

# Trust, reciprocity and volunteerism: Explaining low political activism in post-communist Romania

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**Abstract:** *This article analyzes some of the reasons why political participation in Romania, although structurally comparable with other Western cases, is much weaker. Using survey data, the article tests for three main blocks of variables that are supposedly important for political participation, including human capital, economic resources and context variables, motivations and, finally, social capital variables. The analysis focuses on social capital factors, which are civic volunteerism and social trust. The conclusion is that social capital is important for political activism and that civic activists in the long run may become a resource both for the rebirth of a public space and for effective mechanisms of control of political elites in Romania.*

**Keywords:** Political activism, trust, volunteerism, reciprocity, post-communism, Romania

**Cuvinte-cheie:** activism politic, adevăr, voluntarism, reciprocitate, post-comunism, România

## Introduction

Post-communism in Romania is a period when, after decades of terror and exclusion, one largely notices the revival of democracy in terms of institutions, civil and political rights. Before 1989 people were forced to live in their own narrow private spaces (Völker and Flap, 2001) and to let public space under the ideological control of the communist party. One would expect to see them today engage into the public space and decide for themselves and for the community. People are now free to participate, but they seem to refuse to engage more seriously in public life than voting. Yet weak political participation could be a marker of a deeper deficit. It may rather express the existence of an inchoate public

sphere in Romania, a space of yet unarticulated interests and responsibilities. Romanians seem nowadays to largely disregard public space and to fiercely focus on their private life, by opposing their own private well being to a negligible public no-man’s-land. The rising individualism in society gave up public space and does not seem to claim it back soon. Romanians may neglect public sphere because they don’t feel to belong to such a place, a place where they don’t trust each other, cannot cooperate and feel powerless. With no perceived benefit, they eagerly accept to give it up to impersonal, obscure and distant forces. This is not only a pessimistic hypothesis, in the long run it may prove a threat to democracy.

The aim of this research is to explore political participation in terms of civic

engagement, protest and voting, and to explain its low level in Romania. In order to make the analysis of the Romanian case comparable to other country cases, we choose to use the 2005-2006 World Values Survey dataset for Romania. Although World Values Surveys are generally used in aggregate level analysis, we consider that case-studies are important for underlining the specific relationships between political activism and essential factors in the post-communist settings. In this vein, we decided to make our analysis also comparable to other case-studies, i.e. with a Russian analysis based on 1998 New Russia Barometer Social Capital survey (Rose and Weller, 2003). As underlined below, our choice in making the analysis comparable to other researches largely affects our research design and the variables to use in the statistical models.

The factors that we take into account are three blocks of variables related to human capital, resources and context, motivations and social capital, namely volunteerism and social trust. There is a recent literature that largely emphasizes on the effects of participation in voluntary associations on political participation and the importance of trust for cooperation. We find that political activism in Romania, although weaker than in Western societies, follows the same Western pattern (Barnes and Kaase, 1979). Political activism still depends on motivations, namely on political interest and institutional confidence, on human capital variables, especially on education, and, finally, on social trust and volunteerism. This particular feature is of capital importance for the consolidation of the public sphere. Membership in voluntary organizations may therefore become a general resource for cooperation that spills over society and teach the pursuit of the common interest. There is hope that civic activists might become politically active and help to the rebirth of a public space, a space of freedom and dialogue, an environment where, following decades of terror and exclusion, people are free to express themselves without any coercion from any social or political authority.

## Post-communism and the public space

Restructuring the public space is one of the greatest challenges of post-communism. Once dominated by the almighty state, which disabled citizens to really participate to its definition and organization, it is today abandoned both by state and citizens. The citizens' feeling to belonging to the public space is related to common interest, which is the true foundation of the community. According to Habermas (1989), the public sphere (the public space) could be defined as the environment accepting the public political reasoning, an environment in which the individual can speak freely and where the arguments are not influenced by any political or social power. Thus, it makes possible for everyone to express itself regardless of any constraints on time, resources, participation or themes. It is the space created by the discursive interactions between private people willing to let arguments, not status or authority of tradition, to be decisive (Johnson, 2001). The public sphere was born in 18<sup>th</sup> century Western Europe and it emerged from the opposition between state and individuals forming the civil society. In fact, it had been created as an instrument to fight against the state, in order to guarantee a civil society that can autonomously organize and transform. It is therefore a political public sphere. Thus, public sphere is a medium for political justification, for putting the decision-makers to account, as well as for political initiative, and the mobilizing of political support. The public sphere not only enables autonomous opinion formation, but also empowers the citizens to influence the decision-makers (Eriksen, 2005). Therefore, it is a precondition for democracy and self-government.

In fact, one might conceive two approaches in handling this essential modern concept of "public sphere". Both approaches take into account an essential prerequisite for cooperation, which is trust. The first of them considers the public space as the depository

of the common interest, which should sufficiently motivate people to engage into collective action. The common interest should not be taken as a single, unified, ideologically determined interest, as the communist regime tried to impose to the society as a whole. It rather should be taken as a common objective reality, as a link that binds together the members of the community. According to Peirce, objectivity and community are strongly related. "The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by true, and the object represented in that opinion is real". Thus, "the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of community" (Hartshorne and Weiss, 1934).

The common interest may be tracked down as early as the Greek idea of polis, but the modern idea of common interest originates in the French Revolution ideals. Based on Rousseau's seminal writings, the Jacobins imposed their own conception of a society run by the state as the source of societal cohesion and the ultimate institution of the public sphere. Soon after the French régime of Terror ended, the public sphere underwent a structural transformation that favored the development of intermediary organizations between family solidarity and state bureaucracy, namely the non-governmental organizations merely focusing on assistance and support in providing human services (Wagner, 2000). Two centuries after the French Revolution, stresses Wagner (2000, 547), the emerging paradigm of a decentralized and mixed economy of welfare, favored by the functional and structural transformation of the public sphere, serves as a strong corrective to the Jacobin assumption that the state is the only institution of the public sphere.

The second approach focuses on the political participation and on its effort to influence the decision-makers. Even if many citizens in Central and Eastern Europe have taken to the ballot box, they do not seem so interested in shaping their public space and, finally, their destiny in a now free polity. Democracy

means more than elections, political party organizations and the protection of human rights, stresses Susan Rose-Ackerman (2007). One cannot speak about a full democracy unless the policy-making process is accountable to citizens through transparent procedures that seek to incorporate public input. Thus, citizens and organized groups should be involved by taking part in the rule-making process with the government retaining the ultimate authority to issue general rules, but the transition process has lagged in failing to provide transparent procedures that incorporate public input. Democracy means procedures that seek to incorporate public input, but there has to be clearly claimed the will of public and organized groups to involve in public matters. Romania is still a long way away from a participatory culture and political elites do not face yet vigorous public inputs.

Public opinion and researchers in Romania recently witnessed a vivid concern on public space issue, yet it is merely related to corruption outcomes (Uslaner and Bădescu, 2004a ; Uslaner and Bădescu, 2004b ; Uslaner, 2007). Nevertheless, there is a growing awareness regarding the issue on public sphere and cooperation (Preoteasa, 2002). What seems to be lacking in Romania is a sense of community. In fact, Romanians cannot pursue the common interest because they don't have a common objective reality capable of supporting such a task. Instead of common objective reality, Romanians really have private interests that fully motivate them. When it comes to engage in collective action, they cannot identify a common reality. They rather conceive a non-objective reality, which is elusive, remote, hostile, subject to manipulation by distant forces and impossible to change by ordinary citizens. That might explain why Romanian citizens ordinary turn out to be pessimistic and disengaged.

## **Volunteerism and social trust**

The pursuit of common interest is expressed by the willingness to cooperate, on the one

hand, and by the desire to refrain egoism, on the other hand. The two aspects are embedded in the more recent theory of social capital and are relevant for the political dimension of the public sphere. Social trust, reciprocity and altruism are ingredients for cooperation. And cooperation facilitates the development and growth of political resources of individuals, enabling them to form groups, to define common interest and, consequently, to influence the political system. A society that achieves to set out interactional practices is able to create conditions for cooperation and engagement in the public sphere (Misztal, 2001).

A growing sociological literature recently focused on social capital, which is the relationship between norms, habits of cooperation, and the engagement in the public sphere (Coleman, 1990; Fukuyama, 1995; Misztal, 1996; Putnam, 1993, 2000; Seligman, 2000; Warren, 1999). Yet defining social capital is still an endless debate in political science. Narayan and Cassidy (2001) have already made an inventory and have pointed out the large diversity of social capital measures. Whereas Bourdieu (1980) and Coleman (1988) emphasize on structural features, that are dense networks of cooperation, Whiteley (1999) largely focuses on psychological traits, namely on trust. We try to avoid this kind of debate and turn to a seemingly minimum consensus about defining social capital. Although social capital is a multifaceted phenomenon that needs multiple indicators, there seems to be an agreement on the main constituents of the social capital (van Schaik, 2002). Even the exact relationship between its components remains unclear, at least two elements figure in almost all definitions, i.e. volunteerism and social trust.

Trust is considered important because it facilitates communication, the pursuit of common goals, and plays an essential role in solving problems raised by collective action. Fukuyama (1995, 26) defines trust as “the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest and cooperative behavior, based on commonly shared norms, on the

part of other members of that community. Those norms can be about deep value questions like the nature of God or justice, but they also encompass secular norms like professional standards and codes of behavior”. Putnam (1993) himself turns trust into the basis of all cooperation between individuals. According to Yamagishi and Yamagishi (1994), trust is an expectation of others’ benign behavior under circumstances where people do not have control over others, where they do not know each other. By contrast, assurance occurs in relationships where people do have control over others, for example where people know each other and are mutually committed. That difference might explain the levels of generalized trust and cooperativeness between different kinds of societies (Hayashi *et al.*, 1999).

Social capital theory underlines that participation in voluntary associations has direct and indirect effects. Following Tocqueville, Warren (1999) deeply believes in the importance of social capital for the good governance, that he disaggregates in three complementary domains to which the various associative venues of civil society might contribute: developmental effects on individuals (developing, forming, enhancing, and supporting capacities of individuals for self-governance); public sphere effects (constituting the social infrastructure of public spheres that provide information, develop agendas, test ideas, represent distinctions and provide voice); institutional effects (supporting and enhancing institutions of democratic governance by providing political representation, enabling pressure and resistance, organizing collective actions, and serving as alternative venues for governance).

We focus here only on the external effects of social capital. People active in voluntary associations might form organized civic groups that carry out specific actions of political communication (lobby, advocacy) and manage to control politicians in office. Such organized groups in civil society could force politicians to be more responsible, responsive and efficient by promising political support

or by threatening with its withdrawal. The citizens' response to such responsible behavior of politicians is a growing demand for political solutions, which are at the same time accompanied by satisfaction, trust and partisanship moderation. This is the virtuous circle of modern democracy described by Robert Putnam (1993) in his seminal work. The opposite is easy to imagine, that is alienated citizens and irresponsible, corrupt and indolent political elites. Therefore, people who participate in voluntary organizations in post-communist Europe could make a difference. They might form the democratic elite of organizational activists that are more trusting, tolerant and participatory, emphasize Bădescu *et al.* (2004, 316). These authors view those individuals who are active in civil society as holding the greatest potential to form the yoke of democratic attitudes that might disseminate over time throughout society.

Bădescu and Uslaner (2003) underline that social capital level in Central and Eastern Europe is lower than in Western societies. There is no doubt that Central and Eastern European countries differ from the western countries in respect of their recent past. If we don't consider trust as a psychological trait which may influence many aspects of later behavior, as Allport (1961) does, then we may consider the socializing conditions to be responsible for citizens' cooperation and commitment style. From this perspective, the present social connections come from the general constraints of the communist system, based on tight ideological control and mobilization, deletion and repression. Distrust, social atomization, and loose cooperation could all originate in the kind of connections people had in communist time (Völker and Flap, 2001).

Social and economic problems that citizens face could be another factor explaining low levels of social capital in the region. Struggling through transition, people hardly find time to spend in company of friends, and have no time at all to spend for non-profit activities.

Low levels of participation in voluntary organizations could be explained by the lack of resources, and also by the disappointing experience they had with communist forced mobilization, the persistence of informal cooperation networks and, finally, by the frustration caused by the performance of the new democratic and economic system (Howard, 2003).

## Political activity

It is not easy to define the engagement in the public sphere, yet it is assumed that people activate in this public space in pursuing the common interest. The good citizen is interested in common matters and manages to overpass its narrow individual interest by willing to do one's shares in collective endeavors (Almond and Verba, 1963). It seems that political participation is one of few acts binding individuals in communities. Being politically active really means using its citizenship and taking part to the common duties in the city. In this vein, the first indicator of the willingness to engage in public sphere is to be politically active. In terms of Verba *et al.* (2000), political participation means more than voting, but incorporates all acts that are intended to have the consequence of influencing the choice of governing officials or the policies they make and implement. Political participation has been evolving from simple, conventional forms – voting and working for political parties – to new, unconventional forms, that is protest (Barnes and Kaase, 1979). Alongside conventional forms, point out the authors, participation in volunteer associations, that we considered already, is another type of participation.

Political activity in Western Europe changed during decades of economic, social and political development into unconventional forms. In the industrial period, with social structure and with growing alternatives in ideologies, political parties and movements, people developed loyalties to these ideologies, parties and movements in order to

acquire guidance in how to think and act politically (Barnes, 2004a). According to Barnes, a new type of mobilization emerged and replaced the previous political mobilization in accordance with the changes in values going on in the world (Inglehart, 1977; 1990). The emerging age is one of cognitive mobilization. Although many people remain tied to the political system in the older social and political patterns of adherence, in the age of generalized education and mass communication there is less need to turn to parties for guidance on public policy. Now people are free to choose among a vast range of causes, civil society associations and solicitations and they do so in terms of personal interests and passions. There has been a growing acceptance of what were once considered to be unconventional forms of political action. Today protest politics fits well with social movements' patterns of political activity and with the changes in civil society and parties (Norris *et al.*, 2005).

## Data

The data we use come from a survey conducted in Romania in November 2005 at the Open Society Foundation's request. This survey is part of World Values Survey (the 2005-2006 wave), a larger inquiry conducted in no less than 50 countries. At the same time, this is part of a larger project financed by the Open Society Foundation, namely the Public Opinion Barometer (POB). The sample used is composed of 1.776 respondents aged of 18 years and more and it is representative for the Romanian adult population, with a calculated error of  $\pm 2.3\%$ .

Quantitative analysis is one of the most reliable research strategies when it comes to study attitudes and values on a large scale. We choose on purpose to use this particular dataset in order to make the analysis of the Romanian case comparable with other country cases. The World Values Survey dataset is generally used in aggregate level analysis, but we consider case-studies are important for underlining the specific

relationships between political activism and the essential values of trust and reciprocity in the post-communist settings.

## Concepts and measures

Before focusing on the Romanian case-study, let us briefly present the methodology of this research. It is important to clearly stress from the very beginning on the concepts we use, how they are operationalized and how related variables are measured. But this is also a necessary step in order to clarify the relationship between the dependent and independent variables we take into account. In the same time, as emphasized above, we actually draw our statistical design and our variables from a test made by Rose and Weller (2003) on essential conditions for democracy in Russia. We consider that Russian context is largely comparable to the Romanian one, thus we stick not only to their statistical design, but also to their variable operationalization.

### *Political activism*

Political activism is the dependent variable in our research. When we look to the political activism in Romania, we find that it clearly follows the path unraveled in the 70s by Barnes and Kaase (1979) and splits into distinctive patterns of political activity, namely into voting, membership in secondary organizations and protest. Whereas civic activism includes the membership in various secondary organizations, such as political parties, labor unions and religious, educational, sport, charitable, professional, environmental organizations, protest includes activities as signing a petition, joining in boycotts and attending lawful demonstrations. In order to clearly measure civic activism and protest we build scales by adding the related items in the questionnaire. Each of these political activism dimension scales proves to be fully reliable. The reliability analysis indicates a Cronbach's Alpha measure of 0.9366 for the civic activism scale and of 0.8671 for

the protest scale. For the moment we stick to this observation, and will discuss on the low intensity of the political activism in Romania later on.

People participate in politics because they can, because they want or because they were

asked to (Verba *et al.*, 2000). Therefore the independent variables are grouped in three main blocks, namely resources, human capital and context variables block, motivation variables block and, finally, social capital block.

**Table 1.** *The dimensions of political activism in Romania*

	<b>Civic activism</b>	<b>Protest</b>	<b>Voting</b>
Membership political party	0,811		
Membership labor union	0,739		
Membership church or religious organization	0,685		
Membership sport or recreation organization	0,909		
Membership art, music or educational organization	0,908		
Membership environmental organization	0,949		
Membership professional associations	0,892		
Membership charitable organization	0,930		
Signing a petition		0,910	
Joining in boycotts		0,860	
Attending lawful demonstrations		0,898	
Voting in last elections (2004)			0,999
% variance	49.085	19.815	8.345

Factor analysis (Principal Component Analysis). Varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization. KMO=0,921.  $N=1776$ . Sig.=0.000.

### ***Economic resources, human capital and context***

People with higher household income, those more positive about their household economic situation in one year and more positive about the current economic system are more likely to be politically active. In the same time, human capital might be of great importance: age, education, control over one's own life, gender and socioeconomic status might influence one's disposition in participating. We use here the same measures for economic resources and human capital that Rose and Weller (2003) used in their research, but we add some other context variables that we expect to influence political participation, namely the urban residence, the church attendance and the full-time job.

### ***Motivation variables***

Motivations are the second block of variables we have to take into account in order to assess the factors influencing political participation. People might be discouraged to participate by their own orientation towards the political system. Political interest may be seen somehow as a prerequisite for political participation. Another factor that could discourage people to participate is their low trust in the political system. It seems useless to participate when you have no hope to influence political institutions. These institutions are generally seen as rigged against ordinary men and women and run by corrupt and irresponsible officials. Trust in democratic institutions is seen as a key element for the democratic legitimacy and the support for

any democratic regime (Dalton 1999; Newton and Norris, 2000). Therefore, we measure people’s confidence in the representative institutions of democracy (parliament, presidency, political parties and mayoralities) in order to estimate their institutional trust.

People generally abstain from engaging in political activities when they cannot identify the common interest with other people (Bădescu *et al.*, 2004, 325). We already pointed out that public space is related to the definition of the common interest and we have acknowledged that defining common interest is not an easy task at all. Yet common interest might be defined at large as a willingness to cooperate and to refrain from egoism.

Following Stolle and Rochon (1998), we consider the rejection of free riding as a proxy for altruism and, respectively, the approval of free riding as a proxy for egoism. In fact, what it is important is that approving the free riding mainly expresses a lack of concern regarding the consequences of one’s acts for his fellow citizens. In this vein, World Values Survey questionnaire contains items designed to record such condemnation of free riding. By adding those items we build a scale of egoism that proves to be reliable for our analysis (Cronbach’s Alpha is 0.8057).

In the operationalization of altruism we follow Stolle and Rochon (1998), who have designated a wide range of attitudinal variables as important for social capital. The approval of free riding is one of these variables, along with tolerance and optimism. According to Stolle and Rochon (1998, 52), social capital also implies a willingness to do one’s shares

in collective endeavors. In a setting rich in social capital, one is less likely to expect others to be free riders and, partly in consequence, one is also less likely to be a free rider. Voluntary associations might probably teach this public ethic of condemning the free riding in the use of public services and other associated behaviors, such as lying or stealing a car. All these inappropriate behaviors have in common the fact they disregard the others’ interests and person, that they do not take into account the plausible consequences of one’s acts for other people. Knack and Keefer (1997) also consider that norms of reciprocity are defined by attitudes of cooperation with strangers in prisoner dilemma settings. Civic cooperation is generated by the people’s willingness to cooperate when confronted to an issue related to collective action. That is why van Schaik (2002) uses the rejection of free-riding as a proxy for reciprocity norms.

**Social capital**

As stressed above, social capital has no official definition. Yet there is a minimum consensus that its’ main components are social trust and membership in voluntary associations. The question related to social trust in the World Values Survey questionnaire is: “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?”. When compared, citizens in Eastern European countries display less trust in most people than citizens of West European countries generally do. Gabriel Bădescu (2003) discovered that the mean

**Table 2.** *Agreement with free-riding behavior (egoism indicator)*

Please tell me for each of the following statements whether you think it can always be justified (10), never be justified (1), or something in between, using this 1 to 10 scale	Mean	Standard deviation
Claiming state benefits which you are not entitled to	2,04	2,05
Travel by bus/train without paying a ticket (free-riding)	2,01	1,94
Cheating on tax if you have the chance	2,34	2,48
Someone accepting a bribe in the course of their duties	1,45	1,33

proportion of trustworthy persons is higher in consolidated West European democracies than in the former communist countries. The difference could be real, yet it could come from the meaning of "people". Bădescu emphasizes that a better operationalization would be ethnic trust. In fact, Uslaner and Conley (2003) unraveled different effects of generalized and particularized trust in the case of American communities.

Another problem raised by social trust is its relationship with institutional trust. It is important to know what are the linkages between the two types of trust, because they may affect the overall statistical model reliability. There is no more a widespread consensus regarding this relationship. Whereas Norris (1999) considers the influence running from interpersonal to institutional trust, Brehm and Rahn (1997) depict the relationship as circular. In the same time, Newton (2001) doubts about any relationship between the two types of trust. For him, social trust and political (institutional) trust are two different dimensions. They tend to be expressed by different kinds of people for different sorts of reasons. In our statistical model we also take the two types of trust as expressing different realities and consider them unrelated.

Participation in voluntary organizations is commonly seen as related to the interpersonal trust, while the latter is an important ingredient for cooperation. Even there are confirmations of the relationship between voluntary participation and trust (Wollebaek and Selle, 2002) other scholars continue to be skeptical about it. The correlation between the two variables one can find in various surveys may be the consequence of a selective recruitment of the participants in secondary organizations. Their members are exactly those who trust other people, whereas people who display less trust are not to be found between the members of such organizations. Even when one can find a positive correlation between those variables, the relationship is statistically rather weak. Newton (1999) discovered that it is inconsistent at country aggregate level. Even in

theory, emphasizes the author, there are few arguments in favor of this relationship: the time one spends in the organization is incomparably more reduced than that spent in other socializing environments, as family, school, workplace or neighborhood. Secondly, there are other factors that already proved important for trust and civic engagement, e.g. the education, as Almond and Verba (1963) have pointed out.

Despite those critics, recent literature largely emphasizes on the benefits of social capital for political activism. It seems that participation in voluntary organizations spills over at the scale on the whole society and makes citizens able to cooperate outside the limited range of voluntary organizations (Putnam, 2000). In fact, a chief benefit of participation in voluntary organizations is their ability to foster norms of reciprocity, citizenship and social trust and provide networks of social relations that can be used to pursue the common good (Edwards *et al.*, 1997). Beyond the normative side of social capital debate, a great body of literature aims at empirically assessing the importance of social capital for political participation and democracy in Western and Eastern societies (Dekker and Uslaner, 2001; Hooghe and Stolle, 2003; Klingemann *et al.*, 2006; Rossteutscher, 2003; van Deth *et al.*, 2007). The overall conclusion is that social capital fosters a more active participation to community governance and stimulates political participation. Moreover, social capital, through trust and participation, might foster better governance by the incentives and threats to leaders and policy-makers (Braithwaite and Levi, 1998; Fukuyama, 1995; Prakash and Selle, 2004).

### **Political activism in post-communist Romania**

Although participation in Romania fits with the Western pattern of activity dimension, it largely contrasts by its low intensity. Various

scholars studying Romanian society noticed this feature (Bădescu and Uslaner, 2003; Bădescu *et al.*, 2004; Sum, 2005). In fact, Romanian low political participation is part of a general tendency in post-communist Europe (Howard, 2002; Barnes, 2004b). People participate in politics because they can, because they want or because they were asked to. Verba *et al.* (2000, p. 246) explain the low political participation in terms of lack of resources (time, money, skills needed for political activity), motivations (interest for politics, preferences for particular policies, other gratification that might come from political activity) and recruitment. That is the same in post-communist Europe, emphasize various scholars (Bădescu *et al.*, 2004; Uslaner, 2004). One should not neglect the social shock in transforming Central and Eastern Europe. Erosion and collapse of the social safety net and the rise of permanent unemployment and poverty surprised the society, reminds Ivan Berend (2007). Living standards declined, thus people lack resources enabling them to participate politically. In the same time they feel politically powerless and disregard public issues. Moreover, they reject mobilization because they still remember the communist kind of party-state mobilization. Thus, post-communist participation seems to be much more dependent of communist legacy than previously thought (Howard, 2003).

Another legacy of post-communism is the wide range of social (personal) networks, specific to atomized societies, that make such more formal civil society organizations to be unattractive for many people (Gibson, 2003). Even they were largely useful in time of political stress during communist era (Völker and Flap, 2001), personal networks survival is an anti-modern mark and a burden for the consolidation of today civil society. That is because persistence of networks is a response to the organization failure and to the corruption of formal organizations. Networks that individuals can invoke in response are anti-modern: forms of informal, diffuse

social cooperation; begging or cajoling public officials; using connections to “bend” rules or paying bribes that break rules (Rose, 1998). These pre-modern social features, non-official kinship and networking organizations, survived in post-communism and were ready-made networks for corruption in the new post-communist settings. “Skillful use of connections, friends and relatives in the rights positions, and bribes guaranteed the required inside information to enable a go-getter to be first in line for an unprecedented opportunity (...) Corruption became an element of the political and economic system” (Berend, 2007, 279).

We test now the relationship between features of social capital, especially trust and reciprocity, and political participation in Romania. Moreover, we want to assess the importance of social capital for political participation in Romania by comparing its effects with those of other variables, which are people’s resources and motivations. The three tables below present the impact of the three blocks of independent variables on the three dimensions of political activity.

### ***Impact of resources, human capital and context variables***

Looking to first regression models in each table, those grouping resource, human capital and context variables, we can easily notice the differences and similarities between political activities. Whereas human capital proves to be of some importance for civic activism and protest through variables such as gender, age and especially education, it has no importance for voting. Household income is surprisingly unimportant for civic activism, but seems to be important for protest. This later political activity, protest, has been growing faster in Western capitalist Europe in the ’70s, largely driven by the rise of post-material values (Inglehart, 1977). It is not surprising then to see that young people take to the streets of great Western cities, but also take to more traditional politics (Norris *et al.*, 2005).

**Table 3.** *Factors influencing civic activism in Romania*

	<b>Resources, human capital and context model</b>	<b>Motivations model</b>	<b>Social capital model</b>	<b>Integrative model</b>
Gender (male)	0.044			0.028
Age (continuous)	0.061			0.071*
Education (1-14)	0.130***			0.123**
Urban residence	-0.092**			-0.113***
Full-time job	0.128***			0.121***
Church attendance (1-7)	0.067*			0.045
Socio-economic status (1-5)	0.038			0.059
Household income (continuous)	0.064			0.062
Positive about household economic situation in one year (1-5)	0.012			-0.008
Positive about current economic system (1-5)	0.005			-0.012
Control over one's own life (1-10)	0.020			0.041
Political interest		0.127***		0.083**
Trust in democratic institutions		0.027		0.018
Agreement with free-riding behavior		0.106***		0.070*
Social trust			-0.004	-0.017
Adj. R Square	0.059	0.027	-0.001	0.072

Regression analysis (OLS). \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ . Entries in the table above are standardized coefficients (Beta).

**Table 4.** *Factors influencing protest activism in Romania*

	<b>Resources, human capital and context model</b>	<b>Motivations model</b>	<b>Social capital model</b>	<b>Integrative model</b>
Gender (male)	0.072*			0.026
Age (continuous)	0.086**			0.084*
Education (1-14)	0.110**			0.109*
Urban residence	-0.002			0.009
Full-time job	0.083*			0.067*
Church attendance (1-7)	-0.008			-0.043
Socio-economic status (1-5)	-0.019			-0.026
Household income (continuous)	0.137***			0.133***
Positive about household economic situation in one year (1-5)	-0.058			-0.072*
Positive about current economic system (1-5)	-0.010			-0.015
Control over one's own life (1-10)	-0.007			-0.032

	Resources, human capital and context model	Motivations model	Social capital model	Integrative model
Political interest		0.169***		0.102**
Trust in democratic institutions		0.020		0.059
Agreement with free-riding behavior		-0.012		-0.017
Social trust			0.009	0.014
Volunteerism			0.145***	0.111***
Adj. R Square	0.051	0.028	0.020	0.079

Regression analysis (OLS). \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001. Entries in the table above are standardized coefficients (Beta).

**Table 5.** *Factors influencing voting in Romania*

	Resources, human capital and context model	Motivations model	Social capital model	Integrative model
Gender (male)	0.048			0.001
Age (continuous)	0.056			0.058
Education (1-14)	0.023			0.013
Urban residence	-0.049			-0.021
Full-time job	0.038			0.026
Church attendance (1-7)	0.114***			0.087*
Socio-economic status (1-5)	-0.031			-0.050
Household income (continuous)	0.018			0.011
Positive about household economic situation in one year (1-5)	0.031			-0.005
Positive about current economic system (1-5)	-0.027			0.027
Control over one's own life (1-10)	0.097**			0.083*
Political interest		0.089**		0.064*
Trust in democratic institutions		0.100***		0.099*
Agreement with free-riding behavior		-0.073**		-0.062*
Social trust			0.017	0.013
Volunteerism			0.047*	0.023
Adj. R Square	0.023	0.026	0.001	0.041

Regression analysis (OLS). \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001. Entries in the table above are standardized coefficients (Beta).

Uslaner (2004, 4) doubts that Romanian protesters are driven by post-material values since Romania recently discovered the material benefits of capitalism and since protesters are indeed young, but not necessarily the best

educated, the most civic active, the avant-garde of activism towards a better world. They are rather facing future with pessimism and withdrawal and are not the same people taking part in conventional politics. They

belong to unions more than to civic groups. It is possible, indeed, that protesters in Romania are organized by labor unions. Having a full-time job has an impact on protest and civic activism, but not on voting.

Voting is influenced only by the belief that one is in control over what happens to him and by the church attendance. While the first predictor might be related to the belief that people hold a degree of political power in influencing elected officials, that they are not powerless in partially shaping public policies by promising their votes and threatening with the withdrawal of their votes, the second predictor, namely the church attendance, is more ambiguous. Church attendance has an impact on civic activism and on voting. Whereas the first effect might be explained by membership in church or religious organizations, the second effect might be caused by political mobilization. People attending the church are politically mobilized by priests, especially in rural communities, and vote more frequently than other people. In the same time, they tend to be older, less educated and more rural, so there is circularity in the regression model that might overestimate the church attendance's impact. But the three political activities have in common a very low fraction of their variance explained by resources, human capital and context variables.

### ***Impact of motivation variables***

When variables expressing motivation are introduced in the regression models one can notice that they do not explain more of the variance of political activities than the previous block of variables expressing resources, human capital and context. But motivations are somehow important for political participation, especially political interest, which influence all three kinds of political activity.

Trust in democratic institutions is important only for voting, yet this is an essential feature. Voting is not only a civic right, but it is also a regulation mechanism, the only way citizens may influence the political

system. Free and fair voting procedures may favor institutional trust on the long run. It may favor the citizens' confidence that political institutions do not abuse of their position of power, in this case in managing the voting procedures. Two competing theories, the cultural and performance explanation, proved to be important for institutional trust when tested in Eastern Europe (Lühiste, 2006; Mishler and Rose, 2005). Trust in other people and the confidence in the functioning of the economic and political system both influence citizens' institutional trust.

The agreement with free-riding is equally important for civic activism and for voting, but in different ways. While the agreement with free-riding behavior inhibits voting, it seems to help civic activism, which is at least unexpected and strange. We expected to see a different impact of reciprocity, which is a positive correlation between the rejection of free-riding and participation in voluntary organizations. This unexpected feature leads us to question about the civic activism in Romania, which will be discussed below.

### ***Impact of social capital***

The explanatory power of social capital is generally weak. Social capital merely explains two percent of the variance of protest and explains virtually nothing of that of civic activism and voting in Romania. It is quite scant when compared to the expectations of the social capital theory. Yet it is noticeable that civic activism and protest are related, contrary of what Uslaner (2004) has found in his research concerning political participation in Romania. And the relationship still holds on in the integrative model that takes into account the influence of all three blocks of variables. People who decide to be civic activists are those engaged more frequently in protest activities.

The integrative regression models for all three dimensions of participation finally unravel the overall framework of political activism in Romania. Resources, especially education, are important for all types of

political activity. Obviously, this is not a novelty. It only confirms numerous findings in both Western and Eastern Europe (Almond and Verba, 1963; Verba *et al.*, 2000; Bădescu, 2003; Uslaner, 2004). But motivations are equally important, especially when regarding to political interest. Trust in democratic institutions seems to motivate people only to vote, while rejecting the free-riding does the same. Social capital proves to be an ingredient for protest by its civic activism component alone, but its overall effect is weaker than expected.

## Discussion and conclusion

Romania is a young, unconsolidated democracy, which still struggles to organize a functional public space, regarded as a space accepting reasoning and dialogue, favoring solidarity and common interest. Although the generation of a public space is not yet a subject of prior interest in Romania, it recently became a research topic for political scientists, especially when it comes to talk about corruption (Uslaner, Bădescu, 2004a; 2004b). We are interested in the political participation, which we consider to be a form of engagement in the public sphere. We tested therefore the effects of volunteerism and trust, incorporated into the concept of social capital, and of reciprocity on political activism in Romania. Although social capital's impact is weaker than expected, we discovered that it is still important. Although its impact is scant on voting, civic activism proves to be a resource for protest. This is in line with classical findings and of great importance for democracy in Romania. In fact, civic activism seems to spill over and help political protest. Cooperation is, indeed, the key for effective pressure on the political establishment in the aim of citizens' strong influence on public issues. Civic activists might promote trust, dialogue and cooperation, but also help generate political resources that citizens need in order to control irresponsible political elites. As underlined

before, political participation is essential for democracy because it links citizens and elected officials in an input-output system. Therefore, it is vital that societies in the region generate a democratic mechanism of controlling political elites. According to the theory of political control (Putnam, 1993; Rose-Ackerman, 2007; Uslaner, 2007; Warren, 1999), effective linkages between citizens and politicians are the key to political and economic performance. With no political participation, with no leverages of control, citizens are at the mercy of political elites and can only hope for accidental honest and responsible elites. With no citizens' control, there is no reason to believe that political elites would desire indeed to behave in an honest, responsible and decent manner. On the contrary, one could expect only to find corruption, bad management, poor economic performance, public discontent and a general feeling of powerlessness in such a polity. In the long run, elites could consolidate their power and rule by violence and fear alone. These are the virtuous and vicious circles plausibly linking citizens and political elites.

Associations could become in Romania schools of democracy, teaching trust and cooperation and civic activists might even become an example for society and play the function of opinion leaders (Bădescu *et al.*, 2004, 340). They might be the first to break the vicious circle of corruption, distrust, lack of interest and disengagement from public action. Yet they don't seem to stronger reject free-riding. Our findings make us question the internal effects of voluntary participation. In fact, participation in voluntary associations might prove not to be enough for teaching the habits of cooperation and trust. As underline Bădescu *et al.* (2004, 338), average membership length is less than two years in Romania. If activists stay active only for two years, stress the authors, this democratic advance guard may drop out of civic life and become as mistrusting as other citizens. Moreover, according to the authors, many associations in Romania seem to have relied on Western funds and taken much of

their organizational initiative from Western sources and actually have much more to do with international available funding than with local needs (Howard, 2003). In the long run, they rely more on paid members than on volunteers. Such NGOs even turn little by little into private public offices, which cannot address to the real local needs and that stop working when the available foreign funding stops. This feature may explain the unexpected correlation between membership in voluntary organizations and the approval of free-riding.

Yet our interest is not limited to political activism. There is a hope that civic activists in Romania might become politically active and help to the rebirth of a public sphere, a space of freedom and dialogue, an environment where people are free to express themselves without any coercion from any social or political authority. Activism in voluntary associations, clubs and congregations has not only internal effects. Civic activism not only teaches participants the lesson of democracy by generating a space of debating and decision making, but it could spill over society itself. Civic activism fosters political activism by his lessons of cooperation and pursuit of the common interest. By consolidating trust between individuals with different social, religious and ethnic backgrounds, it facilitates cooperation on a larger social scale. And post-communist societies desperately need to rebuild a public space with its incumbent political function, which is to put the decision-makers to account. In this vein, public space is a medium for political justification, as well as for political initiative and political support. In any given polity this is the common good of citizens and, perhaps, the only common good they have, because public space is the depository of the common interest.

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