

**NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF POLITICAL STUDIES AND PUBLIC
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**THE POLITICAL CULTURE OF YOUNG PEOPLE FROM ROMANIA
PARTICIPATING IN THE PROTEST MOVEMENTS
IN THE PERIOD 2012-2018
-SUMMARY-**

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The purpose and main objectives of the research. The most important questions and working hypotheses

The complex character of the relationship between culture and political power is to be found in the political dimension of culture, as well as in the important impact of cultural values on individuals' opinions, feelings, evaluations and political behaviors and on the legitimization mechanisms used by both institutions and political leaders. For instance, political sociology has taken over a number of concepts and approaches from the theory of culture in order to explain how the cultural specificity and prevailing attitudes in a society influence the institutions and the political system as a whole.

Culture forms the set of values that individuals adhere to, while the political system relies on this set of values in order to guide the actions of individuals. Some theorists have considered culture as an instrument of political power, while others have argued that political power rests on culture constituting the foundation that gives stability to the political system since many of the political options of individuals are influenced by certain cultural models, citizens' internalized values, acquired skills and hopes.

The present doctoral thesis aims to analyze the particularities of *the political culture of young people in Romania*, who, at first glance, pendulate between apathy and disinterest shown towards the traditional duties of a long-term social contract with the state and, respectively, the appetite for precise revolts and the preference for an unconventional participation in the public life.

A first obvious feature of the political culture of young Romanians participating in the protest movements in the period 2012-2018 is *civil disobedience* understood as a collective act that peacefully opposes political decisions considered to either violate the state of right, or be contrary to individuals' interests. Disappointed by the political class in which they do not trust, young people challenge the legitimacy of public institutions over which they feel they do not always have control and thus prefer to solve their problems with the representatives of political authority in the shortest time possible simply by joining protests. At the same time, taking into account the flexibility of the social contract with the state, young people choose to vote only when they consider the stakes of the elections are of a high importance. Otherwise, they prefer either not to vote, or go for a "protest vote" by choosing "the perceived smaller evil" between two or more options that are considered to be bad.

Therefore, we may say that young people in Romania show attitudes of apathy towards the conventional component of political participation, clearly stating their opposition to political authority and, respectively, assertive attitudes towards the non-conventional

participation in the public affairs, with an emphasis on civil disobedience and protest movements.

"Political culture" refers to the way in which the young participants in the street protests have understood and have internalized the political system as a whole, as well as the way in which the latter has been reflected in their personal knowledge and interpretations, feelings and experiences, thoughts and opinions. *Therefore, the present paper aims to analyze the particularities of the political culture of young people - the engine of mobilization and the core participants in the protest movements that took place in Romania, in the period 2012-2018.* By "young people" we mean the socio-demographic category aged between 18 and 35 who mostly participated in the above mentioned protests.

We have chosen to analyze the period 2012-2018 because in this particular time frame there was a social effervescence similar to that from 1990-1992 which has been reflected in the predisposition of Romanians and, in particular, of educated young people living in main cities to participate in a multitude of protest movements directed against the politicians in power.

The aim of this paper is to determine if there are any developments regarding the typology of the political culture of young people, the category that should constitute the engine of social change and a source of inspiration for others. The main question that this doctoral thesis is looking to answer is the following: "To what extent does the simple participation of young people in the protest movements from the period 2012-2018 constitute a sufficiently solid argument to affirm that we are witnessing a change in the political culture of young people, which is gradually moving from the mixed parochial-dependent typology to the dependent-participative one?" A secondary question that emerges is at it follows: "To what extent the particularities of the political culture of the young participants in the protests can be applied to the entire category of young people in Romania, taking into account the fact that the participatory-protest action has been, in general, the prerogative of educated young people living in the most developed cities, which are also important university centers?"

At the same time, this paper aims to identify the reasons that lay behind the act of civil disobedience carried out by young Romanians who have decided to join protest movements. Consequently, the second secondary question that we are looking forward to answering is the following: *<To what extent can the constructivist perspective constitute a valid approach for interpreting the protest movements that took place in Romania, in the period 2012-2018? By appealing to emotions, cultural elements, the framing theory and the construction of a distinct identity, to what extent can this theoretical approach provide a plausible explanation for the changes that have taken place in the political behavior of young people, more precisely for*

their transformation from passive spectators to the political life into active members of an "aesthetic" political minority that pursues the fundamental reform of the political class?>

For a comprehensive understanding of the social phenomenon that has involved protest movements in the capital of Romania and several other important cities, in the period 2012-2018, we consider it appropriate *to carry out a comparative analysis, both with other manifestations from our country after 1989, and with other demonstrations which have taken place, during the analyzed period, in two countries located in the geographical proximity of Romania: Bulgaria and Hungary, in an attempt to establish if we can discuss about a regional phenomenon of contesting the models of representative democracy and the capitalist monetarist system promoted by the Western countries or these manifestations are, rather, the result of the particular historical and political, cultural and economic developments of the states in the region.*

The structure of the doctoral thesis

The structure of this paper includes, in addition to the introduction and conclusions, four other distinct chapters.

The second chapter of the present doctoral thesis aims to clarify both the two key concepts on which the entire theoretical edifice is based: *"political culture"* and *"protest movement"*, but also other specialized terms that will be used in the presentation of the main theoretical approaches from the fields of political science, sociology and psychology regarding the research object, such as: *"citizenship"*, *"political participation"*, *"democracy"*, *"freedom"*, *"justice"* and *"civic disobedience"*.

In the third chapter of the paper, we aim to draw a comparison between the protest movements of the 90s and, respectively, those that have taken place in the period 2012-2018, in order to establish what would be the most important similarities and differences. As a result, the questions to which we aim to find an answer are the following: *"What would be the main points of convergence and the most important differences between the demonstrations of the 90s and the protest movements that took place in the period 2012-2018?"*; *"To what extent can we conclude that the street protests that have started in 2012 are a natural continuation of the idealist student demonstrations of the 90s?"*

If the third chapter seeks to carry out a comparative analysis between the protest movements that have taken place in the period 2012-2018 and, respectively, those of the 90s, in the fourth chapter we extend the theoretical approach beyond the borders of our country. More precisely, in this chapter we aim to analyze the protest movements that took place in

Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary, in the period 2012-2018, in order to establish *to what extent we can discuss about a regional phenomenon of challenging the models of representative democracy and the capitalist monetarist system promoted by the Western countries or these demonstrations are, rather, the result of the particular historical and political, cultural and economic developments of the states in the region.*

The fifth chapter of the doctoral thesis seeks to answer the following question: *"To what extent the constructivist perspective, by appealing to emotions, cultural elements, the framing theory and the construction of a distinct identity, can constitute a valid interpretive approach to the protest movements that have taken place in Romania, between 2012 and 2018, offering at least a plausible explanation for the decision of young people to unconventionally participate in the political life through civil disobedience?"*

Methodology. The main research methods and techniques

As a first step, we considered it opportune to carry out a qualitative research in order to establish to what extent we can discuss about developments in the typology of the political culture of young people. More precisely, with the help of qualitative research methods and techniques, we aim to assess to what extent the political culture of the young participants in the recent protest movements is gradually moving from the mixed parochial-dependent typology to the dependent-participative one. At the same time, the qualitative research seeks to analyze whether the particularities of the political culture of the young protesters can be applied to the entire category of young Romanians. Despite the fact that in this paper we have also used quantitative research techniques mainly referring to opinion polls carried out for the analyzed period: 2012-2018 by the most important public opinion polling institutes based in Romania, the research approach is, predominantly, a qualitative one.

The present doctoral thesis has used *the sociological survey* as a main research method, which combined *the interview* as an interrogative technique for gathering information with *the study of the bibliography dedicated to the research topic.*

In order to ensure a high degree of comparability of the collected information, we have used eleven structured, individual interviews, which consisted of administering to all the respondents fifteen standardized questions, prepared in advance. Therefore, we tried to keep the same wording and order of the questions, as well as the same tone of voice when we addressed the questions to the respondents in order to eliminate any risk of influencing the answers of the interviewees.

Although the fact that we have administered the same set of fifteen questions to all respondents may remind you of a quantitative research, we stress out the fact that all questions were open-ended and the respondents enjoyed a total freedom in terms of the answers they provided within a formal, face-to-face conversation, except for the interviewed persons with a previously set agenda, a busy professional/academic schedule, living in another city and not being able to travel to Bucharest. Moreover, there was no minimum and maximum time limit allocated to each individual interview. Consequently, one interview lasted from 50-60 minutes to 2-3 hours, depending on the time, the availability and the openness to dialogue of the respondents. We have spent around one month for preparing the interviews, three months for taking the interviews and two months for transcribing the interviews and analyzing the collected information.

As we aimed to further enrich our knowledge and understanding of the recent protest movements through the multiple perspectives belonging to various social actors, we considered it opportune to interview renowned sociologists (Prof. Univ. Dr. Vasile Dîncu, Conf. Univ. Dr. Alfred Bulai, Cristina Andreea Șerban-Iacob), well-known political scientists (Conf. Univ. Dr. Cristian Pîrvulescu, Lect. Univ. Dr. Daniel Buti, Lect. Univ. Dr. Claudiu Crăciun, Prof. Univ. Dr. Sabin Drăgulin), activists and informal leaders of the protest movements in the period 2012-2018 (Lect. Univ. Dr. Claudiu Crăciun, former USR deputy and environmental activist Mihai Goțiu), activists and informal leaders of the protest movements directed against the governmental restrictions introduced as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (deputy and activist George Simion), as well as two representatives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, taking into account their professional duties during public gatherings such as rallies and demonstrations.

The main objective followed in the administration of the eleven structured interviews was to establish to what extent the research hypothesis framing the political culture of the young protesters in the mixed dependent-participative typology is confirmed or denied, partially or totally.

In addition, the interviews sought to capture as many aspects as possible regarding the knowledge, main information sources, feelings and evaluations of young Romanians in reference to the political system as a whole, as well as the real reasons laying behind their decision to get involved in protest movements directed against the political establishment. Therefore, one of the questions of the interview analyzed to what extent the decision of young people to adopt an unconventional participation in the political life through civil disobedience was the result of their own beliefs or, rather, of the manipulation to which they were exposed through online social networks. At the same time, another question aimed to find out

respondents' opinions regarding the main means used by the informal leaders of the street demonstrations to mobilize young Romanians to the recent protest movements.

Another objective that we intended to fulfill through the administration of the interviews was to create a typology of the young participants in the protest movements taking place in the period 2012-2018 in terms of place of origin, level of studies, main motivations and goals.

Following the structure of the doctoral thesis, the interview also included three specialized questions in the field of political science, with a high degree of difficulty for unaware respondents. However, we considered that the high level of academic training and the rich professional experience of the interviewees would ensure a response rate close to 100% on these particularly difficult questions. The first question investigated respondents' views on the main points of convergence and differences between the demonstrations of the 1990s and the protest movements taking place in between 2012 and 2018 in order to set the extent to which we could conclude the recent street revolts were a natural continuation of the manifestations that began in 1990. The second specialized question aimed to capture the point of view expressed by the interviewees regarding the protest movements that took place in Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary, in the period 2012-2018, in an attempt to establish if they should be interpreted as part of a regional phenomenon challenging the models of representative democracy and the capitalist monetarist system promoted by the Western countries or as rather being the result of the particular historical and political, cultural and economic developments of the states in the region. The third question with a high degree of difficulty sought to analyze to what extent the interviewees believed that, through the appeal to emotions, cultural elements, the framing theory and the construction of a distinct identity, the constructivist perspective could constitute a valid interpretive approach for the protest movements in the period 2012-2018.

Moreover, the structured interviews aimed to find out respondents' views on two narratives heavily promoted by certain national television channels regarding the hostile interests of certain foreign billionaires and their apparent intent to orchestrate a coup d'état by secretly organizing and financing the protest movements in the period 2012-2018. As a result, we considered appropriate the points of view expressed by the two representatives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in order to establish to what extent the protest movements of the analyzed period constituted a real threat to the national security.

Furthermore, the eleven interviews had both an anticipatory and a practical component. Through the anticipatory component, we aimed to make a series of predictions regarding the

evolution of the protest phenomenon in Romania and to identify the main social contexts, economic challenges and/or major political events that could generate large protest movements, similar to those taking place in the period 2012-2018. The practical component sought to analyze the solutions identified by the interviewees to encouraging the conventional participation of young Romanians in the political life.

Another research method that we used in the present doctoral thesis was *the comparative method*. This particular research method implied a simultaneous or a successive analysis process of several political approaches on some basic theoretical concepts related to the research topic, in order to establish what are the main similarities and differences between them. Firstly, we resorted to the comparative method in the chapter dedicated to the definitions of the key concepts. This research method made an important contribution to establishing the similarities and differences between the main theoretical approaches in the national and international specialized literature on issues related to *justice* and *democracy*.

For instance, we used *the comparative method* in order to present the perfectly opposite perspectives of Plato and Karl Popper regarding the concept of "democracy". According to Plato, democracy is the worst form of Government that involves the rule of law, a synonym to anarchy, as there is a risk that power will end up in the hands of *incompetent individuals*, under the influence of their own passions and selfish interests, in contrast to *the guardians of the fortress*. The latter are defined by reason and wisdom - understood as a higher level of knowledge resulting from a long-term education - which allows them to control both their emotions and their will and thus act to ensure the happiness of all the members of the society. For Plato, democracy represents the ephemeral tyranny of the people, in a society where everyone is free to do what he/she wants, in the absence of any limits and restrictions. For Karl Popper, democracy represents the form of political organization opposed to dictatorship, where citizens exercise their control over the rulers through the adoption of a Constitution and the introduction of the separation of powers in the state, a principle that thus limits the power enjoyed by the decision-makers.

At the same time, we resorted to *the comparative method* in order to present the main similarities and differences between the views expressed by the American philosophers John Rawls, Robert Nozick, Ronald Dworkin, Richard Rorty, Michael Sandel, Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Walzer, C. Gilligan, Susan Moller Okin on the issue of "justice". Both John Rawls and Robert Nozick agree when they argue that utilitarianism has failed because of its tendency to homogenize the society and the need to treat individuals as means for the sake of maximizing the general happiness. The differences between the two approaches result from the way Rawls

and Nozick build the society and the way goods are distributed in a community. Despite the numerous criticisms that have been formulated against the theory of "justice as equity", among them recalling: the libertarian objections that belong to Robert Nozick, the author of the theory of "distributive justice as justification", the liberal ones invoked by Ronald Dworkin and Richard Rorty, the communitarians' criticisms supported by Michael Sandel, Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Walzer and the feminists' ones promoted by C. Gilligan and Susan Moller Okin, we bring to one's attention John Rawls's perspective on justice that contributes to a better understanding of the research theme of the paper. According to the American philosopher, justice should be the most important quality of social institutions and its absence justifies what Rawls calls "civic disobedience".

Secondly, we used *the comparative method* in the third chapter of the thesis, which aimed at making a comparison between the demonstrations of the 90s and the protest movements that took place between 2012 and 2018. Our approach was based on the initiative of the Romanian sociologist Cătălin Augustin Stoica, who discovered a series of similarities and differences between the protest movements of 2012 and those of the 90s, in the chapter suggestively entitled "The multiple facets of popular discontent: a sociological sketch of the protests in the University Square in January 2012", part of the volume *The Winter of our Enmity: The Protests from Romania, January-February 2012*, coordinated together with the anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu.

In addition to the fact that we added other relevant elements to Cătălin Augustin Stoica's list of similarities and differences, we also included the perspectives of the political analysts Alexandru Radu, Daniel Buti and Diana Mărgărit, the historian Mihnea Berindei, the journalist Ariadna Combes, the author Domnița Ștefănescu, the anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu and the sociologists Anne Planche, Alfred Bulai, Dan Jurcan and Vasile Dîncu on the aspects under analysis and we extended the research to all the protest movements that took place in Romania, in the period 2012-2018.

The fourth chapter of the doctoral thesis extended *the comparative analysis* outside our country's borders by analyzing the protest movements that took place in Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary, in the period 2012-2018, with the aim of establishing to what extent we could discuss about a regional phenomenon of contesting the models of representative democracy and the capitalist monetarist system promoted by Western countries or these demonstrations should be rather regarded as distinct social events, resulting from the particular historical and political, cultural and economic developments of the states in the region.

A third research method used in this paper was *the historical method*. This method has proven its effectiveness in presenting the way in which the concept of "liberty" has evolved within the main approaches and theories in the specialized literature, from the protoliberalism of Thomas Hobbes, passing through the classical liberalism of John Locke, and up to the utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill. At the same time, we used the historical method to resume the chronological thread of the events within the protest movements that took place in Romania and in two other neighboring countries: Bulgaria and Hungary, in between 2012 and 2018.

Novelty of the research

What new elements does the present doctoral thesis bring to the specialized literature? If the topic of "political culture" was in the sphere of interest of political scientists such as Gabriel Almond, Sidney Verba, Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, Dan Sultănescu, Bogdan Teodorescu and sociologists including Herbert Marcuse, Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe, Elena Nedelcu, Gheorghe Fluga, the research topic referring to "protest movements" is relatively recent and less addressed in the international and national specialized literature.

Beyond the novelty of the research topic that results from its particular character: the political culture of the young people participating in the protest movements in the period 2012-2018, the doctoral thesis suggests a new way of explaining the changes that have taken place at the level of young people's behavior mainly referring to the relatively sudden abandonment of apathy and the active involvement in demonstrations directed against the political establishment. Therefore, if other specialized papers recently published on the same topic appeal to the model of the political process and the opportunities for collective action, as well as to the theory of resource mobilization to explain the participation of individuals in public revolts, the present doctoral thesis aims to analyze if the constructivist perspective, by appealing to emotions, cultural elements, the framing theory and the construction of a distinct identity, can constitute a valid interpretive approach for the recent protest movements from Romania.

Moreover, the paper aims to continue and further develop the approach of sociologist Cătălin Augustin Stoica who mentioned a series of similarities and differences between the protest movements of 2012 and those of the 90s, in the chapter suggestively entitled "The multiple facets of popular discontent: a sociological sketch of the protests in the University Square in January 2012", part of the volume *The Winter of our Enmity: The Protests from Romania, January-February 2012*, coordinated together with the anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu.

Another approach that the present doctoral thesis aims to take a step further is the one belonging to Vintilă Mihăilescu. The anthropologist captures, in a photo album dedicated to the street protests organized against the famous GEO 13/2017, some of the elements that differentiate the two spaces of contestation against the political authority of ruling decision-makers and parties: the University Square in 1990 and the Victoriei Square in 2017.

Out of the desire to continue the efforts of the sociologist Cătălin Augustin Stoica and the anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu, we will dedicate a separate chapter of this paper to extensively analyze the main points of convergence and the most important differences between the protest movements that took place in the period 2012-2018 and the ones of the 90s in order to determine to what extent we can conclude that the street protests debuting in 2012 are a natural continuation of the idealist student demonstrations of the 90s. If other specialized papers recently published on the same research theme capture a series of similarities and differences between the demonstrations of the 90s and the protest movements of 2012, the present paper extends the analyzed time period until 2018, which corresponds to the period of social effervescence that begins with the protests supporting Raed Arafat in 2012 and ends with the "Rally of the Diaspora" in 2018.

Another novelty element that the present doctoral thesis brings to the specialized literature is the attempt to establish, during another chapter, to what extent we can discuss about a regional phenomenon of contesting the models of representative democracy and the capitalist monetarist system promoted by the Western countries when analyzing the protest movements that took place in Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary, in the period 2012-2018 or these demonstrations are rather the result of the particular historical and political, cultural and economic developments of the states in the region. In addition to their geographical proximity and common historical path through their membership of the former Communist bloc until 1989, Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary have experienced a difficult transition from communism to democracy and, respectively, from a centralized economic system to a market economy after 1990. At the same time, the three countries face similar internal problems and share converging geopolitical interests in the region having a similar trajectory in NATO and the EU.

If other specialized papers recently published on the same research topic make a comparison between the protest movement supporting Raed Arafat in 2012 and the "Occupy Wall Street" movement - the anti-capitalist protest of young Americans that started in New York, in the Zuccotti Park, the anti-austerity protest of the Spanish youth "Los Indignados" and, respectively, the "Arab Spring" - a series of protests that were directed against the authoritarian or totalitarian regimes in several countries from the Middle East and North Africa,

starting in 2010, the present doctoral thesis focuses on analyzing the main similarities and differences between the protest movements that have taken place in the geographical proximity of Romania, in countries that share a series of similarities from a historical, political, economic and social point of view, without neglecting, in within the analysis framework, the aspects related to some protest sub-themes inspired by new social movements (opposition to the exploitation of natural resources from protected environments, opposition to ACTA) and, respectively, to actions, themes and slogans borrowed from the repertoire of some Occupy Wall Street movements.

Last but not least, our theoretical approach acquires a practical value through the structured interviews with renowned sociologists, well-known political scientists, activists and informal leaders of the protest movements and, respectively, representatives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Even if other specialized papers published recently on the protest movements topic have also resorted to the same qualitative research technique, the interviews were either unstructured or semi-structured, being administered exclusively to participants in protests, either during the demonstrations or afterwards. In order to ensure a high degree of comparability of the collected information, in the research carried out as part of this doctoral thesis, we administered eleven structured, individual interviews, which included fifteen standardized questions, prepared in advance for the respondents. We aimed to administer the questions in the same form, order and tone of voice in order to eliminate any risk of influencing the responses of the interviewees. The open nature of the questions and the total freedom enjoyed by the respondents in formulating their answers led to a set of complex interviews, with an approximate length of three hours. Although the quality of the recording of the interviews using the digital recorder was very good and it did not involve any sound or background noise problems, we allocated the interviews with Prof. Univ. Dr. Cristian Pîrvulescu, with Conf. Univ. Dr. Alfred Bulai and, respectively, with the former USR deputy and the environmental activist Mihai Goțiu, 1-2 days for an accurate transcription of the various interesting aspects reported by the interviewees.

Taking into account the intrinsic complexity of the research theme aiming to analyze the political culture of young people from Romania participating in the protest movements in the period 2012-2018, we considered it opportune to further enrich our knowledge and understanding of the recent demonstrations with the multiple perspectives belonging to different social actors and not only with the point of view of the participants in the protests who are the subjects of the current analysis. Hence, this fact explains the decision to also invite to the interview famous sociologists, well-known political scientists, activists and informal

leaders of the protest movements against the Governmental restrictions introduced as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic that have manifested themselves, predominantly, since 2021 and, respectively, representatives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.