

‘Nu plecăm până nu plecați!’- A Case Study on the Rise of the Digital Civic Activism in Romania (2015-2018)

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Abstract: *In this study we focused our attention on the involvement of the oldest and the most active online community, Corupția ucide, in organising or rallying protests in 2015, 2017 and 2018. We wanted to show to what extent the representatives of this community managed to increase the number of (involved) fans supporting the cause of anti-corruption protests and how they used Facebook as an interactive tool for communicating with users in the case of the three analysed protests. The Corupția ucide community has provided internet users with information about protests and anti-corruption legislation, has succeeded in connecting and engaging citizens to participate also in the street, not only in social media, and has paved the way for the digital civic activism institutionalisation in Romania.*

Keywords: *anti-corruption protests; online communication; digital activism; social media; Diaspora Rally; Romania 2018; Corupția ucide (Corruption kills).*

How to cite: Pătruț, M. (2022). ‘Nu plecăm până nu plecați!’- A Case Study on the Rise of the Digital Civic Activism in Romania (2015-2018). *BRAIN. Broad Research in Artificial Intelligence and Neuroscience*, 13(3), 288-307. <https://doi.org/10.18662/brain/13.3/368>

Introduction

There has been a growing number of research studies on the relationship between digital activism and social media (Tsatsou, 2018) use during protests around the world over the past three decades. Academic papers refer to several concepts considered synonymous with the term *digitalactivism*: *internet activism* (Kang, 2017), *hashtag activism* (Briones, Janoske, & Madden, 2016), *social media activism* (Miller, 2017), *networked activism* (Tufekci, 2013), *online activism* (Yang, 2018). The synonymic phrases used for the popular term *digital activism* have taken into account fashionable linguistic discourses or technological developments: *web* and *cyber-activism* were related to early forms of digital communication, *social media*, *mobile and hashtag-activism* refer to post-2005 technological developments (Özkula, 2021). In addition, the perception of the social actors towards the analysed phenomenon has also changed, they no longer consider that there is a rigid delimitation between the online/virtual and the offline/real (Sandu & Nistor, 2020). Activism in the virtual environment is materialised beyond the digital networks, the online and the offline are perceived not separately but as a whole continuum (Maiba, 2005).

The definitions given for digital activism are not very precise, but broadly speaking they highlight as follows: practices of resistance and rebellion (Hands, 2011), “political participation, activities and protests organised in digital networks beyond the politics of representation and by non-state actors” (Karatzogianni, 2015), political activism on the internet or political movements based on it (Vegh, 2003) or an act of communication expressing personal opinions on public issues and the use of internet-based digital technologies for offline activism training (Mercea, 2011). Özkula (2021) considers that digital activism includes five practices: (a) advocacy and political commentary, (b) recruitment and movement building, (c) organisation & coordination, (d) online direct action, hacktivism, and civil disobedience and (e) research and documentation about activism. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) have argued that the digital means of activism have fostered the ‘personalisation of collective action’ by providing maximum flexibility in terms of how, when, where and with whom individuals can join and participate in protests. George & Leidner (2019) consider the following activities to be emblematic of digital activism: “clicktivism, metavoicing- amplification of a user’s voice or opinion through re-sharing, assertion - content creation, e-funding, political consumerism, digital petitions,

botivism- robot-distributed activism, data activism, exposure and hacktivism”.

Theoretical framework

As society has become increasingly digital, more and more researchers have begun to study the impact of social media on online activism. Four types of online activism have been identified: *political*, *social*, *cultural*, and *nationalist* (Yang, 2018). For most activists, online communities represent the necessary space for networking or debate created to facilitate awareness of real problems experienced and the urgency of engagement to solve them. Studying how activists have turned to new technologies to organise protests and managed to combine careful coordination with decentralisation, Scott & Street (2000) used the phrase ‘organised spontaneity’. In addition to the problems of organising, activists need to find a method that combines the commercial logic of how social media works with their need to transform it into a public information infrastructure. The main social media platforms are institutions which shape the interactions within the collective action spaces of protesters.

According to Youmans, W. L & York, (2012) social media has supported the collective action in four ways: a) facilitating coordinated public action by discontented citizens; b) creating information flows which have reinforced the protesters’ perception of success; c) increasing the costs of repression by the governments in power; and d) enhancing publicity by disseminating information to an (inter)national audience. Valenzuela (2013) finds that social media use translates into increased protest activity among the adult population and advances three explanations for this relationship: *information* (social media as a source of news), *expression* (social media as a space for expressing political views) and *activism* (social media as a place to join the cause and seek out mobilising information). Mundt, Ross & Burnett (2018) highlight the important role played by social media for rallying, coalition-building and collective meaning-making before or during the course of protest movements. Social media helps to engage human resources, by facilitating access to information for large numbers of users, thus enabling social movements to reach critical mass, and material resources by supporting digital crowdfunding campaigns. The coalitions between different groups of protesters who have different identities or come from different geographical areas but have the same common goal/same cause are achieved through the access allowed by social media to individuals’ social capital, their interpersonal networks between which “weak/strong ties” can be created (Nien, 2017). By removing the media from the process

of interpreting social reality as a public sphere, social media plays a significant role in shaping the discourse on the issues raised by various protests and participates in creating collective meanings, strengthening the sense of identity/collective cause among protesters.

We should not ignore the (possible) risks that the use of social media can have for the protest participants. ICTs [information and communication technologies] not only have an emancipatory potential, but they are also tools used to reinforce the political or economic power. “Online surveillance by state agents is widespread, and the discourse on netwars and cyberattacks places hacktivism or online civic disobedience within (cyber) terrorism rather than activism” (Cammaerts, 2015, 8-9). Similarly, social media platforms can impose various constraints on the protest participants, from preventing the use of pseudonymous or anonymous posts, counter-activism by regime actors to removing the accounts of key movement activists, to shutting down the use of social media altogether. “Social media tools facilitating protests can also be used by the repressive regimes and their supporters to mitigate and disrupt opposition” (Youmans& York, 2012).

In Romania, the first protests in which participants turned to social media for coordination and mobilisation started in 2012 (Stanici, 2018). The street protests in the University Square (January 2012) against the healthcare reforms promoted by the Emil Boc government are the first protests in which participants got organised and rallied on the online social networks, especially on Facebook. Members of the online discussion groups have scheduled on Facebook the times of their protest meetings (Grigorași, 2017) in the squares in the centres of the country’s major cities. The most visible Facebook groups/pages through which protests were organised and coordinated were *Piața Universității* (University Square) and *Indignații de Romania* (Indignados of Romania) (Goina, 2012). The protests dedicated to the Rosia Montana project also benefited from the support of online communities (*United We Save, United We Change, United We Save Rosia Montana*) created on the Facebook platform. This is where the information leaflets, promotional materials, open letters and online petitions went viral, and the cultural events were created. Facebook provided the experienced protesters with a solid support for participation in these collective actions (Mercea, 2014). On 14th October 2013, the protests against the Chevron company which intended to start work on shale gas extraction began. On Facebook the protest was visible after the creation of two virtual communities: *Pungești-TV* and *Pungești-Reșistența*. Sharing pictures and video files featuring villagers and protesters who came from the country to support them, these virtual communities produced a strong emotional impact,

supported a local protest action and gave it (inter)national visibility (Cmeci, Coman, 2016: 22-23). Immediately after the fire in the Colectiv club (2015), several pages or communities appeared on Facebook providing information about the tragedy, its causes and consequences: *Corupția ucide - #Colectiv*, *Ajutor Colectiv*, *R.I.P. - Colectiv*, *Împreună rezistăm*, *Ajutor Colectiv*, *Marsul Tacerii Colectiv*, *Colectiv Pentru Viitor*, *Revoluția #Colectiv*, *Solidaritate cu România #Colectiv*. They facilitated the development of an alternative communicative space and a critical, anti-system discourse, being the main source of information for those who wanted to find out in real time details about the tragedy and its victims and the main mobilisation tool for organising volunteer centres and street protests (Pătruț, 2017).

During the 2017 protests, the most popular Facebook groups were *#Rezistența*, *Corupția ucide*, *600000 pentru Rezistența*, *Geeks pentru democrație*, *Împreună rezistăm*, *Vă Vedem din Sibiu*, *Inițiativa Timișoara*, *Inițiativa România*. The *Corupția ucide* Community was a real forum for discussion and debate, the place where information was exchanged, photos and videos were posted and shared by participants in the protests in order to show their support for the movement and to further activate others in the network (Gubernat & Rammelt, 2017). There were also (re)posted articles from the (inter)national press providing coverage of the anti-government protest. Basically, *Corupția ucide* was a network node whose message was picked up by thousands of other users. The central points of the rallying narratives distributed in social media were the messages encapsulated in the form of the *#rezist (resist)*, *#coruptiaucide (the corruption kills)*, *#democracy*, *#romanianprotests*, *#RuleOfLaw*, *#neamsaturat (we had enough)*, *#rezistența (the resistance) hashtags* (Pătruț & Stoica, 2019). The moral conflict between the government and the protesters was managed on Facebook by the administrators of these online communities, real “soft leaders or choreographer” (Gerbaudo, 2012: 5) who were always in the background, but who were able to create the emotional space necessary for collective action. The empirical research on the Romanian online activism was continued by Vasilendiuc & Bardan (2019) who focused on the online communities *Corupția ucide* and *#Rezistența* during the protest of 20th January 2018, gathering 60,000 people. Even though the peak of the rallying and organisation of Facebook protests was reached in January-February 2017, the two communities were still active in January 2018 during the protest entitled “All roads lead to Bucharest. Our generation's revolution”. *Corupția ucide* is the online community that has had a greater impact on users by coordinating direct actions before and during the protests, focusing on internal organisation, recruiting new members and creating new networks, stimulating discussion and debates among members.

Research inquiries and methodology

The Romanian Diaspora is very influential economically and politically, with strong connections to the country, especially with family members. It is the most important investor in Romania, bringing around €2 billion annually. With almost 4 million Romanians living abroad, the diaspora represents more than 20 percent of the country's population (Buzasu, 2018).

On 10th August 2018, dissatisfied with the social-democratic government and its decisions on justice laws and penal codes, 100,000 people once again took part in the *Diaspora Rally*, as it was called in the press, attended by both Romanians from the country and from other countries around the world. The diaspora rally was marked by violence between protesters and police, caused by violent groups and the reaction of the gendarmerie (Stan, 2018a, 2018b). The “We won't leave until you do” protest took place on 11th August 2018, this time peacefully, with tens of thousands of participants.

Protesters were again rallied by using the online platforms. In addition to the already well-known platforms *Corupția ucide* or # *Rezistența*, a number of new Facebook groups and pages have appeared specifically for connecting and rallying the Romanian citizens in the diaspora: # *Rezist Birmingham*, # *Rezist Budapesta*, # *Rezistentă in Valencia*, # *Rezistăm si la Paris*, # *Rezist Diaspora*, # *Rezist Dublin*, # *Rezist Londra*, # *Rezist Olanda*, # *Rezist San Francisco*, # *Rezist Torino*, # *Rezist Bruxelles*, # *Rezist Toronto*, # *Rezist Stockholm*, # *Rezist Stuttgart*, # *Rezist Marsilia*, # *Rezist Liguria*, # *Rezist Madrid*, *Diaspora Europeană* (Răuțu, 2022).

The aim of this paper is to provide a complementary insight to the few studies which analyse the contribution of the online social networks to the dynamics of protests in Romania between 2017 and 2019. For the present research, we used the content analysis and collected data/posts from the *Corupția ucide* community between 15th July 2018 and 15th August 2018. In order to show the constant involvement of the mentioned community in the organisation of anti-corruption protests in Romania in the last years, we have compared the data from 2018 with those from 2015 (from the protest which broke out after the fire at Club Colectiv) and from 2017 (the # *Resist* protest). All the quantitative data on the activity of the *Corupția ucide* community used in the article was generously provided by the

representatives of Facebrands.ro, namely the Facebook page monitoring service in Romania.

Our research questions are as follows:

RQ 1- As in the case of previous protests, was Facebook used as a tool for interactive communication with those interested in the organisation and unfolding of the 10th August 2018 protests?

RQ2- What were the protest frames used by the organisers to get protesters engaged through the events created on Facebook?

Results and discussion

The number of new and/or engaged page fans is a key indicator showing the health or vitality of a Facebook page (Ernault, 2013). Facebook fans are those users who have liked a page and chosen to receive updates from the administrator of the liked page. Engaged users are engaged fans, who are unique individuals having interacted with the page content over a period of time, either by clicking on an individual post or creating stories (Carpenter, 2017). Engaged users generate more exposure among fans for the posts they have interacted with.

The *Corupția ucide* Facebook page was created immediately after the fire at the Colectiv Club in 2015 to provide those interested in the protests with up-to-date information (Adi & Lilleker, 2017) or to rally citizens to volunteer in order to provide assistance to the victims of the fire and their families (Pătruț, 2017).

Figure 1. shows us that the *Corupția ucide* page also had a steady increase in the number of fans during the three protests:

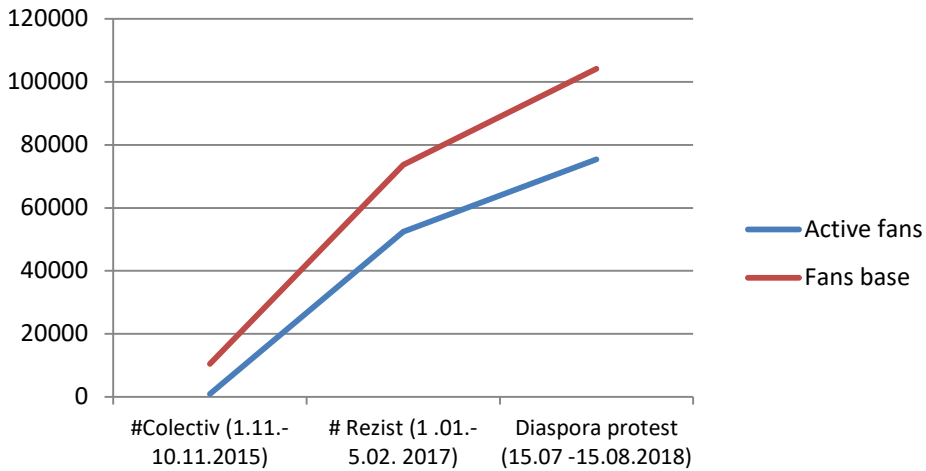


Fig. 1 Corupția ucide - new & engaged fans during the anti-corruption protests (2015, 2017, 2018)

The number of fans ranged from 890 active fans in 2015, to 52,487 in 2017 and 75,406 in 2018 and from 10,421 fan base in 2015, to 73,687 in 2017 and 104,143 during the 2018 protest. These impressive boosts in the number of fans meet the demand for information felt by the protesters. The civic participation in the protests is based on the consumption of information from the internet (Sultănescu, 2021, p.230) and this well-known community has been used as an information hub by its members. Data browsed by Zelist Monitor, an online communication monitoring platform in Romania, shows that half of the mentions of the protests came from Facebook (47.8%), Twitter (14.5%) and Instagram (10.7%) and classic online media sources (7%) (Sultănescu, 2021, p. 236-237).

On Facebook we can measure the interactivity of a page in two ways: user-to-user and user-to-document (Tedesco 2007, p.1187). While the first form of interactivity involves the distribution of different posts from one member of the social network to another, the second involves liking and commenting on posts/documents available from the network. Both types of interactivity succeed in showing the involvement or engagement of virtual friends in the process of communicating with the political or organisational actor. Interactivity or engagement rate gives a more nuanced and realistic picture of the presence of the political actor on Facebook. Engagement is “the number of people who clicked anywhere in your post. This includes liking, commenting and sharing and people who’ve viewed your video or

clicked on your links and photos. And it also includes people who've clicked on a commenter's name, liked a comment, clicked on your page name and even gave negative feedback by reporting your post". (Ernoul, 2013).

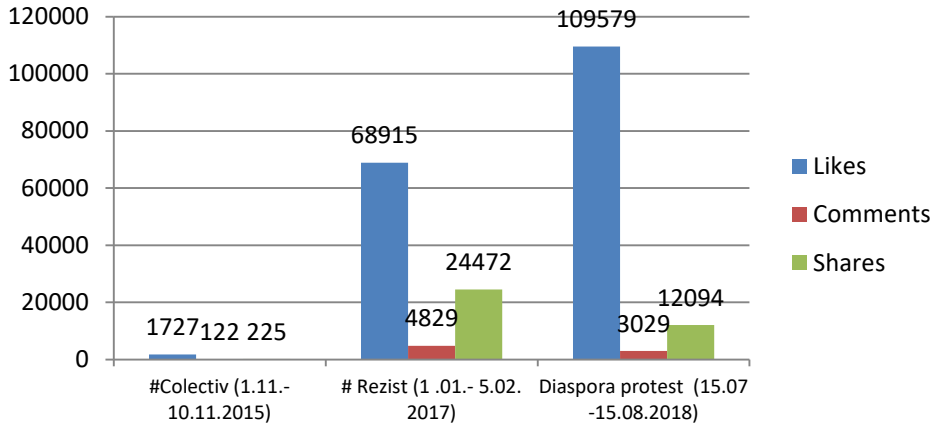


Fig.2 Interactivity of the *Corupția ucide* page (2015, 2017, 2018)

Figure 2 shows the increase in interactivity of the *Corupția ucide* page. Compared to 2015, the year of its creation, we see that in 2017 and 2018 the page has become a national phenomenon, which has succeeded not only in rallying massive numbers of protesters, but also in creating a new form of resistance to the abuses of power. In addition to being consistent in supporting the anti-corruption protests, the community also relied on a very good organisation and professionalisation of communication with virtual members (Pătruț & Stoica, 2019). Florin Bădița, the founder of the community, stated in an interview “Until the EGO 13 in 2017 there were 3-5 of us and we were not very well organised. After the EGO 13 we understood that we had to organise ourselves a little. As page administrators and editors there are 15-20 people in total, of which 10 are more active. We also have different groups of 100-200 people with whom we collaborate on a punctual basis or on different actions. There is no central office, we mostly work online. I’m from Cluj, most of them are in Bucharest, there are also some in other cities or abroad. ... Our work consists of managing the Facebook pages and facilitating the organisation of protests, we consider ourselves facilitators, not organisers. Then we have discussions with the team, we see what has happened, what we can do, we read messages, we reply to messages, we do research, we try to keep up to date, we are in contact with other civic groups (Florescu, 2018). Everybody has a different task, we are also working with slack, a little corporate, but very efficient. You

have different channels there: we have one channel for graphic design, doing a banner, etc. or the channel for creative writers, they are doing stuff with texts, or everything that is related to writing, we have a channel for law, where people take care of juridical stuff. Very decentralized, everybody can contribute to the ensemble of things, without needing all information.” (Gubernat & Rammelt, 2017).

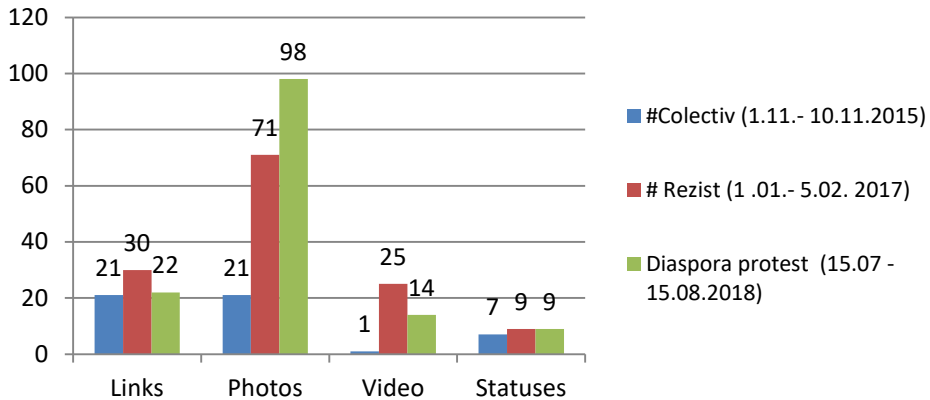


Fig. 3. Types of content distributed on *Corupția ucide* (2015, 2017, 2018)

Following consistency, organisation, professionalisation, the community offered virtual members also diversification of online activities: The Civic Starter educational project, a civic entrepreneurship incubator and the Activist House, a space for knowledge sharing between civic organisations and protest participants. Moreover, the socio-political context has contributed to a tremendous increase in the site’s interactivity: in 2017 a lot of discussion and knowledge exchange about organisational logistics and anti-corruption legislation (under the form of many law texts and many useful links to different resources, as now shown in figure 3), many advocacy campaigns, anti-government campaigns, anti-government petitions; in 2018 many discussions about the abuses of the gendarmerie and the violent suppression of the protest, gathering evidence of abuses committed by the authorities and legal advice given to the victims (many photos during street protests in as many cities of the country, many videos taken and then posted by witnesses of the violence in 2018, see figure 3). Bennett & Segerberg (2012) showed that new protest movements are also driven by self-motivation of participants who distribute their own ideas, plans, images, resources to others. Sharing content supporting civic-political activism thus becomes a form of personal expression and self-validation of one’s beliefs.

In the study of social movements, the frame theory was used in order to explain the way in which ideas and meanings contribute to the development, the diffusion and the functioning of the (counter)mobilisation in the collective actions. These collective frames are negotiated expressions of the meaning, they are social schemes which guide the action and support the discursive process which accompanies the action. The most important functions of framing are diagnosis, prognosis and motivation (Benford& Snow, 2000). In order to provide an answer to the second research question in our study, we have summarised the events organised by the *Corupția ucide* community in Table 1.

Table 1. Events created by *Corupția ucide* during and after the August 2018 protest

No. crt	Name of the event	Date of the event	Place of the event	No. of people who announced their intention to participate	No. of people who announced their interest in the event/protest
1.	Support the Diaspora in the PiataVictoriei/Victory Square! (Corupția ucide, n.d.f)	10.08.2018	Bucharest	7.2 k	15.9 k
2.	On 10th August the people of Fagaras go to Bucharest! #diasporaacasa (Iesiti In Strada Daca Va Pasa, n.d.)	10.08.2018	Făgăraș.Brașov	74	222
3.	Peasants and farmers are coming on 10th August to Bucharest (Corupția ucide, n.d.a)	10.08.2018	Bucharest	96	684
4.	Cluj: From PiataUnirii/Union Square, with the Diaspora on 10th August (Umbrela Anticorupție Cluj, n.d.a)	10.08.2018	Cluj-Napoca	2.9 k	5.9 k
5.	10th August: Romanian citizens go to protest #together (Ștafeta	10.08.2018	Bucharest	1.4 k	3.7 k

	Steagului Uniunii Europene, n.d.)				
6.	Simple: we demand the resignation of the entire government! (Rezist Zürich, n.d.)	11.08.2018	Bucharest	3.4 k	11.7 k
7.	We won't leave until you do! (Coruptia ucide, n.d.b)	11.08.2018	Bucharest	11.1 k	23.6 k
8.	Bucharest, don't forget, Cluj is always on your side! (Umbrela Anticorupție Cluj, n.d.b)	11.08.2018	Cluj-Napoca	1.5 k	3 k
9.	We won't give in! (Coruptia ucide, n.d.c)	12.08.2018	Bucharest	3.8 k	10.9 k
10.	We won't give in! (Reset, n.d.)	12.08.2018	Iași	426	1.1 k
11.	Cluj: #We won't leave until you do!	12.08.2018	Cluj-Napoca	683	1.6 k
12.	Let's file Criminal Complaint For Brutal Intervention (Coruptia ucide, n.d.d)	13.08.2018	Bucharest, Military Prosecutor's Office	37	265
13.	30 minutes #ForRomania (Coruptia ucide, n.d.e)	13.08.2018	Bucharest, Piața Victoriei	1.6 k	6.5 k
14.	Democracy dies in gas and truncheons! (Rezistentă, n.d.)	17.08.2018	Bucharest	438	1.7 k
15.	ClujFlashmob WHY ME? 10th August-Let's not forget! (Umbrela Anticorupție Cluj, n.d.d)	19.08.2018	Cluj-Napoca	89	458
16.	ClujFlashmob: Keep an eye on 10th August! (Umbrela Anticorupție Cluj, n.d.e)	26.08.2018	Cluj-Napoca	26	76

The first five events, all scheduled to take place on 10th August 2018, show members of the community the injustice caused by the social-

democratic government, an injustice to which the Romanian people fell victim (diagnosis framing). In the presentation of the events, the organisers state that “We say a firm NO to the laws aimed at undermining the independence of justice, to the proposed and voted amendments to the Penal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure, and we demand a review of the positions adopted, in order to bring these provisions in line with the opinions expressed by professionals, with the EU recommendations and with common sense. Romania is not a country of corruption, incompetence or criminals, but it is our country, the country of those of us who want a better future, transparency, dignity, fairness and uprightness. Let’s meet in the streets!”. After the violent clash between the police and the protesters, the community quickly gets organised and announces that, in addition to the problem initially reported, another problem/unjust situation has now arisen - abuse by the police. These injustices need immediate action: call for the resignation of the government, the sanctioning of those responsible, the filing of criminal complaints by those who have suffered physically and the continuation of the protests (prognosis framing) – “452 people required medical attention after the intervention of the gendarmeries. We need to be at least 452 people in the Victory Square wearing masks (surgical or for painting) and remind the world that democracy dies in Romania in gas and truncheons. We are staying in the streets until the fall of the Dăncilă Government! Leave before someone dies!”. The last four events want to underline that the brave protesters who remained on the barricades continued to show their indignation towards this government: “We’ll keep our eyes on them, on the “authorities” until all the representatives of the gendarmerie who attacked the protesters are held accountable before the law and until the moral authors of this communist action of repression of people’s voices do not disappear from all public functions” (motivational framing).

Conclusions

Since 2012, we can speak of a (re)discovery of civic spirit and digital activism, a rediscovery that has led to an impressive number of people getting involved in supporting social, political, civic or cultural causes, leaving their computers to vote or protest (Stoiciu, 2019). On Facebook, event pages have been created where the Romanians in the country and in the diaspora are invited to take to the streets to support the constitutional right to vote, campaigns are run to mobilise people to vote or to challenge the actions of political authorities (Pătruț, 2017; Pătruț et al., 2011; Pătruț & Stoica 2019).

Even if before 2012, the Romanians did not have a “protest culture” or a mature spirit of civic participation, since 2015 the *Corupția ucide* online community has managed to connect compatible citizens, to rally large groups of people to join protests, advocacy campaigns, petitions and anti-government actions. Together with other influential civic networks (*Rezistența*, *Inițiativa Romania*, *Declic*, *Vă vedem din Sibiu*, *#Rezist*), they have made available to internet users information about protests, legislation and issues that have divided the Romanian public opinion, have shown that civic rallying can be a formative action, have paved the way for the institutionalisation of the digital civic activism in Romania and have demonstrated that some concrete (albeit short-term) results can be achieved.

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