Santa Klaus. Romanian presidential elections, moral revolt, and the anthropological discourse

Abstract: *The article explores possible explanations for the surprising outcome of the last Romanian presidential elections which ended in victory for Klaus Iohannis. What really changed between the two polling tours? What caused the wave of enthusiasm that influenced so dramatically the elections?*

> *It is now the social scientist's foremost political and intellectual task – for here the two coincide – to make clear the elements of contemporary uneasiness and indifference*
> Wright Mills, 1959

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The fact that Romania has a new president is no breaking news; but the way this happened may be something new. 25 years after the execution of the Ceausescu couple on Christmas day, Romania is celebrating a brand new Santa Claus. Iohannis Klaus.

On November 2nd, there were 14 candidates running for president in Romania. All the opinion polls were presenting Victor Ponta, the leader of PSD and current prime minister, as the winner. Unsurprisingly, he collected 40.44% of the votes, getting ahead of his main counter-candidate, Klaus Iohannis, by 10%. It could not be reasonably envisaged that anything might change this situation. And during the two weeks between the first and the second tour nothing "really" happened, not even the usual public confrontation of the two candidates. However, the participation of the electorate rose unexpectedly from 53.17% to 64.10% in the second round, and Iohannis won with 54.43%, i.e. 1 million votes more than Ponta, thus surpassing the hugest handicap in the history of post-socialist elections[1] and producing a huge wave of enthusiasm[2].

Enthusiasm exists; enthusiasm should then be explained.

Year	Participation	Winner's score	Loser's score	Winner's score
		(first round)	(first round)	(second round)
1990	86,19%	99,10%		-
1992	76,29%	47,34%	31,24%	61,43%
1996	75,90%	28.22%	32.25%	54,41%
2000	57,50%[*]	36,35%	28,34%	66,83%[**]
2004	55,20%	33,92%	40,97%	51.23%
2009	58,02%	32,44%	31,15%	50,34%
2014	64,10%[***]	30,37%	40,44%	54,43%[****]

[*] After the defeat of and delusion produced by "the first democratic president", the interest in elections fell down.

[**] Iliescu is running for presidency against the extreme right leader, Vadim Tudor, and wins by means of a huge negative vote.
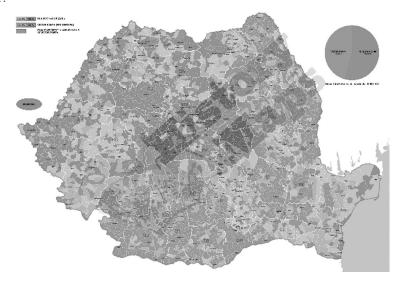
[***] 53,17% in the first round.

[****] 89,73% among the Diaspora.

Who won the elections?

Even if after the victory many "true believers" became vocal, and a supplementary 10% of the population declared having voted with Iohannis, in fact everybody was stoned: how was it possible, what happened in fact?

The search for explanations ran high already on the election night. In the emotionally-charged context of surprise, the first explanation was that the elections had been… emotional. However, the urgent question was *who* had won the elections by gaining over the handicap in the first round? Several catchy formulas were launched then by the media:

1. It was the right. But then again, what "right", as there is hardly any real distinction between left and right in nowadays Romania. Some had stated already during the elections that it was the anti-communist right. By presenting Ponta and his party as the embodiment of the old „specter of communism", vocal „anti-communists" produced a „moral panic"(Cohen 2002) mobilizing a traditional middle class scared by the risk of „restoration"[3]. Actually, it is not that the right had won, but that the left had sorely lost, said others; the vote had been essentially negative, a rejection of PSD. That might be true, but if PSD was responsible for bringing the population on the brink of despair, then Iohannis, a German as quiet and neutral as a white wall onto which one can project every hope and expectation, stood for hope almost without knowing it[4]. It was only the alchemy of these two elements that mobilized voters: if discontent my pull people out in the street, it is only a kind or another of hope that may guide their steps.

2. It was the "hard-working" Romanians. The scrutiny maps broadcasted by the media were painted in two colors: Transylvania was blue (liberal), while the other two historical regions, Moldova and Wallachia, were red ("communist"). The myth of country being split in two appeared to have gained ground once more.

3. It was the Diaspora. This was the first time it made itself visible on Romania's political scene and made an impression on everyone. But what lays beyond this "impression"?

4. It was the Internet generation. Internet users thus saw themselves brought together as a distinct, corporate kind of subject. But then why did Monica Macovei, who was a louder, wider-known representative of the same "right", and whose campaign went viral in the first round, not even win the percentage that she had been credited with by opinion polls? More-over, we know from many other instances that what we've come to name "clicktivism" is not the same thing as real-life mobilization. As my colleague Bogdan Iancu would say, the inter-net is like a syringe: it's not the object itself that cures you, but rather what you put inside it…

More nuanced answers were soon to follow. I will select from them the one that seems to be, at least for the time being, the most thorough analysis of the recent elections. It belongs to sociologist Dumitru Sandu.

Even before the first round, he published a more nuanced elections map, resulted from more detailed data aggregation. Six voting patterns ensued, while the map was not bicolor, but patched: it was the development centers, rather than the historical provinces, that made a dif-ference (Sandu, 2014 a). Similar maps were published by other sociologists and polling insti-tutions. The myth of the split country got (relatively) busted.
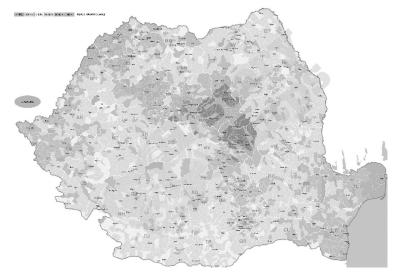
Figure 1.

After the second round, Sandu returned with a detailed statistical analysis in order to find out who and to what extent had contributed to the difference between the two rounds Sandu, 2014 b). According to him, these are the factors which account for the victory of Iohannis:

1. The most prevalent factor by far was how developed and modern the local community is: approximately 27% of the votes for Iohannis were determined by the development-modern-ization particulars of the community.

2. Ethnic-regional votes (which contributed by at least 15 percent). Although the Hungari-an minority participated in the second round to a lesser extent than it had in the first round, they boycotted the recommendation made by their party (UDMR) to support PSD and voted

en masse with Iohannis. Similarly, Dobrogea, which is also a multi-ethnic region, saw a strong mobilization for Iohannis in the second round, even though it was in the grips of PSD. Romanians might be proud of the results of the elections, but the votes from regions inhabited by ethnic minorities were very important too (see map).

3. The rejection of Victor Ponta (which contributed by almost 15 %)

4. The community's experience of migration (3%): the role of the Diaspora was "significant, but not determinant", is the conclusion of the sociologist. And he states: "Both the public image and the governmental practice are lagging long behind the actual realities of transnational connections. Both of these present the Romanian Diaspora as if it were still predominantly cultural, and were mobilized by nostalgia about origins, holiday tourism or ritual conferences. That is no longer the case for a long while now". It is not only the city, but the village as well – even though traditionally its inhabitants had been PSD voters – that underwent structural changes due to social remittances and the "skyping with grandma" phenomenon: PSD is lagging behind its own voters.

Figure 2. Evolution of percentages; raises or falls in percentages as compared to the first round: Klaus Iohannis historymaps.ro (History Maps).

And let us not be naïve: even though it goes unmeasured, the contribution of European offices in the recent geopolitical context of Russian expansion was surely not to be neglected!

To my mind, there is still one fundamental question to be answered: if all these seem to be the main *social structures* where mobilization occurred, how did this actually occur, why, and why to this level? Sociological analysis will only disclose that the mobilization for the vote occurred in areas with a potential for *change* and can tell us which these are and maybe how they built up their potential to revolt. Still, the way that they put it into practice remains a mystery. My first notion about this is that we're dealing not only with *structures*, but also with *energies*, and that the revolt, as a general mood, created the revolted, at least to the same extent to which the revolted initiated the revolt. Therefore, the question regarding *who, stricto sensu,* won the elections might be misleading…

The moral revolt

Approaching such a social movement in terms of "energies" is by all means puzzling. Nevertheless, some hints may be found in old fashioned crowd psychology and classical social psychology as well as in more recent anthropological approaches of emotions or morality that had burgeoned in the last decades. In a more general sense, social sciences are more and more describing the world we are living in as kind of *fear & desire societies*. *Discontent* and *hope* also emerged as objects of sociological/anthropological scrutiny, thus mobilizing even more emotional "energies" in descriptions and explanations of social behaviors[5].

If not restricted to a normative point of view, "moralities" (Heinz, 2009) are also – or should be considered – part of such social "energies" fuelling individual and collective behaviors[6]. My guess is that what triggered these last days the huge mobilization of the Romanian electorate could be better understood if looking *also* in this direction. It is in this sense that I would like to sketch here what I prefer to call a "moral revolt", inspired by (not rooted in) the idea of „moral economy".

Moral economy as presented in the classical books of E. P. Thompson (1963) and James Scott (1976), for instance, offers an account of the social psychology and agency of peasants as being rooted in a kind of "subsistence ethics": the social ties of the peasantry are cooperative rather than competitive, so as to prevent the economic actors in traditional societies from behaviors seeking to maximize personal profit; or, in Scott's terms, everyone in the community has a right to a minimum level of subsistence, and elites have a duty to support this right. Consequently, moral economy is (also) a legitimating deep belief in a certain system of social equity that can not – or should not – be undermined by the State or the Market if rebellion is to be avoided. "The problem of rebellion is not just a problem of calories and income but is a question of peasant conceptions of social justice, of rights and obligations, of reciprocity", Scott concludes. *Mutatis mutandis*, we can also say that everyone in a society has a right to a minimum level of dignity or *moral capital*, and the Power has a duty to support this right, i. e. a *minimal granted reciprocity pact*. Further on, we could suppose that the masses may mobilize when they sense an imminent threat to their moral capital, in order to restore the minimal guaranteed pact of mutuality. A couple of specifications are due: a) by "moral capital" I mean the social recognition of the intrinsic moral value of a person, irrespectively of other values this person may share; b) the minimal guaranteed pact of mutuality refers to that limit under which the perception of belonging turns into a feeling of exclusion. This could all be summed up, if you will, by the dynamics of *dignity* and *indignation*: a perceived affront to my dignity will make me feel excluded and revolt in order to restore a meaningful sense of belonging.

What happened, then, from this perspective, in the recent elections?

Scott uses a very plastic image in order to illustrate the condition of moral economy: a group of people sitting up to their neck under water; any disturbance of the water might drown them. Whoever starts making waves – be it an internal parvenu, the state, or the market – is bound to ignite revolt. From this point of view, those in power did not only make waves, but they've been throwing stones into the water, watching from the shore how people start drowning. Ponta's campaign slogan, "proud to be Romanian", was consequently turned on its head by many citizens, as "proud to be proud". And the way in which the PSD dealt with the elections abroad, by refusing to open enough polling stations and by causing people to queue for

hours, sometimes without even making it to the ballots before closing time, was the final straw. The reaction was, *We're winning together*, which, beyond the slogan, was meant to encourage cooperation and to limit competition, even if for a brief while. This is why everyone was there, the Diaspora and the peasants, the hipsters and the punks: these were masses, not classes. They were brought together not by collective structures, but by individual energies. Paradoxically, if there was any aggregate subject of revolt, that was Power itself.

Even so, we could not grasp what happened those days before the second round if we limit ourselves to *hic et nunc*: there is a history behind this phenomenon.

Let us therefore open up the space of analysis and take a look at the wider context of this moral revolt.

At the mass level, this can be best described by the general mood of society: the lowest levels of trust in the parliament and in the government across the EU (13% in Romania, 33% in EU); the last but one position regarding life satisfaction in Europe (40% in Romania, 79% in EU); the last but one place regarding financial satisfaction, the same as Greece (36% in Romania, 64% in EU); the worst decline in optimism, after Greece, in the past three years (from 44% to 20%); Romanian youth has experienced the worst decline in optimism between 2008 and 2010 (more than in Greece): from 63% to 27%; most Romanians (56%) fear for their future; homicide rates is 2.2 per one thousand inhabitants, rating fourth in Europe, after the Baltic countries; suicide rates are higher than in Europe and is continuing to grow (6.3 per one thousand inhabitants aged between 15 and 19, as compared to 4.6 in Europe; 40.6 for men aged between 50-54 as compared to the European medium of 28.7)

As for authority, it got ahead of itself in terms of the disregard shown to the population, regardless of which party we're talking about. Ranging from Basescu's "right" to Ponta's "left", a whole bunch of politicians set into motion a complex lexicon of humiliation, which was widely covered by the media and was retained by the collective memory. Such an extreme act of disdain on behalf of President Basescu sparked a noteworthy spontaneous revolt, which indirectly led to the downfall of the Ungureanu government in 2012. The same kind of disdainful response to citizens' demands regarding the gold mining project at Roºia Montanã and the shale gas in Pungeºti led to a series of manifestations that resemble the Occupy movement, that came together as the *United we save* organization, which on December 1st, 2014, on the Romanian national day, mobilized its members to make their protest heard in Brussels. As the Spanish *indignados* put it, we're not against the system, but the system is against us; still, we learned how to become *indignant*. And indignation is etymologically rooted in *indignus*, meaning *non degno*, without – or deprived of – dignity…

We are thus witnessing a cumulative effect, both of the disdain shown to the "moral capital" of the citizens, and of the breaking of the "minimal guaranteed pact of mutuality". The turnaround of the recent election results is not "an emotional bubble", as described by the politician and sociologist Vasile Dîncu (2014), but is part of a *memory of revolt*, which probably became the most significant *potential of change* in Romania[7]. Now it also secured the *pride of success*, which can be inscribed in the ascending spiral of the David and Goliath effect: mobilization becomes a challenge for an ever-wider category of "sportsmen of civism", a game against the system in which the users of social networking services have a noteworthy advantage.

After years of depressive defeatism, Romania showed, to itself and to the world, that it can produce change in spite of its reputation of passivity. It was not simply individuals, but the nation itself that regained a sense of its hitherto taunted sense of dignity. Regardless of what will happen

with Iohannis, the triumph of these elections is to be measured in the restoration of hope and, thus, of the potential for action. The risk is to lose measure and slip from belief to mysticism.

Occupy the wor(l)d

Even though we're referring to a circumscribed political event, with clear stakes, what happened on November 16th 2014 shares something of the wider phenomenon of *Occupy* movements. It might therefore be useful, I think, to remember what might be the main features of this phenomenon. A sketchy outline would emphasize the following: a) it is global in reach, beyond its unavoidable local particulars; b) it is a mood, beyond material manifestations; c) it presupposes mass energies, rather than class structures; d) it is *moral* beyond being political. This final point is perhaps the most significant, because it explains why such movements usually lack a definite political agenda, and what lies beyond this apparent lack of ideology. As explained by Ivan Krastev, "mistrusting institutions as a rule, the protesters are plainly uninterested in taking power. The government is simply "them", regardless of who is in charge. The protesters combine a genuine longing for community with a relentless individualism (…) They describe their own political activism almost in religious terms, stressing how the experience of acting out on the street has inspired a revolution of the soul and a regime change of the mind" (Krastev, 2014). "Perhaps for the first time after 1848, the revolt is not against a government, but against being governed" – Krastev concludes.

This latter remark alludes to yet another dimension of such revolts, perhaps the most profound, albeit the least visible. Revolts against being governed (even when they are seemingly against one given government or the other) are ultimately a refusal of the very language of governance, which is to say the System. Nietzsche once said that we did not get rid of God if we still believe in grammar – a radical way of emphasizing that language is power. *Indignados* everywhere refuse it, therefore, and sublimate it through humor, through political Dadaism or Bakhtinian carnivalesque. What they are looking to change is the *language* of Power, and not one of its particular *discourses*. Without knowing it (yet), the System is starting to be undermined in its very moral legitimacy and ontological composition. The rest is history…

Anthropological discourse

Perhaps the social sciences should also change their language in turn, or, to be more precise, to adapt it to the new realities. In fact, it is nothing more than reloading Mills' *sociological imagination* and its power to connect "personal troubles of milieu and the public issues of social structure" (Mills, 1959).

As I already suggested, an analysis in terms of *energy*, not just *structure*, might perhaps be momentous: morality is not only about *values* or *norms*, but also about *feelings*, i.e. energies of action in their own wright. It would be analogous to the transition from Newtonian mechanics to the complementarity principle in quantum mechanics. Or, to put it more simply, to the complementarity between European "material" medicine and the Chinese "energetic" one. Beyond such analogies, we need to renew our *vocabulary*[8].

On the other hand, such an approach would walk hand in hand with a change of emphasis from the individual as a *rational subject* to the individual as a *moral person*. This would entail the transition from the currently dominant theory of rational choice to the alternative one of the struggle for recognition, for instance. Therefore, a change – or reframing – of *paradigm*.

Nonetheless, these changes have only just begun, while the main stake is a long-ranging one: the construction of a *new political subject* – and this is far from being a mere local problem.

Notes

[1] In 1996, the to-be president Constantinescu started with a handicap of 4% and in 2004 the elected president Basescu had a 7% handicap in the first tour.

[2] Some post-electoral enthusiasm is just normal, but this time the optimism concerning the future of the country increased with more then 30% and the trust in the presidential institution jumped from 17,8% before elections to 43,9% some days after. Klaus Iohannis also become the most "e-visited" president in Europe, with more then 1.3 million funs on face book, surpassing by far even Angela Merkel.

[3] The general attitude of this category can be summed up by the utterance of one of its best known representatives, Horia Roman Patapievici: "modern incivility bears a name: the revolt of the masses" (Patapievici, 2002). In his turn, the well-known political analyst Vladimir Tismăneanu was commenting from the United States the Romanian elections considering Ponta "a small Kim" or, on another occasion, a Putin oriented and obedient leader (Tismaneanu, 2014). For him and many others alike, the reign of PSD was equivalent with an authoritarian restoration of a Russian/Asiatic type of communism.

[4] As he would not or could not present himself as a politician, Iohannis posed as a *moral person*: "I'd sooner lose the elections than be a boor!", he stated, thereby changing a hindrance into an advantage. What's more, the hybrid liberal party that supported him, made up of the same sad figures of Romanian politics, had enough addresse as to remain in the backstage and play in offside, allowing the PSD to play "the boor". In a paradoxical – and symptomatic – way, it was his image of a political outsider that helped Iohannis to gain political capital.

[5] "Hope and desire are always in uneasy relationship" (Crapanzano 2003: 19). Nevertheless, in order to mark them out one could get some insights from the psychological distinction between fear and anxiety: desire has a precise object, hope does not. Further on, this would imply that we have also to mark out the *fear & desire* denotative polarity from the more connotative and "transcending" one of *discontent & hope*.

[6] I consider *discontent* (with "bad" things) and *hope* (for the "best") as fundamental – even if culture and context bound – *moral feelings*.

[7] The popular discontent is with "real existing capitalism" (still suspected by some to be a disguised form of communism), not with the very idea of capitalism or market; Romania is not (yet…) a *Shrinking Society* (Hage, 2003). What was on stake was the hope for a *better* society, i.e. a change of the *national* system, whatever this could mean.

[8] Mills can also be inspirational in this respect. As he browses through moral/ axiological relations between "personal troubles of milieu and public issues of social structure", he draws an outline of what we might call a matrix of the moral energies that are active in society, ranging from *well-being* and *satisfaction* to *panic*, *indifference/ apathetism*, and *discomfort/anxiety*. And he goes on to ascertain that ours is a time of uneasiness", but „neither the values threatened nor whatever threatens them has been stated; in short, they have not been carried to the point of decision. Much less have they been formulated as problems of social science". Half a century later it is about time we did it…

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