

AUSTERITY – THE TRIGGER FOR WAVES OF CONTENTION IN ROMANIA.

*Representation of the Romanian street
protests of January-February 2012 in the
international press*

Ruxandra GUBERNAT*

Henry RAMMELT**

Abstract: *This paper deals with the international media coverage of the Romanian protests from January-February 2012. The purpose is to analyze whether the events managed to transcend the borders of national representation in the media. Our hypothesis is that, due to the fact that Romania is not considered to be a major player in world politics and economy, the representation of the social protests in foreign publications will be mainly informative, describing the series of events as a consequence of the economic hardship and integrating this social movement in the wave of protests which occurred all over Europe, after the economic crisis of 2008. Results of a combined approach to the analysis of newspaper content – integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods – suggest that the international media depicts endemic corruption and public discontent as the underlying profound causes for the protests, where austerity was the trigger.*

Keywords: *Romanian protests, international media coverage, content analysis, corruption, public discontent, austerity measures.*

* Université Paris X Nanterre, GAP, Email: ruxandra.gubernat@gmail.com

** Institut d'Etudes Politiques Lyon, Triangle UMP, Email: henry.rammelt@sciencespo-lyon.fr

1. Introduction

Social protests that took place in Romania in January and February 2012 raised several questions about this country's civic engagement, generally described as being apathetic and unorganized. Was this movement a spontaneous one, a normal reaction to wage cuts provoked by the economic crisis? Or do the reasons and motivations behind this movement, which took over most of the major cities in the country, underline a deeper cleavage between the political class and the unsatisfied citizens? Should this movement be placed under the simple definition of "social demands" or should it be taken a step further, questioning the relationship between the political field and the electorate and their way of understanding political roles, which leads to a trial of "redefining" and "re-organizing the public sphere"?

Beyond the obvious results of this Romanian social movement – and we are talking here about the government's resignation a few weeks after the protests started and the government's decision to give up the implementation of its health care reform; etc. – the purpose of this article is to analyze how and if the Romanian public discontent managed to transcend the borders of national representation and what was the message sent on a global level. Romanian national media consecrated legion of articles debating upon the goals of this movement, emphasizing the civic reawakening and the novelty of the political claims. But what was the counterpart in terms of media coverage in the international press?

Our hypothesis is that, due to the fact that Romania is not considered to be a major player in world politics and economy, the representation of the social protests in foreign publications will be mainly informative, describing the series of events as a consequence of the economic hardship and integrating this social movement in the wave of protests which occurred all over Europe, after the economic crisis of 2008. This paper is, hence, an attempt to explore the representation of the relationship citizens – public institutions in Romania during the protests of January-February 2012, in the international press. For the purpose of the present article, we decided to use the technique of content analysis – both quantitative and qualitative – over a corpus comprised by articles concerning our subject published in major international newspapers in France, United Kingdom and USA, for a period of a month (10th of January - 10th of February 2012). The selection was made upon criteria of circulation strength, impact on an international public and upon linguistic constraints.

Even if we are dealing with "protests", the purpose of this paper is rather analyzing reporting on protests, than the protests themselves. In what concerns the paper's scope, it will, hence, be distinguished from what is called 'Protest Event Analysis (PEA)' that is used to „map, analyze and interpret the occurrence and properties of large numbers of protest *by means of content analysis* [...]" (Koopmans/ Rucht, 2002, p. 231., emphasis added).

2. Description of the analytical framework

This paper attempts to determine, via a series of variables, the image of a series of events, described as one of the main purposes of content analysis. As such, we decided to analyze the themes and the general tone used in the titles and the content of the articles belonging to our corpus. In accordance to Neuman (1997), 'content' "refers to words, meanings, pictures, symbols, ideas, themes, or any message that can be communicated" (Neuman, 1997, 272–273). The choice to use quantitative *and* qualitative content analysis is, then, justified by the need to analyze both manifest and latent content. Accordingly, the purpose is to describe *the form* as well as *the meaning* of our corpus, in order to *identify* the main directions of the media content under analysis and to *explain* their probable interpretant of the audience. In accordance to Morris' classical trichotomy in the analysis of signs ('syntactic', 'semantics' and 'pragmatics'; Morris, 1971) our purpose is, in a first step, to analyze signification, the content of the selected texts, and, therefore, it is meant to be a semantic approach to content analysis. In a second step, we tried to focus on the content-interpretant relationship, and therefore, to apply a stance to content analysis that could be classified as pragmatic, following Shoemaker/ Reese (1996), who consider that "reducing large amounts of text to quantitative data (...) does not provide a complete picture of meaning and contextual codes, since texts may contain many other forms of emphasis besides sheer repetition" (Shoemaker/ Reese, 1996, 32).

Following Laurence Bardin's (Bardin, 2007, 125ff.) definition, the first phase of our analysis was dedicated to the selection of documents, to the formulation of hypotheses and objectives and to the identification of the indicators that will be used for the final interpretation. Being dedicated to the winter time protests in Romania, especially in Bucharest, the sample of data comprises the part of the population of articles in five daily newspapers in France, United Kingdom and USA, responding to our search routine. For the sample period, we took under consideration the time frame between the approximate beginning of the protests and the change of the government, considered to be the period of maximum intensity in terms of representation in the media.

To identify the sample, we applied the full text search of the selected newspapers with the search routine 'protest* /and romania*'. The purpose of using the truncated forms as a means of suffix stripping is a method to get a more complete sample within information retrieval systems. A truncation of protest and Romania (via the * symbol) resulted in all relevant articles related to protests in Romania such as: protest, protesters, protesting, Romanians, Romania's, Romania etc.

The units of analysis are words and word-connections.

The core of quantitative content analysis is its category-system. Categories are parameter values of the interesting variables comprised by "a group of words with similar meaning or connotations" (Weber, 1990, p. 37). In what concerns the construction of the category-system, our approach was more empirically than theory-oriented. We followed here the directions indicated by Bardin (2007), who understands content analysis as an empirical method, dependent on the type of 'word' that is discussed and the type of interpretation aimed (Bardin, 2007, p. 207ff.). For the interpretation of our variables we made inferences, by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics of messages (cf. Holsti, 1968, p. 5). Understood as intermediate procedures, whether the inference methods are based on quantitative indicators or not, inferences enable the transition from mere *description* to the *interpretation* of the text.

After a preliminary reading of the articles, and after dividing the content in meaningful units, we identified three major themes, present in the titles and the content of the articles: "*Austerity measures*", "*Corruption*" and "*Public discontent*". Having these three trends in mind, we formulated a second, „open“ hypothesis, in the form of a question: Are the categories equally distributed in our corpus of articles? Is the frequency of these categories (or of the corresponding index variables) correlated with the newspaper's country?

Based on our first impressions of the three guiding explanations of the protests we chose to formulate coding rules by using an intensional definition of the categories, describing their characteristics and adding the most frequent index-variables, generating the corpus of the category-system. The categories are dichotomous, which means that the unit of analysis does either refer to the category or does not refer to the category. Hence, every unit of analysis is exclusively disjunctive by referring to one single index-variable or being included in the intensional definition of the related category.

Table 1
Category-system

Category	Intensional definition	Index-Variables
Austerity	All the words and word-connections referring to government imposed measures to reduce its deficit.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⤴ pay/wage/pension/job cuts ⤴ incomes/public salaries reduced ⤴ austerity measures/ anti-austerity protests
Corruption	All the words and word-connections referring to abuse of public office, abuse of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – cronyism/clientelism (f.e. "mafiosi") – corrupt* – personal benefits (f.e. "feathering their

Category	Intensional definition	Index-Variables
	power, conflict of interest, cronyism.	nest")
Public discontent	All the words and word-connections referring to a general attitude of disaffection towards public institutions, elites and the system itself.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. unhappy with the government/political class 2. lack of confidence in the system (f.e. "political blindness sapped public confidence") 3. lack of responsiveness (f.e. "govern against the will of the people" or "scission between the country's political class and the people on the street")

The three categories have different explanatory localizations, different scopes of inclusiveness. Apparently, the category "*Austerity measures*" is much more specific than the "*Public discontent*" category. But it is not the purpose of this part of the study to determine whether one category might be the result of a broader social feeling, covered by another category, but to display the distribution of explanations for the protest within newspaper reporting.

Pretest

We tried to assess the validity of the category-system by pretesting it. For the pretest we chose to apply a certain form of sorting: three reviewers (of former journalistic profession) were asked to match the index variables and the definitions with the three broad categories. Categories, index variables and definitions were assigned bijectively and after a short group discussion we decided to keep the category-system.

Media sample

This study is approaching newspapers as being one of the main sources of actuality, through which the messages of the Romanian street protests were transmitted to a global public. The first stage of our analysis was dedicated to a quantitative content analysis method, which allowed us to observe and ascertain what information was presented, through a manual coding frame, in order to establish the frequency of our variables and to identify the main directions in the representation of the events. This first step was used for verifying the hypothesis and confirming the choice of our categories. Considering this step as being incomplete, we decided to apply a qualitative content analysis, in order to penetrate the manifest content and to understand the meaning assigned to our categories.

As stated in the introduction, we analyzed fifteen broadsheet daily newspapers from France, United Kingdom and USA, which resulted in a total amount of 50 articles,

mainly news and feature stories. We selected the publications *Le Parisien*, *Le Figaro*, *Le Monde*, *Libération* and *La Croix*, for the French press, *The Sun*, *The Times*, *Financial Times*, *The Independent* and *The Guardian*, for the UK press and *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Washington Post* for the US press, the criteria being the daily circulation of these newspapers in 2011 and their international notoriety. We took under consideration every reference to our subject present in the title, headline and the main text.

Within the French press, we identified 18 articles related to the protests, in the five publications analyzed. The representation of the subject was very unequal, 9 articles (55%) being found in *Le Parisien*, 6 articles (30%) in *Le Monde* and 1 article (5%) in *Le Figaro*, *Libération* and *La Croix*. The number of articles dedicated to the social protests in Romania were more equally distributed in the UK press. Nine out of 19 articles were published in *The Guardian* (47%), followed by *The Times* and *The Independent*, each with 4 articles (21%) on the subject, and *Financial Times*, with 2 articles (11%). No article was found in *The Sun*. The US press dedicated 13 articles to the subject, 7 articles (53%) being found in *The New York Times*, 4 articles (30%) in *USA Today* and 2 articles (17%) in *The Wall Street Journal*. *Los Angeles Times* and *Washington Post* didn't publish any article on the subject.

The majority of the articles appeared in the first two weeks of the protests (10-25th of January), a second wave of interest being shown after the fall of the Romanian government, in the first week of February.

Reliability

In what concerns the assessment of reliability of results, we decided in favor of simple inter-coder reliability calculation, in order to examine the degree of similarity of nominations between the two coders. A calculation of the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient appeared to be less conducive than a simple inter-coder reliability. To calculate the observed agreement, we divided the number of items on which the coders agreed by the total number of items.

Table 2

Number of total references to our categories in all publications analyzed, by country

Category	France	United Kingdom	USA	ICR
Austerity measures	68	63	63	0,77
Corruption	19	21	17	0,84
Public discontent	76	41	22	0,74

3. Results of the content analysis

The results of our quantitative content analysis show that the category “*Austerity measures*” was the most represented in all analyzed publications. We identified 194 references to austerity, almost equally distributed in our press sample. We took under consideration phrases such as “austerity measures” (“*mésures d'austerité*” or “*cure d'austérité*”, as the equivalents in the French press), “wage” and “job cuts”, etc., but also explicit sentences that we considered to be relevant for the description of this category, such as “*protester contre la dégradation de leurs conditions de vie*” (“*protest against the degradation of their living conditions*”) (*Le Parisien*, 17th of January).

As shown by the qualitative analysis, the coverage of the street protest, in the majority of the surveyed newspapers, was mainly concentrated on describing the movement as a consequence of the economic hardship and of the austerity measures implemented by the Romanian government after the economic crisis. The theme “*Austerity measures*” was found in more than 80% of our sample. Here, the reporting normally followed a logic of portraying the austerity policies as the most pronounced and noticeable explanations for the protests, by enumerating a detailed series of measures.

For our second category, “*Corruption*”, we identified 57 references, present in more than 60% of the articles, also almost equally distributed in the newspapers analyzed, by country. Even if this category is the least represented in the publications, in terms of total number of references (only one article, out of 50 articles analyzed, found in the edition of January 17th of *Le Monde*, described the topic of corruption in detail), we would qualify the theme as being more nuanced, providing contextual information about reasons for mobilization.

We didn't intent to measure the intensity of reporting concerning “corruption”, nor to analyze the state of “corruption” in Romania, but to withdraw the explanations given to its relationship with the protests. It is important to note that the topic of corruption, together with what media defined as “cronyism”, was constantly associated both with the protest and the politicians, but only as a general theme, cases of corruption being mentioned only in order to describe the general environment. We listed here sentences such as: “*la "corruption" de la classe politique, majorité et opposition confondues*” [“*the corruption of the political class, majority and opposition mingled*”] or “*Nous sommes ici pour dénoncer la corruption(...)*” [“*we are here to denounce corruption*”] (*Le Parisien*, January 19th), “*many protesters are also angry at what they see as cronyism and corruption*” (*The Guardian*, January 24th) or “*deep-seated corruption*” (*The New York Times*, February 7th) and “*cronyism in state institutions and widespread corruption*” (*The New York Times*, January 15th and *The Independent*, February 6th).

Throughout the articles under analysis, we found that corruption was depicted as being one of the main causes for social mobilization in Romania. Expressions such as “ras-de-bol' face à la corruption de la classe politique” [“browned-off, frustrated by the corruption of the political class”] (*Le Parisien*, January 19th), “politicians (...) interested in feathering their nest” (*The Guardian*, January 24th), “(...)governments hadn't stolen so much and bled us dry” (*Usa Today*, January 19th) or “mafioso government” (*The New York Times*, January 15th) were used in order to describe additional reasons for citizens' disaffection with the political elites.

The endemic state of discontent of citizens towards the Romanian politicians, because of the unethical behavior of the elites, together with a bad image attributed to the president and the government, due to a general perception of lack of responsiveness and efficiency, were summed up by the authors of the present paper under the category “*Public discontent*”. Throughout the corpus, we found 139 references to this third category, highlighting a general feeling of exclusion of the citizens from the political discourse – “le manque d'intérêt des politiques pour les problèmes concrets des gens” [“the lack of interest of politicians for the practical problems of the people”] (*La Croix*, January 17th) and the disappearance of the public trust in the ruling class – “political blindness has only sapped public confidence in the government” (*The Guardian*, January 24th). The biggest quantity of references to this category was found in the French press, which has allocated a total number of 76 references, a three times the number found in the US press and an almost twice the number identified in the UK press.

The articles from the majority of publications under surveillance assigned strong connotations in order to describe this category, using expressions such as “dictatorship formed by president and prime minister” (*The Guardian*, January 24th), “l'autisme de la classe politique” (*Le Monde*, January 23th), “PDL (parti au pouvoir), USL (opposition), même misère!”, (*Le Monde*, January 17th; *Le Parisien*, January 19th) or “people saying that all parties are just as dirty” (*The New York Times*, January 19th). The dissatisfaction with the current leaders is, as such, to be understood as a deeper cause for the protests, as a chain reaction of the citizens claims – “We want change – from the top to the bottom” (*Usa Today*, January 19th).

The articles also presented the president Traian Basescu as being one of the focuses of discontent. The analysis showed that Basescu lost his credibility and was found responsible by the protesters for the decline in living standards. The articles reproduced slogans such as “Death to the dictator Basescu”, “Clear out, you dirty dog”, and “Basescu can seriously damage your health” (*The Guardian*, January 24th) and insisted on the fact that Basescu became an unpopular figure for the citizens: “(...)Traian Basescu, jugé responsable d'une baisse du niveau de vie” (*Le Parisien*, January 14th), “le président Basescu, dont la cote de popularité est au plus bas” (“president Basescu, whose popularity is at its lowest”), (*Le Monde*, January 17th)

or “many Romanians have become disenchanted with their once-popular president” (The New York Times, January 25th).

One of the main reasons for the high number of total nominations of “*Austerity measures*” compared to relatively small number of nominations of “*Corruption*”, can be found in the detailed description of what austerity implies: wage/ job/ pension cuts etc., whereas corruption was often mentioned as mere context factor. The following paragraph, that could be found in several articles (*USA Today*, *Le Monde*) appears to be exemplary: “It imposed harsh austerity measures under the agreement, reducing public wages by 25 percent and increasing taxes. Anger has mounted over the wage cuts, slashed benefits, higher taxes and widespread corruption” (*USA Today*, January 19th). “Widespread corruption” is depicted as one of two major sources of anger but, in what concerns a frequency analysis, it is clearly outnumbered by the six nominations for “*Austerity measures*”.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to design a portrayal of the Romanian social events, as sketched by major international newspapers. After a thorough analysis of the corpus, we can state that the Romanian protests had no major impact on an international scale, but had benefited of almost daily reports in the first two weeks of the events. Especially in short articles, and mainly in newspapers written in English, a short description of the events was followed by an *enumeration of austerity measures* implemented by the government. Thereafter, the events were described as part of a global phenomenon of growing disaffection between citizens and elites after the financial crisis, involving countries like Greece and Portugal (cf. *USA Today*, February 6th). In the French press, we observed a more nuanced description of the *reasons for mobilization*, focusing more in detail on context factors, such as detailed descriptions of acts of corruption, or by telling stories about public misbehavior. The topic of civic reawakening didn't find its place in the reporting of the protests, with the exception of two articles published in *The Guardian* and *Le Monde*.

The use of “*Corruption*” and “*Public discontent*” in the reporting, as – what we called – *context factors*, could lead the readers of the articles to interpret them as *underlying profound causes* for the protests, whereas the above-mentioned enumeration of “*Austerity measures*”, even if substantial, could be understood as the *trigger*.

References

- Bardin, L. (2007), *L'analyse de contenu*. Presses universitaires de France, Quadrige.
Holsti, O.R. (1968), „Content Analysis”, in Lindzey, G.; Aronson, E. (eds.), *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, Vol. II, New Delhi: Amerind Publishing, 596-692.

- Koopmans, R.; Rucht, D. (2002), „Protest Event Analysis”, in Klandermans, B.; Staggenborg, S. (eds.), *Methods of Social Movement Research*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 231-259.
- Morris, C. W. (1971), *Writings on the general theory of signs*, The Hague, Mouton.
- Neuendorf, K. (2002), *The Content Analysis Guidebook*, Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications.
- Shoemaker, P.; Reese, S. (1996), *Mediating the message: theories of influences on mass media content*, White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Weber, R. (1990), *Basic content analysis* (2nd ed.), Newbury Park, Sage Publications.

Analyzed Newspapers (10th of January - 10th of February 2012)

Le Parisien, Le Figaro, Le Monde, Libération, La Croix.
The Sun, The Times, Financial Times, The Independent, The Guardian.
The Wall Street Journal, USA Today, The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Washington Post.