungarians.

Precinct returns from the 101 communes, townships, and municipalities point to an answer for the higher than average county turnout (Figure 2). In areas with Orthodox majorities, the turnout tended to be much higher than in areas with Catholic and/or Reformed majorities or significant minorities.



Note: all 101 communes, towns, and cities in Bihor County are present three times each in the scatter plot graph, according to the share of their Catholic, Reformed, and Orthodox communities, respectively.

Figure 2. Turnout in Bihor County cities and communes by religion

In addition, the Pearson correlation coefficient between the religion and turnout, based on precinct returns aggregated at commune, township, or municipality level, shows that lower turnout in Catholic and Reformed areas was overcompensated by Orthodox and, to a lower extent, neo-Protestant turnout. The end-result was the higher than national turnout in Bihor county. A relevant side note is that the ethnic breakdown of the other, mainly neo-Protestant, category in Bihor county included only 10% Hungarians.

Table 8. Religion and turnout in Bihor County: Pearson correlation coefficient

| | Orthodox (55.8%) | Catholic (8.4%) | Reformed (16.6%) | Other, mainly neo-Protestant (19.2%) |
|-------|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------|---|
| rural | 0.6 | -0.5 | -0.6 | 0.4 |
| urban | 0.8 | -0.6 | -0.8 | 0.2 |
| total | 0.7 | -0.5 | -0.6 | 0.4 |

Note: rural areas: 91 communes, 51.1% of total county population; urban areas: 6 towns, 4 municipalities, 48.9% of total county population

The precinct returns, aggregated at national, county, and even locality level, show a major disconnection between the Catholic and Reformed Churches in Romania and their faithful. These churches or either completely failed to mobilise or did not even try to mobilise the faithful.

Neo-Protestant (Pentecostal)

Pentecostals are the largest neo-Protestant denomination in Romania. According to the 2011 census, there were more than 362,000 Pentecostal Christians in the country or 1.8% of the total population. At national and county level, the turnout of neo-Protestant believers remains a puzzle. In the top five counties by share of neo-Protestant minority, in the 7.9-10.4% range, were three of the top performing counties by turnout, Bihor, Suceava, Bistrița-Năsăud, but also two counties around the national average, Arad and Sălaj. The combined nationwide share of the top two neo-Protestant denominations, Pentecostals and Baptists, is only 2.36%. This is far too low for a decent subsample in surveys and perhaps even for an exit poll, of which there was none at the 2018 referendum. The Pearson correlation coefficient between the share of neo-Protestant (Pentecostal and Baptist) believers and turnout, based on precinct returns aggregated at county level, is a low to modest 0.32. The national trend is similar to the one in Bihor county: positive correlation, compared to the other main minority denominations, but somewhat lower than the intensity of the correlation for the Orthodox. Again, this has to be taken with a grain of salt due to the usage of aggregated, not individual level data.

In eight communes Pentecostal Christians are a majority, a plurality, or a significant minority of the population. Precinct level returns show that the turnout in these communities with a strong Pentecostal presence was more or less in line with the county average for rural areas, with one exception. In these rural communities, there is no evidence for a strong, successful mobilisation drive by the Pentecostal Church.

Table 9. Turnout in majority of plurality Pentecostal rural communities

| County | Commune | Registered voters | Turnout (%) | Pentecostal (%) |
|----------|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Vrancea | <i>Slobozia Bradului</i> | 4,284 | 29.58 | 61.18 |
| Covasna | <i>Belin</i> | 2,124 | 14.69 | 46.45 |
| Braşov | <i>Apaşa</i> | 2,389 | 8.46 | 45.63 |
| Galaţi | <i>Brăhăşeşti</i> | 6,339 | 20.35 | 45.22 |
| Suceava | <i>Volovăţ</i> | 4,190 | 36.78 | 43.94 |
| Suceava | <i>Iaslovăţ</i> | 3,084 | 38.81 | 43.00 |
| Ialomiţa | <i>Bărbuleşti</i> | 3,782 | 18.03 | 42.16 |
| Arad | <i>Brazii</i> | 998 | 48.40 | 40.69 |

Greek Catholics

2011 census data shows there were some 150,000 Greek Catholics in Romania, just 0.7% of the entire population. Most Greek Catholics are ethnic Romanians from Northern Transylvania. Greek Catholics are a majority or a significant minority in four communes in Northern Transylvania. However, the turnout in three of those communities was below the county average and in one community just above the county average. It is more likely than not that the Greek Catholic Church also either failed to mobilise or did not even try to.

Table 10. Turnout in majority of plurality Greek Catholic rural communities

| County | Commune | Registered voters | Turnout (%) | Greek Catholic (%) |
|-----------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------|--------------------|
| Satu Mare | <i>Târşolţ</i> | 2,489 | 10.53 | 59.69 |
| Satu Mare | <i>Porumbesti</i> | 2,056 | 14.20 | 54.78 |
| Maramureş | <i>Sarasău</i> | 2,236 | 10.55 | 41.38 |
| Maramureş | <i>Siseşti</i> | 4,533 | 23.60 | 40.57 |

Muslims

Muslims are a tiny minority of 0.3%. Two thirds of Muslims in Romania come from the historical Turkish and Tatar community in South Eastern Romania in Constanta County, an area that was part of the Ottoman Empire until 1878. There is just one commune in Romania where Muslims are the majority. In this community, the turnout was about 20 percentage points higher than the overall Constanta County turnout, which itself was the third lowest nationwide. It also was markedly higher the average turnout in rural Constanta precincts, but again

this was also low by national standards. Even so, the overall turnout figure for this community was just about above the validation threshold.

Table 11. Turnout in the majority Muslim rural community

| County | Commune | Registered voters | Turnout (%) | Muslims (%) |
|-----------|-----------------|-------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Constanța | <i>Dobromir</i> | 2,264 | 34.85 | 57.67 |

Concluding remarks

This paper put forward a multi-causal explanation for the failure of the 2018 Romanian traditional family referendum. First, the boycott campaign; second, low saliency and even confusion for some voters due to a combination from the lack of real debate in Romanian society on the issue of the referendum, lack of mobilisation, and the unusual, even bizarre, wording of the question on the ballot paper. The two sets of causes are not exclusive, but cumulative. Besides these causes, the paper also put forward two conditions that favoured the outcome: the high bar for referendum validation and the divisive political context.

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button is a short story by F. Scott Fitzgerald about a man who ages backwards, later adapted into a Hollywood film. The 2018 Romanian family referendum also features curious contradictions. Let us review these curiosities.

The referendum's failure did not change Romanian attitudes about gay marriage

A first curiosity is that, despite the low turnout and, thus, the rejection of the referendum by a clear majority of Romanian society, it did not change people's attitudes towards gay marriage. Although one could argue that there is a trend of increasing support – or, better said, decreasing opposition – in the younger population, the main finding of the IRES (2018) post-referendum polls was that the referendum had no effect on the overall level of support for gay marriage and the level of tolerance for homosexuality.

This finding begs the question: if it did not change people's attitudes, why did the referendum fail? To answer this question also means to answer the starting question of this paper, namely how was it possible to diminish the level of opposition to gay marriage, as expressed by turnout for a “yes” vote from 74% of the population in opinion polls to just 19% at the ballot box?

The boycott campaign as a cause

The boycott campaign explanation means, in effect, that the issue on the ballot was reframed into a political issue about the party then in power, the Social Democratic Party, and, especially, its deeply unpopular leader, Liviu Dragnea. This could explain why people's attitudes towards gay marriage did not change: for most of them, this was not the issue of the referendum. The referendum became part of the "internal war" feature of permanent, even violent, conflict in Romanian politics, as described by historian Maner (1997) and sociologist Bucur (2019). In effect, the high tension political context during 2017-2018 helped fuel not a broad debate about gay marriage and the merits of a constitutional revision, but an insurgent and virulent boycott campaign seen as a proxy in the ongoing political struggle against Dragnea and PSD. The boycott campaign itself comes with yet another curiosity: yes, it was highly effective, although vicious in nature, but who was behind it? It is said "victory has a thousand fathers, but defeat is an orphan". Why did nobody come forward to claim "the victory" of the boycott campaign? The questions about the boycott campaign open several avenues for future research, such as the degree to which issues, political or not, can be reframed in Romanian or indeed any society in a communication age dominated by the Internet, social media, and profiling based on personal data. Thus, the 2018 Romanian referendum could join the 2016 British Brexit campaign and the 2016 US presidential election as a case study. Questions are also raised about societal vulnerability to an influence campaign, transparent or not, domestic or foreign funded. Last but not least, it raises questions related to the power structure: was the boycott campaign organic or rather of the Astroturf kind? Who or what had the organisational capability to design and successfully carry out such an ample Internet-based campaign? The sensitive nature of the answers to these questions offers some clues as to why nobody came forward to claim ownership of the boycott campaign.

Although effective, the boycott campaign did not finish off the referendum. Only 12% of respondents said the referendum campaign changed their mind on the issue of gay marriage, one way or another, according to the IRES (2018) post-referendum poll. In other words, the boycott campaign explanation is not enough to explain the referendum's failure. The end-result of the boycott campaign was that it depressed the turnout by keeping at home persons that usually vote, especially highly opinionated, partisan voters. Thus, it made the task much harder for those in favour of the constitutional revision against gay marriage. Since a sizeable slice of habitual voters were no longer in the pool of possible voters, reaching and then crossing over the turnout threshold of 30% became dependent on voter mobilisation of individuals that usually do not vote or vote only in first order elections.

Low saliency and confusion as causes

The case for the low saliency for the issue on the referendum ballot was put forward by Alina Mungiu-Pippidi (2018). The result of the 2018 Romanian family referendum should be seen as a prime example of political action based on an erroneous interpretation of opinion polls and a serious lack of knowledge concerning their limits. The referendum provides yet another example to reinforce some classical contributions on this issue, such as Zaller's (2006) seminal work of *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. The real world answers to surveys are mere opinion statements, not a simulation of a possible referendum sometime in the future. In other words, polls register preferences, not strong choices. Preference or intention becomes social fact only through mobilisation and/or a high saliency, binary choice issue.

On the issue about clear or unclear binary choices, aiding and abetting low saliency was the confusion around the referendum that came from the bizarre wording of the question on the ballot paper. It made no reference to what the referendum was really about and asked voters to put their faith in Parliament's decision, i.e. to trust politicians, one of the most untrustworthy occupations. More likely than not, the lack of attention paid to the wording of the ballot is in itself not random, but has to do with the disconnection between political elites and the population, as well as with the level of the elites' political acumen.

Given the low level of support in the population for gay marriage, the reason behind the low saliency of the referendum is another curiosity. The paper argues that it comes from two main sources: (A) a lack of real debate in Romanian society on the issue of the referendum and (B) a lack of mobilisation.

The failure of serious, real debate in Romanian society on the issue of gay marriage

Overall, Romanian society lacks the culture of a referendum debate. Besides the peculiarities of the media cycle in the run-up to the referendum, the comparison with the 2016 British Brexit referendum showed the underdevelopment of social institutions required for a broad, serious, democratic debate. The complete failure to have a proper campaign or broad debate led to low saliency for the issue on the referendum ballot, which, in turn, depressed turnout. This curiosity reveals the inner contradictions between Romania's aspiration to be part of the prosperous, democratic West and its level of development. In other words, it is a failure that points to underdevelopment in public and intellectual life: weak societal capability to self-aggregate on public issues subject to debate, underdevelopment of the intellectual arm of political parties and movements, of think tanks and NGOs. This does not mean that democracy is less functional in Romania than in other countries, but that it is capped by low social cohesion, low social capital, and, as a result, it disappoints its citizens and turns them away from politics. In short, the

failure to debate poses serious question about the state of Romanian democracy and public life a generation after the fall of Communism.

The failure of mobilisation: buck-passing between parties and churches

The paper argues that the failure to mobilise voters for the referendum was the main cause of low saliency and the depressed turnout. In other words, the referendum might have had some chance to cross the validation threshold even despite the vicious boycott campaign, but the lack of mobilisation finished off that chance. How and why of mobilisation failed is yet another curiosity.

With one notable exception, all political parties publicly endorsed a “yes” vote. Political parties also delivered the votes in parliament for the constitutional revision. Yet, political parties did not mobilise voters for a referendum they enacted. In effect, the parties stopped short of “owning” the referendum. The paper put forward two hypotheses. First, concerning top down mobilisation, the parties “hedged” against the pro-gay marriage stance of europarties. In effect, they had to balance their own political capital in Brussels, too low to pick a fight with the European political elite, against the great majority of their electorate, which, according to internal polling, are greatly opposed to gay marriage. Second, for bottom up mobilisation, the hypothesis is that, in the absence of political and economic incentives, a large majority of local politicians refrained from covering the personal economic cost of mobilisation. In addition, seeing the impact of the boycott campaign on the ground, they might have viewed the referendum as a lost cause for which their political and economic capital was not worth sacrificing.

The question arises then why religious denominations, especially the Romanian Orthodox Church, did not pursue a mobilisation strategy, especially since it did mobilise for the petition campaign. Undoubtedly, the referendum leaves a legacy of failure for the Coalition of the Family as grassroots organisation for Christians and for organised religion, especially the Orthodox Church. The referendum outcome and, especially, the lack of mobilisation leave a high question mark on the collective leadership of the Orthodox Church, i.e. the Holy Synod – the conference of Orthodox bishops. In the most religious society in Europe, according to Pew Research data, the Christian churches had the means and motives to mobilise their believers. The paper puts forward a hypothesis for the decision taken by the Orthodox Church not to pursue mobilisation. It sees this decision in line with the Byzantine cultural legacy in regards to state-church relations. Unlike the Western Christian Churches, especially the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church plays a (secondary) role in support of state authorities. Arguably, the church is “part” of the state and defers to the state’s political leadership. The pursuit or support of public policies or political stances in the style of US evangelicals or Christian right is profoundly alien to European Orthodox Christianity.

Another curiosity of the referendum is that while nobody claimed responsibility for the boycott campaign, nobody “owned” the “yes” campaign either. In essence,

organised religion pursued a buck-passing strategy towards political parties, while political parties pursued the same buck-passing strategy towards the churches. In the end, this led to the failure of the referendum. As a concept, buck-passing comes from the theory of international politics. According to John Mearsheimer (2001, 267), it is one of the two main strategies, alongside balancing, “that states employ to defend the balance of power against aggressors”. Where possible, buck-passing is actually preferred for the simple reason that the “buck-passer does not have to fight”, i.e. he does not have to spend blood and money in a costly war. In my view, this holds the key for the buck-passing decision in the case of the referendum. Polling showed it was a sure thing. In addition, political and religious leaders that endorsed the referendum did not want to be seen as against the times, namely against the wave of cultural change towards identity politics and political correctness coming from the West. They did not wish to spend “blood and treasure” in a culture war. “The buck-passer simply wants someone else to do the heavy lifting, but it certainly wants the threat contained”, notes Mearsheimer (2001, 269). Moreover, buck-passing occurs when the distribution of power is multipolar. In the case of the referendum, this holds true. Political parties and the church were powerful actors that had the means for mobilisation, but wanted to avoid the pains and exposure of doing it.

Limitations of the paper, further research areas & referendum aftermath

Perhaps a final curiosity regarding the 2018 family referendum is the dearth of reliable, open access data. No exit polls were conducted. Transparent, trustworthy opinion polls are few and far between. This lack of data raised serious issues about the limits of scientific analysis into the 2018 referendum. Many hypotheses in this paper cannot be analyzed with the available data or require a level of proof, which cannot be met in social sciences. Nevertheless, it remains the duty of the social scientist to ask not just the easy, but also the tough questions. The referendum also leads to a discussion about the regression towards a society less open to knowledge than in the 1990s. Access to exit polls and opinion polls datasets was non-problematic in the first decade or so following the fall of Communism. It need not be so 30 years later.

The turnout analysis in the paper provides the case for a failure of mobilisation by main political parties and religious organisations, especially the Orthodox Church, despite public statements of support for a “Yes” vote in the referendum. It also points to questions or areas that could benefit from further research. For instance, turnout was high in some communes, which were something like islands in a sea of mediocre turnout. Why was that? The hypothesis is that some local notables, the mayors, local councillors, Orthodox priests, and/or neo-Protestant pastors, were the main drivers of voter mobilisation. However, this would require further field studies of a qualitative approach. The turnout analysis

also revealed a major disconnection between ethnic Hungarians and their political and religious leaders that endorsed the “yes” vote, as well as a disconnection from other ethnic and religious groups that are in the majority. Why was that, given the right of centre, conservative political leaning of ethnic Hungarians in Romania? The turnout data also revealed a disconnection between Catholic and Reformed Churches in Romania and their faithful. In part, this is explained by the ethnic makeup of these denominations. Nonetheless, this is not the whole story.

As for the aftermath of the 2018 family referendum, Romanian society quickly moved on. The referendum was not a “real”, fundamental choice on a high saliency issue, defining for what kind of society/polity Romania is. Looking back, it seems more of an “an accident”, not a profound choice made by society. On the other hand, the causes and conditions of the referendum’s failure raise questions about how Romanian democracy and society work, and about what the future holds.

This paper is based on remarks delivered to the round table *The 2018 Family Referendum - popular consultation and social myths* organised by the Centre for Studies and Documentation “Society, Law, Religion”.

Table A1. County level turnout data

| County | Code | Turnout (%) | Rank | Adjusted turnout (%) | Adjusted rank |
|-----------------|------|-------------|------|----------------------|---------------|
| Suceava | SV | 30.67 | 1 | 42.77 | 1 |
| Neamț | NT | 26.47 | 7 | 39.01 | 2 |
| Botoșani | BT | 26.84 | 6 | 36.59 | 3 |
| Bistrița-Năsăud | BN | 26.97 | 5 | 36.21 | 4 |
| Bihor | BH | 28.73 | 3 | 35.83 | 5 |
| Dâmbovița | DB | 28.98 | 2 | 34.64 | 6 |
| Mehedinți | MH | 26.33 | 8 | 33.95 | 7 |
| Olt | OT | 27.16 | 4 | 33.53 | 8 |
| Caraș-Severin | CS | 24.14 | 11 | 31.86 | 9 |
| Bacău | BC | 21.34 | 19 | 31.11 | 10 |
| Dolj | DJ | 24.77 | 10 | 30.74 | 11 |
| Vrancea | VN | 22.27 | 15 | 30.45 | 12 |
| Hunedoara | HD | 22.18 | 16 | 29.61 | 13 |
| Vaslui | VS | 20.39 | 22 | 29.56 | 14 |
| Alba | AB | 22.60 | 14 | 29.50 | 15 |
| Iași | IS | 21.20 | 21 | 29.32 | 16 |
| Giurgiu | GR | 25.43 | 9 | 29.31 | 17 |
| Buzău | BZ | 23.08 | 12 | 29.30 | 18 |

| | | | | | |
|----------------|----|-------|----|-------|----|
| Sălaj | SJ | 22.09 | 17 | 28.56 | 19 |
| Teleorman | TR | 22.67 | 13 | 28.03 | 20 |
| Arad | AR | 21.33 | 20 | 27.30 | 21 |
| Brăila | BR | 20.07 | 23 | 27.05 | 22 |
| Călărași | CL | 21.92 | 18 | 26.92 | 23 |
| Gorj | GJ | 19.92 | 24 | 25.35 | 24 |
| Galați | GL | 17.65 | 32 | 24.91 | 25 |
| Ialomița | IL | 19.35 | 25 | 24.52 | 26 |
| Brașov | BV | 17.58 | 34 | 23.28 | 27 |
| Argeș | AG | 18.71 | 27 | 23.08 | 28 |
| Prahova | PH | 18.41 | 29 | 22.89 | 29 |
| Maramureș | MM | 17.78 | 31 | 22.85 | 30 |
| Vâlcea | VL | 17.60 | 33 | 22.34 | 31 |
| Timiș | TM | 18.37 | 30 | 22.30 | 32 |
| Cluj | CJ | 18.61 | 28 | 21.78 | 33 |
| București | B | 16.25 | 35 | 21.25 | 34 |
| Ilfov | IF | 19.06 | 26 | 20.49 | 35 |
| Sibiu | SB | 14.96 | 38 | 20.08 | 36 |
| Satu Mare | SM | 15.01 | 37 | 19.78 | 37 |
| Mureș | MS | 15.83 | 36 | 19.75 | 38 |
| Tulcea | TL | 14.10 | 40 | 19.37 | 39 |
| Constanța | CT | 14.47 | 39 | 18.79 | 40 |
| Harghita | HR | 11.30 | 41 | 13.90 | 41 |
| Covasna | CV | 8.96 | 42 | 10.68 | 42 |
| National total | | 21.1 | | 27.48 | |

Sources: author's calculations based on Central Electoral Bureau (2018) and National Statistics Institute (2019); adjusted turnout is calculated based on resident population instead of electoral roll population.

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