

AN INQUIRY INTO THE EVOLUTION OF ROMANIA'S PUBLIC SPHERE

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Abstract:

The concept of 'public sphere' remains one of the most disputed landmarks within the inquiries and debates upon sources and legacies of Romanian transition. Drawing on the arguments of Frazer, Hauser, and others, the present article argues that nowadays reconfiguration of the public sphere in Romania is influenced by ascent of hybrid public-private arenas enabled by a rhetorical function of the internet. The article discusses the sources, genesis context and evolutions of Romanian public sphere, tackling issues as role of diasporic communities in reshaping publics' categories, democratic balance, and the notion of legitimacy, highlighting also possible outcomes stemmed from ongoing multiplication of modernity. The research employs a two-step methodology: the first section of the article proposes a conceptual reconstruction of the public sphere term, exploiting the peculiar casuistry of Romanian communist and post-communist scenarios, while the second part analyses the evolution prospects of public sphere in the Eastern Europe and not only.

Keywords: public sphere; post-communism; modernity; Romania; transition; digitalization.

Introduction

The world has gone through tremendous changes since 1962 when philosopher Jürgen Habermas released his influential theory on the genesis and evolution of the public sphere. Nevertheless, his inquiry into the categories of bourgeois society was part of a complex contemporary quest, exploring the patterns and consequences of an unforeseen wave of modernity. The '60 were about the “passing of tradition” (Lerner 1967) and modernization attempts of the first Arab Springs, individualization of East European communist regimes and the ascent of “national roads to socialism” (White 2002), renegotiations of the gender, racial and ethnic landmarks in the West and not least the blast of mass communication and rise of television culture worldwide. The growing influence of the public sphere concept was connected simultaneously with trends such as the reconstruction of communication and community models, mediatization of politics (Esser and Strömbäck 2014), reconfiguration of social spaces or the birth of future network societies (Castells and Cardoso 2005). Habermas’s theory came as a response to an ongoing debate upon functions and roles of a newly created version of publicness, one driven by discursive relations and natural and structural opposition against the state.

The creation of the public sphere took place at the intersection of modernization with informational and technical revolutions, nonetheless involving the persistence of an exclusion border. Sharing substantially different stories of modernity, civilizational realms as Eastern Europe or the Middle East, translated in distinct equations the consequences of the '60 communicational and technological changes. Here, the discursive formation of functional public spheres was often adjourned until late '80, when doctrines such as *gorbachevism* opened the road for a recovery process. More than 20 years after, the debates upon roles and vocation of the public sphere were still marked by reconstruction mythology. Trapped somewhere between westernization move and subsurface and yet cryptic global responses, changing societies of the East tried to find their own paths towards a peculiar version of modernity. The initial prospects of this realignment endeavour ceased after 2000 when phenomena such as digital globalization, deterritorialization, diasporization and the rise of non-state power actors entered the scene. The porosity of the borders accompanied by reconfigurations occurred within time and space frames conducted to a major shift within nature and dynamics of public spheres.

Furthermore, the interplay between ominent public spheres and counter or alternative public bodies rise significant questions about the

boundaries between public and private arenas. Empowerment of technological connectivity and electronic globalization often labelled as internalization (Fortunati 2005), enabled the genesis of fluid communicational and representational spaces. Hence, the historical dichotomy separating the old-world democracies from the nascent liberal societies almost disappeared, simultaneously with a major transformation in communication technologies. Civic uprisings and reformist turmoils experienced by Eastern Europe after 2010 were accompanied by the rediscovery of conservative legacies and sometimes praetorian affinities in the West. Social media-driven youth movements, urban activism and reigniting populist or conservative moves were acting as a relevant sample for the multiplication of modernity (Eisenstadt 2002). Moreover, new branches were revealed within previous apparently harmonized social and cultural landscapes. The generational gaps and structural cleavages of traditional or more modern societies were doubled now by new technological, economical or culturally rotten fractures.

Liquefaction of the symbolic limits between publicness and privateness (Splichal 2020) and ongoing debates upon the relevance and accountability of a global public sphere (Castells 2008, Volkmer 2014), were followed by background symptoms such as solidification of darknet territories and enclaved communicational domains. The downs of a post-mediatization age, wherein the public-private communities built their own translation of the common interest and share more and more individualized languages, affected the classical functions and roles of the public spheres. In this context, the liquefaction of the publicness-privateness divide created the grounds for accelerated segregation and segmentation of the public spheres in both western and eastern societies. Stratified publics (Frazer 1990) and fragmented public spheres (Alexander 2006) evolved towards atomized public-private arenas. Essential identity-building vectors such as nation and ethnicity were doubled by new community-building forces such as environmentalism, civil disobedience, or technological credos. Unexpectedly, this trend was perceived as more accentuated within former transitional actors from Eastern Europe. A presumable explanation for this move is targeting the lack of cohesion and functional fluxes within local public spheres, still conserving contradictory modernity echoes. Simultaneously unifying and dividing, the liquefaction of publicness and, moreover, of the public spheres, could relate to the epitome expression of a rhetoric revelation. The change in nature and structure of communication fluxes during internetization and the newly discovered ability of every digital user to create, initiate and run communication influenced previous media monopolies upon public agendas, communities' membership filters and establishment and negotiation of common interest.

Legacies of Romanian communism and the rise of the hybrid public sphere

Romania's communist experience is more widely known rather for the flamboyant and excessive nuances of the late years of Ceaușescu regime, embodied in colourful celebration marches and portrayal adoration rituals, than for the peculiar trajectory of its modernization game. Ended in 1989 under the circumstances of a violent popular riot, which led to the removal of Nicolae Ceaușescu from power, Romanian history as a communist block is yet perceived as fragmentary and incomplete. Reclaiming of the public (Kligman 1990) and reconstruction of public identities, spheres and voices was seen as inextricably linked to the dismantling of sultanistic and personalist legacy of the 80's (Verdery 1991), even if local patrimonial communism was perhaps grounded on a more extended historical determinacy. Mastering the art of blending effective bureaucratic structures with networks of corruption, loyalty and mutual exchange (Kitschelt et al. 1999), Ceaușescu regime almost succeeded in dissolving the boundaries amid private and public spaces. This distortion of the private territoriality and the hypertrophic growth of the public body adjourned the emergence of modern civil spheres that started to function in other reformed communist versions along with *glasnost* policies. For more than two decades, scholars argued about the consequences of the sultanist heritage upon future anatomy and accountability of a local public sphere, even more so as the *velvet revolution* metaphor couldn't be applied to the Romanian scenario. In this context, the prodromal stages of Romanian communism remained much obscured, their determinant role in shaping further expressions of the public spheres being neglected for several decades.

The specificity of the Romanian public sphere phenomena arose, however, from its contradictory nature. Emerged almost suddenly in the downs of one of the most violent transition exercises, the Romanian revival of the public sphere was a long time perceived as an expected result of the Ceaușescu regime unique repressiveness. The collapse of the private spatiality under the omnipresent pressure of the state, transformed into a personal patrimony of the ruler, almost obstructed the genesis of alternative resistance and debate spaces. Chronic food shortages of the 80's were accompanied by the dissolution of the familial and community bonds, distorted by increasing domestic intrusion of the regime. The communist state controlled the reproduction policies, the infantile pedagogy, every cultural aspect of life, the private and public discourses and even the self-representation of individuals in relation to the "parent state" (Verdery 1994). This clash of two distorted versions of privateness, one derived from the

expansion of a totemic and patrimonial state, and another resulted from the compression of the individuals' private life, translated into a decline of the public itself. In the aftermath of Romanian socialism, the public space was shrinking and often overlapping with the personal domain of the ruler, even former communist elites being gradually marginalized and excluded (Linden 1986: 347).

Thus, at the zenith point of Romania's dynastic communism, in 1989, individuals were sharing a silent solitude and solidarity in front of the state, depicted as a monolithic structure of "tribal networks" (Tismăneanu 1989). It may consider that the liquefaction of the private and public spaces, induced by the peculiar configuration of Romania's personalist rule in the 80, enabled the rise of what we may call a constellation of negative public spheres. This sort of silent, yet conscious public bodies will become key actors in the major societal change of 1989. As an interesting fact, at the time of the 1989 Revolution, a great majority of the Romanians were officially enrolled as members of the Communist Party. Still, their participation within the bureaucratic structure of the Party did not determine a genuine reformist move of vibrant disobedience or protest echoes. In this context, the absence of a negotiated rupture and the multi-layered and difficult to predict nature of the Romanian Revolution (Anghel 2015) tend to plea for the cardinal role of a silent public, subsisting under the surface of patrimonial state control. Initially started as a local riot against authorities' attempt to remove from office one religious' leader in Timișoara County, it soon transformed into an anti-regime movement and ended in a bloody anti-communist collective uprising, Romanian revolution was considered the birth moment of a new public and consequently of a future public sphere. To give a fair answer to this hypothesis, some retrospective outlook may prove as necessary, more the dormant stage of the local public sphere occupied a long-time span.

How Habermas has seen the dynamic and function of the public sphere, arose from the basic notion of public. As regards the basic model of the bourgeois public sphere, in Habermas early perspective, "the general rule that governed interaction among private people" is one of "public concern" (Habermas 1991: 127). Designed to mediate between society and the state, the bourgeois equation of the public arena was directly dependent on the factor of publicity. The circulation of information between private individuals and the emergence of a sense of community, nourishing subsequent critical scrutiny upon state behaviour, was, however influenced by the evolution of two interrelated trends: expansion of mediated communication and its reflection upon public affairs, mediatization. Observing that with "the new media", the very "form of communication has changed" (Habermas 1991: 170), Habermas concludes that also the public itself will perform new roles. Compared with printed communication, more fragmentary and assigned to

new bourgeois elites, radio and television marked a diffusion movement and the rise of a new public. However, the heterogeneity of private interactions and dialogues of the new mass public hindered or almost suspended the mechanism for “rationalizing” political domination of the state (Frazer 1990: 59). The ideal model of the public sphere initially sketched by Habermas could be reduced to four critical assumptions: the existence of unrestricted rational discussion upon public matters, the dialogue should be open and accessible to all, common interest should be prevailing, and inequalities of status should be bracketed (Frazer 1990: 59). Yet, this conceptual map of the public sphere, pictured as a medium in which political participation is enacted through the instrumentally of discursive interactions, could be less useful in addressing the casuistry of societies “emerging from Soviet-style state socialism” (Frazer 1990: 56) or other peculiar modernization projects.

Frazer and others argue that in the case of stratified societies, the singularity and unity of a public sphere may be contested by the very existence of a variety of publics. Considering that within stratified societies, the institutional framework determines group inequalities, the debate and deliberation clause remains difficult to accomplish (Frazer 1990). Starting from this critical observation, even if the rhetoric of publicity and accessibility clauses, on which the public sphere is based, are apparently satisfied, several significant exclusion borders may linger in the background. The classical theoretical critique rests on landmarks such as gender, ethnicity, or economic status, but the parallel journey experienced by spaces and Eastern Europe could militate for whole different segregation triggers, including access to urban modernity features.

At the assertion of communist rule in 1947, Romania presented itself as a recent nation-state, still confronted with strong developmental gaps and dependent on a dominantly agrarian economy. The insular industrialization achieved during interwar years was limited by the very presence of a rural civilization complex, the Romanian village being perceived as a territory of the private, profoundly conservative, and difficult to engage within a consistent and comprehensive modernization project. The “Soviet blueprint” (Kligman and Verdery 2011: 50), seen as a basis for creating mimetic regimes within Eastern Europe, implied an influential process of technology transfer, accompanied by informational and representational changes. All these factors were designed to disrupt the local resilience of yet traditional societies of the East. Essentially, the Soviet project of modernity was grounded on key assumptions of industrialization, promotion of urbanity, increasing literacy and deconstruction and replacement of parochial identities (Chubarov 2001: 9).

In order to build a functional industrial proletarian move, it became necessary that the peasantry culture be recovered and reinterpreted in a

manner that would facilitate a modernization leap, all the more that the birth of the city will remain, in Romania's case, a project marked by unforeseen duality. However, the Romanian modernization experience was forged by many reasons. The communist formula installed at power under Soviet Army patronage and reuniting foreign leaders as Ana Pauker, Vasile Luca and Teohari Georgescu with one indigenous partisan, Gheorghe Gherorghiu-Dej, survived only until 1952. The clash between the pure Soviet model of the collective leadership and the ascent of a local leader, harbouring from the beginning intense nationalistic arguments, proclaimed the severance of Romanian communism from the initial model (Jowitt 1972). Gheorghiu-Dej glissade in favour of a traditional, personalist and charismatic type of leadership was yet hiding important authoritarian traits, his attachment to stalinist heritage being, in fact, a strategy for the preservation of personal power in a quasi-traditional way. During the sixties, coined as the "liberal decade" of Romanian communism, Dej softened the feminine emancipation discourse and unleashed discrete cultural agrarianism, which will imprint the rising urbanity and industrial conscience with contradictory nuances. There was a necessary tribute paid in front of a still traditional society exposed to strong turmoil of unprecedented mobilization and modernization.

It remains important to highlight that, the urbanization of Romania was accomplished by only one generation, the uprooting of the village culture never being complete. The new urban inhabitants transferred many of the rural culture representational landmarks into the city, this silent heritage being perceptible mostly within the rise of a dual regime of publicness. In the late years of the Dej regime, the nascent urban culture along with industrialization and diffusion of television culture enabled a partial renovation of the identities and discourses, opening the road for a very compressed version of public space. The circulation of information among private individuals and the genesis of a sense of community was assured by the state's metamorphosis under the formula of mediating bodies. Cultural and professional associations mushroomed under communist state tutelage, and slow liberalization of ideological pressure enabled interactions, dialogue and debate amid individuals detached from their previous locative identities. Yet, it was the case for a controlled version of public space, a public sphere wherein the state was discreetly governing the dialogues, the configurations and the perception of the common interest. Nevertheless, this incomplete public arena was apparently open to all individuals and, most important, bracketed many of the previous inequalities of status. The gender border was moderated since women gained access to the workforce and public visibility and previous status landmarks such as property and education ceased under the influence of newly created lucrative identities.

Although, Dej's regime version of publicness was marked by the presence of background segregation and segmentation vectors. The state failed in fully deconstructing the village culture, the distance between the urban experience of publicness and the rural enclavization in front of this offensive of modernity proving the duality of the newly discovered public identity. The two regimes of publicness were thus perceptible by appealing to two axes, a spatial one and one related to the representational dimension. Romania's villages survived the collectivization of agriculture declared as an accomplished objective in 1962 but managed to preserve their traditional deficit of public spatiality. The debate and deliberation clauses remain a domain of the masculine, while the main identity-building factors were still filiation and political status, instead of newly coined lucrative identities. Moreover, the traditional scaffolding of social taboos and prescriptive behaviours continued to subsist even within apparently modern urban culture. In its temerarious attempt in transforming political values into social and cultural rules, the communist ideology of the 60's accepted a superficial rebranding of the conservative morals in key matters such as divorce, marriage or segregation of gender roles. In this context, at the end of the Gheorghiu-Dej era in 1965, Romania experienced a multi-layered modernization, embodied mostly in multiplicity of the publicness regimes. The dominant public sphere was hosting interactions amid private individuals and state's mediating bodies, assuring an illusory negotiation of the common interest, but this construct was competed by interrelated arenas. The variety of publics, some of them trapped in pre-modern political orders as gender or green peripheries of the rural, will affect the stability, accountability and perpetuation of this hybrid equation of the public sphere. Nevertheless, the modernity achieved during Dej's rulership will be essential for the further recovery of the understanding of the concept of 'public' and, additionally, of a public sphere, but the beginning of the Ceaușescu will increase the fragmentation and atomization tendency.

A final conclusion that could be drawn from this journey refers to the establishment of an initial equation of publicness, strongly dependent on the state's tutelage. Community and association vectors were not discovered because of a natural evolution of private interactions and discourses enabled by informational revolution, but alternatively, both trends were shaped by the state's intervention. This radial model of modernization will have its limits and setbacks, all the more during the Ceaușescu era, the gradual suppression of the publicity principle and the distortion of mass communication will invert the evolution of the proto-public sphere. However, the violent pro-natalist policies promoted since 1966, followed by increasing ideological pressure of the 70, the decline of the bureaucratic structure in the early 80 and hypertrophic patrimonialization and totemization of the state occurred

after 1977, were coming in fact on fertile soil. Underserved, Nicolae Ceaușescu was credited for mis-modernization in Romania's communist experience and lack of transitional alternative scenarios, but the peculiar path of local communism was already established under Dej.

Liquefaction of borders amid state and what may be called a partial public sphere exposed the latter to a deconstruction process during the 70 and 80. However, the slow maturation of urban culture and the weakening of the traditional memory ended in a subsurface modernization movement. Unique mediatization of the Romanian revolution events, transmitted live by national television, acted as a triggering vector for voicing latent individual concerns, and transformed into matters of common interest. Yet the image of a progressionist, liberal-oriented, comprehensive public sphere will be soon be contradicted by the action of competing counter-publics. The main legacy of Romanian communism may recall thence perpetuation of multi-layered and often contradictory discursive arenas, populated with divergent and silent publics, whose negotiation and mediating power will be revealed along with the rhetorical revelations of digitalization. The fragmentation of the audiences and the lack of convergence of the public were experienced mostly by the Western world along with digital globalization and the ascent of new imagined communities, governed by independent or parallel media logic. Nevertheless, this segmentation tendency was hindered or limited by the pre-existence of a culture of debate, grounded on consensus and specific designs of the common interest. Still, transitional actors as Romania, sharing independent evolution trajectories, confronted this matter with a blind spot. Here, the 70 and 80 failed in creating the frame for a new culture-based public sphere, the liberalization years, perceived as a belated perestroika era, revealing in fact, the unexpected costs determined by the absence of a common narrative of change.

Contesting the boundaries: Birth of the fluid public spheres in the East.

It is difficult to deny that internet blurred the limits between categories of social life that were considered “mutually exclusive”, the “great dichotomy” (Bobbio 2017: 72) separating publicness and privateness and remaining essential for preserving the democratic accountability of liberal societies as they were conceived within the tradition of western political thought (Splichal 2017: 39). The invention of the private life was, however, the turning point for the future conceptualization of the separation amid state and individuals, the boundary amid the two spheres being established through instrumentality of an informational revolution. Altogether, the emergence of the bourgeois public can relate to three interrelated trends: the creation of new technologies of printing (Habermas, Lenox S. and Lenox F. 1974: 53),

circulation and diffusion of news through independent media outlets and the genesis of new social spatiality, enhancing and promoting discursive interactions.

However, the solid distinction between the two spheres, privateness and publicness was sanctified by the rise of the general notion of the public. Crossing several renegotiation stages, since its initial statement, the basic notion of public embodied a transactional aspect. Dewey considered that consequences are those which draw the line between territories of publicness and privateness (Dewey 2016: 84). When the outcomes of the transactions trigger relevant consequences upon other individuals, which were not directly involved in the social interaction, the regulatory intervention of the state becomes mandatory (Splichal 2017:40). However, the dynamics and interplay amid spaces of privateness and publicness were subject of multiple reconsiderations, mostly determined by the growing complexity of media communication. The idea of the public evolved in close relations with the expansion of mass media, often “reshaping political legitimacy” (Calhoun 2010: 302) and underpinning the rise and development of liberal democracy. Nevertheless, at this point, the significance of the public is still linked by two other associated topics: the sphere of public goods, seen as collective rights and the concept of the public sphere, pictured as an arena of open communication (Calhoun 2010: 302). The latter one was described as a space of free interactions amid strangers, assuring evaluation and control functions upon states monopolies as public health, social policies or even limitations of individual rights.

This gradual shift occurred within defining equation of the public it was influenced simultaneously by the changes supervened in syntax and social perception of space. Furthermore, a transformation of the communication realms played another important part in this process. The second informational revolution determined by the expansion of mass media challenged the previous configuration and meanings of the bourgeois public, by deconstructing its spatial limits. The spaces of interactions became more and more fluid, as the elite’s saloons and popular coffee shops were replaced by borderless spatiality unleashed by television culture. Concomitantly, the interaction and reactions of the individuals became anonymous and marked by the factor of latency, the influential quote “Don’t talk back!” (Habermas 1972: 170) being contradicted much later. Once gliding from a republic of letters, hosting a culturally cohesive public, towards an age of unseen audiences, mobilized under auspices of different modernity narratives, the connotations associated with the public sphere altered. The efficiency and range of applicability of the privateness-publicness distinction was perceived from now on as problematic, more so as the mass media enhanced future permeability and porosity of the two dimensions. The intersections amid

private and public arenas were shaped by decline of what Dewey's theory labelled as an "organized" bodies, the weakening of the "community" (Dewey 2016), publicity and dialogue conditions resulting in a distorted version of public.

Moreover, the later emergence of what was defined as "proto-publics", generated by "the public-worthiness recommendation algorithm" offered by social media (Splichal 2017:53) may be considered as a recovery symptom for a community and association crisis started already during the second and the third phases of the mediatization of politics (Strömbäck 2008: 236-238). During the inception stages of mediatization phenomena, defined by the ascent of mass media as the most influential source of information and channel of communication between citizens and political institutions (Strömbäck 2008: 236), individuals still conserve their ability to compare mediated experiences with attitudes and values resulted from personal interactions and exchanges of opinions. As regards the second phase of mediatization, corresponding also to stage of autonomization of the media logic in front of the political actors and uncontested hegemony of the television culture, the public was exposed to a fragmentation process. This fracture originated in two distinct aspects: the decline of the interaction-based experiences and the regression of the dialogue and negotiations clauses carried previously within the bounds of association networks and proximal communities. "Negotiation of newsworthiness" (Cook 2005) influenced the way audiences were structured and perpetuated, their equivalence with the notion of 'public' becoming often the subject of dispute. The television culture assured somehow the coherence of the master narratives circulated through the instrumentality of their settings agenda, but the audiences' perception and their capacity to act as communities were affected by the decline of the debate and negotiation clauses. Building consensus, as a critical factor for the establishment of coherent publics, was directly affected by the ephemeral nature of media storytelling. The media generated publics were, in fact, fragmented audiences, acting only temporarily in synergic manners, and testing too seldom the accountability and legitimacy of the political action. In this context, it seems that paradoxically mediatization weakened the mediation role of the public and implicitly the regulatory and democratic function of later formulas of the public sphere.

Hereby, the third phase of mediatization announced the increasing independence of the mass media in front of institutions and political actors, media considerations becoming active "part of the policy-making processes" (Strömbäck 2008: 238). The hypothesis that "all social institutions are media institutions" (Altheide and Snow 1991: 9) announced in fact the future dependence of the public, and one step further of public opinion and public action, upon reflection of the media discourses. The replacement of authentic

individual interactions with mediated processes of community building will deeply affect the capacity of the audiences to convert into *genuine publics* (Splichal 2017:53), even if the consequences of this alienation process were chronicled rather along with internet ascension. Even so, the tendency towards a dispersion of the publics, transformed into multi-layered, latent, or virtual communities may have its roots in median ages of mediatization, especially as casuistry of changing societies expelled the classical formulas of the bourgeois public. The resilience of the public sphere phenomena and implicitly the perpetuation of their cardinal function, the mediation amid state and society, was grounded among other things on the behavioural clauses of democracy.

Within classical liberal societies, individuals apprehend identities and values through various tools, as formal education, exposure to their referential groups' representations and discourses or interaction with institutions and mass media fluxes. Hereby, digitalization came as an alternative in redefining a structured and cohesive cultural picture, benefiting from intergenerational bounds, which could promote and explain experiences of togetherness. Members of a liberal society share a common behavioural and representational mindset, that assists them in professing social roles, inclusively in assessing the distinction amid territories of publicness and privateness. Mediatization played a diversification role and tested the consistency of those interaction-based experiences, but did not succeed in totally replacing them, even in the downs of digital modernity (Lyon 2017). Thus, the pre-existence of a natural evolutionary process in the establishment of the publics advocated for the conservation of basic consensus-based social ecosystems.

Notions as nation, religion or ethnicity faded sometimes into the background and ceased their influence on identity-building mechanisms, but the West succeeded at least partially in maintaining a balance between dialogue-based experiences of community and the rise of virtual, fluid and often parallel public arenas. By comparison, the Eastern part of the European space crossed a substantially different evolution scenario. Here, the mediatization stages and, concomitantly, the invention of the public occurred under different circumstances. Going one step back, the genesis of bourgeois public recalled for the conjugated presence of information accessibility as well as openness for dialogue and negotiation. The East European societies encountered with these two interrelated clauses only under the patronage of the communist projects of the early '50. Moreover, the community building processes and the negotiations of the groups' values and identities were forged for a long-time span by the state's intervention. Individuals' competencies in developing "active private networks", designed to act as substitutes for other alternative "social ties" (Howard 2003: 153) were also

hindered by silent legacies. Also, the gradual dismantling of the state's monopoly upon associative life induced asymmetric responses, the main result of the "Leninist experience" in Eastern Europe referring to reinforcement of "dichotomic antagonism between official and private realms" (Tismăneanu, Howard and Sil 2017: 36). Subsurface resistance bodies claimed in some cases their share in occupying the void created by the communist collapse, while individuals choose to validate a culture of privatism. Still, privatization of networks and retreat from the public space marked a fall within conditions of possibility assigned to post-communist versions of the public sphere.

For certain, abandonment of public places should be perceived as a protective gesture and a temerarious attempt to rebuild the genuine foundations of dialogue and negotiation clauses, distorted by decades long state pervasiveness. Although, the resistance against public mobilization and deployment of civil privatism (Howard 2003:) was much stronger in societies lacking the support of traditional mediating bodies. As a relevant sample, Poland made its way toward democratisation through the instrumentality of a syndical move, grafted yet upon cvasi-traditional benchmarks as nation and religion. Individuals inherited thus an intermediary layer in organizing their interactions with newly created institutional frames, without departing from rediscovered spaces of privateness. The birth of the political and civic publics arrived here under the circumstances of a coherent public arena, upon which mediatization acted only as an organizing vector. It was not the case of instantaneous community and dialogue patterning, but rather the sedimentation and recovery of previous scattered instances of associative life. Most of the post-communist publics were already engaged in discrete networks at the beginning of transitions, behavioural openness imitating in a credible manner the western journey towards deliberative democracy. However, the sustainability and endurance of such networks will be tested along with digital tournament of communication, revealing in fact paradoxical tendencies. Without a flag to follow and experiencing low levels of societal engagement in favour of liberalisation, other less optimistic transition scenarios recovered their initial deficit and made the case for spectacular civic developments. So what has changed under the veil of digital communication?

Unquestionably, during the first two decades of post-communism, most of the theoretical and applied approaches upon transition denounced the deficiencies of the social capital of emerging liberal societies. Low levels of an associative life scarcity of public participation and political activism or lack of efficiency of political competition nourished the metaphor of "democracies without citizens" (Ekiert and Foa 2011: 2). It was the beginning of a vivid debate upon discrepancies accumulated between formal

conditions of democracy and the behavioural and representational backwardness. Even if structural aspects as multi-party competition, transparency, the rule of law, the openness of the public arena and the protection of basic civil rights were achieved, the decline or simply the absence of social cohesion changed the initial stake of this adaptive phenomenon. In the late 90's a great part of academic inquiries revolved upon the topic of democratic mobilization and growing civic formalism. It was a time when Poland syndical memory or Bulgarian ethno-nationalism were credited as supportive grounds for nascent public discursiveness, meant to enable further civic engagement and democratic equilibriums. By comparison, the flawed background of Romanian regime change, marked by prolonged social divide and violent street convulsions, heralded an imminent anti-democratic backlash. However, in spite of a linear evolutionary script, the consolidation and communism reformation theories (Linz, Stepan 1997) showed their limits no later than one decade, the 2000's revealing in fact a heterogeneous and fragmented picture.

The reconstruction of associative experiences and the burst of civic engagement and alternative public arenas came as a surprise at the beginning of 2010. The rise of vibrant civil bodies was traditionally linked to the transformation echoes of the first phases of the exit from communism, so civic enlightening of the former socialist space remained under scrutiny. The societal convulsions induced by this unprecedented mobilization of various social clusters coincided with a major reform within the spatiality and temporality of human interactions. Internetization and unprecedented power exerted by markets turned into conversations (Levine et al. 2009) contradicted the traditional theoretical corpus concerning the maturation of democracy. Instead of mushrooming of ONGs and growing solid dialogue culture, new civic movements redrawing the map of Europe were based on spontaneous association patterns enabled by the virtualization of the public space. Phenomena, as de-territorialisation, the rise of inland diasporic communities and global digital diasporas marked the genesis of new publics, ignoring decades gaps amid Western and Eastern perceptions of communities.

The rise of fluid public spheres, redefined under the terms of arenas of social life, placed at the intersections of privateness and publicness, wherein individuals discuss, exchange, and negotiate meanings and action patterns in direct relation with the state was influenced by the ascent of a triple deconstruction move. In the East, digital globalization came as an erasure wave, dissolving the spatial determinacy of groups, challenging also landmarks as narrative-based identities or coherent and unique logic of community belonging. Inland territories of the East were from now on crossed by new emerging borders, separating insulated groups from digital

diasporic stances. Moreover, the decline of the scriptural culture offered new translations of identities, and individuals were liberated from previous ethnic, national or even local narratives. The image dominated culture of communication contradicted the temporal and spatial logic of nations and state-actors orders, inaugurating new rites of belonging, grounded on vectors as civil disobedience, millennial dogmas or digital literacy. The unforeseen intensity of these symptoms should be connected to the persistence of a peculiar configuration of modernity in the East, embodied dominantly in discrepancies accumulated in topics such as collective consensus and openness of the communication and discursive dimensions. This new triad of fluidity benefited in Romania's case from the presence of adjacent factors, which materialized in the lack of operability of the privateness-publicness divide and heterogeneous repertoires of mediatization, promoted in early post-communist times. Yet, the civic enlightenment fostered by digitalization should be acclaimed with moderation, since contemporary boundary-making and social segregation of community and public arenas raise strong interrogations about the legitimacy of pathways opened by action-oriented networks. Even more, Romania's casuistry depicted recently worrisome tendencies such as the rise of recreative activism, populist conversions of reformist moves or reigniting illiberal and authoritarian discursive drifts.

Romania's rhetoric tournament and the future of the public sphere

Transnationalization of the public spheres and discursive activation of subsurface cultural clusters changed the perception of roles and functions of the genuine publics, the organized bodies leaving their place to newly discovered digital crowds. Yet, the main hypothesis that could explain the unique occurrence of a fluid public sphere in the East remains connected to the peculiar anatomy of the privateness – publicness divide. Contestation of boundaries became possible since “Global civil society had the means to exist independently from political institutions” (Castells 2008: 87). Reinterpreting Castells' seminal quote, publics and their arenas had the power to shift from political negotiations of consensus to an appropriation and privatization of the public space. Lack of common values, absence of a culture of dialogue and growing distances amid the depiction of community and togetherness were already prevalent in the Eastern side of Europe. These trends became, even more, accentuate within the picture of formerly isolated communist scenarios, due to the presence of incomplete segregation of the private–public regimes. A short inquiry into the genesis and development of Romanian sultanism revealed the persistence of a fluid line amid spaces of privateness and publicness. This interplay of meanings resulted in ambivalent transition stages, the sinuous paths of post-communist ending however into

an unexpected civic awakening. A quick web search using the catch phrase “Romanian democracy” returns mixed results. Distant topics as 1989 anti-communist Revolution are merged with recent events as the 2019 civic uprising, the essential reflections of local democracy within a digital mosaic including terms as civic empowerment, new generation activism, anti-corruption, reform and beyond all social change. The 2020 festivals of protests tend to complicate things even more since catchphrases as a sanitary dictatorship or anti-national conspiracy depicted a new and very vivid alternative public sphere. From bad civil societies of the early 90’s, militating for national revival to new cyber mobs, Romania witnessed several developmental shifts; every single one was however linked by the evolution and faith of both publics and media ecosystems.

And yet, a common programmatic background bridges two essential contexts credited successively as birth moments and confirmation rites regarding Romania’s liberal engagement. Thus, the 1990 Bucharest's University Square movement, considered as a prodromal stage of civic protest and the post-2014 more goal-oriented reformist and anti-corruption reactions are brought together by their apparently determinant role in first assuring and later preserving the vernacular democracy project. The two historical instances share many similarities but are departed by even more subsurface details. Still, critical scrutiny of this dual founding narrative emphasizes the presence of an influential communicational factor. Both phenomena were grounded on a mediatization and civic enrolment strategy, acting as a triggering vector for further political and social change. The media reflections of those two layers of civic uprisings were critical for acquiring negotiation power, the societal reform occurring often in a transactional manner. Since the key vector of these trends remains the notion of the public, the re-emergence, the dynamics and finally, the decay of new audiences stays as a critical landmark in understanding the rise of alternative public bodies and spaces. Lately, Romania was portrayed as a champion of ultra-liberal effervescence, defying the illiberal trends voiced by otherwise sound democracies in the region. Bouncing back its initial legitimacy deficit and crossing several evolutionary leaps, Romania apparently transformed itself into a pacified and resilient liberal society. However, a practical question lingers in the background, eluding somehow previous optimistic prospects. Is the new digital landscape a tool for individuals’ civic empowerment, or do the true outcomes of cyber mobilization remain under scrutiny? Meanwhile, filter bubbles and echo chambers started to produce and promote alternative translations of facts, underpinning the unexpected outcomes of cyber-balkanization: the rise of post-national global identities, isolation of social media self-referential communities (Singer et. al 2014) and

the rise of post-truth politics. All the trends mentioned above left their mark on syntax, meaning and setting agendas of the local public sphere.

Following Gerard Hauser, metaphor, due to “street rhetoric” (Hauser 1998) becomes a new equation of dialogue, the 2018 events, when Romania experienced one of the largest waves of protest since 1990, underpin the awakening of new civil identities and voices. In the late August, a large crowd occupied the streets of Bucharest, opposing to a set of laws that were seen as a weakening of the judicial independence. The triggering vector for this mass mobilization was the latent discontent of large categories of people toward government and institutions. Demonstrators circulated a heterogeneous agenda, revolving around key terms of state reform and anti-corruption measures, the political class being incriminated also for growing social inequalities. Far from being new, mistrust in state institutions, alienation of political elites and growing social and cultural cleavages (Abăseacă and Pleyers 2019) were from now presented as a necessary and sufficient reason for rising a common civic voice, able to shatter the traditional governing mode. Essentially, the street protests were depicted as corrective and active measures for fixing a broken democratic mechanism. They were also proposed as a means to surpass the electoral tool, even more as the government’s slippages and democracy involution were considered irreversible and calling for instant action. Whether innocent or guilty, this dogma had its believers.

A great part of post-2010 electoral results sparked long-term discontent and ended in the stigmatization of certain groups. The exclusion mechanism operated in terms of age, education, digital literacy, and culture, leaving behind classical landmarks as ethnicity, religion, or gender. Radicalization of discourses against older generations, populist supporters and peripheral or impoverished groups took the form of a spatial divide. The urban centers were described as consonant with global, liberal, and modern quests, while the marginal spaces were seen as a permanent menace to local democracy. The main feature of Romania’s public debate remained in that context the persistence of an asymmetry paradox. Somehow, the increasing civic engagement of various audiences and their ability to generate relevant setting agendas and to monopolize the digital conversations shadowed other silent publics, still faithful to non-rhetoric media frames, as television.

Looking back in time, even if after 2010 Romania crossed several cycles of protest, grounded on environmentalist and reformist repertoires, the end of the decade brought into prominence an influential change in the civic bodies. Aggregating increasingly complex social claims, the 2018 street rhetoric was seen, maybe for the first time after the anti-communist pact, as driver for a genuine and comprehensive societal reform. It has been said that “ordinary Romanians” (Abăseacă and Pleyers 2019) refused to mobilize until

2017 and 2018, as the thematic background of the previous protests escaped the motivational logics of older audiences or non-urban and traditional publics. Exploring this perspective, the 2011 NGO's oriented *Occupy* replica or more popular environmentalist activism, surrounding the controversial mining project of Roșia Montană, were not able to act as transversal themes and to mobilize the society.

Still, the new civil communities built during the Rosia Montana episode had by default, a conversational nature. The exit of the topic from the current political agenda shouted down the debate, the collective disobedience rituals as marches and street gatherings falling into oblivion. However, this strange interplay amid the mobilization and deconstruction of local civil bodies could be explained by appealing to at least three key elements. The first explanatory argument refers to the lack of institutionalization of Romania's street movements, reduced often to spontaneous participation of individuals, responding to social media appeals. Lacking trustworthy umbrella organizations and refusing any political patronage, the civic mobilization ended without the sedimentation of a genuine networked-based public. People ceased their interactions since the street rhetoric spectacle closed. The disappearance of Romania's and UE flags, accompanied by drums and voices of the chanted slogans also represented the dissolution of the revolutionary public. Secondly, the long-term absence of youngster movements in recent Romania made the protests more fashionable and acting as new mantras of togetherness. Third argument targets the proximity and the contagion clause. Especially as Romania didn't have its own Woodstock.

The effervescence of the global environment between 2011 and 2015 had complex motivational grounds. Romania's movements replicated some of the claims, as an outrage against political elites and call for societal reform, but the programmatic background contained significant differences. Since national conscience and social identities tend to blend in Eastern Europe (Touraine, Pleyers) and in Romania's case particularly, the distances amid conservative or radical actors were significantly concealed by the perpetuation of decades old arguments. The lure of democratic harmony, grounded on "hopes of transition" (Abaseasca, Pleyers 2019) fostered a general, vague agenda, missing some clear cut ideological or teleological landmarks. The permeability of the civic project attracted miscellaneous audiences, but their interconnectivity was weakened by absence of a programmatic update. The protest waves were fueled in the Romanian context mostly by fear of a declining liberal and democratic climate, the street discursivity being dominated by topic of liberty. There was a strange revival of early post-communist rhetoric, the continuous incrimination of the political elite's silent ties with old regime making the case for an anachronic reaction. Meanwhile, the western protest publics had at their heart of their

mobilization quest elements as sanctioning the outcomes of neoliberalist policies and fighting growing social precarity (Abaseasca, Pleyers 2019). This disparity became more obvious as regards the resilience and sustainability of the civic environment. Essentially Romania's post 2010 civic burst remains in their very nature "unfinished revolutions" (Roper 2000), difficult to operationalize in democratic terms due to both lack of participation of the public and the absence of a well-structured agenda. The civic smart mobs acted as watchdogs of the democratic project, but left no trace in the political projects, with very few notable exceptions. Even so, the actors who claim their prize after the recoil of the street phenomena did not fully capitalize the initial popular support. The deconstruction of the street public was as surprising as its birth, the long-term heritage of the civic protest cycles being located perhaps elsewhere. The structural clauses of public sphere considered simultaneously as "discursive space" and "realm of public opinion" were separated in Romania's casuistry from the functional conditions as a culture of negotiation and openness of interactions. However, the perishable nature of the civic audiences should be understood in terms of a modernity distortion. The communication revolution and liberalization of the media spectrum came as an evolutionary leap for a society defined by silent social pacts. The exit from communis occurred in terms of a violent uprising, but the effective participation of many societal layers was limited to a stander-by approach. Moreover, the "politicisation of the public sphere" (Schöpflin 1995) remains a fact, even if during late consolidation stages. Since the triad activist-media-civil structures were often perceived as a secondary realm of disguised political actors, the establishment of an independent public sphere was adjourned until the digital stage, where uncontrolled associative patterns came to life under the formula of a rhetoric revelation. For Romania and not only, but the fluid border amid spaces of privateness and publicness and the long-time ignored deficit of communication intimacy converted into a voracity in sharing and collecting groups identities and voices. The early civic protest cycles were attached to a cvasi-general and global related agenda due to the uniformity of its employed public. Urban youth, already sharing essential communicational and representational frames as anti-system and social equity claims was brought together into a familiar social media arena. The street translation of the social media move was temporary and acted as an experimental ritual of protest. The effects converted into a civil disobedience cult were not intended to serve as basis for institutionalization and formalization of civic networks. Associative and conversational activism of the first decades converted however into a large-scale social experiment. The essential shift occurred in substance of civil activism, and which enabled the liberalization of the public sphere stays connected to new digital publics entering the scene.

For many years, Romanian diaspora term was used to describe well-educated, liberal oriented and digitally active migrants, engaged in homeland politics and society as promoters of western values and civic change. De-territorialization of politics and emergence of transnational digital communities assured a growing visibility of these migrant groups, their active voice in topics as politics and societal reform influencing constantly the inland political agendas. The interest manifested by various political actors in capacitating those voice, gradually transformed the Romanian diaspora into a flagship for a democratic renewal endeavour. Often playing a conclusive role in deciding the result of the inland elections or just supporting the street civic echoes, the Romanian diaspora became a disputed electoral capital. In this context, the estrangement of the digital and non-digital publics grew even more. This fracture was opposing modern audiences, conscious of their rhetoric power and ability to create and impose their own public agenda and passive crowds, attached to traditional political messages and rituals. Moreover, the digital realm was a conversational space monopolized by liberal and democratic messages, the virtual communities being depicted as essential vectors of societal renewal, modernization, and change. Although, the progressionist and democratic nature of both virtual communities and digital publics will be put under scrutiny by later events.

Until 2018, the civic exercises were perceived and labelled as youth-oriented socializing events, targeting a compliance and control play role. The pressure exerted upon the government decisions was based on a short-term partnership with various communicational vectors, with further collaboration being excluded by a lack of congruence and sustainability of civic claims. Yet, Romania's protest waves circulated successively more and more simplified and flattened themes, the 2018 "Diaspora at home" movement marking the zenith point of a sort of national civism. Even if initially the protesters called for the withdrawal of government decrees that softened the anti-corruption legislation, soon the driver of the movement changed in direction of a general reform project. The triggering vector for this reinterpretation may be the unprecedented levels of violence connected to the "10 August" momentum, when authorities' repression of the manifestation made headlines in the international media. Romania was revisiting once again its foundational mythology as open society, the diasporic discourses targeting this time a reunification project. Brought together under the auspices of a comprehensive and inclusive societal agenda, incarnated best into the image of a giant Romanian flag, projected over the protesting crowd gathered in Bucharest central square, the two publics seem to reunite. The ground-breaking consensus of the inland and diasporic audiences was apparently announcing the creation of a modern public sphere, able to combine the discourses and interactions of two previously antagonistic group

cultures and languages. However, the social unity achieved during the 2018 protests will be challenged by an unexpected semiotic shift.

The street rhetoric will host more and more flattened themes, the classical anti-corruption and social equity messages being accompanied by a discrete revival of timeless national harmony appeals. This popular twist of the civic narratives can and should be traced in a long-time span, a visual archaeology inquiry disclosing interesting facts. The digital arenas and the street rituals are nowadays impregnated with dual, modern, and traditional landmarks. Moreover, post-truth politics also announces the rise of visual logic in the public sphere. New cultural pacts were emerging while democracy itself shifted toward discursive overload. The rhetorical revelations of new digital crowds were essentially linked to the presence of a new structure of digital conversations. Until de early 2010, online debate, online politics or online interactions were seen as the trademark of liberal youth, concerned with civic renewal and counter-current politics. It was all about making civic attitudes fashionable and immersing into an internationalizing atmosphere, militating for an apparently borderless and progressive global village. Yet, gamification and algorithmic populism (Maly 2020) changed the stake of digital realm, opening this citadel for new types of actors. As we speak, generations of previously rejected digital users engage in conversation, share their experiences, discuss politics and issues concerning society, and simply ignore the traditional rules of democratic debate. There was no need for tolerance, acceptance, empathy, or even rule of the law since these new digital crowds discovered a new and free interaction space. The unregulated nature of the internet converged with some dormant affinities of the Romanians and not only, for providential solutions, conspiracy narratives, naturist medicine, mythization of the past or recovery of communist nostalgia.

New digital users often isolated themselves in local information bubbles and biased news sources. More importantly, they build a world for themselves as the digital sphere they found was estranged and difficult to navigate. An interesting sample of this second planet of digital interactions is offered by the rediscovery of forgotten catchphrases, patriarchal stereotypes, and retailored populist affinities. Lakoff's metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 2007, Althuis and Haiden 2018: 9) concerning edifices of shared knowledge, may explain this evolution. There are middle age and third age citizens that entered digital politics through the doors of social media, mixing personal content, closely connected groups, and domestic politics in an unpredictable manner. This new category of digitally active citizens, promoting discourses upon identity, national renewal and recovery of collective goals are, in fact, trapped in complicated both algorithmic and persuasive strings. Fake identity "sock puppet" accounts are driving a sort of democratization of propaganda,

while the real users are influenced by an illusion of a previously unknown majority. For certain, the separation of the digital continents it is not complete, mainstream media, television and traditional opinion leaders still play a role in shaping and aggregating public beliefs and preserving a strong connection with a generally accepted description of reality. But the fracture is still there, threatening to become irreversible, challenging from now on the very definition of the public sphere. The decline of the interactionist clause of democracy and gradual segregation of the interests, beliefs, languages, identities, news feeds, moral landmarks or political tools of various audiences may reveal, in fact, the crisis of liberal projects, challenged by new bubble publics. The Romanian journey toward the maturation of a public sphere replicated on a small scale the modernization challenges of Eastern Europe. However, the endpoint of recent transformations that occurred in the field of virtual mobilization, social media nativism or counter-politics remains unknown, the public sphere roles being redefined by diffuse communities, post-national power actors and emerging identity narratives. There is a time of spin doctors, filter bubbles, fake news proliferation and post-truth challenges. What will result from this mélange of technological upgrade, rediscovery of the primitive mind and interconnectivity it remains to be seen.

Conclusions. Silent public spheres and the future of democracy

It has been said that falling off the last modernity barrier, the border amid privateness and publicness, will engage a major social and cultural revolution (Splichal), which will replicate the magnitude of Guttenberg's moment. The printed text seemed at that time to establish a definitive landmark within conscience, representation, values, memories of human communities, the irreversibility of this evolution has been challenged in our minds only by the presence of post-technological apocalypse or biological disasters including outbreaks of epidemic diseases. The Darwinian irony of our very own modern imaginary was, however, contradicted by a post-Guttenberg tournament of digitalization. Not even for a moment, futurologists have thought that the expansion of technology and growing interconnectivity of time and space dimensions would end the age of the written text. Along with increasing power of digital communication, the contemporary world encountered processes such as liquefaction of memory and identity, deconstruction of the classical axis of sender-receiver mediated communication or redrawing of the community models. Digitalization sanctified an expected tribalization of the image, the information medium being fundamentally changed by this inversion. News, cultural landmarks, association, and identity-building messages, were alle resumed within the rediscovered power of the image. The landscape of the media, politics and

institutions was placed under the power of image storytelling, this tournament of visual communication hiding however hidden costs.

An image can be perpetually reinterpreted and host contradictory meanings, the story can rewrite through the gaze of every single digital user. Moreover, the anonymous receiver can initiate a new message, adding his unknown yet crucial contribution to the initial content. Moreover, the unidirectional and coherent structure of groups' history, communities' identities and even communicational codes can be reinvented one click away, the contemporary blaze of hybrid cultural conflicts proving that the true stake of democracy survival lies from now within the representational and communicational battlefield. At this moment, the digital world may defy the Newtonian paradigm of space-time dominance, creating ambivalent geographies of identity and community. Liquefaction of memory and identity influences the way individuals relate to notions such as nation, ethnicity, or political value, while liquefaction of communication processes opens the road for a renegotiation of meanings of public action, discourses and roles.

Looking at this picture, some conclusions may be drawn, even more, the post-spatial and post-scriptural political and cultural orders changed the leading roles and even the limits of what we agreed to call as public sphere. The proliferation of labels as: "global public sphere", "networked public sphere" (Friedland, Hove and Rojas 2014), "European" and "transnational" public sphere (Splichal 2006) act as testimonies for a reconstruction attempt. Still, essential questions remain to be asked, since the function of an intermediary layer mediating amid state's scaffolding and more heterogeneous and ambivalent private lives lies under scrutiny. Do we still need the dialogue-based public dimension? Perhaps it is the term 'public sphere' a dead political construct that continues to act as a relict within present debates. Multiplication of public sphere expressions and segmentation of the public sphere domain represents a worrisome symptom or an evolutionary leap of democracy. Are we more united or divided by the fluidization of boundaries amid privateness and publicness or amid state and society? Since an image has no memory, the truth will lay in the eye of the beholder.

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