

Moldova's Twitter Revolution

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Cellphones and text messaging are widely believed to have played a crucial role in fostering the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (or at least, making the protests as widespread and successful as they were); the Berkman Center at Harvard published probably the most comprehensive study of the role that social media played in the Orange Revolution (even though I criticized some of its cyber-utopian assumptions in a recent essay for *Boston Review*).

Could it be that five years after the famous protests in Kiev's Maidan Square another technology - Twitter - will usher in another revolution in neighbouring Moldova? Will we remember the events that are now unfolding in Chisinau not by the color of the flags but by the social-networking technology used?

If you asked me about the prospects of a Twitter-driven revolution in a low-tech country like Moldova a week ago, my answer would probably be a qualified "no". Today, however, I am no longer as certain. If you bothered to check the most popular discussions on Twitter in the last 48 hours, you may have stumbled upon a weird threat of posts marked with a tag "#pman" (it's currently listed in Twitter's "Trending Topics" along with "Apple Store", Eminem, and Easter).

No, "pman" is not short for "pacman"; it stands for "Piata Marii Adunari Nationale", which is Romanian name for the biggest square in Chisinau, Moldova's capital. This is not the first time that a Twitter "tag" has been used to mobilize young people around a particular event; the most famous previous case has been that of "griots" - the tag used to report on the youth riots in Greece, which later spread to Europe, arguably also with the help of Twitter (check these two pieces I wrote on the subject of "networked protest" - one for *The Economist* and one for *openDemocracy*).

Ever since yesterday's announcement that Moldova's communists have won enough votes to form a government in Sunday's elections, Moldova's progressive youth took to the streets in angry protests. As behooves any political protest by young people today, they also turned to Facebook and Twitter to raise awareness about the planned protests and flashmobs. Led by youth NGOs like HydePark and ThinkMoldova, the protests began very peacefully - as a flashmob, where young people were simply supposed to hold lit candles in the vicinity of the square.

However, this morning things got out of hand - and, with or without Twitter's help, the crowd got much larger, reaching as many as 10,000 people, who first picketed Election Commission headquarters, the president's residence (windows are reported to be broken - and there are also reports that this building has been stormed), and other government buildings

before storming the building of the Moldovan Parliament, which happens to be just across the road.

Technology is playing an important role in facilitating these protests. In addition to huge mobilization efforts both on Twitter and Facebook, Moldova's angry youth - especially those who are currently abroad (roughly a quarter of Moldova's population are working abroad due to dire economic conditions back at home) - could follow the events on this livestream provided by a Romanian TV station - directly from the square.

I've just spoken to a Moldovan friend who is himself a big technology fan; according to him, there is little to none cellphone coverage in the square itself (turning off cellphone coverage in protest areas is a trick that was also used by the Belarusian authorities to diffuse 2006 protests in Minsk's central square), so protesters have to leave it to post updates to Twitter via GPRS technology on their mobiles.

The related posts on Twitter are being posted at a record-breaking rate - I've been watching the Twitter stream for the last 20 minutes - and I see almost 200 new Twitter messages marked with "pman" (virtually all of them in Romanian, with only one or two in English). In the last few hours there have also emerged several "smart" aggregators of posts on the subject, like this one - they have to contextualize what exactly is happening -- and this one for YouTube videos. Many blog posts are also being updated in real-time - minute by minute - check this one. There are also a plenty of videos on YouTube and photos, including those uploaded to Facebook.

There are also a few moving English-language Twitter posts like this - "in #pman a grenade thrown by the police has torn apart one of the protester's leg"- that would surely be perused by foreign journalists. It's hard to predict for how long this cornucopia of user-generated media would continue; my Moldovan contacts report that the authorities may have required some Moldovan ISPs to restrict Internet connection with the outside world, so the protesters might soon face difficulties in getting their reports out.

All in all, while it's probably too early to tell whether Moldova's Twitter revolution will be successful, it would certainly be wrong to disregard the role that Twitter and other social media have played in mobilizing (and, even more so, reporting on) the protests. Of course, it helps that young Moldovans are sick and tired of the communist government (for a long time the only one in Europe) and there may be a few reasons to be concerned about voting irregularities but, overall, the Chisinau protests undoubtedly present an interesting case-study that I hope academic institutions like Harvard's Berkman Center and others would take on and examine in detail.

VADIM DENISOV/AFP/Getty Images

UPDATE: please also check these two posts (#1, #2) on the topic that I have written since

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More analysis of Twitter's role in Moldova

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Now that I have had more time to reflect on what actually happened in Moldova and chat to a few more people, here are some temporary conclusions on the role that Twitter played and didn't play.

- 1. One paradox is that there are relatively few Twitter users in Moldova to start with.** Google search shows only around 70 who list their location as Moldova. This could mean several things: a) they didn't choose Moldova when they registered for Twitter - for various reasons (some may have chosen Romania for political reasons, some may have decided not to choose anything at all, which is also an option) b) the number of users IN Moldova is really small but Moldovans elsewhere managed to keep the meme among Twitter's most popular ones c) Twitter played a much smaller role than we think.
- 2. Moldovans abroad played an important role by participating in the protests remotely by helping to keep the story alive via Twitter.** Watching the reaction of the Twittosphere to my own previous post, I saw that a large proportion of users with Romanian-sounding names actually seem to be based elsewhere in Europe. It's interesting how Twitter has given them an option to participate in the protests remotely by simply "buzzing" about the story.
- 3. It really helped that even non-technology people in the U.S. and much of Western Europe are currently head over heels in love with Twitter.** It's really good that the Moldovan students didn't organize this revolution via Friendster or LiveJournal (which is still a platform for choice for many users in Eastern Europe). If they did, they would never have gotten as much attention from the rest of the world.
- 4. The use of Twitter has been limited to mobilization of some local supporters and raising international awareness.** It didn't really help much in coordinating actions of people who ARE already on the square, in part because they are offline. My Moldovan friends are telling me that a technology that would really help in that public square would not be Twitter, but a good and loud megaphone. When you have angry and disorganized crowds, you don't need decentralized platforms - you want to centralize instead. This shows a potential limitation of Twitter, especially given the speculation that the government may have cracked down both on the Internet and mobile communications. Another related lesson - as evidenced in Burma's protests in 2007 - the more satellite phones there are in the country, the better.
- 5. There were some major differences with the Orange Revolution events in Ukraine.** Here are just a few innovations that we have observed in Moldova that we didn't see five years ago: a) the ability to keep the story in the international news by "hijacking" the Twitter conversations b) the ability for Moldovans abroad to join in c) the availability of much more user-generated content directly from the field.

That said, I should point out that the civil society sector in Moldova are not exactly a bunch of new media novices. I remember going to Chisinau myself in the summer of 2007 to deliver a couple of new media workshops which were targeting the NGO community (that was back when I was still working for Transitions Online). Well, at least it looks that some of my workshops weren't in vain :-)

Also, last year I had a chance to meet Oleg Brega, one of the most active Moldovan activists (he also runs a popular Moldovan blog Curaj and keeps posting updates from the square). I was very impressed by his almost uncanny ability to rely on the Internet (as well as mobile and video technologies) to bring public attention to his causes (a typical Brega stunt: provoking the Moldovan police to arrest him and have someone capture this on video and then republish to YouTube). You can check a full list of his (and his brother's) great video provocations [here](#).

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Moldova's Twitter revolution is NOT a myth

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As someone who started the "Moldova's Twitter revolution" meme, I think I owe the world another essay. No, no, I am not going to renounce the meme -- quite the opposite, I'd like to step up the debate.

Let me say this upfront: I don't think that Moldova's Twitter revolution failed because of Twitter. No, it failed because of politics -- and Moldovan politics are not the easiest kind of politics to make sense of. I firmly believe that social media did a great job; political leadership from Moldova's opposition simply wasn't there to exploit it in meaningful and smart ways.

Now that we've dealt with politics, let's dig into gray areas on the role of Twitter. First of all, I still stay behind all of the points I made in my previous post on the subject, especially the one about the world's current obsession with Twitter playing an important role in making these protests visible.

Beyond that, I think we won't get far in our analysis of Twitter's role in this week's events without making a distinction between "planning" and "executing" a revolution. I have never argued or believed that social media -- and Twitter in particular -- is good for planning revolutions; if you plan to overthrow the Castro regime and are discussing those plans on Twitter, well, perhaps, you shouldn't bother.

The open nature of such platforms makes revolutions planned on Twitter or Wikipedia very unlikely to succeed, for authoritarian governments are likely to monitor such conversations and eliminate most emerging threats almost in real time. This is also why I spoke against the use of LiveJournal for planning flash-mobs in Belarus in 2006 -- this just seemed silly to me, as the KGB was essentially reading the same blogs as activists. Too bad it happens to be among Clay Shirky's favorite examples -- also mentioned in his book -- of new and smart online organizing.

However, this doesn't mean that social media tools like Twitter shouldn't be used to raise awareness of the unfolding events once the tactics have been planned with the help of more secure platforms. Quite the opposite: I think that raising awareness of existing protests -- both nationally and internationally -- is where social media adds most value. What protesting movements decide to do with the political capital accumulated through the Internet is for them to decide; in the Moldovan case, I think the the political parties leading the protests simply squandered it.

Perhaps, the biggest fallacy committed by the critics of my "Twitter revolution" thesis has been to assume that Twitter exists in some sort of isolated environment that is easily quantifiable and shut off from other media platforms. It's this kind of assumption that leads them to conclude that "few Twitter accounts=few reasons for the Twitter revolution to happen."

Well, I am sorry to break the news, but Twitter doesn't exist in isolation; and we would not learn much only if we watch discussions started on Twitter *only within* Twitter -- most interesting stuff is likely to happen outside of it (even though slicing these discussions through Twitter alone might be useful for other meme-tracking purposes). Twitter is part of a much richer social media landscape, with many other important services and networks (Facebook, LiveJournal, WordPress, and many others come to mind) that are usually connected in ways that are not always visible to English-language audiences -- and sometimes, not even to bots that do data-mining for these audiences (do you know how "memes" and ideas spread between Twitter and, say, the Russian-language portion of LiveJournal -- especially its sections that are password-protected? I certainly don't.)

When a new posts appears on Twitter, it usually has a life cycle that is invisible to most of us: somebody posts it to a

Romanian-language blog, somebody posts it to a Russian blog on LiveJournal, etc -- and suddenly, these re-posts allow for initial updates to be discovered by local media -- who may not know about Twitter at all -- who then pass on the news to even greater and more diverse audiences.

In the case of Moldova, it's possible that Twitter has made much bigger impact on the new media environment outside of (rather than inside) the Twittersphere by simply feeding a stream of blogs, social networks, and text messages with content. In my view, people who point to the low number of Twitter users in Moldova as proof of the mythical nature of the subject have conceptual difficulties understanding how networks work; on a good network, you don't need to have the maximum number of connections to be powerful -- you just need to be connected to enough nodes with connections of their own.

As such, the number of Twitter users in Moldova is important, but not particularly relevant -- or even very illustrative of anything. The fact that so few of them actually managed to keep the entire global Twittersphere discussing an obscure country for almost a week only proves that Twitter has more power than we think. That only 80 users have blown this story out of any proportion to me looks like the clearest indication that our public sphere is getting democratized; I think it would be an even more powerful example if there were only 8 users.

Think of it this way: I have quite a few Moldovan friends, several of them on Twitter. Because of this blog, I also have the capacity to beam their narrative to a much wider global audience. In this environment, fixating on the actual user numbers is meaningless; it's like taking the "social" out of the "social media." We didn't build all those networks in vain -- this is how information is supposed to flow.

Another crucial innovation missed by most analysts of social media's role in the protests seems pretty straight-forward to me: the Twitter revolution proved that the public square -- the usual place where riots and rallies take place -- may no longer be the focal point of organizational efforts. It's still important but the balance of power has shifted away from it by giving the audience of the protests a virtual role to play as well. Yes, as Daniel Bennet points out in his critique, Twitter may not have played a role in coordinating events in the square. But there was NO coordination in that square - all reports look like it was total chaos and anarchy. With or without Twitter, there was nothing to organize as the genuine political agenda seemed to be amiss.

But to prioritize the internal organizational elements of this story is to entirely miss out on the crucial role that Twitter played in mobilizing the masses outside of and far away from the square (and, in part, getting some of them TO the square in the first place). I can think of many situations, in which what is happening outside -- and especially what is being discussed outside -- is far more important than what is happening inside the rioting crowds.

For example -- and I am just thinking aloud here -- suppose that Twitter's non-Moldova-based masses were not as fond of Moldova's protesters as they turned out to be. Suppose that, in fact, they were supportive of the communists. Could Twitter help to channel their energy somewhere?

Something similar happened in the war between Georgia and Russia last summer, when we saw Russian Internet users bond together and start organize their own cyberattacks on Georgian targets. Now, just imagine if someone has leveraged all the buzz about events in Moldova by asking those people to lend their idle computer power for a DDOS attack on the entire cyberinfrastructure of Romania, which the Moldovan government thinks played a role in the riots. In this scenario, the protests themselves are just a prelude to a much bigger distributed global protest that may be exponentially bigger than events taking place in the square; those only serve as a prelude (mind you that the overthrow of the government is not really always the point of a protest; there could be many other objectives).

Finally, my original reasoning for dubbing this a "Twitter revolution" rather than a "Grape revolution" was to signify that it's qualitatively different -- mostly because of the role that technology played -- from the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine. I still think that this is the case -- and it's very hard for me to accept the opposite when I see Twitter still full of buzz around what happened.

The naysayers here remind of people who insist on claiming that reality doesn't exist even after knocking their head on the wall -- I simply don't buy into the thesis that it was a CIA-inspired Twitter campaign... It's kind of surprising to see so many people misunderstand the power of networks in such profound ways.

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