‘Yes We Vote’: Civic mobilisation and impulsive engagement on Instagram

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Abstract:
Social media have become increasingly central to civic mobilisation and protest movements around the world. Emotions, symbols, self-presentation and visual communication are emerging as key components of networked individualism and connective action by affective publics challenging established political norms. These emerging repertoires have the potential to reignite civic engagement, although their coherence and sustainability have been questioned.

We explore these phenomena through an examination of Instagram use during the 2014 Romanian presidential election. Voting irregularities during the 1st round, particularly affecting the diaspora, gave rise to an impulsive civic movement utilising social media to express solidarity and drive turn-out in the 2nd round. Using an original coding framework, we look at how narratives of identity, community and engagement were visually constructed by users on Instagram; the activities, settings, spaces, objects and emotions that comprised this multi-authored story.

Our analysis reveals the creation of a loose “me too” collective: an emotionally charged hybrid of self-presentation and participation in a shared moment of historic significance, which otherwise lacked particular norms, political agendas or hierarchies. The civic movement on Instagram materialised primarily through photos documenting the act of voting; an imagined community that combined co-presence in physical space with virtual solidarity through photos of ballots, flags and landmarks. The platform appears to favour impulsive, symbolic and affective expression rather than rational or critical dialogue. As in other cases of post-systemic grassroots engagement, individuals came together for a short period of time and expressed the need for change, although this remained largely an abstract signifier.

Keywords: ***Affective publics, civic mobilisation, connective action, identity, Instagram, social media, Romania***

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Social media are becoming increasingly central to political mobilisation around the world. From domestic politics and elections to civic movements, such as Occupy and the Indignados, to events that dominate global headlines, social media provide citizens with the space and tools to get the latest news, interact with others, share their thoughts and emotions and join causes and campaigns. In January 2015, people around the world used the #JeSuisCharlie hashtag to express solidarity with the cartoonists and journalists murdered by Islamist gunmen in Paris. Similarly, the practice of temporarily altering one's Facebook profile photo so as to incorporate a flag in an expression of solidarity has become common in the wake of further terrorist attacks in Paris (November 2015), Brussels (March 2016), Istanbul (June 2016) and Nice (July 2016).

As the relevance of representative politics and traditional forms of participation is questioned, the meaning and importance of campaign-related activities that have a highly symbolic, satiric or emotive nature have been subject to intense debate. Some scholars see in these practices of reflexive individualism (Loader, Vromen, and Xenos, 2014) and political consumerism (de Zuniga, Copeland, and Bimber, 2014) the potential recalibration of democracy; the enfranchisement of disengaged citizens, particularly younger generations, as well as the construction of symbolic narratives that could help citizens reimagine institutions (Papacharissi, 2015). Others have noted the proprietary nature of digital platforms (Couldry, 2015) and have raised questions about the political gravitas of symbolic actions that may ultimately merely create the illusion of participation. Central to this discussion is the construction of identity and, in particular, negotiating the boundaries or emphasis between the individual (the self) and the collective (the community) (Highfield 2016).

This paper looks at the use of Instagram by Romanian citizens during the second round of the 2014 presidential elections between incumbent prime minister Victor Ponta (who won the first round and was widely seen as a product of the old political system) and Klaus Iohannis (mayor of Sibiu and candidate of a newly formed liberal alliance). As reports of voting irregularities during the first round – particularly affecting the diaspora – became widespread, Romanians turned to social media to protest and mobilise. Hashtags such as #diasporavoteaza [the diaspora votes] and #yeslavot [Yes to voting / I go out to vote] emerged and #ponta, #nuponta [no ponta] gained more traction. This online activity was followed by numerous protests around Romania and, on the day of the second round, by huge queues at many polling stations around the world (Norocel, 2014). The massive turnout by the diaspora appears to have contributed to a last-minute swing in favour of Iohannis who secured a surprise victory.

Despite the wealth of the literature on social media, online political communication and digital civic engagement, there is surprisingly little research on the visual aspects of civic mobilisation and on

more qualitative examinations of civic self-expression through photographs in social media. The bulk of existing research focuses on top-down campaign messages and on the more textual aspects of political discussion on Facebook and Twitter, as well as on large-scale analyses of network formation and dynamics.

Research on social media and civic mobilisation has focused predominantly on the United States and Western Europe as this is where a lot of innovative practices have been observed. This is the first known study of citizen uses of Instagram in a political context (a study has focused on its use for campaigning purposes among Swedish political parties: Filimonov, Russmann and Svensson, 2016); and also the first known empirical analysis of social media photographs in the political context of Romania. In particular we examine the spaces, objects and situations that users choose to frame and represent voting as part of their daily realities and how these are associated with civic or political messages, feelings, opinions and causes; as well as how this body of individualised online activity becomes more than a sum of its parts, through becoming a shared moment.

Identity and Community in the Era of Networked Individualism

The exponential growth of the web and the diffusion of digital technologies into everyday life have coincided with, and contributed to, important shifts in the ways in which we express our identities and construct our communities. In the era of networked, reflexive individualism communication technologies and consumption have become central to the construction of identity, whose realisation has to be performed and enacted (Wellman et al., 2003; Loader and Mercea, 2012; Loader, Vromen, and Xenos, 2014).

At the same time, over the last couple of decades we have witnessed the shift from local, hierarchical and densely-knit social groups to more fragmented, loosely bounded and virtual social networks. As the relevance of traditional processes and agents of representative democracy is questioned, participating in online and offline movements, protests and causes becomes a popular mode of engagement. This process was first described by Bimber (1998) as ‘accelerated pluralism’: the fragmentation of interest-based politics and the shift towards issue politics and a fluid form of citizenship in which people mobilise and polarise for short periods of time around certain issues, events and *ad hoc* movements (Highfield, 2012).

Social media structures and network capabilities have facilitated the creation of “volatile structures that envelop an ever-developing habitus of civic engagement” (Papacharissi, 2014, 115). The key

feature of this habitus is the blurring of the boundaries between the political and the everyday: as everyday acts are framed by modern communication repertoires, the civic becomes situated in the ordinary (Boyte, 2010). Taking a selfie, using a hashtag, creating or sharing a meme, using an emoji or emotional reaction button, leaving a comment, changing your profile photo or using other features – such as like buttons, filters etc – all constitute an emerging *platform vernacular* (Gibbs et al., 2014) of discursive, symbolic and affective actions that cross the boundary between the individual and the collective, the formal and the informal. The affective dimension of politics – the personal emotional resonance of events which can be instantly expressed and shared within a network – is particularly important as it leads to the formation of a collective within which one can create a jointly authored narrative (Papacharissi, 2014; 2015).

The cultural legitimacy and political significance of such activities has been a matter of extended debate. What is the civic value and impact of symbolic actions, such as altering one's profile photo on Facebook? Taking a selfie and using a hashtag to incorporate one's post into an ongoing global discussion might be seen as a superficial act of narcissistic self-promotion (Halpern, Valenzuela, and Katz, 2016); or it could be seen as enhancing a sense of collective endeavour, demonstrating solidarity, connoting significance and creating shared identity around events of importance (Zappavigna, 2014). In this sense, as noted by Highfield (201,: 158), "the social mediation of everyday life… is not just for documenting irreverence and play […] such mundane content can take political dimensions". From the perspective of rational choice voting is negligible and largely symbolic, but such individual symbolic acts formalise the significance of a political community. Equally important are the multiple benefits such engagement can have at the micro-social level, i.e. for the political socialisation of individuals.

The formation of collective identity on and via social media is an interesting phenomenon that is still unfolding and evolving. Hashtags have emerged as key facilitators of community, especially on Twitter and Instagram perhaps less so on Facebook, as different platforms with slightly different architectures and uses produce different civic affordances: platform vernaculars are shaped through the logics of architecture and use (Gibbs et al., 2014). For instance, the use of hashtags permits the construction of "blended emotion, drama, opinion and news in a manner that depart[s] from the conventional deliberative logic and aligned with a softer structure of affect worlds" (Papacharissi, 2014, 117). The community is at the same time defined while also being transient: the posts archived under a hashtag represent the quickly fading footprint of a community around an event or topic, as is for example the case with #BlackLivesMatter or #HeforShe. The hashtag is not just a slogan or empty signifier around which millions of people can cluster; it also acts as a gateway into that jointly

authored narrative (as searching for a hashtag collates relevant posts) and as a brand of sorts with which individuals can associate themselves: the hashtag *becomes* the community or movement.

Communities and movements can have many forms. A range of campaigns inspired by charities and pressure groups such as the ice bucket challenge, to raise awareness of the Motor Neurone Disease, the #nomakeupselfie, raising money for Cancer Research, or women posting on Facebook the colour of the bra they were wearing to raise awareness of breast cancer. While each of these can suggest personal resonance of the issue and sponsoring organisation (Deller and Tilton, 2015), it is likely some participated purely in order to follow a trend and be part of a collective (Gerbaudo, 2015). Thus a community could be either clearly defined or loose and of a moment yet still represent a movement which attempts to have societal impact of some form.

Engaging through Social Media: Opportunities, Limitations, Questions

The emerging platforms and forms of digital mobilisation have lowered the barriers of engagement: the cost, energy, time and commitment required to join a collective are considerably reduced compared to more conventional forms of political participation, such as joining a political organisation or taking part in direct action. Bennett and Segerberg (2013) call this the *logic of connective action* – i.e. a form of civic activity in which participants engage with issues on their own individual terms, by finding common ground in easy-to-personalise action frames. Such frames allow members to understand, interpret and share them in their own ways. This is quite different from traditional processes of collective action requiring a coherent ideology, commonly accepted goals, rituals and practices, possibly including codes of conduct and ground rules (see Kavada, 2015), as well as – crucially – clear boundaries between the in-group and out-group.

The line between connective and collective action is not always clear. In recent years we have observed a number of causes and protest/mobilisation movements in the Arab world (especially during the Tahrir Square protests in Egypt), in Europe (such as the anti-austerity movements 15M/Indignados in Spain and Aganaktismenoi in Greece, where Menoume Evropi, an anti-Grexit, pro-EU movement, was also formed) and in the United States, as well as around the world (#Occupy). Recent studies on some of these cases (e.g. Juris, 2012; Theocharis et al., 2014) indicate that social media were instrumental to their growth and visibility. Some of their key characteristics – the lack of recognisable leaders, a certain vagueness in terms of their precise goals and policy agendas, little presence in old media, an emphasis on inclusiveness and the incorporation of demographics that might not have traditionally engaged with public affairs – fit the description of

connective action (Castells, 2012). It is interesting, however, that in every single case the role of space and physical co-location has been reaffirmed, rather than fading. These movements appropriated, claimed or occupied physical space – usually prominent civic landmarks or public squares – and the experience of community was grounded in space, a necessary tactic in raising awareness, enhancing recognition and incentivising participation. Secondly, their legitimacy or decision-making processes are usually tied to physical presence, which can spark tensions and struggles over management, control and collective voice (Kavada, 2015).

Couldry (2015) points out that this narrative of coming together through social networks – the 'myth of us' – depends on proprietary platforms run for the profit of their owners and shareholders, and it overlooks the diversity of ways through which people engage with others and with causes. Furthermore, the extent to which looser connective action can lead to long-term political transformation is unclear and subject to debate. Anduiza, Cristancho, and Sabudeco (2013) found that such organisations tend to be newly formed, lack formal membership and are mainly internet-based. Mobilisation takes place through social networks and participants are expected to be younger, less organizationally embedded, and less politically experienced and their participation is likely to be both impulsive and isolated to a single context and a moment in time. The individualising dynamic that blurs in/out boundaries may also hamper the development of a deeper common identity.

Furthermore, what many of these movements have in common is that they consider established politicians, political parties or power systems to be the problem, usually without offering a tangible alternative (Castells, 2012). While they declare their belief in (direct) democracy and justice, they fail to arrive at clear demands or realise positive political change and their victories – as in the case of the Arab Spring – occasionally proved short-lived or led to the downfall of the establishment without a better alternative taking over. Having said that, Papacharissi (2015) notes that these networks of mediated interactions and civic activity that she calls *affective publics* may be ephemeral and transient, but they also construct powerful symbols that may enable people to reimagine democratic institutions; they may cause disruption and so their impact could be subtle and long-term. A sense of hope, promise and potential is at the core of their affective palette and this can be a potent means of acquiring agency and self-efficacy.

Research on political communication has traditionally focused on the rhetorical tools and strategies used by politicians and parties to win elections (Koc-Michalska and Lilleker, 2016). Yet within loose and decentralised networks, affective publics and networked citizens can unite and create political and media events. Therefore it is also important to examine the content of their interactions and the ways in which the multi-authored stories of civic action are written in order to gain further insights

into the outcomes sought, the gratifications gained, the tools used and the negotiation of the boundaries between the self and the body politic.

Photographs have become an integral, perhaps dominant, part of social media activity and exemplify the blurring of the personal and public; technology makes snapping a photograph easy and the wide array of apps to edit them and platforms to share them with one click makes sharing appealing, perhaps more appealing than sharing extensive pieces of text or commenting on others' messages. Analysing collections of images demonstrate how civic storytelling is constructed *visually* by users themselves: the spaces, objects, actions and social settings they choose to associate with the political and the civic. Photographs also capture how users construct their identity through visual self-expression, and how they claim or negotiate their place within a collective identity. An analysis of visual artefacts is thus valuable because it casts light on the role of physical space and the relationship between online and offline spheres, especially in the case of campaigns and movements that unfold across cities or countries. Hence Instagram is a fertile space for research on emerging visual political cultures.

Launched in October 2010, and bought by Facebook in 2012, Instagram (2015) has 400 million registered users who have posted over 40 billion photographs. Instagram users can connect their profiles to their Facebook profiles and Twitter feeds. However, of paramount interest is the use of pictures: the norm among Instagram users is to take pictures of oneself ('selfies') or of others, then add explanatory text. Usage has ranged from user-generated guides of major cities to sharing images of mundane events in daily life as well as visual demonstrations of presence at events, such as concerts. The main characteristic of Instagram is that photos are usually posted "live", created by the user, as opposed to other social media where there is widespread sharing of memes, official, satirical or other user photos. The combination of the everyday, the visual and the live elements of social media is particularly interesting from a civic mobilisation perspective.

Civic Mobilisation on Instagram during the 2014 Romanian Presidential Election

Most studies of mobilisation through social media, as noted, have focused predominantly on the United States, Western Europe and Egypt. Research on digital civic engagement is much sparser for some of the relatively newer democracies of Central and Eastern Europe. This paper focuses on the 2014 presidential election in Romania; a post-communist EU member-state that combines an interesting blend of traits common to established liberal/consumer democracies and to former communist states.

While the democratic process has been consolidated in Romania over the last 27 years following the collapse of the Ceausescu regime, the post-1989 political system has been plagued by limited political accountability, widespread corruption, clientilism, over-bureaucratisation, public fund waste and poverty overall amounting to what Crowther (2010, 1) calls "difficult democratisation" and "protracted post-communism". The system is stable and has managed to marginalise extremist voices, yet factors such as shifting party alliances, the propensity of Romanian MPs to migrate between parties and the lingering presence of politicians associated with the communist regime have created a culture of systemic mistrust and public cynicism (Stan, 2005; Stan and Vancea, 2009). Despite symbolic milestones towards democratisation, notably in 1996 and 2004, there is a widespread sense of failed expectations; that the old political system is impossible to get rid of. Hopes that Romania would be transformed taking a more central place at the heart of Europe have been disappointed (King and Marian, 2013).

In this context of stagnation, frustration and a weak civil society, certain interesting developments have started to emerge. Social media use is becoming increasingly integral to younger people's daily lives and identities (Garbasevschi, 2015) with a particularly notable increase in Facebook use 2010-2012 (Momoc, 2012b). The 2009 presidential election was the first contest with significant online activity, although this was mostly driven by citizens, i.e. bottom-up. Several political leaders had a social media page or profile (especially on Facebook and Twitter), but use was limited temporally (it did not continue after the election), in scope (it was mostly one-way broadcast-type content promoting offline events or attacking the opponent) and volume (with low numbers of posts) (Holotescu et al., 2011; Momoc, 2012a).

Furthermore, a range of inclusive grassroots movements have started to appear, such as the 2012 Piaţa Universităţii (University Square) protests. A key aim of the movement's online presence was to challenge negative and stereotypical media frames of protesters and to show that they were educated city dwellers who envisaged "a better future" for Romania. In order to construct a more positive representation of those taking part in protests, organisers focused on showcasing the personalities, dreams and aspirations of individual activists. As Grigorasi (2014, 69) points out the Piaţa Universităţii page was followed by a very diverse demographic, ranging from students and NGO members to housewives and football fans, as well as the diaspora. Perhaps the most important element of framing the campaign – and one that appears salient in other political and cultural contexts – was dissociation from established political parties.

Finally, the Romanian diaspora has emerged as a potent political actor over the last decade. After the 1989 transition and the country's accession to the EU, millions of Romanian citizens have left the

country mainly to seek work or better living conditions abroad. Romania has one of the most advanced arrangements regarding the diaspora's voting rights and, subsequently, that transnational constituency has demonstrated a distinct identity (consistently favouring the liberal centre-right over the socialist centre-left), high levels of engagement and motivation (forming long lines to vote at overseas polling stations in the 2009 election) and political muscle (effectively tipping the 2009 election in the 2nd round in favour of the liberal underdog, PDL candidate Traian Băsescu) (Burean, 2011).

These phenomena – an increasingly social media-literate youth, the emergence of internet-fuelled peaceful civic activism and a powerful, engaged diaspora – all came to the fore during the 2014 presidential election, a contest that Victor Ponta (Prime Minister and candidate of the social democrat party PSD) was expected to win. Polls prior to the first round of voting, in which fourteen candidates stood, predicted he would gather 40% of the vote, while Klaus Iohannis (the mayor of the city Sibiu and candidate of the newly formed Liberal Christian Alliance (ACL) consisting of the PNL and PDL) was estimated to gain 30%. During the first round it became apparent that the required "number, size and placing of voting stations abroad [had] been seriously underestimated. Consequently, very long queues formed outside these voting stations, oftentimes stretching over several hundreds of meters" (Norocel, 2014).

Although people queued for long hours many were unable to vote as the stations were closed as scheduled at 9pm. A total of 161,054 votes were declared from the various polling stations across the world (the Digi 24 website on 7th December 2016 reported there are as many as 3.5 million Romanians living abroad). Social media were quickly flooded with records of long queues and with high numbers of citizens who could not cast their vote; as a result protests were organized over the following days in the principal urban centres (Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Timişoara and elsewhere) in support of the diaspora. The issue became politicised as both candidates took opposing sides, while many thought that limiting the diaspora's electoral power was deliberately engineered by the PSD-led government so as to advantage Ponta.

Using hashtags such as #diasporavoteaza [the diaspora votes] and #yeslavot [Yes to voting / I go out to vote], Romanians mobilised at home and abroad, online and offline. The protests called for solidarity in Romania with those in the diaspora who had spent time and money to cast their vote abroad; and calls for a higher turnout in Romania were also made, thus presenting the diaspora's effort as symbolic of the desire for a more democratic society and positioning them as a key factor for Romania's future. The protests were successful in that the diaspora were given greater provision to vote. As a result, more than 400,000 were reported to have voted in the second round with many

more still unable to do so – some being "shoed away" with tear gas in cities such as Paris and Turin. Klaus Iohannis secured a surprise victory in the 2nd round with 54.43% of the vote. In the remainder of this paper we present the design and findings of an exploratory study of how community action unfolded on Instagram.

Research Design

The empirical part of our study explores how narratives of identity, community and engagement were visually constructed by Romanians on Instagram during the 2014 presidential election. Specifically, viewing the pictures as strategic-personal public communication, designed to speak about the poster, the context and to others, we believe we can assess through a rigorous coding scheme 1) the nature and depth of political participation of these users; 2) the mood and motivation of participants ; 3) and the collective identity being established. Answering these questions provide insights into broader issues at the interface of social media and politics. We can offer insights into the relationships individuals formed with a wider community, the coherence of activism and of the community. In other words we can assess pictures as a form of political expression, as a source of data on activism and the role Instagram plays as a space for political activism.

The starting point for our data collection was November 16th, 2014 – the day of the second round of the presidential elections. We set up a protocol using the platform If This Then That (IFTTT) to save photos on Instagram posted with #yeslavot, #alegeri2014 and #diasporavoteaza, which a preliminary analysis showed were the most frequently used election hashtags. Our data collection ended on November 25th, when hashtag use subsided. Once collected, the data went through an iterative process of filtering, sorting and analysis. While the initial dataset included several hundreds of posts, we eliminated all duplicates and all posts that had been removed by the user (or by Instagram) as it was not possible to open the link and analyse the full image. The final sample included 174 posts (image and caption) whose textual content was translated into English. No subsequent comments to posts were included.

For the analysis of the Instagram posts we designed a coding scheme combining visual discourse, content and textual analysis. The literature on social research methods and data analysis has struggled to keep up with the sudden onset and potential civic agency of user-generated online content (Fielding, 2014), while the field of visual research methods in socio-political contexts is particularly under-developed. Analysing citizens' own photographs in order to dissect the ways in which they construct identities, communities and civic narratives in space and online requires taking a multidisciplinary approach that combines elements from anthropology, sociology, urban and media studies.

Due to the original and exploratory nature of the research, we approached our sample with an open mind and a coding strategy that essentially adhered to the spirit of grounded theory. Our coding book featured 104 categories, variables and questions – from basic image properties to an extensive features analysis and from structured or binary categories to interpretive open-ended questions. We registered all the different elements featuring in the photographs: human presence (ranging from a selfie to large crowds), activities represented, types of spaces, buildings and objects, including those that may carry particular political meanings such as flags, civic landmarks etc. Combining a close reading of the captions/hashtags with the photographs, we also tried to identity the point of the post (was it to report, witness or expose something happening in the spirit of citizen journalism? To state one's presence in an important moment?); as well as the range of emotions, statements of values or ideologies, political issues or agendas promoted and any attitudes expressed towards particular institutions or personalities. We also looked for any evidence of memory/the past, inclusion, exclusion, stereotyping, othering, isolation and coming together.

Every post was coded multiple times by multiple coders as the aim of this qualitative approach was to capture as wide a range of settings, symbols, emotions and interpretations as possible rather than narrow our analysis around pre-set hypotheses. Coding of the photos took place in two stages: the first involved two coders working under the supervision of the authors, while the second was carried out by the authors themselves. In order to test the coding scheme and to establish inter-coder reliability in the binary/features categories, both coders carried out blind coding on the same 10 posts, which produced 99.32% agreement. Based on the queries and issues arising from the pilot, the coding book was revised accordingly and a protocol was established when dealing with particular scenarios. One emotion that was not originally included as a separate element of the coding book and emerged as highly prominent in the "other" category was 'pride'. We therefore recoded all photographs to make sure that that element had been captured and counted correctly.

Finally, using both group and individual mind-mapping and incorporating the notes from all coders, we identified the recurring patterns, key themes and elements of the civic discourse constructed by Instagram users during and after the 2nd round of the Romanian election. Although small and not covering the period before the 2nd round of the election, our sample captures a rich tapestry of visual narratives, emotions and civic practices and, as this is the first known study of Instagram in a political context, it offers a potential methodological model for the visual analysis of civic discourse and mobilisation via social media.

A Shared Moment, a Hashtag Movement

Our analysis of the sample showed that civic mobilisation by Romanian voters on Instagram during the 2nd round of the 2014 presidential election amounts to an impulsive, short-term movement that formed around the three hashtags. Certain elements and emotions (solidarity, pride, happiness and perseverance) were prevalent in the sample. However, no hierarchies, structures, rules or leaders were visible in this movement. The only norms that emerged concerned the vernacular of the platform, such as taking photos of objects and activities in a similar way to other users so as to conform with norms of this movement. The main issue at the heart of this phenomenon was the right to vote – either due to the obstacles and delays facing the diaspora or as a means of expressing one's civic presence – and a sense of celebration for Iohannis' victory which was seen as heralding a new era for Romania. After a few days the use of that particular vernacular – through the hashtags and photographs – subsided.

The 'Me Too' Collective

The great majority (152) of the Instagram posts analysed are clearly user-generated pictures of live, in-the-moment action, even if that occasionally includes taking a photo of a screen or screenshot from the computer, thus accentuating the narrative of participation in a shared moment. Most photos are impulsive; only a few are "posed" or carefully set up, reinforcing the immediacy and significance of capturing the moment. Furthermore, in order to understand the purpose or type of posts, we classified them as one or more of five categories: self-presentation (88); reporting a live event (50); expressing feelings/views (46); representing a daily setting or normal life (11); and exposing a social problem (5).

What became clear quite quickly was the lack of engagement with, or dialogue on, particular policies or issues. The main narrative was one of participation in the election and expressing hope regarding the future of the country. We therefore argue that the campaign was largely one of self-actualization with the images representing a hybridisation of self-presentation and bearing witness to, or being part of, a live event. Many images also include an implicit or explicit call to action, directly or indirectly encouraging others to vote.

The self-presentation images are in fact largely composed of 'selfies' (both of individuals and groups – altogether making up 42 out of the sample of 174 images) but very few are explicitly what might be classified as "narcissistic" (pouting, posing etc.). Rather they are demonstrations of the individual as part of a collective. The photos featuring human presence are pictures designed to incorporate the self into this impulsive hashtag-led movement. Here we see the formation of a loose collective that

materialises through the act of voting: the images shared by half of the users show Romanians on their way to voting or in the act of voting or having voted. While given that one of the hashtags was "Yes I vote" (#yeslavot), this is not entirely surprising, however the ways this was articulated visually and textually are very interesting. In an almost formulaic manner, Instagrammers show off their voting documents; passports, stamp cards (58), ballot papers (20) and ballot boxes (7) (**Figure 1**). Thus, an implicit norm emerges that users abide by to become part of that instant movement.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

As Highfield (2016: 2-3) notes "[a] polling booth selfie is an example of an act that is both personal and political: it is obviously personal in the sense it is about the individual, their own actions and… experiences. It is political as it is a clear engagement with a definite political activity. [Such actions] are examples of how our mundane uses of social media intersect with a particular political event that is not an everyday occurrence".

In accordance with the literature on affective publics (Papacharissi, 2014) and networked individualism (Loader and Mercea, 2012), there is evidence of the political penetrating the everyday, and vice versa. Hashtags about the election blend with hashtags and photos on various other objects, subjects, activities: #yeslavot became a statement alongside #Sunday #morning # chilling # tea #biscuits by one user. Hence the election became an event within the normal course of ordinary life; remove the political messages and symbols and it could have been a visit to a museum, a music festival or any other civic event. While some may view this as a 'dumbing down' of politics, it could equally be perceived as a re-normalisation of political engagement as a socially legitimate practice.

There were also images depicting other forms of activism including taking part in a rally or demonstration (27), celebrating (15) and marching (7) as well as other non-violent actions (2). A sense of acting collectively within a shared moment of specific historic and political significance for their country is discernible. A sense of joy and pride is widespread; users capture that moment on camera with their friends, family and even pets and then tag it on to the multi-authored narrative on social media.

What is therefore expressed through these posts is a sense of efficacy and empowerment, especially among the youth – the impression that voting makes a difference on the result and for the future of Romania. Hence the pictures promote voting as a positive action, one that is "cool" so implicitly seeking to create a bandwagon effect within Romania and across the diaspora. Positive emotions (happiness (44), hope (16) and especially pride (59)) run through the sample; very few posts contain

negative emotions (17 depict frustration) and the majority of negativity is almost exclusively directed against Victor Ponta himself. Pride is expressed in terms of being part of a broader collective movement, persevering against obstacles, fulfilling a civic duty, and experiencing an historic moment that occurred out of public protest. References to pride could also be an indirect response and reference to media reports and campaigns such as the ones initiated by the British press in 2014 shaming and belittling Romanian migrants (Cheregi and Adi, 2015). Hashtags such as #proudtoberomanian or #proudromanian are used to reinforce this.

A (Trans)national Imagined Community

Many posts document the diaspora's efforts to vote (showing people queuing, noting how many hours they waited etc) in 20 cities in the US and Europe, including New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, London, Paris, Prague, Vienna and Munich, amongst others (**Figure 2**). Flags and national colours (blue, yellow, red) are used to express unity between those in the diaspora and at home. Klaus Iohannis is named a few times in the sample, but not consistently; the emphasis of the movement is not on him, but on itself. While there is lack of a strong political or partisan identity, the predominant identification is with the nation through the symbolism of Romanian flags in around a quarter of the images (45). The presence of those flags both at home and abroad acts as a connector of the diaspora with the domestic community and also symbolises the rise of a generation attentive to political processes and their outcomes, aware of their role in shaping them.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

We found that space and place were instrumental in communicating the individual user's presence and participation in the shared moment. Public spaces such as squares and civic buildings and, in particular, landmarks (monuments, statues) appear in many posts, acting as a backdrop that emphasises the civic ritual of voting. Taking photos of recognisable public spaces and buildings fulfilled a dual purpose, of locating the individual in a particular place that has broader civic connotations, and of projecting the historic importance of the occasion, by anchoring this particular movement to civic landmarks (**Figure 3**). Some of those who could not physically be there chose to post a photo of their TV or computer screen, therefore simulating their co-presence.

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

The other notable mechanism of creating an imagined community was a sense of perseverance and implicit resistance against a Ponta establishment perceived to have tried to prevent them voting.

Ponta's actions appear to have been the catalyst for the creation of a pro-Iohannis movement, which is simultaneously depicted as cosmopolitan and patriotic. The sample includes more than 30 captions including references against Ponta: ranging from #noponta, #antiponta, #outponta to the less deferential #puiemonta, a deliberately misspelled slogan, transposing the first letter of two words, which in its correct version would literally translate into 'fuck ponta'. Solidarity and a sense of national unity and electoral victory are depicted through conflating the partisan (pro-Iohannis) with the national (Romanian) and perhaps inadvertently and implicitly placing non-Iohannis voters in an out-group.

Alongside anti-Ponta hashtags there was the remediation of images and posters showing Ponta being punched, slogans on a banner such as "Ponta stay home" and graffiti on a wall reading "Ponta criminal", some also described him as a thief. Hence we find the celebrations put into context with text reading similar to this sentiment: "Romania I thank you for having woken up and that you slapped the red party scum!". At the same time there was also a sense of othering, from the pro-Iohannis camp directed at Ponta's support base which shows the bitter political chasms that divide Romanian society. One comment read: "Go home you old people, it's us who are paying you. Go home". This suggests that this community feel they are, and represent, renewal, youth and political change, as opposed to the past and a corrupt system.

Romanian Presidential 2014 Elections on Instagram: Memorable Collective Experience, Unclear Political Legacy

The hashtagged pictures posted to Instagram during the 2014 presidential election in Romania were representations of a moment as well as part of a broader narrative that had deep emotional resonance. That resonance related to a moment in time that would have repercussions, the hope of a better future and the pride of being a part of political change was here expressed through the act of taking a picture and posting it to Instagram, a zeitgeist that would re-emerge in response to parliament passing laws which in effect legalised corruption in January 2017 (Adi and Lilleker, 2017). The protests brought together Romanians across their nation and the diaspora, pictures were again used to express individual and collective identities, blending the civic with the everyday, but mobilised to effect change. As the result of the election was announced they depicted their celebration, it appears they await doing the same once corruption is eradicated from Romanian political life. Their passion, motivation and civic duty was evident, through their words (captions, hashtags), emotions (smiling, celebrating) and persistence (queueing for hours or protesting for days). During the election their engagement appears to have been driven by an abstract need to join a shared moment and to express

their solidarity symbolically, this was an instance of connective action by an affective public of networked individuals, the protests evidenced collective organisation around a political agenda.

Based on this case study, we posit Instagram's architecture encourages the formation of loose collectives around symbols and visual narratives. Citizens engage in connective action, performing acts that display solidarity between users of a hashtag, as opposed to offering contrasting perspectives or views. An Instagram community can form around symbolic and affective communication more effortlessly through the use of easily identifiable social reference points which define who is in the community and who is not. Papacharissi describes the processes as networked digitality, built upon the self-actualization of users who seek to be heard and connect with like-minded others: "Spaces that stimulate political interest, expression and engagement work best when they invite impromptu, casual and unforced forays into the political" (2014, 121). In the case of the 2014 election there were no political demands, policy or ideological agenda or long-term goals, in 2017 the demand was simply for an end to corruption. This is consistent with recent phenomena of *post-systemic grassroots engagement* not just in Romania but across many liberal democracies.

But, an underlying theme of the posts was a sense of civic duty. The pursuit of perceived rational (self) interest was not at all present, as would have been for example the case with supporting a candidate who promoted a particular set of economic measures or class interests. The sense of the self, and self-interest, is expressed through being a collective. However the collective is held together around connective action only: the only political demand is *change*, an empty signifier that everyone can relate to and interpret differently.

Concluding reflections

Politics on Instagram depict a "me-too collective" which shows solidarity through connective action. In this respect visual online environments may encourage event-related, emotionally-charged, collective participation but they are not necessarily spaces for enduring activism. The visual demonstrations of solidarity and collective achievement were sufficient but, in the longer term, perhaps mark an important moment in civic communication in Romania, solidifying the diaspora as a powerful stakeholder in Romanian civic life. The actions also resonate with a general trend in social media-based civic engagement towards accelerated, accessible and affective, but also more superficial and possibly less impactful, short-term digital movements. For Romanians, the likelihood of longer-term significance may result from the predominantly 'feel good' atmosphere around the hashtags, which celebrated participation and democracy. This seems less common, perhaps specific to Instagram, as most instances of popular and populist protest movements have been shown to

utilise social media to mobilise people against a perceived enemy, such as the Occupy and Indignados movements.

Therefore, while Instagram in this case emerges as a pseudo-public sphere that can bring together diasporic and domestic communities, the nature and boundaries of the medium (predominantly visual, live, social and embedded in the everyday) both shapes and reflects the nature (and limits) of social media-based civic engagement: dynamic, performative, emotionally charged and viral, but also limited to the present as opposed to having a manifesto for the future. Still, every major political event or social movement – however short-lived – can have potentially significant long-term effects on the political socialisation and engagement (de Zuniga, Copeland, and Bimber, 2014). For example, key elements of this campaign (use of hashtags and common visual frames) were replicated by voters in Moldova – a country culturally, geographically and linguistically proximate to Romania during it parliamentary election on November 30th, 2014. Moreover, some of the anti-SDP themes and metaphors such as "Ciuma Rosie" (the red plague) and "Hotii" (the thieves) seen at the 2014 presidential elections have been revamped and reused in the 2017 anti-corruption protests taking place across Romania and globally in cities where large Romanian diasporic communities reside.

Hence, the ways in which the online and the offline intermingled on Instagram seems particularly interesting. Physical co-presence (e.g. queues in polling stations, crowds in public space) appears key to the construction of the movement, even if largely online. Instagram provided the space in which a virtual, transnational community could form and grow. It also allowed those who could not be present to join this "me too" collective by posting photos of their TV and computer screens. That element perhaps reveals the true character of this event as an historic moment that was *affectively* experienced by networked citizens.

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Figures

Figure 1: post 027

Figure 2: post 152

Figure 3: post 005