

**To Bridge or to Bond?**  
**Exploring the Impact of Facebook Use on Protest**  
**Participation in Moldova**

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the  
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## **CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP**

I, Oxana Onilov declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the School of Communication, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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## ABSTRACT

Although there has been a considerable amount of literature exploring the potential of social media for protest participation, only a few studies have explored this in less-established democracies such as the post-Soviet space. This study addresses this gap by examining the impact of Facebook use and online social capital on offline protest participation through the case of the post-Soviet Moldova: a hybrid state with a politically monopolised media, but a relatively uncensored internet. Specifically, it analyses the Moldovan protests against the governing political elites of 2015. The thesis aims to explore how the media and political contexts affect the relationship between social media, social capital and protest participation.

In order to achieve this, a mixed methods research design was adopted in this thesis. This design combines both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The first quantitative phase consisted of a web survey that was administered through Facebook messenger and completed by protesters. The data were used to examine statistically the relationship between social media, online social capital and protest participation. The second qualitative phase consisted of semi-structured interviews with protesters and activists. Thematic analysis of data allowed to explain quantitative results in more depth.

The findings of the two phases demonstrated that Facebook use had an impact on protesters' participation; however, the contribution was small, and its significance lay in the dialogic relationship with other factors, such as television and offline social ties. First, the impact of Facebook on participation was mediated by online bridging social capital, the type of social capital that is missing or considered low in many post-Soviet countries. In a politically monopolised media context, the development of online bridging social capital allowed people to connect with a large and diverse network of actors; access novel and alternative information; find mobilising and political knowledge; form an opinion; and construct a collective identity, all significant antecedents of protest participation. However, the impact was small because it mainly described the post-Soviet young generation, the cohort that less engaged in the protests. The study also showed that the relationship between social media and protest resulted to be complex and its mobilising potential mainly rested on integrating and bridging online and offline, as well as other media channels. These elements were mutually constitutive and together emphasised the

ways in which Facebook could support protest engagement. These results can inform broader theories about protest participation and digital activism in the post-Soviet space, which is vital when understanding non-Western contexts.