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

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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.

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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.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research background and rationale

From Tahir Square in Cairo to the streets of Madrid, New York, Kiev, Santiago, Moscow, and Athens (among others), activists and protesters have used social media platforms to sustain their political movements (Bennett & Segerberg 2013; Castells 2015; Della Porta & Mosca 2005; Langman 2005). This growing political use of new media fuelled interest in the issue and has led researchers to explore whether social media can facilitate protest participation and thus, enhance democratic development. However, scholars have not yet been able to reach a clear consensus on the democratising potential of social media.

Castells (2015) for example, argues that the communicative autonomy afforded by the internet is the new form of power, and that social movements born, conveyed and based on the internet allow citizens to "watch the powerful" (Castells 2009, p. 413) and create, distribute and receive content beyond the accredited knowledge. Some scholars go further and emphasise "media frenzy movements" (Sorkin 2012) such as Twitter revolutions that can be synonymised with quests for more democracy and freedom (Shirky 2011) that can even "result in regime change" (Breuer & Groshek 2014, p. 32). Others avoid talking about social media-fuelled revolutions but stress the fact that social media has changed the way people interact not only with each other but also with authorities (Oates 2013). The dystopian side of social media is also described as a tool of control and repression (Christensen 2011a; Howard et al. 2011; Morozov 2012). The focus here is on the authorities who can use social media to block, distort and control the online flow of information (Christensen 2011a; Gainous, Wagner & Ziegler 2018) in an attempt to consolidate their power.

An alternative critique against utopianism includes claims that technology in itself cannot bring changes and stating otherwise means to adopt a technological deterministic position (Fuchs 2012a, 2017). Collectively, these critics argue that the only way to grasp the impact of social media on social movements is to recognise the amalgam of different social, political and economic factors that might influence participation and avoid the adoption of for-or-against positions (Fuchs 2012a; Morozov 2012). To better understand how or whether social media can impact participation, scholars encourage researchers to

accumulate more evidence on the real outcomes of social media on social movements (Kidd & McIntosh 2016). And this is the central aim of this research study: to contribute to the scholarship on the emerging relationship between social media and protest participation through a target study of the Moldovan anti-government protests of 2015. This includes exploring where its findings might stand in regard to this debate and whether they will challenge or support existing narratives on the roles of social media for participation.

The growing use of social media has impacted the ways people engage in protest activities. Nevertheless, the literature disagrees about which types of online social activities are more likely to promote and sustain protest participation (Boulianne 2015, 2017; Skoric et al. 2016). First, not all types of social media use encourage participation, and second, different patterns of use produce different effects. Studies have highlighted the use of social media for information and news (Boulianne 2016; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung & Valenzuela 2012), online opinion expression (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux & Zheng 2014; Valenzuela 2013), relationship building (Gibson & McAllister 2013; Skoric, Ying & Ng 2009), and collective identity construction (Bennett & Segerberg 2013; Gerbaudo 2015), all of which are demonstrated to be antecedents of participation. However, some studies, for instance emphasise that the informational use of social media (Skoric et al. 2016) is more critical for protest participation than the relational use, while others assert the opposite (Boulianne 2015). The explanation for these inconclusive findings can be attributed to the different contexts where social movements take place and the various ways social media are used in them. Thus, due to the heterogeneity of contexts, it is difficult to establish a definite explanation of the potential of social media for protest participation. The fact that protests are usually more national than global indicates that these are analysed within the specificity of their context (Gerbaudo 2012). Hence, this study offers input into the social media patterns that are more conducive to participation and examines how the political and media contexts affect the relationship between social media and protest engagement. The context here is the post-Soviet Moldova, a hybrid state with a partially free, politically monopolised media but with an unregulated and uncensored internet.

Some researchers have suggested that the online environment may generate social capital, that is, the compound of interpersonal relationships and the resources acquired from them that scholars (Coleman 1988; Putnam 2000) identified as central to cooperation. The inherent social structure of social media allows the construction and maintenance of online weak and strong social ties that consequently lead to the creation of online bridging and bonding social capital (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2007, 2011; Williams 2006). The strength of the first lies in the increased ability to get access to innovative information and knowledge and to build consensus among different groups of people. The strength of the second is the social and emotional support and trust that exist among tightly knit relationships. The resources acquired from the two types of relationships have different potentials to promote cooperation. Of interest to this study is an examination of which type of online social capital can act as a mediating mechanism between social media use and offline protest participation, and whether the protest-related affordances offered by social media are facilitated through online bridging or bonding social ties. Although a large number of studies have focused on the relationship between social capital and participation in general, only a few have looked at the types of social capital developed online (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2007, 2011; Ellison et al. 2014; Vitak, Ellison & Steinfield 2011; Wellman et al. 2001; Williams 2006) and even fewer at the types of online social capital that can impact offline protest participation (Gibson & McAllister 2013; Hwang & Kim 2015; Skoric, Ying & Ng 2009).

Adopting the concept of social capital in this study means to consider the circumstances under which this was developed, specifically in the post-Soviet space. Though the Soviet system collapsed and institutional changes took place, "patterns internalized through communist socialization are difficult to eradicate" (Lasinska 2013, p. 25). Because of the omnipresent Soviet rule, the public life of the Soviet citizens was politicised, monitored and controlled through different trade unions, mass membership organisations and the secret police (Howard 2003). The formality and obligation towards the public sphere resulted in apathy and withdrawal from civic and political life and low bridging social capital. However, the control under which the Soviet citizens lived produced in return genuine and meaningful relationships among small tightly-knit family and friend groups (bonding social capital). Therefore, many post-Soviet countries are still characterised by high levels of bonding and low levels of bridging social capital (Howard 2003; Lasinska

2013). This context makes the study of social capital and its development in the online post-Soviet environment even more interesting. It leads us to examine whether social media can reproduce, supplement or compensate the social capital existent offline and which type of online social capital is more likely to promote offline protest participation in the post-Soviet online space.

Regardless of the findings related to the impact of social media on protest, it is important to note that the bulk of studies have been conducted in the context of consolidated Western democracies (Boulianne 2017), with another large number concerned with recent uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa region. Valenzuela (2013) claims that "most data on social media and protest behaviour have been collected in either mature democracies or authoritarian regimes, leaving aside the special case of third wave democracies" (p. 921). The post-Soviet space, which is the focus of this research, is a representative of the third-wave democracies and remains one of the least-researched regions. This scarcity is one of the reasons for conducting this study and examining the peculiarity of social media impact on protest participation in the post-Soviet context through the example of Moldova. Besides, Boulianne (2018) has called for more research into transitioning systems as well as cases when the "free press scores and the Internet restriction do not align" (p. 17), and Moldova represents such a case.

1.2 Significance of the study

In line with the above research background, this study stemmed from a growing interest in the potential of social media to effectively enable democratic changes in contemporary societies, with a particular focus on the post-Soviet space. Unlike studies on Western countries and the Middle East and North Africa region, there have been significantly fewer studies on the role of social media in social movements in the post-Soviet context and Eastern Europe (Lokot 2013, 2014; Oates 2013; Oates & Lokot 2013; Onuch 2015), with little to none on Moldova (Lysenko & Desouza 2012). The relatively under-researched post-Soviet context is another reason to focus on Moldova as a representative of the post-Soviet space in general, but also as a singular case study with defining social, political and economic attributes.

This study also contributes to the existing literature and the debate on the relationship between new media and protest engagement. The focus is on particular social media uses that are more conducive to promote protest participation and how these impact on, and are impacted by, the larger media and political contexts. In terms of concepts applied, this study represents the first academic research focused on online bridging and bonding social capital as a precondition to protests in Moldova and the post-Soviet contexts. Although there is a large number of studies on the concept of social capital in the post-Soviet region in general (Dowley & Silver 2002; Lasinska 2013; Letki & Evans 2005; Marsh 2000; Nichols 1996; Paldam & Svendsen 2001; Rose 2000a, 2000b; Rossteutscher 2008; Uslaner 2003), no studies have touched upon the types of social capital developed in the post-Soviet online environment and whether online social capital would be a reproduction of or a contrast to offline social capital.

This study attempts to lay a foundation for media and communication scholars to further investigate the role of social media in the post-Soviet or other similar contexts.

1.3 Definition of terms

This research is based on concepts that are borrowed from various academic disciplines. In an effort to facilitate its interpretation and integration within this study, the following terms used throughout this thesis are defined here in alphabetical order:

Bonding social capital is created among tightly knit networks that are characterised by multiple interactions, high level of trust, reciprocity and solidarity. These are inward-looking networks used to "getting by" (Putnam 2000, p. 23).

Bridging social capital is created among weak ties, people who come from a variety of backgrounds. It allows two or more unconnected groups to share and exchange novel and alternative information, broaden and innovate knowledge, find new opportunities and build consensus. These are outward-oriented and are used to "getting ahead" (Putnam 2000, p. 23).

Dignity and Truth Platform (Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr) – the Moldovan nonpartisan initiative group set in February 2015 that organised the majority of the anti-government protesting events of 2015 (Platforma Civică Demnitate și Adevăr 2015).

Explanatory sequential mixed methods research (Creswell & Plano Clark 2018) is a type of research where the researcher collects and analyses both quantitative and qualitative data in sequence, the quantitative data come first and the qualitative second. The findings of the two phases are then integrated into final analysis.

Facebook is a social media platform that consists of three main parts: "(1) the information infrastructure and tools used to produce and distribute content; (2) the content that takes the digital form of personal messages, news, ideas, and cultural products; and (3) the people, organizations, and industries that produce and consume digital content" (Howard & Parks 2012, p. 362).

Online social capital is the compound of online social connections and the resources that arise from these interactions and which have the potential to facilitate cooperation and engagement (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2007; Gil de Zúñiga, Barnidge & Scherman 2017; Skoric, Ying & Ng 2009; Wellman et al. 2001).

Protest participation refers to "networks of informal relationships between a multiplicity of individuals and organizations, who share a distinctive collective identity, and mobilize resources on conflictual issues" (Diani 1992, p. 6; Diani 2000, p. 387; Diani & Bison 2004, pp. 282-3) to engage in activities that oppose political, societal, media or economic actors (Norris 2002a; Teorell, Torcal & Montero 2007).

Political engagement involves participatory (voting, protesting), affective (interest in politics, ideological orientation) or cognitive (exposure to political news) behaviours (Anduiza, Jensen & Jorba 2012, p. 3) that are "directed towards political institutions, political processes and public authorities […] or towards the fellow members of a community […] (Barrett & Pachi 2019, p. 3).

1.4 Research questions and methodology

Given the preceding background, the main research question that stands at the centre of this study is:

What is the impact of social media usage on offline protest participation?

To answer this research question, the following two sub-questions are put forward:

1. *What is the role of Facebook in engaging people in offline protest participation?*
2. *Is the role of Facebook for participation mediated by online bridging or bonding social capital?*

Roles are treated in this thesis as uses/functions of social media that might be conducive to political participation. Hence, the first sub-question considers the ways and rationales behind activists and protesters' use of Facebook for protest-related activities. It examines different patterns of social media usage and which online activities are more likely to lead to offline protest involvement. The second sub-question examines first the Moldovan Facebook community and whether this may sustain the development of online bridging and bonding social capital. It then analyses whether the protest-related functions of Facebook and considered in the first research sub-question are performed, transmitted through, or mediated by online bridging or bonding social capital.

The two research sub-questions are addressed both quantitatively and qualitatively using a mixed methods research design. Mixed methods research is defined as a type of research where quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis are combined in the same study and the results of the two approaches are integrated (Creswell & Plano Clark 2018, p. 5). The design applied in this study is explanatory sequential (Creswell & Plano Clark 2018), meaning that quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis come in sequence, starting with the quantitative data and following with the qualitative one. The first quantitative phase consisted of a web survey that was administered through Facebook messenger and completed by people who participated at least once at the protests of 2015. The purpose of this phase was to get portraits of the protesters in terms of socio-demographics, use of media, and protest participation. Besides, the quantitative data were

used to examine statistically the relationship between social media, online social capital and offline protest participation, amongst other things.

These quantitative survey results were also used to guide purposeful sampling and identify participants for the follow-up qualitative phase, which consisted of semi-structured interviews with activists and protesters. The data were analysed thematically and used to elaborate and explain initial quantitative results in more depth. The findings of the two phases were integrated and discussed together. The purposes for applying a mixed methods research were complementarity and triangulation (Bryman 2006; Greene, Caracelli & Graham 1989). This means that the results of one phase were used to elaborate on and enhance the results of the other and to triangulate the findings for mutual corroboration.

1.5 Case study background

The analysis of social media potential for protest participation was based on the case of the Moldovan anti-government protests of 2015. Moldova is a post-Soviet Eastern European country sandwiched between Ukraine and Romania. It has a population of 3.5 million people (National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova 2018) and a GDP per capita of 3.227 U.S. dollars (International Monetary Fund 2019). It is considered Europe's poorest country and characterised by endemic corruption, ranking the 117 least corrupt nation out of 170 (Transparency International 2018). The country is facing a rapid monopolisation of power in the hands of a few wealthy businessmen and politicians (Całus 2015a, 2016; Cenuşă 2016; Konończuk, Cenușa & Kakachia 2017; Popșoi 2016b). These same people were associated with the orchestration of the bank fraud (Anticoruptie.md 2016; Barbăroșie 2015), the main event that triggered the protests in the country. During 2012–2014, three Moldovan banks gave loans to a number of companies and individuals connected to different politicians and businessmen (Kroll 2015). The money was subsequently transferred out of Moldova into offshore bank accounts (Bird & Cotrut 2016; Radu, Munteanu & Ostan 2015).

The state urgently bailed out the looted banks and created an impressive one billion US-dollar hole in the public finances, the equivalent of an eighth of the country's GDP

(Sanduța 2017; Sanduța & Preașca 2016). The bank embezzlement scandal coincided with the worsening economic situation and the period of the corrupt ruling government, and led to the largest protests since Moldova's independence. A group of lawyers, journalists, analysts and public figures created a grass-roots campaign and organised protests amid the corruption scandal. Various protests, flash mobs and sit-ins were organised during the year, attracting protesters of all ages, occupations and political orientations from all over the country. After the protests, the country witnessed significant changes that brought the organisers and activists of the protests into politics and the parliament. However, even though many high-ranking officials were dismissed by the newly formed government or resigned themselves (Barbărosie 2019; Călugăreanu 2019) and the central bank started to prepare legal actions to recover the stolen one billion dollars, the money hasn't been recuperated yet and no politicians have been punished.

Essential to the context of this case study is the media landscape in the country during the protests. For the previous eight years, the Moldovan press, which had been described as being "partially free," had succumbed to a "strident oligarchization and politicization" (Litra 2016, p. 7). The law on media ownership transparency voted by the parliament in 2015 revealed that the media was heavily concentrated in the hands of politicians and oligarchs with political connections (Cebotari 2015). When the protests started, 70% of Moldova's TV market was owned by just one politician, Vlad Plahotniuc, the oligarchic chairman of the Party of Democrats, and the remaining 30% was spread among other politicians (Gogu 2016; Nani 2015). Vlad Plahotniuc was considered the real decision-maker of the Moldovan political scene. Besides, he and the people from his entourage had been associated with the orchestration of the bank fraud (Anticoruptie.md 2016; Całus 2015b; Sanduța 2017; Sanduța & Preașca 2016). Therefore, the press became a strong political instrument that carried stories based on the orders of the political parties and oligarchs that funded it (Cozonac as cited in Necsutu 2018). It also prepared public opinion for disputable government actions; legitimised or distracted the public's attention with irrelevant content; denigrated the opposition; and propagated the image of a prosperous Moldova with an efficient government that would fight corruption (Macovei et al. 2017). This ownership structure affected the pluralism of opinions in Moldova and led to "a near-monopoly on public opinion" (Vitalie Călugăreanu as cited in Gogu 2016), especially when television was the most popular medium in the country.

According to Cărăuş and Godarsky (2015), in 2015, when the protests started, almost 70% of the Moldovan population were using television daily as their primary source of socio-political news. Among the four most-watched TV channels, the state-owned public television channel Moldova 1 had 53% of the total viewership. The next two – Prime TV and Publika TV, with 52% and 42% of the viewership respectively – belonged to Vlad Plahotiuc. Jurnal TV, owned by a fugitive businessman, followed closely with 50%, and was the only TV channel that openly supported the protests. The television audience represented people over the age of 45 years, the age group that mostly attended the protests according to the interviewed participants of this study. This fact led to the question about what motivated people over the age of 45 years to take to the streets, bearing in mind that they were heavily exposed to politicised messages and only 2.7%. of them were social media users (Gramatic 2015). Regarding other types of mass media used in Moldova at that time, radio and newspapers were the least consulted sources in terms of socio-political information with 5.6% and 1% of users respectively (Cărăuş & Godarsky 2015, p. 19).

New media started developing in the late 2000s (Lungu 2016). Online media have become the quickest source of information for Moldovan citizens and serve as an incentive for TV, newspapers and radio stations to create their online pages. Approximately 60% of the population had internet access by the end of 2015 and 51% used it daily (Gramatic 2015). The internet added diversity in the news coverage and became the most important source of information for 20% of the population (Gramatic 2015). This group is made up of active young people with higher education from cities (Cărăuş & Godarsky 2015). One of the main reasons to go online has been the manipulative power of the mainstream media (Macovei et al. 2017). The online space is relatively open in terms of internet freedom and censorship (United States Department of State 2015).

Regarding the use of social media, at the end of 2015, the following social networks were the most popular in Moldova as per number of users: odnoklassniki.ru; Facebook; LinkedIn; Instagram; and Twitter (Gramatic 2015). Odnoklassniki means "classmates," and the website was designed as a social network for old classmates and friends. It is widely used in the Russian Federation and post-Soviet countries. However, the number

of its accounts fell by 25% from 2016 to 2017 (Gramatic 2017). The second most popular social network in 2015 was Facebook*,* which has been registering a steady growth in the number of its users; by the end of the first year of the protests, in November 2015, there was a 33% growth of new Facebook accounts in Moldova (Gramatic 2017). Although it cannot be argued that this growth is exclusively the result of Facebook being related with the protests, a few of the interviewed participants mentioned that they created their Facebook accounts to learn more and keep updated with the progress of the events. This study therefore focuses on Facebook for these reasons and because the majority of its users are located in Chişinău, the capital, where the protests took place. Besides, Facebook became a frequently quoted source of information in mainstream news, usually in the few independent or protest-supportive channels. This occurred because Facebook figured prominently as a mobilising tool, a place to express dissent and build the protest organising team. It is also important to note that Facebook use is representative of the young cohort, with 64% of the total number of users situated in the age group of 18 to 34 years (Gramatic 2015).

Having briefly introduced the political (see more in Chapter 3) and media landscape in Moldova, it is important to note that very few academic studies on the impact of new media on protests in the Moldovan context have been conducted until now (Lysenko & Desouza 2012; Lysenko & Desouza 2014). There are academic studies related to the post-election protests of 2009, but none to the 2015 protests analysed in this study. However, significant to this study is the fact that the uprisings of 2009 have been dubbed "Moldovan Twitter Revolution" (Morozov 2009b, 2009c, 2009d), which emphasises the fact that there is promising potential of social media impact on participation. Although this label seems exaggerated because at the time there were less than 100 Twitter users in Moldova, Lysenko & Desouza (2012) argue that social media use became significant because of its simultaneous use with other new media and mobile technologies.

Since 2009 the country has witnessed other social movements, but none can be compared with the anti-government protests of 2015 in terms of size, diverse protest tactics employed, generous international media attention, and extensive use of social media. Hence, this research project is the first academic mapping of the 2015 Moldovan protests against the corrupt political elites who held the monopoly over the media market, and

whose private interests shaped the news sent to almost 70% of the population. And although the internet was not restricted or censored but used mainly by the young, the question that arises is: What in terms of media use motivated and informed the protesters to take to the streets? This study thus examines whether social media could bypass the near media monopoly and carry out its potential to engage people in offline protest participation. It focuses on the different ways social media could augment participation in the context of protests held against state actors with their own agendas and framing powers.

1.6 Overview of the thesis

This thesis is organised in eight chapters.

Chapter 2 situates this thesis in the academic literature by reviewing research studies on the relationship between social media, social capital and protest participation. The chapter explains how the three concepts interact and how social capital will be treated as the mediating mechanism between social media use and protest participation. The interrelationship between the three concepts is discussed and deconstructed in four sections: (1) social media and protest participation; (2) social capital and protest participation; (3) social capital and social media; and (4) social media, social capital and protest participation. The first section focuses on the relationship between social media and protest participation, and presents the current debate on the democratising effect of social media through the analysis of the different roles social media may perform in encouraging protest engagement. This discussion aims to inform the analysis of the Moldovan protests and understand where this case study can stand in this debate.

The second section touches upon the relationship between social capital and protest participation. It first introduces the concept of social capital and then narrows its focus to the dimensions of social capital applied in this study and mainly, bridging and bonding social capital. Next, the section presents the discussion on the strength of each social capital – bridging and bonding – for protest participation. The third section focuses on the relationship between social capital and social media and, consequently, online social capital, which is the very concept applied in this thesis to better grasp how social media

can influence participation. It also addresses the discussion on social media as a favourable environment to build online bridging and bonding social capital. The fourth section is a presentation of studies that combined the three concepts: social media, online social capital (bridging and bonding), and offline protest participation. It also analyses how social media can lead to offline protest participation through the promotion of online bridging or bonding social capital.

After explaining how the concept of online social capital is applied in this study, this chapter then lays out the conceptualisation of social capital in the post-Soviet context in general and in Moldova in particular. The chapter concludes with an overview of the relationship between social media, social capital and protest participation and summarises the gaps that this thesis addresses.

Chapter 3 introduces the case study background in more detail. The first section of the chapter focuses on contextualising the case study by presenting the political background and bringing in a brief introduction into the establishment of the so-called and self-proclaimed pro-European government responsible for the banking scandal. It explains the scheme behind the bank fraud scandal and how Moldovan politicians were involved in orchestrating and benefiting from it. The second section of the chapter then describes how the banking scam triggered the anti-government protests, focusing on their organisation, development and the main actors involved.

Chapter 4 presents the methodology of the study. First, the chapter offers a definition of mixed methods research design and delineates the philosophical foundations used in this study. Second, it introduces a short revision of the research questions and explains how these relate to the mixed methods approach. Next comes the explanation of the research process, mainly the explanatory sequential mixed methods research design and its defining characteristics. This section points out how the data collection and analysis of the first quantitative phase was followed by the second qualitative phase, and it explains why priority is given to the second.

After establishing the general overview of the research study design, the chapter provides an overview of the quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis respectively.

First, it focuses on the quantitative strand by presenting the survey sampling, and explaining the measurement of the main concepts and how the data were analysed statistically. Second, the qualitative strand explains how, based on quantitative data and using purposeful sampling, the participants were selected for follow-up, semi-structured interviews. The same chapter discusses how qualitative data were analysed thematically. The last sections of the methodology chapter focus on the integration of mixed methods results, validity in mixed methods design and ethical considerations.

Chapter 5 presents the findings of the quantitative phase and is divided in two sections. The first section starts with introducing the survey response rate. Then, descriptive statistics is introduced. First, the section focuses on socio-demographics and presents the portrait of the average Facebook user protester in terms of age, sex, education and occupation. Second, it presents the general and protest-related media use preferences of the participants, where they learned for the first time about the protests from, and whether they used Facebook for protest-related activities. Third, this section focuses on online and offline protest participation. It covers the types of online and offline protest activities participants got involved in during the Moldovan protests. Fourth, it considers the online bridging and bonding social capital built by the participants on Facebook.

Having presented the descriptive statistics, what follows is the statistical analysis of the data. This section first introduces the hypotheses and then the regression analyses that tested the relationship between different variables of interest. Examined here are the relationships between Facebook use and offline protest participation; Facebook use and online bridging and bonding social capital; and the latter with protest participation. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the quantitative data and offers explanations for the findings.

Chapter 6 introduces the qualitative findings and integrates these with the quantitative results presented in Chapter 5. The chapter is structured in three sections. The first section focuses on the different roles Facebook performed in engaging people in offline protest participation. It discusses Facebook as a tool to initiate the movement, a platform to build the organising team, an organisational tool, an informational channel, and a space to form and express opinions, build collective identity, and fight trolls. After considering how

Facebook facilitated offline collective action, the second section of the chapter focuses on the type of online social capital – bridging or bonding – that served as the mediator between Facebook and participation. The third section of this chapter examines other factors that emerged as significant preconditions for protest participation, mainly television and offline bonding social capital. The main findings are summed up in the conclusion of this chapter.

Chapter 7 is the discussion chapter which interprets and explains what the results mean. It first provides a discussion on the reasons for associating Facebook participation with the creation of online bridging social capital, and why this mattered for protesting more than online bonding social capital. It also explains that online bridging social capital is almost always limited to the category of young protesters, that is, the post-Soviet generation. Second, it introduces the relationship between online bridging and offline bonding social capital, highlighting the interconnected relationship between online and offline (context), bridging and bonding (type of social capital), and Soviet and post-Soviet cohorts (generation). The third section presents the discussion on the blurry boundaries between Facebook and television and how this hybrid media system influenced participation. The conclusion to the chapter features a diagrammatic representation of the intertwining factors that could explain participation in the Moldovan anti-government protests.

Chapter 8 is the conclusion chapter. It summarises the main findings of this research study in relation to the proposed aims and research questions. It also emphasises the limitations, points towards possible future research, and restates the significance of the results.

CHAPTER 2: SOCIAL MEDIA, SOCIAL CAPITAL AND PROTEST PARTICIPATION: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This study aims to explore the impact of social media use on offline protest participation. The premise is that the potential of social media lies in the multitude of different resources it may augment and the functions it may perform that are conducive to participation. Research has demonstrated that the inherent social structure of social media allows the construction of a space where social interactions can circulate politically relevant information and knowledge (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung & Valenzuela 2012); find mobilising information (Valenzuela 2013); form an opinion (Diehl, Weeks & Zúñiga 2016; Vaccari et al. 2015); learn the skills to engage in a debate; and get a sense of group belonging (Gerbaudo 2015; Gerbaudo & Treré 2015), all of which are significant antecedents of protest participation. However, the types of resources relevant for participation depend on the context where protests take place, since social, political, economic and media characteristics shape what social media users are looking for online. Only a few studies have explored the potential of social media in less-established democracies and shed light on the complexity of context-specific inquiry. The context focused on in this thesis is the post-Soviet region, which is one of the least-researched fields, and a gap that is addressed in this research through the case of Moldova.

Access to social media functions is mediated and transmitted through social relationships, which is one of the dimensions of the concept of social capital applied in this study to explain participation. Social capital is about social relationships and the resources acquired from these interactions that can support social cohesion and facilitate cooperation (Coleman 1990; Putnam 1993). Social capital is employed in this study as a mediating mechanism to explain how and why social media can impact offline protesting. Special focus is put on two types of social capital: online bridging social capital and bonding social capital (Putnam 2000). The former describes online relationships between weak ties (a friend-of-a-friend kind of relationship), which might provide access to innovative and alternative knowledge and connect diverse groups of people, thus creating more opportunities to be asked to participate. The latter describes online interactions among strong ties (family members and close friends), and its strength lies in the provision of social support and trust that can motivate participation. Therefore, after first

considering the social attributes of social media and the different affordances it can provide for participation, this study then analyses whether the access to these is mediated or transmitted through online bridging or bonding social capital. In doing so, this study contributes to the literature on the relationship between online social capital (bridging/bonding) and offline protest participation, since this is limited, and its findings are inconsistent. In addition, it explores the extent to which the type of online social capital that is conducive to participation is influenced by the post-Soviet media and political contexts.

This literature review therefore focuses on the relationship between the three main concepts used in this thesis: social media, social capital, and protest participation. To better understand and visualise how the three concepts interact, their interrelationship will be deconstructed as four relationships, as presented in Figure 2.1: Relation 1 – social media and protest participation; Relation 2 – social capital and protest participation; Relation 3 – social media and social capital; Relation 4 – social media, social capital and protest participation. Before looking into how social media can promote protest participation through the construction of social capital, it is important to understand how the existing literature has portrayed these relationships. They will be discussed in the sections that follow.
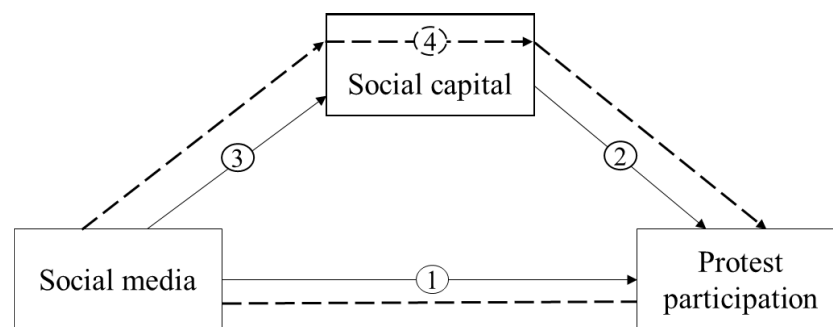
Figure 2.1: Relationship between social media, social capital and protest participation

2.1 Relation 1: Social media and protest participation

This section touches upon the first relation (Relation 1) as illustrated by the solid arrow in Figure 2.2. It begins by exploring how the existing literature portrays the main concepts – social media and protest participation. It then focuses on the existing debates on the potential of social media for protest participation by analysing the different roles social

media may play in motivating protest involvement. This section aims to inform the analysis of the Moldovan anti-government protests and better understand whether the results of this study will challenge or support the existing narratives on the democratising effect of social media.
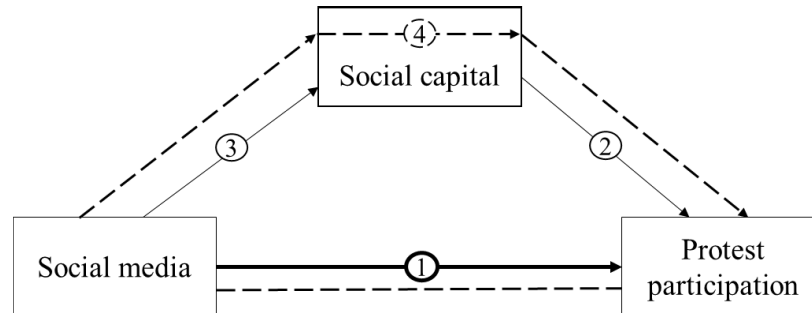
Figure 2.2: Focus on relation 1: social media → protest participation

2.1.1 Social media and protest participation: definitions and interaction

Social media is a web 2.0 innovation that has dramatically changed the way we interact with the online world and with other users. It has become an indispensable part of our personal, professional and social lives (boyd & Ellison 2007). It allows us to connect, share, express ourselves, and take collective action in a context that is easy to use and facilitates socialisation. Howard & Parks (2012) define social media as consisting of three main parts:

> (a) the information infrastructure and tools used to produce and distribute content;
> (b) the content that takes the digital form of personal messages, news, ideas, and cultural products; and (c) the people, organizations, and industries that produce and consume digital content (p. 362).

This definition relates to Facebook, the social media platform analysed in this study, since it provides its users with tools to produce and use different types of content and to distribute it among others doing the same. The production and distribution of content is facilitated since Facebook is an integrated platform "that combine(s) many media and information and communication technologies" (Fuchs 2012a, p. 6). Its interactive and dialogic nature affects the way content is delivered, digested and how people use it to

produce social outcomes (McLuhan 2009) Besides, it is a user-centered platform (Van Dijck 2013) where "the people formerly known as the audience" (Rosen 2006) simultaneously become consumers and "produsers" (Bruns 2008). This acquired individual authority allows users to create, distribute and receive content that is beyond the accredited knowledge, and to reflect, challenge and change existing practices. The implications of social media for protest participation thus lie in its potential to empower people to create change by facilitating collective action in various ways.

In order to understand the capabilities of social media to support and promote participation, a clear definition of protest is also required. Broadly speaking, protest is a dimension of political participation that refers to actions by ordinary citizens that are directed towards influencing political outcomes in society (Brady 1999, p. 737). This definition emphasises the fact that participants are non-elites who engage in activities with the intention of presenting their oppositional claims against established power structures in order to influence political arrangements. This study relies on a narrower definition as conceptualised by Diani (2000), who synthesised the works of leading scholars in the field (McCarthy & Zald 1977; Touraine 1981; Turner & Killian 1957; Zald & Ash 1966), and suggested the following definition:

> networks of informal relationships between a multiplicity of individuals and organizations, who share a distinctive collective identity, and mobilize resources on conflictual issues (p. 387).

This implies that the plurality of individuals and groups constitute networks. These networks develop around the shared beliefs that set the preconditions to the formation of a collective identity. The existence of a conflict raises the collective identity to mobilise resources and undertake various forms of collective action. Diani's (2000) definition serves as a useful lens through which social media can explain protest participation because it highlights some of the dimensions social media might shape and maintain and mainly, networks, collective identity, and resources. The inherent social structure of social media facilitates interaction among its users, who might be exposed to politically relevant information and offered the opportunity to elaborate on issues, and also feel connected to a community that fosters norms of reciprocity. Such resources that are built

in the online environment might create opportunities for users to adopt political attitudes and behaviours.

A growing body of literature underlines the importance of the internet in general and social media in particular for social movements and protest participation (Bennett & Segerberg 2011; Della Porta & Mosca 2005; Garrett 2006; Langman 2005; McCaughey & Ayers 2013; Van De Donk et al. 2004). However, the impact of social media on social movements and its potentially democratising effect has been questioned by scholars. Inconclusive findings have resulted in the formation of different camps where some scholars emphasise the revolutionary power of social media, while others either highlight its supplementary effect or regard it as limited or negative. Hence, there are scholars who talk about "revolution 2.0" (Twitter or Facebook revolutions) (Gainous & Wagner 2014) and describe the internet and social media as the crucial factors that can make social movements happen. They might equate social media with more democracy and freedom (Shirky 2011).

Scholars who acknowledge that social media has changed the way of doing politics are more modest and highlight the reinforcing effect of social media on participation (Calenda & Mosca 2007; Kim 2006; Norris 2002a; Oates 2013). The negative or limited side of social media is also described through a focus on new media as a tool of distraction or as a tool of control and repression (Christensen 2011a; Howard et al. 2011). Over recent years, however, the debate has moved over hyperbolic claims and scholars argue that "a robust and empirically driven conversation about the value of social media for social movements is only starting to emerge now" (Kidd 2017, p. 17) and this remains "a nascent research area – theoretically, methodically and empirically" (Keating & Melis 2017, p. 878). Therefore, in order to understand where this study's results might stand in regard to this debate, and whether they will challenge or support the existing narratives but most importantly, responding to these calls for more research, this thesis explores the contributions of social media for protest participation through the case of Moldova. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that some of the explanations for these mixed findings are related to the heterogeneity of national contexts, where the studies are conducted, and the various social media usage practices that can have varying effects on participation (Casteltrione 2015).

Taking these arguments into account, it is important to first emphasise that the majority of studies were conducted in the context of consolidated Western democracies, with other studies situated in the Middle East and North Africa regions. While the post-Soviet region has witnessed protests where the internet and social media use were a prominent feature, it remains one of the least-researched regions. This gap is another reason this study examines the characteristics of social media impact on protest participation in the post-Soviet context through the example of Moldova. Second, in order to fully assess the potential of social media for protest participation, there is a need to focus on the different ways users employ social media for protest-related activities and to understand the effect of each usage pattern (Casteltrione 2015). Therefore, the next section continues to focus on the existing debate on the impact of social media for political involvement, but through an explicit analysis of the different roles social media may play for participation. The reason for this analysis is to get a closer look at the ways social media might facilitate mobilisation in other social movements and understand how this may inform the analysis of social media roles in the case of the Moldovan anti-government protests.

2.1.2 Roles of social media for participation

The impact of social media on political participation depends on the nature of its use (Boulianne 2017; Casteltrione 2015; Kim, Hsu & Gil de Zúñiga 2013; Skoric, Zhu & Pang 2016; Skoric et al. 2016) and the media and political system where protests take place. These conditions lead to different assumptions about which types of social media uses are more likely to promote and sustain participation. For instance, the informational effect of social media might be more pronounced in countries without a free and independent press (Boulianne 2017), while political debate may occur more in a context where this is not encouraged or allowed (Diamond 2010; McGarty et al. 2014; Shirky 2011; Skoric, Zhu & Pang 2016). This argument leads to an examination of which social media uses (if any) increased political participation in Moldova, bearing in mind the specificity of the political and media contexts. Besides, scholars call for more research into transitioning systems as well as cases when the "free press scores and the Internet restriction do not align" (Boulianne 2018, p. 17), and Moldova does represent such a case. These contexts might offer unique insights into the roles of social media for protest

participation and provide a base for other researchers to further investigate this topic in the post-Soviet context or in other politically similar regions.

Thus, studies addressing the potential of social media for protest participation examine the extent to which political participation might be influenced by the information circulating online, the engagement in online political debate, the possibility to develop collective identity, or whether participation can be contagious among the members of the online social network. Therefore, some of the most discussed functions and roles social media may perform for protest participation have revolved around the following themes: (1) information and news transmission, (2) opinion formation and expression (3) mobilisation, (4) collective identity formation, (5) networking or relationship building, and (6) the double-edged effect of social media, among others. Each of these social media roles will be discussed in the following sections.

Information and news transmission

One of the main points addressed by scholars when explaining how social media may influence participation, either positively or negatively, is related to the idea that social media provides availability and accessibility to more information. Scholars argue that by facilitating access to more information, social media may increase knowledge about political issues and opportunities, raise awareness and interest, and create opportunities for opinion formation and expression (Bennett & Segerberg 2011; Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela 2011; Valenzuela 2013), thus increasing the possibility of participation (Castells 2009). Being exposed to multiple sources of information transforms newly acquired knowledge and renders it more "worthy of diligent consideration than information from only one perspective" (Harkins & Petty 1987, p. 267). Besides, the use of social media for information and news can impact not only those who deliberately seek it, as some scholars claim (Cantijoch 2012), but also those who get incidental exposure. By befriending someone on Facebook, an individual has access to information through his social network ties and does not necessarily have to seek it out (Tang & Lee 2013; Xenos, Vromen & Loader 2014).

The informational function of new media is emphasised by Oates (2013) in her analysis of the protests against the disputed Russian Duma elections of 2011. She claims that the wealth of online political knowledge in forms of information, photos, videos and news about election fraud limited the authorities' ability to shape the flow of information spreading to citizens through traditional media. This undermined the dominance of state media and provided a freer space. Besides, online information "empowered citizens in specific ways that the Kremlin apparently finds hard to understand, much less to co-opt or control through its traditional way of dealing with Russian citizens" (Oates 2013, p. 166). Although Oates avoids claiming that there was a revolution fuelled by the new media, she argues that the internet brought a shift in the Russian political landscape. Nevertheless and unsurprisingly, the state responded to the challenges posed by the online sphere by employing techniques of information denial and manipulation (Oates 2013; Spaiser et al. 2017; White & McAllister 2014). For instance, Twitter simultaneously played a neutral, supportive, organisational and destructive role for protest participants (Nikiporets-Takigawa 2013, p. 16).

The informational feature of the new media also provided a base upon which the Tunisian uprisings of 2011 were built. Before the protests started, the internet served to share stories of government abuse and broadcast images and narratives about the regime. During the protest, the internet was used to keep everyone updated about the extent of the protest, as well as offer an idea of the past movements and help determine the scope of the forthcoming movements (Howard et al. 2011). Blogs offered space for open political conversations about regime abuse and the perspective for change, YouTube reproduced stories that mainstream media did not cover, Twitter united protesters within the country and abroad (Howard et al. 2011), and Facebook was "crucial in shaping peoples' collective consciousness" (Marzouki et al. 2012, p. 241).

Bimber (2003), however, argues that more information does not always necessarily mean that people are more capable of processing that information, nor does it lead to a better understanding of the issues and, therefore, to participation. Micó & Casero-Ripollés (2014), who analysed the Spanish 15M movement, argue that the sheer number of online resources led to the dispersion of communication, and the fact that there was access to new media did not necessarily imply that its users had the communicative and technical

skills to use it. More than this, scholars have pointed out that the internet generates an unequal distribution of knowledge that can produce "different levels of knowledge, establishing differences between the information rich and the information poor" (Micó & Casero-Ripollés 2014, p. 861). The fact that there is information online does not necessarily mean that users will make use of it; they might not be interested, find it useful, or even know that it exists (Fuchs 2012b).

Opinion formation and expression

The informational capability of social media is closely related to opinion formation, expression, and political discussion (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux & Zheng 2014), all of which have been found to promote political participation (Cho et al. 2009; Mutz 2002; Skoric, Zhu & Pang 2016; Vaccari et al. 2015) and be positively related to offline protest participation (Macafee & De Simone 2012). The premise is that the informational and communicational aspects of social media offer the space where opinions are easily formed and exchanged, and this facilitates enhanced knowledge. Political knowledge, then, motivates reflection and depth of reasoning, and thus more qualitative opinions (Delli Carpini, Cook & Jacobs 2004).

Pingree (2007) argues that "the act of message composition is often much more effective at improving understanding than any act of reception" (p. 447). After composing a message and sharing it with others in a political conversation, participants not only exchange information, elaborate on arguments and process the information received (Kim, Hsu & Gil de Zúñiga 2013), they can also mobilise themselves and others (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux & Zheng 2014; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril 2009; Valenzuela 2013). According to Valenzuela (2013), "Political discussion can lower the costs of political learning and motivate individuals to participate and join social or political causes more often" (p. 924). Expressing opinions in the online context is especially relevant in emerging democracies where institutional forms of participation are not firmly established (Rojas & Puig-i-Abril 2009). However, Macafee & De Simone (2012) argue that although the expressive use of social media is related to political participation, this characterises mainly those who have the intention to participate.

Mobilisation

The argument of the mobilising function of social media is that it can provide mechanisms that enable people to organise easily and cheaply and get involved in collective action. These mechanisms can include (1) mobilising information, (2) facilitation of the recruitment process, and (3) organisation of the events. Valenzuela (2013), in a study of the Chilean demonstrations of 2011, argues that social media is a favourable space to find mobilising information in identificational (names and contacts), locational (time and place), and tactical (instructions how one participate) forms (Lemert 1981). Besides, Valenzuela (2013) demonstrated that mobilising information online can lead to offline participation.

As for recruitment, social media is considered a helpful environment to disseminate calls for actions (Diani & McAdam 2003; González-Bailón et al. 2011) and organise these into collective activities. For instance, as suggested by Verba, Schlozman & Brady (1995), receiving an invitation to participate helps potential protesters overcome one of the barriers of participation: "because nobody asked them" (p. 15). Although an invitation does not necessarily imply that the invited will undertake collective action, a recruitment invitation has been demonstrated to be a predictor of protest participation (Schussman & Soule 2005; Snow, Zurcher & Ekland-Olson 1980). González-Bailón et al. (2011), in their study of the recruitment patterns in Twitter during Spanish Indignados movement of 2011, argue that the decentralised structure of social media allows numerous and different recruiters to "plant activation seeds" with the intention to reach a "network core" of people, who in their turn will share the call for participation and contribute to "the growth of the movement by generating cascades of messages that trigger new activations" (González-Bailón et al. 2011, p. 5).

The mobilising function of social media also highlights the way it can change organisational dynamics. Scholars claim that protests can be now organised without the complex and costly structures of the traditional organisations (Bimber, Flanagin & Stohl 2012; Della Porta & Mosca 2005). Castells (2015), who analysed different revolutions and movements that happened in 2011, argues that social media has the power of replacing the hierarchical structure and may even lead to leaderless movements. He claims that new media helped to build decentralised movements, and he focuses on the

potential of the internet to offer flat structures that can ensure coordination functions. Nevertheless, Gerbaudo (2012) has challenged this claim on theoretical and empirical assumptions. Having conducted 80 interviews with activists in different countries where large protests happened, Gerbaudo (2012) claims that behind these movements was a "choreography of assembly", that is, a group of people who used social media to organise and mobilise the movements. This group meant to use social media "in directing people towards specific protest events, in providing participants with suggestions and instruction about how to act" (Gerbaudo 2012, p. 12). For instance, the activists of the Spanish 15M movement made use of Facebook, Twitter and other social media networks to perform the tasks of the different offline committees that dealt with the structure of the movement, the working groups that took care of the problems, and a general assembly were decisions were taken (Micó & Casero-Ripollés 2014).

During the Ukrainian Euromaidan, social media channels were also considered crucial for building the protest (Tucker et al. 2015) by connecting creative ideas and putting up posters and slogans, by facilitating the collection of financial support for the movement (Bohdanova 2014), and by offering access to resources such as legal support, medical services and transportation (Tucker et al. 2015). The analysis of the Moldovan uprising of 2009 conducted by Lysenko & Desouza (2012), which is the only academic study in the Moldovan context so far, also stresses out how a multitude of different technological tools was involved in organising the movement. First, the preparation and ignition of the movement involved young activists from Moldovan NGOs and student groups. These student groups collected a large database of contacts and telephone messages, and emails were sent to people to join the movement. At this stage, groups created in Facebook and Odnoklassniki also served as platforms to spread mobilising information. The next stage of actual protest participation was when Twitter started to be used, mainly to inform about future planned actions.

Collective identity formation

According to scholars, another mechanism that the use of social media augments for protest participation is the promotion of a collective identity: the feeling that users belong to a larger community and share common goals. This perception can then be used as

collective action by the organisers of a protest (Myers 2000) and connect unaffiliated and not yet mobilised activists with active participants and organisers (Mercea 2012). Several empirical studies have illustrated that the more an individual identifies with a group, the more he/she is inclined to engage in protest actions with that group (Klandermans et al. 2002; Simon & Klandermans 2001; Stryker, Owens & White 2000). The identification with a group and their values is greatly influenced by the way the movement is framed (Benford & Snow 2000). There is a stronger probability that people will engage in protest activities if the protest's grievances are framed in a unifying rights discourse (Onuch 2015, p. 225).

However, Bennett & Segerberg (2013) argue that contemporary social movements are described by a "logic of connective action", where collective identity is overtaken by a more flexible and personalised identity. Their assumption is that digital media allows the framing of demands and grievances in a much-personalised way in comparison to established frames of formal organisations. These frames do not require the "symbolic construction of a united we" (Bennett & Segerberg 2013, p. 28), since personalised expression allows users to connect in flexible ways and choose what reflects their ideologies and beliefs.

Nevertheless, Gerbaudo (2015), in an analysis of protest avatars used by the protesters of Spanish Indignados movement, Occupy Wall Street, and the Egyptian revolution, argues that social media can be used to build a collective identity, which means that it is not so individualistic. By adopting the photo of the Egyptian Khaled Said or the Spanish logo of *Democracia Real Ya* as profile pictures, social media users express their support for a movement's system of ideas. Avatars are inclusive, symbolic representations of "post-ideological content" (Gerbaudo 2015, p. 918) that can be spread quickly over social media when users choose to adopt these as their profile pictures. This transforms into an act of identification with the collective, where users "temporarily surrender part of their own unique individuality, in order to become an active unit in a collective aggregate that transcends over their own actions" (Gerbaudo 2015, p. 927).

Relationship building

The potential of social media for networking is also discussed by scholars in regard to its potential to motivate participation. The inherent social structures of social media platforms allow users to build formal and informal types of social ties online (Gil de Zúñiga, Barnidge & Scherman 2017; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung & Valenzuela 2012; Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela 2011; Valenzuela, Park & Kee 2009), which might increase the possibility of them becoming targets for recruitment and gaining more access to mobilising and political knowledge. However, since social media are composed to a large extent of weak ties, scholars claim that these are not as associated with risky participation as the protest involvement might presuppose. Gladwell (2010) affirms that the use of social media will only impact activities that do not require users "to make a real sacrifice" (p. 47). Participation will be limited to liking or sharing a post or joining a social media group, a phenomenon Morozov (2012) calls "slacktivism", which is "feel good online activism that has zero political or social impact" (Morozov 2009a).

Shirky (2011) argues, however, that though there is truth in this critique, it is not a primary issue when analysing social media impact since "the fact that barely committed actors cannot click their way to a better world does not mean that committed actors cannot use social media effectively" (p. 38). Onuch (2015), for instance, in the study of the Ukrainian Euromaidan, emphasises the importance of online weak ties and argues that these had the potential to set the agenda and provide useful information about the protests. Their impact, however, functioned more strongly when combined with the pre-existing strong ties. Online weak ties proved to be very significant in this current study too, as will be discussed in the analysis chapters. Social ties built online is one of the dimensions of the concept of social capital applied in this study to better understand how the use of social media may lead to actual political involvement. Although in this chapter networking is discussed along with other social media roles (such as information, mobilisation, collective identity, etc.), in this study social interactions are treated as the base upon which it is possible to achieve all these roles. This means that access to information and news, opinion formation, facilitation of organisation of events, development of a collective identity, etc. are mediated by the different types of online networking. Since this represents a significant part of the conceptual framework used in this study, Section 2.4 will elaborate on it.

Double-edged effect of social media

Another issue addressed by scholars regarding the impact of social media on protests is that it is not a one-way impact and it can also be used as a tool of control and repression. In other words, it can be just as powerful in the hands of the authorities as in the hands of the activists and protesters (Christensen 2011a; Howard et al. 2011). For instance, during the Russian protests of 2011 mentioned earlier, the same tool that supported the protest and the protesters was used by the administration to consolidate its power and weaken oppositional voices, and thus shift the narrative in favour of political elites. The pro-government's and the opposition's Twitter messages have been called by Oates (2013, p. 55) "one nation, two media audiences" as a way of highlighting how social media can serve as a useful tool, not only for protesters but also for those who are protested against. During the Arab Spring, authorities also resorted to internet and social media to control and undermine protests by closing down or blocking access to social media platforms, infiltrating and tracking protesters, disseminating derogatory information about the movement and its participants, and spreading pro-regime propaganda (Breuer & Groshek 2014; Howard et al. 2011; Marzouki et al. 2012).

Morozov (2012) underlines the importance of asking who controls the digital tools and who has most access to them. He argues that the tools that seem to bring democratising impact are most effective in the hands of authoritarian regimes but are also used in more democratic societies. Penney & Dadas (2014, p. 89) in their analysis of Occupy Wall Street, suggest that social networks cannot be completely controlled by the protesters since they are owned by commercial entities and this "leaves protesters vulnerable to restriction on their ability to communicate" (p. 89). Because the impact of social media on participation is still a debated topic, Morozov (2012) suggests that "the only way to make the internet deliver on its emancipatory potential is to embrace both cyber-realism and cyber-agnosticism" (p. 339). He encourages social media users to recognise the social, political and economic factors that may lead to protest participation; treat social media as a facilitating tool; and avoid to take a for or against position regarding its impact on movements.

Fuchs (2012a, 2012b) also emphasises the idea that researchers studying the relationship between social movements and new media should not adopt a technological deterministic approach. It is not the technology per se that results in the emergence of movements, "but human actors who are embedded into antagonistic economic, political and ideological structures of society" (Fuchs 2012b, p. 781). The problems in society conditions the use of technology and, in return, technology shapes society in multiple ways. Besides, as Lessig (1999) states the "code is law" and the architecture (or code) of the internet is the central regulating force that is capable of selecting "who, what, and most important, what ways of life will be enabled or disabled" (Lessig 2006, p. 8). This leads us to reflect on how technology represents the interests of its developers. Kidd & McIntosh (2016) have introduced the term "techno-ambivalence" (p. 792), which means a middle ground that balances the flaws of the opposing camps and encourages the accumulation of more evidence on the real outcomes of social media on social movements. This is precisely one of the main purposes of this current study: to accumulate more evidence and contribute to the knowledge on the actual impact of social media tools on protest participation. Although this study does take into account the debating camps and besides, the particularity of the case study analysed here, it adopts the critical view of Fuchs (2012a, p. 387), who suggests the use of dialectical reasoning. It was expected that social media's impact on participation would not be one dimensional or unilateral. This postulation was proved by the data analysis, which uncovered that there was an amalgam of factors that influenced the use and importance of social media for protest participation, and the impact was not necessarily positive. This is elaborated on in Chapters 5 and 6.

The literature presented in this chapter helps to locate where this study's findings might stand and how these can contribute to the wider debate on the democratising effect of social media. The question that emerges here is how social media manifested in the Moldovan protests. This leads to an analysis of the different roles and possibilities social media could have facilitated for the Moldovan protests and an examination of the peculiarities of these roles in a post-Soviet context. In looking at how Facebook may have played a protest-related role, the concept of social capital emerged as a useful lens through which to study the relationship between social media and protest participation. Social capital is treated as a mediating construct that has the potential to explain the path from

online interaction and acquisition of resources to offline political engagement. This relationship is considered in the following section.

2.2 Relation 2: Social capital and protest participation

This section discusses the second relation (Relation 2) described in the literature review and indicated in Figure 2.3 by the solid arrow symbolising the relationship between social capital and protest participation. It first introduces the conceptualisation of social capital and then it narrows its focus to the two dimensions applied in this study: social networks (bridging and bonding) and trust (generalised and institutional). What follows is a discussion on the dimensions of social capital and how these can foster protest participation.
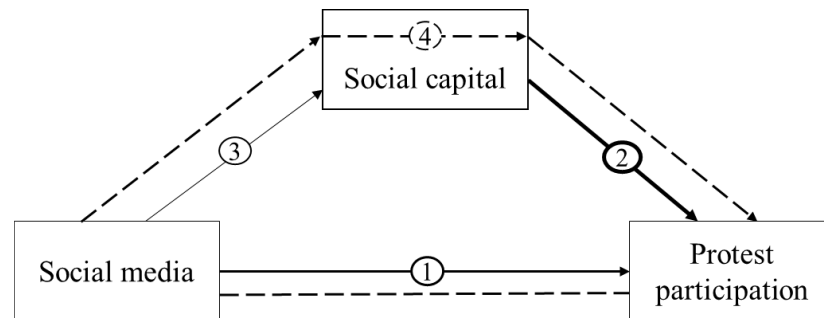
Figure 2.3: Focus on relation 2: social capital → protest participation

2.2.1 The concept of social capital

The main idea behind the concept of social capital is that social relations matter because they create social cohesion and cooperation among people (Coleman 1990; Putnam 1993). These ideas can be traced back to such sociologists as David Hume, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx (Lin 1999; Poder 2011) and Max Weber (Portes 1998). However, the renewed interest in the term comes from the theorisation of the concept by three key scholars: Pierre Bourdieu (1986), James Coleman (1988) and Robert Putnam (1993; 2000) whose works served as the base for many successive multidisciplinary scholars. Although these three contemporary approaches have some common elements in their definitions, there are different conceptualisations in the underlying ideologies. The following presents a discussion of the three main theorisations, with a special emphasis

on Putnam's work, since this is partially adopted as the conceptual framework for this study.

First, Bourdieu's ideas trace back to Marx, who saw social capital as class goods and as an explanation of social inequality. For Bourdieu (1986), the possession of more or less long-standing relationships determines an unequal access to resources:

> The volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent … depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected" (p. 249).

One of the qualities of social capital is its unique multiplier effect, meaning that the more an agent invests in social relations, the more profits they get in the form of social capital. The investment in social relations implies mutual recognition and acknowledgment that results from continuous exchanges of resources and social interactions. Social interaction empowers the agent as it gives access, activates and acknowledges other types of capital, such as economic, cultural or symbolic and these hold value if they are reducible to economic capital (Bourdieu 1986). However, the control of capital is not uniformly distributed, and agents are unequal in possessing and activating their resources. These inherent inequalities place agents in different social positions. Thus, social capital along with other types of capital "explain the structure and dynamics of differentiated societies" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 119). As such, Bourdieu (1986) focused on access to resources and opportunities from a more private and hierarchical aspect. This conceptualisation of Bourdieu (1986) has been criticised, however, because he reduces the ultimate source of social capital to economic capital (Portes 1998) and perceives all human actions as bound by interest (Swartz 1997).

The other view is that of James Coleman. In contrast to Bourdieu, Coleman (1988) considers social capital not only a private good but also as having the features of a public good, and where the activities of actors have impact for the whole group. His approach to social capital is based on two theoretical perspectives: a functionalist Durkheimian paradigm; and rational theory. The first places the individual in a social context where his

actions are subject to "norms, rules and obligations" (Coleman 1988, p. 95), and the second approach states that people cooperate because they pursue their own interests (Coleman 1990). Social capital thus has an instrumental purpose. Entering into relationships to achieve something one cannot achieve alone then creates rewards, "thus social capital itself is often … a by-product of activities engaged in for other purposes" (Coleman 1990, p. 312). Thus, the main idea behind Coleman's conceptualisation of social capital is that individuals' actions are influenced by social structure; however, the motivations for action reside in their personal interests and they are rationally choosing which actions to engage in. Coleman (1990) tries to bridge individual choices to social interaction and thus provide a transaction from micro to macro. His conceptualisation, however, emphasises contradictory aspects of social capital. First, according to Portes (1998), Coleman does not distinguish between the mechanisms that generate social capital and the resources or benefits obtained from this, an issue which can easily lead to "tautological statements" (Portes 1998, p. 5). Second, since Coleman did not explicitly theorise the transition of social capital as an individual good to a collective good, this shift is perceived as conceptually confusing (Portes 2000).

The most influential work on bringing the concept of social capital to civic and political engagement, and which is applied partially in this research study, is that of Putnam (1995a; 1995b; 2000). Putnam's theorisation of social capital is based on the ideas of Coleman (1990; 1988), as he also perceives it as an attribute of communities. In his study of the preconditions for the development of democratic reforms in Italy, Putnam (1993) concluded that Northern Italy, in comparison to Southern part, witnessed a better functioning of government and prosperous economy thanks to a stronger civic culture. Civic culture is defined by Putnam in terms of membership in voluntary associations, electoral participation, and interest in public affairs (Putnam 1993). These social structures cultivate norms of reciprocity, interpersonal trust, and tolerance. In other words, individuals who interact routinely create a sense of trust, responsibility, and cooperation between them and thus act accordingly (Putnam 1993). The main finding of Putnam's study in terms of social capital was that "trust, norms and networks … can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions" (Putnam 1993, p. 167). In the same vein as Coleman, Putnam (1993) suggests "one special feature of social capital, like trust, norms, and networks, is that it is ordinarily a public good … [which]

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must be often produced as a by-product of other social activities"(p. 170). This work of Putnam has received criticism because he does not explicitly explain the direction of the causation (Tzanakis 2013), thus engaging in "logical circularity" (Portes 1998, p. 19) and (with Coleman) "definitional tautology" (Portes 1998, p. 20). The scholar (Putnam 1993) understands that all the elements that account for the presence of social capital stem from its outcomes, thus perceiving social capital as a cause and an effect at the same time (Portes 1998).

Putnam's initial definition of social capital was later used to explain its decline in US society. The metaphor "bowling alone" that appears in the title of his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Putnam 2000) emphasises the shrinking associational involvement and participatory behaviour of American society and the idea that one is more likely to bowl alone than in a team. Putnam tries to explain the decline through causes such as work meaning pressure of time and money and the feeling of busyness; the issues that come with urban sprawl and people's disengagement with their local communities; generational change implying the replacement of the mobilised and civic-minded World War II generation with their less involved children and grandchildren; and use of mass media that causes social disconnection and civic disengagement.

Putnam (2000) also proposes possible solutions for a higher civic engagement and, thus, social capital, because social capital

> enables citizens to solve problems more easily … helps communities to advance because members know that they can rely on each other … fosters awareness of the ways in which our fates are interlinked, and encourages us to be more tolerant, less cynical, and more empathetic (pp. 288-9).

He also proposes an evolved definition of social capital: "connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (Putnam 2000, pp. 18-9). Thus, Putnam's conceptualisation of social capital focuses on three elements: norms such as reciprocity; social values such as trust; and social networks with a special emphasis on voluntary associations. Using this conceptualisation of

Putnam, this study chose to focus on social values (trust) and social networks as it is explained in the following paragraphs.

In the same book, Putnam (2000) makes what he calls the most important distinction between the different dimensions of social capital, namely "bonding social capital" and "bridging social capital" (p. 22). The former refers to relations among people who are already similar and thus form homogeneous groups, and the latter refers to the links between more diverse groups of people. According to Putnam (2000), bonding social capital is useful for "getting by" and bridging social capital for "getting ahead" (p. 23). Although Putnam refers to this taxonomy without a sustained analysis, these very network patterns are adopted in this thesis. This study does not follow Putnam's definition of social capital as such, however; rather it applies Putnam's more specific concepts of bridging and bonding social capital. It adheres here to the idea that different types of social interactions – homogeneous (bonding) or heterogeneous (bridging) – result in different types of resources that can be used to augment collective action and thus be useful conceptual tools to explain political participation. In the context of this research, it is important to highlight this taxonomy since Moldova, as a post-Soviet country, is often characterised by the abundance of one type of social capital (bonding) and lack or scarcity of the other (bridging). This represents a significant argument for this research study and will be discussed in more detail in Section 2.5.

Another dimension of social capital emphasised by Putnam (1993; 2000) and also often focused on in the post-Soviet context is trust. Because of this, the conceptualisation of social capital used in this study includes the concept of generalised and institutional trust too. Although the main focus in this study is on the two types of social capital discussed earlier (bridging and bonding), trust is also explored by examining whether social media can foster its development. The following sections will first elaborate on bridging and bonding social capital and then on generalised and institutional trust.

Bridging and bonding social capital

According to Putnam (2000), the distinction between bridging and bonding social capital is probably the most important of all the dimensions of social capital. Although Putnam

(2000) only briefly defines in his work the patterns of bridging and bonding networks existent in societies, he is credited with conceptualising bridging and bonding social capital. In coining the elements of this taxonomy, Putnam (2000) touched upon the research of Granovetter (1973) and his distinction between strong and weak ties; the former referring to tightly knit relationships that usually occur among family members and close friends, and the latter to the friend-of-a-friend kinds of relationships.

This categorisation makes clear that different types of relationships produce different kinds of social capital when different norms and networks are applied. Bridging social capital is outward-oriented and connects people from a variety of backgrounds. It bridges crosscutting networks and allows two otherwise unconnected groups (Burt 1992; Williams 2006) to share and exchange more and newer information, broaden and innovate knowledge, find new opportunities and build consensus. Because of its far-reaching characteristic, Granovetter (1973) called this "the strength of weak ties" and exemplified this with the situation when one is looking for employment. He argued that job information is predominantly found and flows among weak ties, not strong. Weak ties operate as bridges and facilitate the access to useful and new information. This is also called by Putnam (2000) the social capital that is useful in "getting ahead" (p. 23). However, bridging ties also provide less emotional support in comparison to bonding ties.

Bonding social capital is created by close relationships, such as those among family or close friendships, and is considered to be found among people with similar interests. It is inward-looking and used for "getting by" (Putnam 2000, p. 23). The bonding, strong ties are characterised by multiple interactions and thus are more protective, offering high levels of trust, reciprocity and solidarity. Nevertheless, strong and homogenous relationships create what Putnam (2000) calls "out-group antagonism" (p. 23), that is, outgroups and exclusions. As well, the tighter is one's social network, the less information will reach one because the information will move in a circuit of overlapping friendship. On the whole, bridging social capital is associated with larger and weaker networks, and bonding social capital with smaller and denser networks. The first develops between groups and the second within groups. The strength of the first is access to new and alternative information and knowledge, and of the second, emotional support. Since these two types of social capital are employed in this study to understand collective action,

Section 2.2.2 will elaborate on the implications of bridging and bonding social capital for protest participation.

Generalised and institutional trust

Trust, the other dimension of social capital analysed in this thesis, describes the degree of relationship strength. Its importance lies in its possibility to "lubricate(s) cooperation" (Putnam 1993, p. 170) and improve the functioning of a society. The trust people have of each other is called interpersonal trust and the trust they have towards organisations and institutions is called impersonal, institutional or political trust (Khodyakov 2007; Newton 2001; Putnam 2000; Sztompka 1999; Uslaner 2002). Regarding interpersonal trust, Putnam (2000) distinguishes between thin and thick trust. These two types of trust relate to the types of networks suggested by Putman: the first is associated with bridging ties and the second with bonding ties. Thick trust is the first type of trust people develop in their lives and is built among close friends and family members (Khodyakov 2007). Similarity and familiarity are the core elements of thick trust; the more people have in common and the more they know about each other, the more they trust each other. Nevertheless, since thick trust develops among tightly-knit groups, it does not link people with out-groups who have access to varied resources (Cook 2005; Uslaner 2002).

Thin trust, also called social or generalised trust (Uslaner 2002), is about trusting people one does not know well and is characterised by social diversity. It has moral implications as it is based on reciprocity (Putnam 2000). People help others, hoping they will get it back when needed. It is also about optimism, the belief that the world is a good place and that people can make it a better place (Uslaner 1998). The expectations towards others is that they will be "fair, honest, and reasonable in their dealings with us" (Solomon & Flores 2003, p. 42) and hold and manifest moral principles (Uslaner 2002). Generalised trust is thus about connectedness and reciprocity, and those with higher trust expect others to follow the same rules, engage more in community activities and cooperate to solve issues (Kraut et al. 2002; Levi 1996; Orbell & Dawes 1991).

Of the types of interpersonal trust discussed here, thin trust (generalised trust) is more related to engagement because this type of trust spreads over close ties and creates new

networks and associations (Putnam 2000). Thin trust is used in this study to analyse the relationship between social media and protest participation. Though both types of interpersonal trust are related, they affect participation in different ways. Thick trust is more associated with civic behaviour and conventional types of participation, while thin trust is more likely to affect unconventional participation (Crepaz, Jazayeri & Polk 2017; Suh & Reynolds-Stenson 2018), such as protesting, the type of political participation analysed in this research. Generalised trust is more likely to lead individuals to engage in "more interactive, less conventional political acts than people with a more narrow sense of trust" (Crepaz, Jazayeri & Polk 2017, p. 276). The relationship between generalised trust and protest participation will be discussed in the following section.

Institutional or political trust (Newton 2001; Putnam 2000; Uslaner 2002) is another type of trust analysed in this thesis, since institutions play an important role in this case study as representatives of the main actors that are protested against. Institutional trust is defined as the belief that institutions are performing well, can offer citizens the means necessary to achieve their goals, and are competent to carry out policies (Coleman 1990; Dasgupta 1988; Hetherington 1998; Uslaner & Badescu 2003). Consequently, a lack of institutional impartiality "will not develop trust in those government institutions that discriminate against" citizens (Stolle & Hooghe 2005, p. 35). Institutional trust is associated with social trust (Almond & Verba 1963; Fukuyama 1995), meaning that trust in people is an important factor to develop trust in institutions. Peoples' interactions and involvements in collective activities result in knowledge of how to cooperate and trust others. Therefore, a strong civil society makes it possible to generalise trust in people to different social institutions and the state (Putnam 1993; Putnam 2000). However, Parry (1976) argues that institutional trust is more likely than social trust to be embedded in the ability of institutions to perform their functions. His argument might better describe the post-Soviet Moldovan context, where scholars claim there is no link between social and institutional trust (Khodyakov 2007). The type of institutional trust will be examined in Section 2.5 which focuses on the relationship between trust and protest participation in the post-Soviet context.

2.2.2 How can social capital promote participation?

The concept of social capital has reinvigorated political participation studies (Bourdieu 1986; Brehm & Rahn 1997; Coleman 1988; La Due Lake & Huckfeldt 1998; Lin 2001). Scholars argue that through social connectedness people build norms and trust, and through communication social capital produces engagement (Rojas, Shah & Friedland 2011). This means that when people are part of social groups, their regular interactions foster the development of trust and thus increase their social capital. The more social capital a person possesses the more likely that person is going to participate in civic and political activities (Brehm & Rahn 1997; Norris 2001; Putnam 1995a; Uslaner 1998).

In relation to the two types of social capital – bridging and bonding – discussed in the previous section, the bridging social ties would facilitate the diffusion of politically relevant information, connect people to wider networks where they can meet new people, and hence increase the probability they will be asked to participate in activities. As Teorell (2003) states, "since no activity is required for one to be requested to take part in political action, this social capital mechanism can explain why not only activists but also passive members are recruited in politics" (p. 52). Besides, among bridging social ties, information diffusion can reach a larger number of people and traverse greater social distance (Granovetter 1973). Diverse information stimulates a collective interest in politics and provides individuals with the skills and resources for effective participation.

As for bonding social ties, these might also play a role in dealing with the lack of desire to participate and the reasons that an individual may not be asked to participate. Since bonding social capital implies there are people with similar values and norms, it increases the possibility of someone accepting an invitation to participate in a protest if asked by an acquaintance, friend or family member (Campbell 2013). Kenny (1992) demonstrated that having friends who participate makes people more likely to participate themselves, an argument that resonates with the findings of this study. There are two possible reasons for agreeing to participate. First, if the recruiter were to invite a close friend to join a protest, the interpersonal trust among them would help reduce the target's apprehension or uncertainty that might have occurred if the invitation had come from a bridging tie. Second, the shared values and interests developed among bonding ties would influence the perception about the protest invitation and the recruited person would be more likely

to find it worthwhile or necessary (Eccles & Wigfield 2002; Passy 2001). Besides, because adopting a political behaviour is a complex process, the trust and emotional involvement that describe strong ties smooths the reinforcement and social pressure. The importance of homophily for spreading behaviour has been called by Valenzuela, Arriagada & Scherman (2014) the strength of strong ties. Similarity and shared values, interests and beliefs increase interpersonal influence (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet 1968).

Thus, as we may observe social networks, bridging and bonding although through different mechanisms, both play their roles in engaging people in political participation. As Kitts (2000) summarised:

> If transmission of novel information is a key mechanism of disseminating activism, then weak ties should be more effective than strong ties. However, if persuasion or social approval is the underlying mechanism of network mobilization, then effects should be greater for strong ties than for weak ties (p. 247).

And this is what is analysed in this study: the types of social ties and the resources acquired from these that may impact protest participation, with a special focus on their development in the online context.

Regarding trust, the other component of social capital analysed in this thesis, both institutional and generalised trust are perceived by scholars as vital for the involvement in political life (Fukuyama 1995; Putnam 2000) and for "making democracy work" (Putnam 1993). It allows citizens to join forces and decide to engage in civic and political participation (Inglehart 1999; Putnam 1993; Putnam 2000). As Almond and Verba (1963) argue, there simply is no collective action without trust. People become active in politics when they are convinced that others want to achieve the same goals and trust that they will not act to their detriment. Coleman (1990) summarises this by arguing that "a group whose members manifest trustworthiness and place extensive trust in one another will be able to accomplish much more than a comparable group lacking that trustworthiness and trust" (p. 340). Apart from these theoretical arguments, empirical studies have

demonstrated that the relationship between social trust and participation is positive and reciprocal (Fennema & Tillie 2001; Kaase 1999; Putnam 1993; Putnam 2000). This leads to what Putnam (1993) called a "virtuous circle"(p. 188), implying that trust promotes cooperation and cooperation promotes trust.

The majority of studies that have explored trust and participation have focused on conventional types of participation, with the under-searched area of non-conventional types of participation, the type of participation examined in this thesis. However, a few studies have demonstrated that, for instance, social trust and protest participation are positively related (Crepaz, Jazayeri & Polk 2017; Walther et al. 2008) and their effect on each other is mutual (Valencia, Cohen & Hermosilla 2010). This confirms Putnam's virtuous circle, where "the level of participation in non-institutionalised social movements are more likely to drive trust in other people, while at the same time trust in other people is more likely to increase levels of movement participation" (Valencia, Cohen & Hermosilla 2010, p. 74).

There are also studies that have demonstrated that the relationship between social trust and political participation is either weak or non-existent (Pattie, Seyd & Whiteley 2003; van Deth 2001). These divergent findings are explained by the fact that generalised trust is embedded in the socio-political context. This means that generalised trust is less likely to be associated with protest participation in countries with institutions that are less functional (Bäck & Christensen 2016; Stolle 2002; Suh & Reynolds-Stenson 2018). This argument can be related back to the discussion presented earlier on the relationship between social and institutional trust, a relationship that will be discussed further in relation to the post-Soviet context.

Regarding the relationship between institutional trust and participation, the idea is that people who trust the institutions believe that the government encourages citizens to get involved in political activities and this approbation thus fosters more political involvement. The sorts of political activities referred to here are electoral participation, working for a campaign, donating money to a political party, attending political debates, etc. Nevertheless, trust in political institutions is less likely to promote participation in protests against the same institutions. Rather, it will be lack of institutional trust that will

lead citizens to challenge the political elites (Hooghe & Marien 2013; Levi & Stoker 2000). Citizens' critical scrutiny and perception of the institutions as untrustworthy may compel them to take actions and intervene. A similar idea is suggested by Rossteutscher (2008), who argues that "trust relates very clearly to confidence in government in non-democratic regimes" (p. 229). It means that in a non-democratic society, those who trust the government have no tendency to pursue democratic values and thus remain passively engaged, both civically and politically. However, those who do not trust a non-democratic regime are likely to have higher democratic ideals and be more actively involved in political concerns. Since Moldova represents a hybrid regime where the control of the institutions is monopolised by a few politicians, it is very likely that institutional mistrust will be a prerequisite to protest participation, a hypothesis considered in both quantitative and qualitative phases on this study.

2.3 Relation 3: Social capital and social media

This section introduces the third relation (Relation 3) of the literature review (see Figure 2.4) and focuses on the relationship between social media and social capital. It starts with a discussion on whether social media can be a favourable environment to develop online social capital, mainly, bridging and bonding. It then goes on to analyse whether social media can be a conducive space to build generalised and institutional trust.
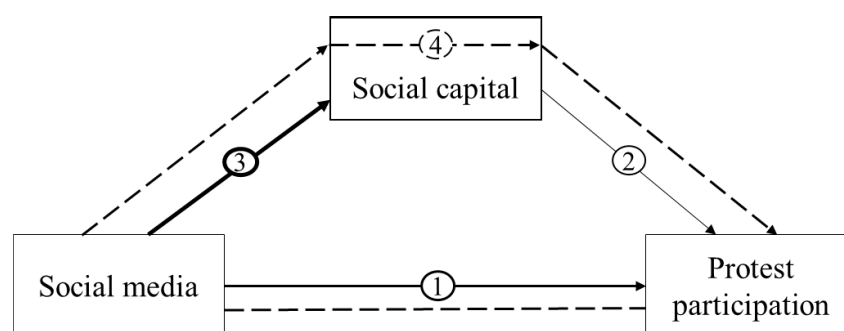
Figure 2.4: Focus on relation 3: social media → social capital

The reinvigorated interest in social capital has brought the concept to another intensely studied area, the internet. Scholars refer to the forms of social interaction and the resources obtained from these interactions through information and technology networks in various ways: digital social capital (Mandarano, Meenar & Steins 2010), online social

capital (Kobayashi, Ikeda & Miyata 2006; Mochen & Xunhua 2013; Skoric, Ying & Ng 2009; Williams 2006, 2007), social media social capital (Gil de Zúñiga, Barnidge & Scherman 2017), and Facebook social capital (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2007). Essentially for this research, there are studies that demonstrated that Facebook use is related to social capital (Burke, Kraut & Marlow 2011; Burke, Marlow & Lento 2010; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2007, 2011; Haythornthwaite 2002; Steinfield, Ellison & Lampe 2008; Valenzuela, Park & Kee 2008).

Facebook is considered an appropriate place to promote social capital since it allows its users to create a profile, reveal their social network through a Friends' list and view others' networks and activities (boyd & Ellison 2007). It thus provides a forum for social interactions and exchange of information and knowledge through a variety of communication features. Exchange of new information and exposure to news and different opinions encourage collective action as Facebook can offer mobilising information that may not be available elsewhere (Bakshy, Messing & Adamic 2015; Kenski & Stroud 2006; Shah et al. 2001). Participation in different online groups usually helps members to build trust, thus enhancing the potential of Facebook to increase social capital (Kobayashi, Ikeda & Miyata 2006). Similarly, Facebook allows subscribers to maintain a large number of connections and recall all previous social interactions, which has positive implications for the development and maintenance of social capital and interpersonal trust (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2007).

However, there are also scholars who are sceptical about the potential of social media to build social capital. There are concerns that the new media may replace face-to-face relationships and actually disengage people from the social norms (Flanagin & Metzger 2001; Nie 2001; Slouka 1995; Wellman et al. 2001) and strengthen societal divisions (Keen 2008), thus bringing a decline in social capital (Wellman et al. 2001). Some scholars even claim that the internet does not meet the conditions needed to produce social capital (Blanchard & Horan 1998; Uslaner 2004b). Others believe that new media neither increases nor decreases social connection; it enhances it (Wellman, Boase & Chen 2002) still others argue that it is conceptually and empirically different from offline social capital (Gil de Zúñiga, Barnidge & Scherman 2017).

To explain these contrasting perspectives, some scholars suggest that it is not the technology as such that influences one's social capital but rather the different ways individuals use the internet for their gratification needs (Valenzuela, Park & Kee 2009). Those who consume new media content related to information acquisition and community building are positively associated with production of social capital, while content used for entertainment is negatively associated with social capital (Shah et al. 2002; Wellman et al. 2001). Informational use of the internet fosters knowledge acquisition and recognition of different political opportunities that increase users' interest in community and political affairs (Rojas & Puig-i-Abril 2009), as well as engaging in political discussion and expression, which are considered predecessors of participation (Shah et al. 2005). For the purposes of this thesis, it is important to stress the fact that the development of social capital online depends on what is consumed, since one of the aims of this study is to understand which Facebook activities are related to which type of social capital, and which type of online social capital leads to participation.

Regarding the types of network capital applied in this study, the literature shows that even though Facebook has a stronger relationship with bridging social capital (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2007; Williams 2007), Facebook can maintain both types of online social capital – bridging and bonding. Online bridging social capital is built around online weak ties which may foster the creation and maintenance of diffuse and larger networks (Haythornthwaite 2002), promote linkages between different groups (Williams 2007) from which users can possibly draw more resources (Donath & Boyd 2004; Hampton 2003; Wellman et al. 2001). It is also associated with the flow of novel and more diverse information on public issues (Cross, Parker & Sasson 2003) and places visited for discussion and re-education of citizens regarding participation in public affairs (Klein 1999). As for bonding ties, social media is used to maintain and solidify pre-existing ties (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2007), and online communities are often comprised of people with similar interests (Norris 2002b).

Many of the studies mentioned here applied Williams (2006) Internet Social Capital Scale to examine the different types of social capital that exist online. Extending Putnam (2000) classification of bonding and bridging, Williams (2006) came with a theoretical model that helps scholars theorise and create valid and reliable measures of the concept of social

capital, online and offline, bridging and bonding. This model was later applied and validated by other scholars in the field (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2007, 2011; Hwang & Kim 2015; Molyneux, Vasudevan & Gil de Zúñiga 2015). This same scale will be used to measure the concept of social capital for the quantitative phase of this study, and it is explained in more details in the methodology chapter, Chapter 4.

Regarding trust, the other dimension of social capital applied in this study, the interest is on the ways social media can generate trust that can be significant for participation. First, there is potential to develop generalised trust online since the context of social media offers its users the possibility of accessing the personal information of their friends and other people they follow. They can see their friends' activities and intentions and decide with whom they can build trust. Studies show that Facebook use can enhance the creation of trust (Skoric & Kwan 2011). Building social trust online means that the information posted or recommended by a trusted person automatically becomes trusted too (Metzger, Flanagin & Medders 2010). This means that a validated, approved and trusted piece of information can help users "figure out how (and from whom) they can acquire additional information, encouragement, and support" (Jost et al. 2018, p. 110), and this may promote participation.

As for the relationship between social media and institutional trust, Moy, Pfau & Kahlor (1999) argue that "users of particular media tend to perceive democratic institutions as depicted by these sources" (p. 139). Therefore, the unmediated nature of social media and the user-generated content may allow the flow of more alternative information than in the mainstream media and thus challenge current viewpoints (Hermida, Lewis & Zamith 2014; Woodly 2008). It can become a space where dissident views are easier and safer to express, affirming and reinforcing dissident attitudes. This critical flow of information can drive mistrust in institutions by threatening their legitimacy and subsequently stimulating protest participation (Bekmagambetov et al. 2018). And though authorities have the capacity to control and manipulate online content, it is more difficult than with traditional media (Wagner & Gainous 2013). The questions that emerge in this thesis are related to the potential of the Moldovan Facebook community to build online bridging and bonding social capital along with the generalised and institutional trust that would encourage offline political engagement.

2.4 Relation 4: Social media, social capital and protest participation

This chapter presents the fourth relation (Relation 4) of the literature review and considers the three concepts together, social media, social capital and protest participation (as indicated by the dashed lines in Figure 2.5). After introducing (1) the relationship between social media and protest, (2) social capital and protest participation, and (3) social capital and social media, this section focuses on social capital as the mediating mechanism between social media use and offline protest participation. Therefore, it considers the possibilities of online social capital for offline protest participation through a discussion of scholarly debates.
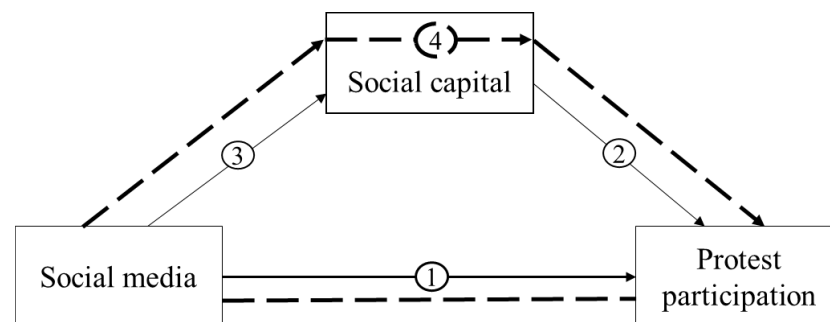
Figure 2.5: Focus on relation 4: social media → social capital → protest participation

As discussed in Section 2.3, social media is a conducive environment for creating and maintaining both online bridging and bonding social capital. These two types of social capital have also their potential for protest participation, as presented in Section 2.2. The question that arises next is: Which type of online social capital can lead to offline protest participation?

Studies that examined the relationship between social media use and participation through the prism of online social capital show that social capital built on social media is not only a predictor of online political participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung & Valenzuela 2012; Valenzuela 2013), it is also related to offline political participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Barnidge & Scherman 2017). This means that relationships facilitated and built on social networks extend to the real world and facilitate direct political coordination that promote political action (Bakker & Vreese 2011; Bennett & Segerberg 2011; Eltantawy & Wiest

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2011). Kobayashi, Ikeda & Miyata (2006) have also investigated the "spill over effect" (p. 606) of online social capital to offline and have come to the same conclusion: the collective use of the internet enhances social trust and reciprocity, which in turn enhances social participation in the offline world.

Referring back to the types of online social capital discussed in Section 2.2, the possibility of online bridging social capital for participation will consist in the flow of useful, novel and varied information that might provide the opportunity and the choice to participate in, and recruit and be recruited for political mobilisation (Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela 2011; La Due Lake & Huckfeldt 1998). In the analysis of the potential of online bonding social capital for participation, its main strength, as mentioned in Section 2.2 is that it offers the reinforcement and social pressure important for behaviour adoption (Valenzuela, Arriagada & Scherman 2014). As strong ties offer emotional connection and support, they can thus provide a way of transmitting behaviours between connected individuals and thus influence collective actions (Bond et al. 2012; Islam et al. 2006).

Hence, while there is promising evidence that people build online bridging and bonding social capital, and there is potential in these types of online social capital to impact political involvement, only a few studies (Gibson & McAllister 2013; Hwang & Kim 2015; Skoric, Ying & Ng 2009) have examined this relationship (although other studies have used the concept of social capital to explain civic engagement). To the best of our knowledge, there are three quantitative studies that analysed protest participation through the examination of the different types of social capital generated by social media use. However, none focused on the impact of online bridging and bonding social capital on actual protest participation (but the intention to participate or general political participation).

The first study was based on South Korean youth and it examined the role of social media on the intention to participate in social movements (Hwang & Kim 2015). The results show that those youth who used social media were more likely to engage in social movements than non-users. Besides, the intention to participate increased if young people had high bridging social capital. A broadly tied network implies more varied resources to use, which are harder to obtain from interactions with existing relationships. Therefore,

it was not just the use of social media that created the intention to participate, but a well-constructed heterogeneous network that increased its likelihood. However, the study of Hwang & Kim (2015) focused on behaviour protesting intentions and not actual participation, as this study does.

Another similar study, but with different results, had Singaporean society as a case study and focused on the relationship between online bridging and bonding social capital and online and offline political participation (Skoric, Ying & Ng 2009). The study found that online social capital was related to participation, both in the online and offline spaces. Online bridging social capital was positively related to potential online political participation and online bonding social capital to offline political participation. Since the cost of online participation is lower than offline and there is less risk for political expression, online bridging social capital was more significant. However, in order to elucidate the fear of participation in the offline context, the reliance on online bonding social capital was crucial. The importance of bonding social ties for offline protest participation is also built on the already existing ties. Nevertheless, this study, as with Hwang and Kim's (2015) study, examined potential and not actual participation. Besides, the concept of political participation was composed of different political activities and none was actually protest participation.

Another study with similar results performed in the Australian context (Gibson & McAllister 2013) focused on the relationship between online social interactions and political engagement and how this changes when bonding and bridging networks are present. The study demonstrated that it was the online interactions between networks of family and friends that led to offline participation and that bridging social capital did not have any impact on political engagement. This was explained by the fact that in Australia, "[the] internet is less well used to mix with people of diverse backgrounds"(Gibson & McAllister 2013, p. 29) and online interaction occurs mainly between bonding social ties. The findings of the last two studies support the hypothesis of "strength of strong ties" suggested by Valenzuela, Arriagada & Scherman (2014) and the idea that bonding social ties offer the social support and pressure necessary to undertake political actions in the real world. The study of Gibson & McAllister (2013), however, also addressed protest

participation as one of the activities that construct the concept of political participation and not treated as a separate activity as this current study does.

Thus, it may be seen that research on the relationship between online bridging and bonding social capital and protest participation is limited, and the findings are inconclusive and rely on quantitative data. In response to the gaps identified, this study introduces new insights into how social media can promote different types of online social capital and how and which type can be conducive to offline protest participation through a mixed methods research study design. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, the methodology chapter.

The following section will focus on the development of social capital in the post-Soviet space and its peculiarities for a better understanding of how this concept is applied in this thesis

2.5 Social capital in the post-Soviet context and Moldova

Most empirical studies on social capital have been limited to North America and Western Europe, and, as a result, its roots have been shaped in this context (Howard 2003; Letki & Evans 2005; Rossteutscher 2008). Because of these origins, Dowley & Silver (2002) have argued that the concept of social capital cannot be transposed so easily to the post-Soviet context and one should bear in mind the complex social factors that surround it. Reliance on strong family and kinship relationships, weak formal institutions, generalised and institutional mistrust, and low civic and political collective engagement impose constraints on the adaptation of this Western concept in the post-Soviet context. That is why when attributed to the post-Soviet context, social capital as conceptualised in the West is perceived as negative, primitive, premodern or even missing by some authors (Paldam & Svendsen 2001; Rose 2000b). The idea of socialism being to blame for the erosion of social capital is supported by many scholars (Kideckel 1993; Lovell 2001; Raiser, Rousso & Steves 2004; Seligman 1992). Examples given are the surveillance of every aspect of communist citizens' lives by state organisations (Paldam & Svendsen 2001; Walker & Stephenson 2012); the economic and political instability that led to low levels of political participation (Inglehart & Catterberg 2002); and citizens being

apathetic about social and civic engagement, and incidences of corruption and underground activities (Kunioka & Woller 1999; Paldam & Svendsen 2001; Raiser, Rousso & Steves 2004). Paldam & Svendsen (2001) even call it the "dictatorship theory of the missing social capital" (p. 2), referring to communism as the totalitarian regime that destroyed social capital.

Despite the fact that it has been years since the Soviet Union's collapse and post-Soviet societies started their journeys to becoming modern and democratic societies, social capital is still considered to be low in the region. Howard (2003) attributes this to the persistence of attitudinal and behavioural patterns, explaining that individuals' current behaviours are shaped by past experiences and the ways they interpret those experiences. People lived with intimidation and distrust in a totally controlled society, and it takes time to change attitudes and behaviours. As Howard (2003) states, "The collapse of communism did not create a tabula rasa by erasing people's prior experiences; rather, those very experiences influence people's current behaviour" (p. 105).

The new democratic institutions are still perceived with distrust, the membership in social organisations is low, there is a lack of interest in volunteering, and informal ties still remain strong. Another factor that influenced the development of a low social capital in post-Soviet countries was the transition process that they all had to undergo. The transition from a communist regime to having democratic institutions brought many changes to their political, economic and social areas. In terms of economy, the ruling elite tried to accelerate industrialisation and urbanisation at the expense of agriculture. This turned to be a difficult process as the majority of post-Soviet countries were lacking efficient and modern factories, experienced management and skilled labour forces (Bunce 1949). These changes meant massive disorder and economic hardship (Lasinska 2013).

The transition also brought strong feelings of disappointment. At the beginning, people felt excitement and hope when striving for more freedom and new democratic institutions, but they quickly became disillusioned. In Moldova's case, this may be seen in the first ruling parties after independence. The country's initial excitement and idealism were quickly replaced by disappointment because of the persistence of corruption, and internal political and ethnic conflicts. This feeling of disillusionment resulted in the gradual

absence of citizens from the public sphere and their lack of enthusiasm to take common initiatives and cooperation (Howard 2003). Thus, the chaotic transition to democracy did not create a favourable environment for the building of high social capital in this post-Soviet region. The changing socio-political context challenged the core tenets of social capital, and civic and political participation and trust.

It is important to note that most Western empirical studies on social capital have focused predominantly on the associational social networks, that is, membership in different organisations and associations (Paxton 2002; Putnam 2000; Van Deth 2003) and the trust developed among their members. Although these Western types of association were imposed in the post-Soviet area, what was in abundance, yet not visible through traditional means, was the informal social capital, the associations that occurred in structures based on family and friends (Howard 2003; Pichler & Wallace 2007). These arguments emphasise the importance of distinguishing between the types of social capital and acknowledging that different regions might display their own dimensions of it. The political and economic circumstances of the Soviet citizen determined the choice of social networks they relied upon, but this does not necessarily mean that their levels of social capital were low in this context. When the literature emphasises the low level of social capital in the post-Soviet space, it mainly refers to bridging social capital. That is why, when focusing on post-Soviet private ties, which is the closest to social capital people were likely to get during and after the Soviet regime (Uslaner 2004a), it is possible to argue that there was high level of bonding social capital. These findings have important implications for the understanding and conceptualisation of social capital and citizen participation in transition societies, even though Howard (2003) suggests that societies characterised by private friendships encounter more difficulty developing a genuine civil society. Therefore, the following sub-sections will focus on the social networks and trust developed in the post-Soviet region to better understand their online development and their relationship with protest participation.

2.5.1 Social networks and trust in the post-Soviet context

The concept of social capital in the post-Soviet context has become synonymous with informal or private social ties, which, though overlapping, may be categorised into two

types: (1) relationships established with trusted friends and family, and (2) instrumental relationships developed with acquaintances to acquire goods and services in a dysfunctional socio-economic market (Howard 2003). Such private informal social relationships were developed in the communist era for two main reasons (Lasinska 2013).

First, the communist citizen was forced to integrate into the social and political system by formal membership in different organisations and associations. Whereas membership in organisations would usually build trust among members, who would then have the chance to learn civic skills and in turn create social capital, in the Soviet countries such membership was coerced and there was no space for the creation of horizontal networks, which is a sign of civil society. According to Howard (2003), "People joined organisations because they had to, or because they were threatened with negative consequences if they did not join, or because they improved their career chances by joining" (p. 27). The Communist Party was the centre of all social organisations, and its authority was unquestionable, primary and charismatic (Hanson 1997). Thus, as a consequence of the failure to generate trust and to exchange civil skills in communist organisations, informal ties became a substitute for what society was lacking. Because of the forceful integration into the communist political system and lack of sincere motivation, citizens needed networks of close people to balance the relationships developed through or imposed by officially supported organisations. So, this informal kind of relationship may be seen as resulting from the "privatisation of life" (Sztompka 2004, p. 491), which means putting more emphasis on family and friends rather than the public sphere. It was a means of surviving in a society where one could not trust institutions or public forms of networking. People felt safer trusting close friends and family members who were able to provide social and emotional support.

Second, to survive in an economically unstable society, people had to rely on their informal ties to find supplies. These types of informal networks are called "provisional" or "instrumental" ties because of their importance for acquiring goods in a dysfunctional market or state system of privileges (Howard 2003; Lasinska 2013; Ledeneva 1998; Paldam & Svendsen 2001). Because of shortages, rationing, and the privileging of elites, taking turns in queues for each other, or having to acquire goods not available through normal means, informal social ties became "an adaptive mechanism" (Lomnitz 1988, p.

43). Ledeneva (1998) refers to these social ties by the term *blat*, which is Russian for "an exchange of favours of access" (p. 37). She claims that *blat* is different from forms of corruption and bribery because it relies upon acceptable and honourable mutual support for others, be they friends, acquaintances or strangers.

These two types of social networks demonstrate that there was social capital in the Soviet Union, but it was spread among informal networks. Besides, the presence of interpersonal networks also indicates the presence of trust. This idea emphasises the importance of being careful and acknowledging the difference between various types of networks and trust. The "radius of trust" (Fukuyama 1995) was short, and it was spread mainly between family members and close friends, the so-called private ties. It was a personal resource that brought a sense of stability and security. Within this radius were also situated the provisional ties that were interconnected with trust in strong ties. The reliance on weak ties implies access to scarce resources, with close friends or family members very often acting as intermediaries of trust (Khodyakov 2007). If the recommendation of a weak tie comes from a trusted person, the trust one deposits in the strong tie positively influences the trust in the weak tie. But in the Soviet Union the development of high levels of interpersonal trust was in great part the result of institutional mistrust. A high degree of control over citizens' private and public lives, along with fear, power and corruption (Solomon & Flores 2003) and the inability of the Soviet government to perform its function and provide its citizens with goods and services in a poor economic setting, might explain the low level or lack of trust in Soviet institutions (Khodyakov 2007).

Thus, it may be said that these two types of social networks and trust that developed during the Soviet era correspond to Putnam (2000) bonding and bridging social capital and, correspondingly, thick and thin trust. The Soviet private ties that consisted of strong ties and feelings of solidarity, security and safety would correspond to bonding social capital and thick trust. The Soviet provisional ties needed for diverse and distant connections to acquire scarce goods would correspond to bridging social capital and thin trust. It is important to note, however, that provisional ties were the closest to bridging social capital that people could acquire during that period. If Putnam were to examine these bridging social ties and thin trust as conceptualised in the West, their level would be very low. Since associational ties and communist organisational membership were

coerced and lacked sincerity and motivation, it was difficult to develop a Western type of bridging social capital and generalised trust.

Decades have passed since the Soviet Union's dissolution, but the region's social capital has not changed or improved much since then. Except are the provisional ties which as a results of the market economy established, changed to different extents in different countries and have become partially unnecessary (Howard 2003). However, bonding ties and thick trust still play crucial roles in the post-Soviet setting. Howard (2003) argues that

> … many people are still extremely invested in their private circles and simply feel no need, much less any desire, to join and participate in organizations, when they feel that, socially, they already have everything that they could need or want (p. 28).

This quote effectively summarises the different levels and types of social capital in the post-Soviet region. It is still characterised by high levels of bonding social capital and thick trust and low levels of bridging social capital and thin trust. Widespread strong networks reduce the need or desire to get involved in more formal civic participation. Besides, the skepticism and reluctance towards the public sphere has persisted from communist times, and institutional distrust and lack of interest in civic and political life is still a widespread feature of post-Soviet countries. This means that in Moldova, as a representative of the Soviet space, tightly knit social ties, thick trust and reciprocity between family and close friends are still the main characteristics of society. At the same time, because of low levels of participation in social life and organisational membership, Moldova's bridging social capital is considered low. A consequence of withdrawing from the public sphere is that citizens have lower levels of generalised trust, less access to novel and alternative information, and fewer chances to learn new civic skills.

Taking into account the types of social capital developed in the post-Soviet Moldovan context, it is interesting to examine the extent to which social capital created online may correspond to social capital existing offline. This opens up the questions of whether social media will reproduce, supplement or compensate for social capital existing offline, and

what type of social capital is more likely to promote participation in offline protests. Since the Moldovan society is still described as having a high level of bonding social capital and people are used to trusting only those close to them, the expectation is that social media will reproduce this. Especially when taking the decision to engage in protest activities, it is more likely that people will trust and rely on online bonding ties rather than online bridging ties. This is one of the assumptions to be explored in this study.

2.5.2 Is there social capital in Moldova?

When the newly established post-Soviet democracies were passing through social distrust and civic apathy, and the World Bank stated that social capital was the "missing link in the development" (Grootaert 1998, p. 1), there was an increased interest in the concept of social capital in Central and Eastern Europe. Since then international organisations such as the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the United Nations Development Program have become involved in community-driven development projects and programs in the former Soviet states. These agencies have been advocating and supporting various projects to strengthen social capital and develop community institutions and democracy. Although there has been much comparative research into other post-Soviet countries, particularly Russia, there has been little academic research on social capital in the Moldovan context. This current study aims to build on this research and extend it.

2.6 Conclusion

The literature review presented here canvasses research on the potential of social media use for social movement participation. The literature shows that the growing political use of social media has generated academic debates that offer optimistic, pessimistic and ambivalent views on the emancipatory effects of social media (Breuer & Groshek 2014; Castells 2015; Christensen 2011b; Fuchs 2012a; Kidd & McIntosh 2016; Shirky 2011). This chapter first explains these divergent views with reference to the different social media usage patterns and the contexts in which the protests unfolded. The most researched context in the academic literature is the West, with only a few studies on the post-Soviet space. This scarcity is one of the main reasons this study concentrates on the

case of Moldova as a representative of the post-Soviet context. Besides, there are calls for more scholarly research on transitioning systems (Boulianne 2018) or third wave democracies (Valenzuela 2013) and for more integrative and critical approaches to the analysis of the impact of social media on political participation (Fuchs 2012a).

This chapter then turns to foundational research around the concept of social capital. It outlines the idea that the social connections and the resources that arise from these interactions in the online space can facilitate cooperation and engagement, not only online but also offline (Gibson & McAllister 2013; Gil de Zúñiga, Barnidge & Scherman 2017; Skoric, Ying & Ng 2009). Specifically, the focus here is on the two types of social capital that can be maintained and built on social media – online bridging and bonding social capital (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2007; Williams 2006) – and their impact on offline protest participation. And although there have been numerous studies on the types of social networks people build online (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2007; Ellison et al. 2014; Kobayashi 2010; Vitak, Ellison & Steinfield 2011; Wellman et al. 2001; Williams 2007), only a limited number have examined online social capital as a mediating mechanism between social media use and protest participation (Gibson & McAllister 2013; Hwang & Kim 2015; Skoric, Ying & Ng 2009). The findings of these studies are mixed and inconclusive. This gap and the inconsistency of results are additional reasons the current study focuses on the types of social ties that are built online and the protest-relevant resources that circulate among those ties. Significant for this study is to consider the Soviet heritage of the Moldovan society, which helps to better understand the types of social capital Moldovan users build online. This study is the first to touch upon the development of social capital in the post-Soviet online space.

CHAPTER 3: THE CASE OF THE MOLDOVAN PROTESTS

To explore the impact of social media on protest participation, this thesis is based on the case study of the Moldovan anti-government protests of 2015 which are described in this chapter. This case is relevant to the aim of this thesis because it offers crucial knowledge about the phenomenon analysed and, specifically, how social media can affect participation in protests in the context of post-Soviet countries. Case studies are defined by Thomas (2011) as:

> analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems that are studies holistically by one or more methods. The case that is the subject of the inquiry will be an instance of a class of phenomena that provides an analytical frame – an object – within which the study is conducted and which the case illuminates and explicates (p. 513).

This definition highlights the fact that case studies are about "what is to be studied" and should consist of "a thing to be explained" and "the thing doing the explaining" (Wallace 1969, p. 3) or as Thomas (2011) puts it, "object" and "subject". The object in this thesis, or the thing to be explained, is how social media use can influence and explain offline protest participation; while the subject is the Moldovan protests. The case of Moldova serves as a prism through which participation is exemplified, mirrored and explored. It is a "normal or representative" type of case study (Snow & Trom 2002, p. 158) since it offers a "fairly or reasonably typicality" (Snow & Trom 2002, p. 158) of a protest where social media use was prominent in facilitating the movement and participation.

Besides, the case of Moldova is also an exemplar of how social media might affect protest engagement in the post-Soviet space. Moldova is representative of the post-Soviet space because it is one of the 15 states that resulted from the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and shares with these a complex and firmly implanted communist legacy (Kotkin & Sajó 2002). Although the former Soviet Union countries developed different levels of democratisation and economy, they are all commonly characterised by a "post-Soviet informality" (Aliyev 2015, p. 191). Informality here refers to the informal contacts and networks that are virtually the basis of every aspect of the post-Soviet citizens' lives – political, economic, social and cultural. For instance, returning to the

concept of social capital discussed in Chapter 2, the literature indicates how informal social ties developed and persist abundantly in the post-Soviet space. The researcher herself has witnessed how kinship groups and inter-personal networks are used to get into university, obtain a job or enter politics. This intrinsic phenomenon entrenches and perpetuates the challenges that Moldova and former Soviet countries struggle with on a daily basis: nepotism, cronyism and endemic corruption (Dimitrova-Grajzl & Simon 2010; Karklins 2005); fraud and "worsening state-society relations" (Round, Williams & Rodgers 2008, p. 184); and social inequalities in general. These factors have been the cause of many protests in the former Soviet space, including the Moldovan protests, the Ukrainian Orange Revolution and Euromaidan, the Georgian Revolution of Roses, and the 2011–2013 Russian protests. Therefore, although generalisability and transferability are difficult in regard to case studies, Moldova does exemplify a post-Soviet country because it has the common problems of transition from the communist past and the informality that transcends all aspects of life (Aliyev 2015). Nevertheless, Moldova together with Ukraine and Georgia are intending to set themselves apart from other post-Soviet countries by developing closer relationships and cooperation with the European Union. This indicates that although Moldova and other post-Soviet countries might have similar reasons and ways of using social media for protest engagement, the case of Moldova might be unique.

The choice to explore social media and participation through the case of Moldova is also based on the researcher's background. The researcher herself is a Soviet-born Moldovan who witnessed the protesting events and followed them closely, mainly through digital media. Although this fact certainly impacted the process of this study (and is acknowledged as one of its limitations), it also facilitated a deep and thorough reflection on the dynamic role of social media for protest participation in a post-Soviet environment. The researcher grew up as bilingual (Romanian and Russian), a factor that emphasises the complex national identity of many Moldovans and the way they identify themselves within both the post-Soviet and Western spaces. This diversity in ethnicity and language is also mirrored in the historical and present-day ways of doing politics, the social struggles of people connected to the values of the past, and the aspirations of those who want to create new identities. That is the researcher's being Moldovan and having directly witnessed some of the historical and national transformations happening in the country has facilitated a more reflexive and in-depth interpretation of the research results.

In addition, the history of previous digitally fuelled post-Soviet Moldovan protests (the post-election protests of 2009) has impacted the choice of this particular case study because it emphasises a possible growth of the potential of social media for participation in Moldova. In April 2009, the Moldovan post-elections protests were labelled as the Moldovan Twitter Revolution (Morozov 2009b, 2009c, 2009d). International media were highlighting how the young people and their generational tools started the protest (Barry 2009; Bennett 2009; Hodge 2009; SpeigelOnline 2009). Word of the protests spreading through Twitter and other social media channels was considered significant in influencing the growing number of demonstrators (Cox et al. 2010).

Although there were less than a hundred Twitter users in Moldova in 2009 (Morozov 2009d) and labelling the protests as a "Twitter revolution" may be exaggerating, the only academic study on these protests (Lysenko & Desouza 2012) indicates that Twitter was important because of its simultaneous use with other news media and mobile technologies. Therefore, if in 2009, when the internet penetration in the country was less than 30% but digital media were already considered a characteristic of those protests, it can be supposed that six years later, in 2015, during the protests analysed in this study when the internet penetration reached more than 60% (Gramatic 2015) and 51% of the Moldovans used it daily (Institute for Public Policy 2015), the impact of social media on participation might have changed and increased too. Moreover, studies conducted in the post-Soviet context have highlighted how online media emerged as an alternative media tool and space for dissenting voices (Lokot 2014; Oates 2013); such findings highlight the possible favourable effect of social media for participation in Moldova. This current case study, therefore, can offer new insights into the impact of social media on participation.

As well, this case study is unique in Moldova's history. In a "captured state" (Całus 2015a; Cenușă 2016) with flawed institutions and a partially free media monopolised by a few oligarchic politicians, a great number of people from all over the country came together and organised the largest and longest protests in Moldova's history. The following chapter will explain the background to the Moldovan protests and illustrate its value in addressing the research questions of this study.

3.1 The theft of the century

"Theft of the century" is how international and national media described the Moldovan banking scam that deprived the country of one billion US dollars (Levcenco 2015; Rosca & Sciorilli B. 2019; Sanduța 2017; Tanas 2017). The Moldovan pro-European government that was established in 2009, despite appearing promising at the beginning, resulted in political elites competing for the control of policymaking in the country and the monopolisation of power in the hands of a few oligarchic politicians (Całus 2015a, 2016; Cenușă 2016; Konończuk, Cenușa & Kakachia 2017; Popșoi 2016b). These same politicians facilitated the methodical theft of funds from three Moldovan banks (Anticoruptie.md 2016; Barbăroșie 2015), a robbery that resulted in a hole in public finances equivalent to an eighth of the country's GDP (Sanduța 2017; Sanduța & Preașca 2016). This financial scandal triggered some of the largest and longest protests since Moldova's independence. These protests are the basis of the case study analysed in this research. This chapter thus explains how the so-called pro-European oligarchic government led Moldova not only into intense political turmoil, but also the deprivation of one billion US dollars. It first explains the scheme behind the bank fraud scandal and how Moldovan politicians were involved in orchestrating and benefiting from it. What follows is a presentation of the organisation of protests, its development and the main actors involved. Because no studies have been conducted on the Moldovan protests of 2015, the following description of events is based on analysis of national and international media news, as well as expert's comments.

Republic of Moldova, a landlocked Eastern European country sandwiched between Ukraine and Romania had never existed as an independent state within its current borders. Initially part of an independent principality for almost five centuries, Moldova was a territory of Imperial Russia, part of a reunited Romania, a Soviet republic, and in 1991 with the collapse of the USSR, it emerged as an independent and sovereign state (Parliament of Republic of Moldova 1991). The ideological heritage of the Romanian and a more recent Soviet past is a polarising issue at social, economic, geographical and political levels. The political narratives usually revolve around a pro-Moldovan, pro-Romanian, pro-Russian or pro-European policy, and the reforms and prosperity of the country are often associated with its geopolitical orientation. However, no policy turned out to be democratic. Since independence and with every new government, Moldova

seems to distance itself further from the democratic path. The first ten years of independence were characterised by a weak and fragmented party and state, tensions over national identity (Crowther 1991), weak civil society and a "traumatic economic downfall" (Tudoroiu 2011). The chaos and disillusionment associated with the first independent rulers and Soviet nostalgia gave way to the installation of a communist government in 2001. For the next eight years, Moldova was governed by a "neo-communist" regime "representing an effort to mirror the totalitarian past with the limited instruments of authoritarianism", as Tudoroiu (2011, p. 240) argued. After two terms and violent protests, the Communist party was removed from power in 2009 and replaced by loose coalitions of anti-communists calling themselves pro-Europeans. Although every new government emerged as a reaction to the previous one and as a new hope for Moldova's stability, the pro-European politicians (2009–2015) brought Moldova into the gravest political and economic instability. Oligarchs and businessmen-turned-politicians engaged in a fierce competition over the control of the state institutions, and the country faced a continuing increase in corruption and abuse of power, with all signs of state capture (Tudoroiu 2015).

Vlad Plahotniuc, the official chairman of the Democratic Party of Moldova was considered to unofficially control the state apparatus and the Moldovan political scene. According to Całus (2016, pp. 4-5), his control was based on four complementary pillars: (1) the group of Plahotniuc's close aids who hold key positions in politics and business, (2) financial power gained as a result of blackmail, takeover of private companies and privatisation of state properties, (3) the control of the administration of justice, and (4) the control of a greater part of the Moldovan press. These tools allowed Plahotniuc and his entourage to engage in a process of eliminating those who hindered his consolidation of power. Apart from the grave political instability, the high-ranking officials and others connected to them led the country into economic hardships. In 2014, it was discovered that three Moldovan banks were involved in a banking scam and one billion US dollars had disappeared.

During 2012-14, these three Moldovan banks – Banca Socială, Unibank, and Banca de Economii – were acquired by new owners who were not connected to each other. The banks started to give significant loans to companies and individuals connected to a number of Moldovan politicians and businessmen (Kroll 2015). These transactions had

"no solid economic rationale" and consequently resulted in a sudden "deterioration in each of their balance sheets that they were no longer viable as going concerns" (Kroll 2015, p. 8). The money was transferred from Moldova into offshore bank accounts (Bird & Cotrut 2016; Radu, Munteanu & Ostan 2015). Records of the transactions were deleted from the bank's computers and other documents were loaded into a vehicle that was later stolen and destroyed in a fire. The bankrupted banks were covertly bailed out by the government with loans taken from the state reserves. These emergency loans (one billion US dollars) created a hole in the public finances equivalent to an eighth of Moldova's GDP (Sanduța 2017; Sanduța & Preașca 2016). The financial scandal resulted in the depreciation of the national currency, a rise in prices and tariffs (de Jong, Abdalla & Imanalieva 2017), and a growing discontent and frustration with the governing parties. The escalation of anti-government feelings led a group of activists to organise long-lasting protests demanding the punishment of those involved in the banking theft and the resignation of government officials responsible for it. This will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

3.2 The Moldovan anti-government protests of 2015

In response to this banking scandal, a grassroots citizens' movement titled the Dignity and Truth Platform (Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr DA) was established at the beginning of 2015. The Platform aimed to become the voice of that segment of society that had been ignored and deceived for long. Consisting of social activists, analysts, lawyers, journalists and public figures, the Platform organised protests to call for full investigations into the missing one billion US dollars, the resignation of those responsible for it, and the deep-rooted problem of corruption. Although the Platform became the main organiser of the protests during 2015, there were other political parties and actors that joined the protests in the common fight against corruption. The following sections introduce and describe some of the most prominent protests that took place in 2015, the year-long period analysed in this thesis, focussing mainly on 25 January, 22 February, 5 April, 3 May, and 6 September 2015.

The first protest took place on **25 January 2015** and was organised by the members of a youth NGO called the Youth of Moldova. The impulse to organise the protest was the decision of two pro-European parties (Party of Liberals and Party of Democrats) to

constitute an alliance with the Communist party. The new alliance, dubbed "the monstrous coalition", was perceived by the Moldovan citizens as a blockade to the European course of the country and postponement of democratic reforms (Jurnal.md 2015b; Popșoi 2016a; ProTV Chișinău 2015b). An organiser of the event, Dinu Plîngău, who was to become one of the most active members of Dignity and Truth Platform and the president of the youth division of the same platform, took responsibility to ensure that the protest was authorised by the capital city council. He also promoted the event on Facebook, inviting friends and a large audience to the protest entitled *"We say NO to the monstrous coalition. We say NO to lies and betrayals"* (Plîngău, Cotorobai & Mihalache 2015). The collective action was deemed apolitical and the flags of the political parties were forbidden. It was a protest of the people, regardless of their political interests. Although the number of protesters was small, the participants wrote and submitted to parliament a petition requesting, inter alia, that it take a firm, accountable stand for governance, declare the justice and law enforcement institutions "under siege", and appoint an independent European General Prosecutor and President of the Supreme Court of Justice (IPN 2015; Tinerii Moldovei 2015a, 2015b).

The second protest was organised by two other young people, Inga Grigoriu and Liviu Vovc, who met each other on Facebook and decided to arrange a flash-mob on **22 February 2015**. They created a Facebook event under the slogan "*We want the money back. We want the country back. We want the stolen billion back"*(Vovc, Grigoriu & Bezu 2015). Between the first and second protests, future leaders and members of the Dignity and Truth Platform had met each other. On 24 February 2015, together they decided to build a new strong civil society based on truth and dignity. The Platform declared itself a nonpartisan initiative group ready to engage in dialogue with those interested in overcoming the Moldovan state captivity and setting it on the path of European integration (Privesc.eu 2015). The Platform underlined that it would rely on experts and specialists and resort to legal instruments, including peaceful protests, to fight corruption (Glasul.md 2015). Thus, the protests to follow were organised under the support of the Platform and an average two-to-three protests a month occurred. Close support was offered by the local TV channel JurnalTV, owned by a controversial rival businessman to Vlad Plahotniuc, Victor Țopa (Popșoi 2016b). Victor Țopa had been living in exile in Germany to avoid being imprisoned on corruption charges allegedly brought on Vlad

Plahotniuc's orders. Nevertheless, his channel was regarded as a significant tool for mobilising thousands of people to protest.

The demonstration of **5 April 2015** was a march of commemoration and a protesting rally. At the call of the Dignity and Truth Platform, tens of thousands of people gathered in Chișinau to engage in a "March of Silence" and commemorate the victims of 7 April 2009 violence, which was the consequence of protests over the Moldovan fraudulent parliamentary election that year. Marchers also protested against the oligarchical political system. They demanded reforms of the justice system, investigation and prosecution of those guilty of the destruction of the financial and banking system and the impoverishment of citizens, and a genuine, not mimicked, fight against corruption and punishment of those guilty for the violence of 7 April 2009 (Realitatea.md 2015). The protesters chanted such slogans as *"Thieves from governance, to jail!", "Down with the criminals", "Bring the billion back", "Plahotniuc, Voronin and Filat, down"* (referring to the chairman of the Democratic Party, the former president of Moldova and the former prime-minister), and *"We want our country back"* (JurnalTV 2015a).

The protest of **3 May 2015** was organised under the motto "Moldova awake" (Platforma Civică Demnitate și Adevăr 2015c). According to the organisers, almost 50 thousand people (or just 12 thousand according to the police) gathered again in the National Square to express their discontent with the government. Asked to come to the event without party flags but with those of Moldova and EU, the protesters demanded the restitution of the $1 billion plundered by the government; resignations of the Prosecutor, the National Anti-Corruption Centre, the National Integrity Commission, the Supreme Court, and the Court of Appeal, and the reformation of these institutions; renunciation of anti-democratic attacks on media freedom; and the fulfilment of the claims included in the resolution adopted at 5 April protest rally (Timpul.md 2015). Representatives of civil society, journalists, opinion leaders, famous singers gave speeches on the National Square before marching next to state institutions and the National Anti-Corruption Centre. The slogans were *"We are the nation", "We want the billion back", "Mafia from governance, down", "Plahotniuc do not forget, jail is your house"* (Vidu 2015). Similar rallies took place in other European cities. Dozens of Moldovans with Moldovan and European flags gathered near the Eiffel Tower to show their indignation with the current government, chanting, *"We want Europe at home"* (ProTV Chișinău 2015c). In the Italian city of Vicenza,

another dozen Moldovans came with placards calling for the resignation of corrupt and incompetent officials, and for jobs and decent wages in their home country.

Although these protests were a huge surprise to the government, which had not expected high attendances, the next day Adrian Candu, the speaker of the Moldovan parliament, published on his blog the confidential bank fraud report prepared by the American company Kroll (Candu 2015). The report revealed that Moldovan businessman Ilan Shor was the main participant in the scandal (Kroll 2015) and consequently, on 6 May, he was placed under house arrest (Baker 2015). His detention was considered an attempt to shift the public's attention to him and away from the other two participants in the scandal, Vlad Filat and Vlad Plahotniuc (Całus 2015b).

Figure 3.1: Large anti-government protests in The Great National Assembly Square, Chișinău, 6 of September. Demonstrators hold Moldovan and European flags and posters reading the names of different Moldovan cities whose residents are present at the protest. Source: (Mihailova 2015).

The largest civic protest since Moldova's independence took place on **6 September 2015**. The organisers estimated the number at 100,000 people (see Figure 3.1 and Figure 3.2). Protesters demanded early parliamentary elections and the resignations of the president Nicolae Timofti and the leaders of main institutions of law, and they expressed their dissatisfaction with elite corruption and the fact that prices for electricity, gas and bread were rising while salaries remained static. Meanwhile Unite, a mobile operator managed

by the state, announced that a free concert with entertainers from Moldova, Russia and Romania would take place the same day as the anti-government protest and not when would usually take place (Călugăreanu 2015). The company's gesture was seen as an attempt to disperse the protesters. However, with the help of social media, Moldovans mobilised quickly and warned the entertainers about the authorities' game. Consequently, the majority of performers from Moldova and Romania cancelled their participation in the concert. Moreover, some of the Moldovan artists participated in the civic movement and encouraged more people to join (ProTV Chișinău 2015a). Their gesture was seen as an act of courage and dignity and cheered by the people present at the demonstration. Another government tactics to diminish the amplitude of the protest were the threat to withdraw the driving licences of drivers who would transport protesters from different cities to Chișinau that day and the sabotage of two renovated trains from Ungheni and Ocnița that would arrive later to the capital (Jurnal.md 2015a).

Figure 3.2: In front of the Moldovan parliament, protesters held a poster that reads: How long are they going to make fortunes on our indifference? Where are the money? The image portrays Moldovan politicians. Source: (Moldova.org 2015)

After the 6 September 2015 protest, the organisers decided to engage in a non-stop protest action and set up a small city symbolically called "The Dignity City" (see Figure 3.3). Comprised of more than 90 tents, the protesters committed to continue protesting until

their demands were met. In two weeks, the number of tents grew to more than 300 and the city brought together dozens of people from different parts of the country (Jurnal.md 2015c; Noi.md 2015). The Dignity City resembled a typical city with its own infrastructure. It was divided into neighbourhoods and had a city council, a functional dining room, a medical centre, a donation point, and a security system (Onceanu 2015; Vasiliu 2015). For instance, the security system was formed by veterans who had participated in the independence movement and the Afghan war. They took care of public order in the city. Volunteers prepared meals for the protesters and offered medical support if needed.

Figure 3.3: Tents that formed the Dignity City. The banner reads "Stefan Voda" (indicating a district in the country) and "We love Moldova". Source: (Ețco 2015)

Later the same month, the opposition leaders announced their own protest actions. The demonstrations were backed by Igor Dodon, then president of the Party of Socialists and a pro-Kremlin sympathiser; and Renato Usatîi, a controversial pro-Russian businessman and leader of Our Party (see Figure 3.3). Like Dignity and Truth Platform they opposed the corrupt political elite and requested the dismissal of the government and announcement of early elections. They had also established their own city called the "City of Victory" and placed dozens of tents in the front of the parliament. Having left and right-wing camps was perceived as polarising the people, undermining each other's efforts, and ultimately benefiting the government. Besides, there had been various media allegations that Vlad Plahotniuc was behind the pro-Russian Igor Dodon (Całus 2018;

Popșoi 2016b; RISE Moldova 2016). Members of the Dignity and Truth Platform speculated that the opposition's protests were a political game that aimed at dispersing and hindering the protesters (Adevărul Moldova 2015; JurnalTV 2015b) (Nicolae Josan as cited in Dumbravă 2015).

Figure 3.4: The supporters of Party of Socialists and Our Party with their own protest against the government, centre of Chișinău, 27 of September 2015. Source: (Eţco 2015).

An important fact that affected future protests was the decision of the civic Dignity and Truth Platform to create a political party in opposition to the governing party. As a consequence of the government's failure to meet protesters' claims and demands, the Platform pleaded to bring people from the civil to the political society (Igor Boțan as cited in Platforma Civică Demnitate și Adevăr 2015) in an attempt to oversee and influence public policies. Thus, in December 2015, a centre-right political party called Dignity and Truth was created (Platforma Civică Demnitate și Adevăr 2015). Some of the most active members of the civic Platform became party members and the party was headed by the lawyer Andrei Năstase. One of the most important aims of the Dignity and Truth political party was to press the government for early elections. The demand for snap elections became common ground when the two opposing protest cities – City of Victory and City of Dignity – decided to join forces (Agora 2016; Gândul.info 2016; Realitatea.md 2016; Ziare.com 2016). Although the geopolitical options of the two protesting groups were antagonistic, in January 2016 the "short-term tactical" alliance was based on their mutual belief that Vlad Plahotniuc wielded too much power in the government (Vladimir Socor

as cited in Tomiuc 2016). It was decided to engage in common protests without any geopolitical slogans, reassuring voters that as soon as the alliance's goals were achieved, they would separate. Therefore, though these left and right-wing parties kept engaging in common protests, its potential decreased and the opposing camps began promoting and improving their images for the electoral campaign. The other protests that followed, although directed against the government, obtained a more partisan implication. Analysis of these is beyond the scope of this study, which focuses only on the first year of protests organised mainly by civil society against the governing elites.

3.3 Conclusion

In 2015, Moldova witnessed one of the gravest political and economic instabilities when Moldovan politicians were found to be involved in a banking fraud that deprived the country of one billion US dollars, the equivalent of an eighth of the country's GDP (Sanduța 2017; Sanduța & Preașca 2016). Impoverished Moldovan citizens took to the streets to express their dissatisfaction with the governing pro-European parties and demand the punishment of those involved in the banking scandal. The protests of 2015 became the largest in Moldova's history and are the subject of the case study analysed in this thesis. These protests make for an interesting case study of how social media may reveal its potential in the mobilisation of a protest movement. Since most of the Moldovan mainstream media was owned by the politicians involved in the theft and protested against, the question is whether social media, which still represented a free space, had any merit in involving thousands of people in street protests. To help understand how social media might have impacted people to participate in offline protests, the following chapter will first explain the research methods used to examine this impact.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter outlines the methodological approach applied in this thesis, which is mainly the two-phased exploratory sequential mixed methods research design. It first explains the rationale behind this methodological approach and defines mixed methods research. Then, it elaborates on the philosophical foundations of mixed methods research and the specific paradigmatic underpinnings used in this study. A short revision of the research questions and research process follows.

After establishing the general overview of the research study design, the chapter outlines the study's quantitative and qualitative phases, respectively. The description of the quantitative data collection and analysis includes the explanation of the survey sample and its design, the mode of administration, measurements of main concepts and the statistical analyses that were applied. This is followed by a delineation of the ways the qualitative data were collected and analysed, with a focus on questionnaire modelling and thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews. Two more sections of the chapter deal with validity in mixed methods research and the ethical considerations pertinent to this study. These are followed by a chapter summary.

4.1 Mixed methods research approach

The Moldovan anti-government protests discussed in the previous chapter present the subject that exemplifies and describes the phenomenon studied in this thesis (Thomas 2011). Through the case of Moldova, this study aimed to explore the impact of social media use on protest participation and understand whether this impact was mediated by social capital built in and related to the online context. To achieve solid results and better understand a phenomenon that had not been researched before in the Moldovan context (and very little in the post-Soviet one) when compared to the Global North, a design that combined quantitative and qualitative approaches, i.e. mixed methods, emerged to be a useful approach. The premise of mixed methods research is that by combining quantitative and qualitative research, the results are more robust since these benefit from the strength of each phase (Greene, Caracelli & Graham 1989; Tashakkori, Teddlie &

Teddlie 1998). The following definition of mixed methods research suggested by Creswell & Plano Clark (2018) was applied in this study:

> In mixed methods, the researcher collects and analyzes both qualitative and quantitative data rigorously in response to research questions and hypotheses, integrates (or mixes or combines) the two forms of data and their results, organizes these procedures into specific research designs that provide the logic and procedures for conducting the study, and frames these procedures within theory and philosophy (p. 5).

This definition highlights the core components of mixed methods research: research design, methods and philosophical assumptions. In this study, the exploratory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark 2018) was employed; this is a type of design in which quantitative and qualitative data are collected and analysed in sequence and then the results of the two approaches are integrated. Quantitative data were collected first to test the influence of social media and social capital on protest participation. Second, the qualitative data were collected and analysed in sequence to provide an explanation behind the results of the first quantitative phase, and to explore individuals' perspectives on their online interactions and constructions of social capital that were conducive to protest participation. These procedures are framed within a multiple philosophical assumptions perspective (Creswell & Plano Clark 2018). The study started with measuring variables and testing hypotheses statistically and continued with considering multiple perspectives, thereby developing deeper understanding of the research questions. This sequence of quantitative then qualitative data collection and analysis is mirrored in the shift from a post-positivist paradigm to a constructivist perspective, thus making use of two philosophical assumptions. The research design, philosophical assumptions, and methods are elaborated in the following sections to provide a full and thorough picture of how this mixed methods study was designed and conducted.

4.1.1 Philosophical assumptions

Having clear philosophical assumptions is a necessary step in conducting research because it shapes research questions, guides the selection of methodology and methods, and informs the interpretation of the findings (Crotty 1998). This means that, depending on the researcher's definition of "what constitutes reality" (ontology) and "how knowledge about reality is constructed and communicated" (epistemology), certain methodologies and methods are chosen to investigate a research project (Crotty 1998). Two of the most common philosophical assumptions or paradigms that underpin research are post-positivism and constructivism. The premise of post-positivism is that the existence of reality is independent of the researcher's thinking (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011). The researcher strives to be impartial and neutral (Leavy 2014) and the research – deterministic and cause-and-effect oriented though probability is accepted (Creswell & Poth 2018). The aim of the post-positivist researcher is to predict, explain and generalise. On the other hand, the premise of constructivism is that reality is subjective and individually constructed (Guba & Lincoln 1994) – knowledge is created as a result of the interaction between individuals and the world (Grix 2010). In constructivism, the researcher's objective is to interpret the meanings others have about the world and to acknowledge that the interpretation is bound to their personal social experiences (Creswell & Poth 2018). Post-positivism is usually associated with quantitative research, whereas constructivism is associated with qualitative research.

In the mixed methods approach, which means mixing quantitative and qualitative research methods and thus two different assumptions about how knowledge about reality is gained, the philosophical assumptions are a disputable topic. Researchers have different opinions on how or whether paradigms can be used in the development of mixed methods research (Creswell & Plano Clark 2018; Teddlie & Tashakkori 2003). Some of the most common views can be summarised in the following positions:

- There are scholars who believe that mixed methods research is not possible because the quantitative component with its corresponding post-positivist paradigm, and the qualitative component with its corresponding constructivist paradigm, are conflicting (Guba 1985; Sale, Lohfeld & Brazil 2002) and thus incompatible.

- Conversely, there are scholars who argue for the mixing of the two types of research and propose different options. Some scholars suggest the dialectical approach (Greene & Hall 2010; Greene 2005) that supports more than one philosophical stance in the same inquiry project. It advocates a dialogue between qualitative and quantitative perspectives and emphasises the natural tensions between them.

- Other scholars advocate for one best single paradigm as the foundation for mixed methods research and suggest pragmatism (Howe 1988; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2004; Morgan 2007, 2014; Patton 2002; Tashakkori & Teddlie 2003; Teddlie & Tashakkori 2009a) or the transformative perspective (Mertens 2003; Mertens 2005). In pragmatism, for instance, the important aspect of research is the outcome and researchers can subscribe to as many approaches as needed to meet the purpose of their research. It is not necessary to commit to one single philosophical assumption (Cherryholmes 1992).

- Additionally, other scholars support the multiple paradigm thesis and argue that researchers choose the paradigms according to their choice of the mixed methods design, since one single paradigm cannot explain the worldview behind each design (Creswell & Plano Clark 2018).

From the positions presented above, the multiple paradigm perspective was employed in this study. This means that two separate philosophical assumptions for each stage (Creswell & Plano Clark 2018) were used: the post-positivist for the first, quantitative stage, and the constructivist for the second, qualitative stage. The two different philosophical assumptions shape and justify the choice of the mixed methods design and, mainly, the explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark 2018) that will be explained in more detail in the next section. Quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis occurred in two distinct phases, with the quantitative phase succeeded by the qualitative one (Creswell & Plano Clark 2011).

To arrive at this position, however, the research problem that needed to be addressed came first, not the philosophical assumptions (Crotty 1998). The research problem and the strategies that seemed suitable to solve the problem served as the starting points. The

aim of this study was to understand how the use of social media could translate into protest participation. A mixed methods research design was found to be suitable because the findings of one approach (quantitative) could be corroborated with the findings of the second (qualitative), thus increasing the quality and credibility of the findings. Therefore, to gather data from a larger number of participants and test the predictive impact of social media on their participation, a methodology that would emerge from the quantitative data seemed suitable. To gather quantitative data to measure variables and test hypotheses, a survey was regarded as the appropriate technique. Thus, a methodology that would generate quantifiable answers to survey questions dictated a post-positivist stance.

The rationale that supported a qualitative strand to the study emerged from the need to explain the relationships between the concepts mentioned above, and provide an explanation behind the refutation or confirmation of the hypotheses put forward in the earlier quantitative phase. The qualitative phase facilitated an in-depth exploration of the reasons for using social media and how or whether its use built social capital conducive to protest participation. Here, a constructivist approach was taken, and the stance that meaning is created by individuals as a result of their interaction with the world and their interpretation of it. Therefore, in this study, the choice of paradigms was guided by the study context and the type of mixed methods design. The research began with a post-positivist stance in the first phase and shifted to a constructivist paradigm in the second.

4.1.2 Research questions in mixed methods research

Research questions are viewed as integral components of the mixed methods research process and vital for the selection of research design, sample size, sampling scheme, the types of instruments used, and the data analysis techniques (Onwuegbuzie & Leech 2006). Since the approach implies that the quantitative and qualitative methods are combined, the same is expected from the research questions. These can either include separate quantitative and qualitative questions or mixed methods research questions or both. A mixed methods research question can be defined as a question that "embeds both a quantitative research questions and a qualitative research question within the same question" (Onwuegbuzie & Leech 2006, p. 483). In this study, the perspective of Onwuegbuzie & Leech (2006) and Teddlie & Tashakkori (2009b) was adopted, since they

suggest using a single integrated research question that will incorporate sub-questions for both the quantitative and qualitative components of the study. In this case, the integrated question helps again to justify the choice for mixed methods approach and drives the methods used (Tashakkori, Teddlie & Teddlie 1998).

Therefore, returning to the research questions suggested in the Chapter 1, the main research question of this study is:

What is the impact of social media use on offline protest participation?

This integrated question incorporates two main sub-questions that are treated both quantitatively and qualitatively. These are presented in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Research questions for quantitative phase 1 and qualitative phase 2

Quantitative phase 1	Qualitative phase 2
RQ1. What was the role of Facebook in engaging people in offline protest participation?	
▪ What is the relationship between Facebook use (and different patterns of use) and offline protest participation?	▪ How and why did protesters and activists make use of Facebook? ▪ Which Facebook protest related roles were more important for protest participation according to protesters and activists?
RQ2. Is the role of Facebook for participation mediated by online bridging or bonding social capital?	
▪ What is the relationship between Facebook use, online social capital (bridging and bonding) and offline protest participation? Which type of online social capital is more significant for participation? ▪ What is the relationship between Facebook use, trust (social and institutional) and offline protest participation?	▪ Which online social capital (bridging/bonding) had a greater impact on protest participation and why? Could Facebook users build trust (social and institutional) that is relevant for participation?

The research questions shown in Table 4.1 explain the choice for the sequential design that is described in the following section in more detail. The design indicates that the quantitative questions come first. These are relationship questions that check trends between variables – social media use, social capital, trust and protest participation. There is also a comparative question that seeks to compare which online social capital had more impact on protest participation. After the quantitative questions are answered, the qualitative questions are addressed. These mainly seek to complement the quantitative findings and understand how Facebook users' interactions built social capital, and whether networks built online had any impact on users' decisions to join the protests.

4.2 Research process

Since mixed methods research implies collecting and analysing quantitative and qualitative data in the same study, the researcher is expected to deal with the issues of (1) timing, (2) priority, and (3) integration of the two approaches. First, (1) timing involves deciding the order in which the data are collected and analysed (Creswell et al. 2003; Greene, Caracelli & Graham 1989), which can be at the same time (concurrently) or one following another (sequentially). Second, (2) priority includes choosing which methodological approach is given priority, that is, the weight and importance the researcher gives to either the quantitative or the qualitative approach, and indeed, whether he/she treats them equally (Morgan 1998). The choice to give priority to any of the two methodological approaches (unequal weight) or treat them equally (equal weight) depends on the interest of the researcher and what he/she is looking to find out in his/her study (Creswell 2003). The third issue (3) is the integration of approaches, which refers to the stage of the research process when the quantitative and qualitative methods mix (Greene, Caracelli & Graham 1989; Tashakkori, Teddlie & Teddlie 1998). The integration may occur at the research question level, data collection level, combination of findings level, or the interpretation stage where findings are merged to bring together the results of the two data sets. Clarity about these elements facilitates the design and implementation of the mixed methods research.

Different mixed methods research designs can be modelled, depending on the sequence (timing) of data collection, the priority given to one (quantitative or qualitative) or both strands (qualitative and quantitative), and the integration of the two forms of data,

Creswell & Plano Clark (2018) have come up with three major designs that can integrate different variants. These are presented in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2: Mixed methods research designs (from Creswell & Plano Clark (2018)

Convergent parallel design	Explanatory sequential design	Exploratory sequential design
QUAN + Qual or QUAL + Quan or QUAN + QUAL	QUAN → Qual	QUAL → Quan
The notation system in the above designs means the following (Morse 2003, p. 198):		

- (+) indicates that the qualitative and quantitative phases are conducted concurrently
- (→) indicates a sequential order in data collection and analysis.
- (QUAN, QUAL) denote priority given to either quantitative or qualitative strand
- (qual, quan) indicates which strand is given less emphasis

Thus, using the typology suggested by Creswell & Plano Clark (2018) (see Table 4.2) but most importantly guided by the study purpose and research questions, this study adopted the *explanatory sequential mixed methods design* (quan → QUAL) as depicted in Figure 4.1. The word *sequential* indicates that quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis came in sequence. The word *explanatory* specifies that the data collection and analysis started with the quantitative phase. Therefore, in Phase 1, quantitative data were collected and analysed. This phase consisted of a web-based survey completed by people who participated in at least one protest. The data were analysed statistically with the help of the software Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (IBM SPSS Statistics). Since the explanatory sequential mixed methods design implies that qualitative results are used to provide an in-depth explanation of the quantitative results, Creswell & Plano Clark (2018) suggest using a sub-group of participants from the first quantitative phase as participants for the follow-up qualitative phase. Therefore, in Phase 2, quantitative survey results were used to guide purposeful sampling and identify participants for the follow-up qualitative phase. This was the first *point of integration* of the quantitative and qualitative data collection. The qualitative phase implied semi-structured interviews with protesters and activists. These allowed the researcher to elaborate and explain initial results by exploring participants' views in more depth (Creswell 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie 2010).

Phases

Procedure

Phases	Procedure

Phase 1

quan
Data collection

Web-based survey

quan
Data analysis

Data screening
Descriptive statistics
Correlation analysis
Regression analysis
SPSS quan. software

Connecting
quan and
QUAL
phases

Selection of participants for
interviews from the survey
results

Phase 2

QUAL
Data collection

Semi-structure interviews with
protesters and activists

QUAL
Data analysis

Thematic analysis
Nvivo software

Integration
of the **quan**
and **QUAL**
results

Interpretation and explanation
of the quantitative and
qualitative results

Figure 4.1: Explanatory sequential design of this research based on Creswell and Plano Clark (2018)

The next step was the *integration process* that, according to scholars, is the crucial point for a mixed methods study (Creswell & Plano Clark 2007; Creswell & Plano Clark 2011). Tashakkori & Teddlie (2010) have coined the term "meta-inference" to refer to the overall conclusion, explanation, and "integration of the inferences that are obtained on the basis of qualitative and quantitative strands of a mixed methods study" (p. 710). This goes beyond what qualitative and quantitative phases can explain alone, and the two engage in a connected data analysis. The integrative analysis also stems from the research design implemented (Creswell & Plano Clark 2007; Creswell & Plano Clark 2011; Tashakkori & Teddlie 2010). Since the research design in this thesis implies a sequential timing, the two data sets were analysed separately, the qualitative following the quantitative. Data analysis of the two phases resulted in two chapters. The first of these chapters, Chapter 5 reports on quantitative findings. The second, Chapter 6 presents mainly the qualitative results but also integrates some of the most important quantitative findings from Chapter 5. The integration of findings also occurs in the discussion chapter, Chapter 7.

The purposes of using a mixed methods research design in this thesis were for reasons of *triangulation, complementarity* and *sampling* (Bryman 2006; Greene, Caracelli & Graham 1989). First, having quantitative and qualitative strands in the same research helps to triangulate findings in order for them to be mutually corroborated. Second, it is used to elaborate and enhance the results of the quantitative phase with the results of the qualitative phase. Third, the quantitative results were used to facilitate the sampling for the qualitative approach, which is explained in more detail in section 4.2.2.

Regarding priority, this was given to the qualitative phase, although scholars (Creswell et al. 2003) suggest that priority should be given to the quantitative data in this design because it comes first in the sequence. Nevertheless, the same authors (Creswell et al. 2003) argue that with mixed methods researchers have the flexibility to innovate and adapt the design to fit their own situations. In this study, the decision to prioritise the qualitative phase is based on the aim of the study to provide an in-depth examination of the impact of social media on participation. The first quantitative findings are also significant, since these helped to construct a portrait of the protester, learn about his/her media preferences and protest participation, as well as reveal the predictive power of social media and social capital on participation.

The strengths of using explanatory sequential design reside in the implementation process being smooth and straightforward (Creswell & Plano Clark 2011; Ivankova, Creswell & Stick 2006; Morse & Niehaus 2009), because the two phases fall into clear separate stages. The following sections will describe each phase – quantitative (Phase 1) and qualitative (Phase 2) – and explain how data were collected and analysed in each phase.

4.2.1 Phase 1: Quantitative

The goal of the quantitative phase was to examine the relationship between Facebook use, online social capital, and offline protest participation. To perform this, web-based surveys were administered and a statistical analysis of the survey results was performed. This section therefore aims at describing how the quantitative phase of the mixed methods research design was conducted. It starts with the presentation of the process of selecting the sample for the survey by defining the population, sample size, design and mode of administration. The second part of the section introduces the concepts employed in the analysis and their measurement. The third part introduces the techniques used to analyse the quantitative data.

Survey sampling

A web-based survey was administered to collect quantitative data to construct the profile of the protester and explore the relationship between social media use, the generation of online social capital, and political participation. This section explains how the target population was selected and defined, and how the sample frame was set, sample size calculated and survey administrated.

To understand whether participation in the protests was influenced to any extent by Facebook use, the recruitment of participants was based on two criteria. First, participants were expected to have a Facebook account, and second, to have participated at least once at the anti-government protests of 2015. Because the protests analysed in this study took place before this research was initiated and it was difficult to reach those who participated, Facebook event pages were used to contact the population from which the sample was selected (see Figure 4.2). Organisers and activists made use of the Facebook event function to provide details of planned protests and invite potential participants. Users

could reply to the event invitation by indicating going, interested or not interested. Since Facebook keeps track of past events and these are displayed by date and location, a search of Facebook protesting events that took place in Chişinău during 2015 was performed. Nine Facebook protest events were found (Platforma Civică Demnitate şi Adevăr 2015a, 2015b, 2015d, 2015e, 2015f; Plîngău, Cotorobai & Mihalache 2015; Usatii 2015; Vovc, Grigoriu & Bezu 2015). The Facebook accounts of those who indicated that they attended those events were extracted to form a list-based sample frame (Couper 2000). Since the same people could get invited to and participate in more than one event, the names were double-checked to avoid repetition. The nine events generated a total of 8549 attendees and, after removing duplicates, the final sum of the sampling frame was 6573.
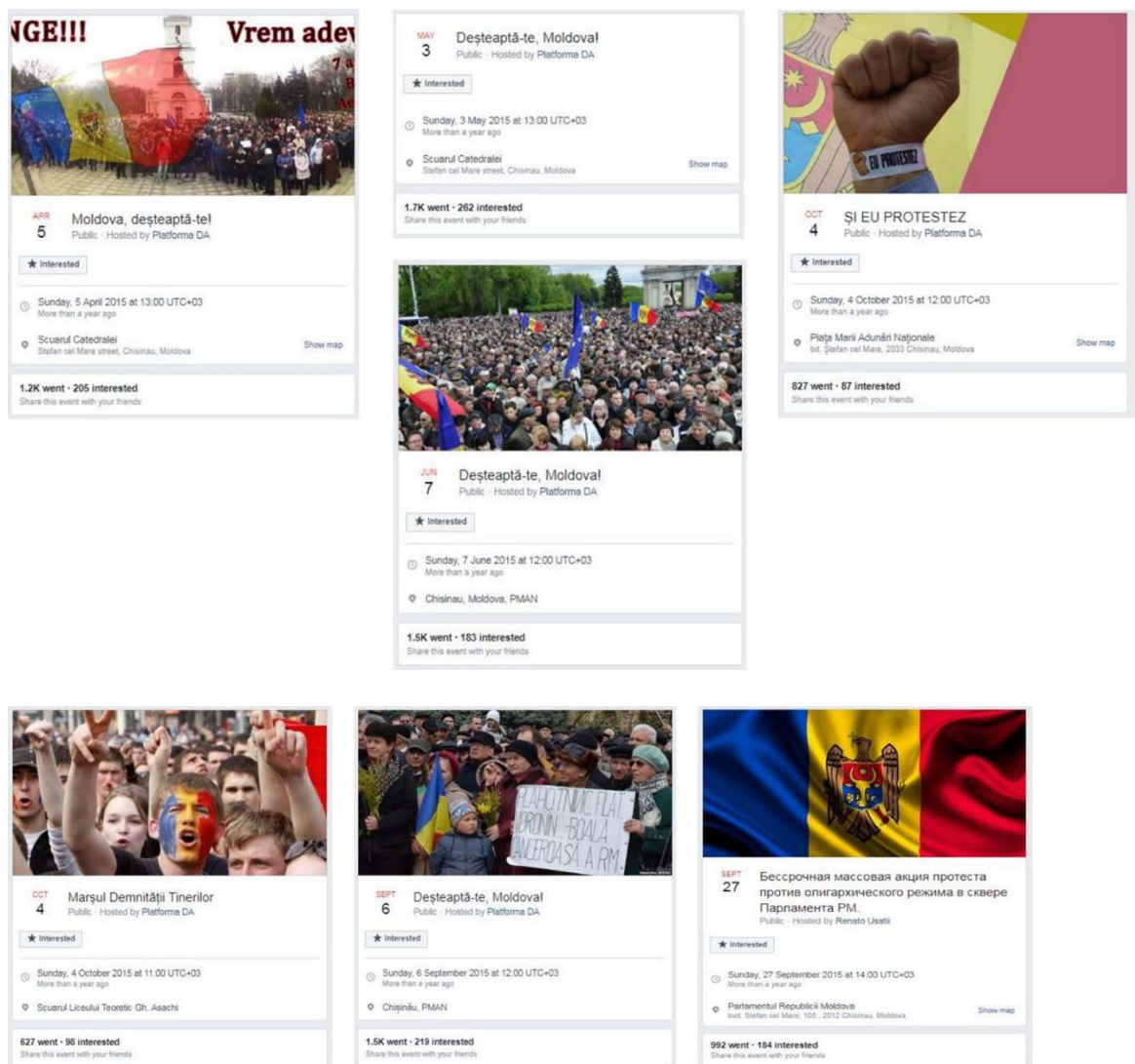
Figure 4.2: Facebook event pages of the Moldovan anti-government protests 2015

To achieve the correct sample size, the Cochran (1977) formula and the online sample size calculator of National Statistical Service at the Australian Bureau of Statistics (National Statistical Service) were used. Choosing the confidence level of 95%, as most researchers do, the margin of error was 5% and the required sample size was set at 363 participants. Expecting a response rate of 20%, a common response rate for web surveys (Lee 2010; Sax, Gilmartin & Bryant 2003), and having the number of respondents required (363), the following formula was used to calculate the number of people who needed to be invited to take the survey (Bryman 2015):

(number of respondents/expected % response rate) x 100 = (363/20) x 100 = 1815.

Thus, the number of participants required to achieve the required sample size of 363 participants was 1815.

To select 1815 participants from the sampling frame of 6573, simple random sampling was used. This sampling technique allowed every unit in the population list to have an equal probability of inclusion in the sample. Each unit from the sample frame was assigned a number and, using random numbers generated by an Excel function, the list of participants was constituted. The following steps were undertaken to select the sample:

1. The population was defined to be 6573
2. All participants in the population were assigned a number from 1 to 6573
3. The sample size (n) was decided to be 1815
4. Using an Excel function of data analysis, 1815 different random numbers between 1 and 6573 were selected
5. The participants to which the n 1815 random numbers refer constituted the sample.

After the sample was selected, participants were contacted through Facebook messaging and asked to complete a web-based survey. The message consisted of a short description of the research project and the link to the survey. To boost the response rate, the respondents who had not already sent confirmation of the completed survey were sent two follow-up messages. The surveys were written in Romanian and Russian and the respondents could choose the language they preferred, however, all surveys were

completed in Romanian. The survey was pilot-tested for comprehensiveness for both languages prior to its launch. The limitation of this survey is mainly the fact that the results are bound to social media users and protest participants; therefore, no inferences about people who were outside of this group can be made.

Measure of the concepts

The survey used in this study comprised 21 questions divided into four sections. The first section determined who the protesters were and measured their socio-demographic characteristics. The second part focused on participants' general use of media as a source of political news and which platforms they used to inform themselves about the protests. The third section measured participants' online and offline participation, that is, the protest-related activities they engaged in online and offline. The last section considered the concept of social capital and its constituting elements, social ties and trust. These were measured on two dichotomies: online bridging and bonding social ties, and social and institutional trust, respectively. The following introduces each section of the survey and explains how the concepts were measured.

1. Socio-demographics

   This section focused on standard demographic questions, such as age, gender, education, occupation.

2. General use of media

   This section assessed general and protest-related media use. The first questions checked participants' preference for media channels and the frequency of use of these channels (7 = more than once a day, 1 = never). Then, respondents were asked how they learned about the protests in regard to media use. They were offered a list of traditional and new media channels, as well as "talking to friends or family" and "other (please specify)" options to choose. This same section checked the frequency of Facebook and TV use for protest-related information (7 = more than once a day, 1 = never) and the importance of these channels for protest information and updates (5 = very important, 1 = not important).

3. Social media protest-related interaction and offline participation

This section was divided in two parts and checked for participants' protest activities online and offline.

Social media protest-related interaction

Using social media for interaction is considered a significant tool of persuasion and action online (Diehl, Weeks & Zúñiga 2016). Thus, the next questionnaire items measured the online protest-related activities participants engaged in during the protests of 2015. The Facebook interaction variable was tailored to measure such activities as the use of Facebook as an informational channel, for political talk, opinion expression and social interaction. Measured on a seven-point scale (7 = more than once per day, 1 = never), the items asked respondents how frequently they used social media to get news and information about the protest; to share protest-related information; to talk about protests with online friends and acquaintances; to express their opinion about the protests; and to stay in touch with other protesters.

First, each item was used as an independent variable to predict the value of the dependent variable – protest participation on one occasion, and social capital on another. Then, the above-mentioned items were used to form a set measuring the same underlying construct: Facebook interaction. The internal consistency of the scale was $\alpha = 0.872$.

Offline protest participation

The main dependent variable used in the majority of regression analyses and that stood for actual protest participation was measured by the frequency of protest attendance. The participants were mainly asked how often they participated in offline protests.

The other questions that focused on the type of activities participants engaged in during 2015 were used as descriptive statistics, mainly to learn how active the protesters were. The dichotomous question (yes/no) asked whether respondents joined a political party, went to a political debate, convinced others to participate in protests or were involved in the sit-ins organised by the protesters during 2015.

4. Social capital

There is no common agreement on how to measure social capital (Islam et al. 2006; Williams 2006), but it can be measured as a single construct or single components can be measured and analysed separately. This study considered the social capital components separately because it offers a more exhaustive understanding of its concept (Lasinska 2013). Scholars recommend identifying a measurable variable and then using them as proxies of social capital (Islam et al. 2006). Thus, social capital was measured in terms of social networks and trust. The social network variable examined was bridging and bonding. Trust was also measured on two dichotomies – institutional and social trust.

Online social capital

Many scholars (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2007; Hwang & Kim 2015; Molyneux, Vasudevan & Gil de Zúñiga 2015; Valenzuela, Park & Kee 2008) who explore online social capital relied on the Internet Social Capital Scale as suggested by Williams (2006). Extending the classification of bridging and bonding as conceptualised by Putnam (2000), Williams (2006) created a tool to measure social capital, online and offline. This scale was adapted later and validated by different scholars. In this study, the scale proposed by Williams (2006) and readapted by Hwang & Kim (2015) was used, the latter specifically focused on the items that were more relevant to online social capital and social movements. Therefore, online social capital was measured by two categories: bonding and bridging capital utilising a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Bonding social capital: The items to measure bonding social capital were constructed based on Williams (2006) original scale and adapted just four items relevant to our research:

1. There are several people on social media I trust to help solve my problems.
2. There is someone on social media I can turn to for advice about making very important decisions.
3. When I feel lonely, there are several people on social media I can talk to.

4. There is someone on social media I feel comfortable talking to about intimate personal problems.

Bridging social capital was measured based on the same scale but as it was readapted by Hwang & Kim (2015):

1. Interacting with people on social media makes me exchange various information and opinions.
2. Interacting with people on social media makes me learn diverse perspectives on social issues.
3. Using social media, I can understand what the important issues are in the society.
4. Using social media makes me interested in social issues.
5. I can learn about different cultures through social media.
6. Using social media, I can get specialised knowledge and information.

Trust

The trust variable was measured in regard to generalised and institutional trust. Zmerli & Newton (2008) suggest that the chosen approach to measure trust may affect the results of the empirical analyses and multi-point scale measurement is more valid and more substantively detailed than dichotomous measurements (Lundmark, Gilljam & Dahlberg 2016). Therefore, *generalised trust* was measured by two questions applying the classic trust question (Rosenberg 1956, 1957) with a multi-point scale (1 to 7, where 1 = disagree and 7 = agree) measurement to form a more valid trust scale. The questions were:

1. Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you cannot be too careful in dealing with people?
2. Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance or would they try to be fair?

These questions were simplified because decreasing the number of words in the generalised trust questions makes it easier for the respondents to understand and it produces an equally valid measurement as Lundmark, Gilljam & Dahlberg (2016)

argue. Thus, using a minimally balanced wording, the above questions sounded like this:

1. In your opinion, to what extent is it generally possible to trust people?
2. In your opinion, would most people try to take advantage of you if they could?

As for the *institutional trust*, the respondents were asked how much confidence they had in the government, judicial system, politicians, traditional media on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = completely distrust, 7 = completely trust).

Table 4.3 presents the actual questions used in the survey and the ways they were coded for further data analysis.

Quantitative data analysis

The quantitative data received through web surveys were analysed with the help of the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS). First, the data were organised by coding of the responses, creating variables and entering them into SPSS. This process prepared the data for descriptive and inferential statistics. First, the descriptive statistics allowed for describing and summarising the data. This helped in the identification of the protesters in terms of age, gender, occupation and education, their media preferences, and their participation at protests.

Inferential statistics helped to assess the relationship between different variables to determine whether these were statistically significant and how much of the variation in the dependent variable was explained by the independent variable. Thus, the regression analyses helped to test hypotheses and understand the direction and magnitude of the relationship between social media and digital social capital and whether these could explain protest participation. The hypotheses put forward in this study are defined in the analysis chapter (Chapter 5).

Table 4.3: Coding of survey questions

Variables	Questions	Scale	Coding method
Age	What is your age?	1 to 7	1 = 18 – 24; 2 = 25 – 34; 3 = 35 – 44; etc.
Gender	Gender	0 to 1	0 = Male, 1 = Female
Employment	Employment. Are you…?	0 to 6	1 = Full-time employed; 2 = temporary unemployed; 3 = self-employed; 4 = unemployed; 5 = student; 6 = other.
Education	What is the highest education level you have completed?	1 to 6	1 = lyceum; 2 = vocational school; 3 = college; 4 = bachelor degree; 5 = master degree; 6 = PhD
Media use for news	How often do you use the following media for news?	1 to 7	1 = never; 7 = more than once a day
Learning about the protest	How did you first learn about the protests that happened in 2015?	1 to 15	Coded as dichotomies, 1 = ticked, 0 = not ticked
Importance of different media for protest-related news and information	How important were the following media to get news, updates and information about the protests that took place in 2015?	1 to 5	1 = not important; 5 = very important
Protest participation frequency	How many street demonstrations did you attend during 2015?	1 to 10	Original coding
Types of protest participation activities	Were you engaged in the following activities during the protests in 2015? ▪ Became a member of a political party ▪ Lived in one of the tents placed in the centre of Chisinau ▪ Went to a political debate ▪ Shared information about the protests to others ▪ Convinced friends to join the protests	0 to 1	0 = no; 1 = yes
Social media protest-related interaction	How often did you use Facebook to ▪ Get news and information about the protest	1 to 7	1 = never; 7 = more than once a day

Variables	Questions	Scale	Coding method
	▪ Stay in touch with other protesters ▪ Talk about protests with your friends ▪ Talk about protests with strangers ▪ Express your opinion about the protests ▪ Share information about the protests		
Social capital	For each of the questions below, choose the responses that best characterise how you feel Online bridging social capital ▪ Interacting with people on Facebook makes me exchange various information and opinions ▪ Interacting with people on Facebook makes me learn diverse perspectives on social issues ▪ Using Facebook, I can understand what the important issues are in the society ▪ Using Facebook makes me interested in social issues ▪ I can learn about different cultures through Facebook ▪ Using Facebook, I can get specialised knowledge and information Online bonding social capital ▪ There are several people on Facebook I trust to help solve my problems ▪ There is someone on Facebook I can turn to for advice about making very important decisions ▪ When I feel lonely, there are several people on Facebook I can talk to ▪ There is someone on Facebook who I feel comfortable talking to about intimate personal problems	1 to 5	1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree
Social trust	How much do you agree with the following statements? ▪ To what extent is it generally possible to trust people? ▪ Would most people try to take advantage of you if they could? ▪ Do people try to be helpful most of the time?	1 to 7	1 = disagree; 7 = agree
Institutional trust	To what extent do you trust the following institutions? ▪ Government ▪ Justice system ▪ Politicians ▪ Mass media	1 to 5	1 = distrust very much; 5 = trust very much

4.2.2 Phase 2: Qualitative

As already noted, the goal of the second, qualitative phase was to elucidate the statistical results obtained in the first, quantitative phase and to explore the results in more depth. To do so, semi-structured interviews with protesters and activists were conducted. This section therefore explains the sample frame and size of the interviews, the questionnaire modelling, and how the qualitative data were analysed.

Semi-structured interviews: sample frame and size

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the data collection method for the qualitative phase. Apart from the set of the same questions to be answered by all the interviewees, the semi-structured interviews allowed additional questions that were not anticipated at the beginning of the interview to explore or clarify some of the issues discussed (Brennen 2012). Emphasis was on how respondents framed and understood the issues and the importance they gave to explain certain points (Bryman 2015). This type of interview allowed both the researcher and the respondent freedom while ensuring that all relevant topics were covered during the conversation. The interviews were divided in two parts: first, with protesters, and then with a number of activists and the organisers of the events. Descriptions of the sample frame and size for the two parts of the interview phase now follow.

Sample frame

To choose the participants for semi-structured interviews, purposeful sampling (Patton 2002) was used. The logic of purposeful sampling, according to Patton (2002), is to select "information-rich cases" (Patton 2002, p. 230) from which the researcher can obtain detailed insights and in-depth knowledge of the studied topic. Since the main aim of this study is to explore the impact of social media on protest participation, users of social media who protested represent "information-rich cases" that possess, by virtue of their experiences, the knowledge of the phenomenon researched. Thus, the selection of participants for the first part of interviews (interviews with protesters) was based on the results of the first, quantitative phase results. At the end of the quantitative survey, participants were given the option to participate in an interview with the researcher. If

they chose this, they were redirected to another link where they had to answer a few demographic questions and leave their contact details. There was no connection between the survey link and the one that redirected participants to the pre-selection interview link, which means the survey was still anonymous for those who agreed to participate in interviews. In the consent form, they were given the choice to leave their real name or a pseudonym. Participants were selected from the quantitative results, which means that they meet the same criteria and represent protest participants who made use of social media.

As for the second phase of the interview, that is interviews with activists and organisers of the protests, snowball purposive sampling technique was used (Patton 2002). Based on the first part of interviews with protesters, a few key names were mentioned repeatedly as information-rich people, important activists and organisers. Thus, the people recommended as valuable by protesters were contacted for a more detailed exploration of the role of social media for protest participation. According to Fuchs (2012b), the only way to determine the real role of new media for protests is to talk to the activists themselves and understand how they used it, and this was the aim for the second phase of the interviews.

Sample size

Scholars claim that the ideal number of participants for a qualitative study is found by conducting interviews until saturation, which is the point at which all questions have been explored in depth and no new themes would emerge if new interviews were held (Charmaz 2006). Though saturation is considered quite a flexible concept, most scholars agree that saturation can be achieved at a comparatively low level (Guest, Bunce & Johnson 2006) and generally do not need to be greater than 60 participants (Charmaz 2006; Creswell 1998). Bertaux (1981) suggests that 15 should be the smallest number of participants for a qualitative study, while Ritchie, Lewis & Elam (2003) claim that the sample should "lie under 50" (p. 84). For this study, it was decided to aim for a sample size that constituted 20 to 25 participants, this being the most common sample size for qualitative studies (Bertaux 1981; Charmaz 2006; Mason 2010; Ritchie, Lewis & Elam 2003).

Interview questionnaire

One of main aims of the second, qualitative phase was to understand and explain the results of the quantitative phase. That is why the results of the statistical analyses of the quantitative phase contributed in shaping the questions for interviews of the qualitative phase. Though these details were always kept in mind during interviews, the interview questionnaire was mainly divided into different but interrelated thematic sections: protest participation; general media and protest-related Facebook use; and social capital. The first section of questions intended to explore participants' engagement in street protests. First, respondents were asked about their personal reasons and motivations for protesting – this being a neutrally formulated question without suggesting any category for possible answers. Next, protesters were asked about the types of protesting activities they were involved in, the frequency of their participation, who they participated with and the sources they used to keep themselves updated with the progress of the protests.

The second section of questions aimed to examine participants' media uses. Participants were asked about their preferences for traditional and new media channels for news and information, the reasons for using the mentioned channels and their personal assessment of the quality of news and information provided by those channels. After, the interviewees discussed how they learned about the protests for the first time and if that was from a media channel, then which media channel. They were also asked about the media sources they used during the protests to receive new information and updates. These questions were also influenced and directed by the results of the survey part that focused on protest-related media use.

The questions that followed next were more specific, and they concentrated mainly on the roles of Facebook for protest participation. Since the quantitative phase had already demonstrated a significant statistical relationship between social media and participation, this set of interview questions aimed to see how exactly participants used Facebook during protests and whether they engaged in protest-related activities online. Participants were asked if they engaged in online debate, that is, commented, shared or posted protest related information; talked to and with their online community about protests; received or sent protest invitations; and became members of protest-related groups or friends with people they met online. The next questions allowed protesters to talk about their personal

opinions on the role and impact of Facebook on their own and others' protest activities. The last question of this section was: What was the way from Facebook use to actual protest participation?

The last section of questions revolved around the concept of social capital. First, participants were asked about their social media community; their interaction with their online strong and weak ties; the resources they acquired from each type of ties; and which ties and resources had a stronger impact on their decision to participate in street protests. Since the survey of the quantitative phase did not include questions related to offline social capital, this was compensated for in the interviews. Respondents were asked about people in their offline community, the ways they interacted with their offline strong and weak ties in regard to protest engagement. As for generalised and institutional trust, questions were tackled as in the quantitative survey, except that respondents had more time and space for deliberation.

Qualitative data analysis

The textual data of interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a process of identifying, organising, describing and reporting patterns or themes within the data set (Braun & Clarke 2006). A theme is a pattern of meaning that is related to the research question and says something about the issue under study. Thus, thematic analysis is not only a way of describing data, but is used to interpret and make sense of them (Clarke & Braun 2017). In this study, a top-down thematic approach was adopted (Boyatzis 1998; Bulmer 1979). This means that themes came from the characteristics of the topic, the researcher's theoretical orientation and the established definitions of the main concepts mentioned in the literature review (Bulmer 1979; Strauss 1987). It was not simply a data-driven thematic approach. The themes emerged from the understanding of the concept of social capital and social media as precedents of protest participation. This approach also dictated that the themes be identified at a latent level. This implies analysing themes beyond the simple meaning of the words and underlying "ideas, assumptions and conceptualisations" (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 84). It involved interpretative work. This type of analysis is drawn from a constructivist worldview (Burr 1995) and serves as another justification for the research design that includes this paradigmatic approach to the second strand of this project.

Regarding the actual thematic analysis, the outline suggested by Braun & Clarke (2006) was used to guide the analysis. The familiarisation with data started with the transcription of interviews and consequent repeated reading of them. The second step was the generation of initial codes that were sorted into potential themes. These comprised 35 broad categories that included types of online activities participants engaged in; ways and reasons of using Facebook; interaction within the bridging and bonding group of ties, online and offline; protest participation and protesters; use of television and the quality of its news; offline bonding relationships, etc. After the themes were identified, they were refined, defined and named. This helped to delineate what a theme was about and what aspect of the data each theme captured. It is important to note that the analysis implied a constant move throughout the phases and so it was first coded manually; then, to facilitate organisation, the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software NVivo was used. This allowed for a smoother process of looking for patterns of codes and links between codes across the data.

4.3 Validity in mixed methods research

Validity in mixed methods research is a major issue scholars try to resolve. It refers to "the ability of the researcher to draw meaningful and accurate conclusions from all the data in the study" (Creswell & Plano Clark 2007, p. 146). Based on different approaches and debates on validity in mixed methods research (Clark & Ivankova 2016; Collins 2015), Creswell & Plano Clark (2018) have devised general principles to guide the evaluation of validity, specifically regarding the research design. These recommendations were taken into account, and validity was addressed, first within the context of each strand, qualitative and quantitative, and then of the mixed methods research by "employing strategies that address potential threats to drawing correct inferences and accurate assessments from the integrated data" (Creswell & Plano Clark 2018, p. 251). Validity threats are different for each research design. For explanatory sequential design such as the one used in this research, some of the possible threats might be "not explaining surprising, contradictory quantitative results with qualitative data" and "not connecting the initial quantitative results with the qualitative follow-up" (Creswell & Plano Clark 2018, p. 252). Thus, to minimise the first problem within this research, follow-up questions of the qualitative phase delved into unexpected results of the first phase. To reduce the second problem, the survey results were purposefully used to select

participants for the follow-up qualitative phase and, based on interviewees' suggestions, information-rich participants and activists were chosen for a better explanation of the quantitative results.

4.4 Ethical considerations

This research underwent an ethics review process and was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (ETH17 – 1492) of the University of Technology Sydney, adopting and abiding by the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research. First, participants' privacy and confidentiality were respected at all stages of the research and anonymity was guaranteed. Participants were informed about the purpose of data collection, procedure and risks of the research. They were also acquainted with the fact that they could withdraw at any time from the study and, if they had any concerns, they could contact researcher's supervisor or the university research ethics officer.

The data were handled in a way as to ensure participants' anonymity and confidentiality. The confidentiality of participants was protected by de-identification. Each participant was assigned an ID and the list with their details was securely stored with a password separately from data documents. Identifying information was destroyed as soon as it was no longer needed. The presentation of the participants was done in such a way as to avoid them being identified.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter focused on the methodological approach applied in this study, mainly the explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark 2018). This means that two different but overlapping data sets were collected and analysed, the first being quantitative (Phase 1) and the second qualitative (Phase 2). Therefore, in order to study the predictive power of social media and social capital on protest participation, the quantitative phase used survey data and a statistical analysis of it. For a better understanding of the quantitative results and an in-depth analysis of the impact of social media, the second, qualitative phase involved interviews with protesters and activists and a thematic analysis of the data. The inferences of the two phases were integrated into an overall conclusion and explanation. The implication and expectation of using the mixed

methods design consisted in gaining robust, accurate findings and a better understanding of the potential of social media for protest participation.

CHAPTER 5: QUANTITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This chapter presents the interpretation of the results of the quantitative strand (Phase 1) of the mixed methods research design applied in this thesis. It aims to answer the three quantitative questions put forward in the methodology chapter, Chapter 4:

1. What is the relationship between Facebook use (and different patterns of use) and offline protest participation?
2. What is the relationship between Facebook use, online social capital (bridging and bonding) and offline protest participation? Which type of online social capital is more significant for participation?
3. What is the relationship between Facebook use, trust (social and institutional) and offline protest participation?

The chapter proceeds by introducing the descriptive statistics before discussing the relationship between social media, social capital and protest participation. It first presents the portrait of the protesters in terms of socio-demographics, their uses of media, participation at protests and levels of social capital. Then, the chapter introduces the hypotheses related to the above-mentioned questions and presents the results from the regression and correlation analyses used to test whether the suggested hypotheses were supported at a statistically significant level.

5.1 Response rate

With a required sample size of 363 participants and expecting a response rate of 20%, 1815 online surveys were sent to people who indicated "going" in the Facebook protest events. Of a total number of 1815 surveys administered, only 190 surveys were completed. Four cases were discarded due to high levels of incomplete, incoherent or missing information for a final count of 186, which constitutes a response rate of 10.25% (Kviz 1977) (response rate = number of completed surveys/number of surveys sent). The low response rate can be explained by the nature of the case study analysed and the survey's mode of administration. First, the use of Facebook to support or denigrate a certain political group witnessed a rapid increase in the Moldovan online environment

since 2015, when the protests started (Macovei et al. 2017). And since this research aims at analysing a sensitive political topic, a great number of respondents refused to complete the survey on the basis that the researcher was acting on behalf of politicians. Besides, there is a very low level of social and institutional trust in the country (Petruți & Bejenari 2017) and people find it hard to trust people they do not know personally and who enquire about their participation at protests against political elites.

Second, because the surveys were sent through the Facebook Messenger application, the researcher's profile was blocked numerous times. This happened mainly because Facebook blocks profiles which send many messages to people who are not in their Facebook friends list. In addition, because of people's mistrust or fear of getting spam or viruses, many Facebook users marked the survey message as unwelcome. This was another reason Facebook blocked the researcher's profile. However, although the response rate is admittedly low, many studies that use web surveys report response rates below 20% (Lee 2010; Sax, Gilmartin & Bryant 2003) and many others demonstrate that response rates below 10% are not uncommon (Fricker 2008; Porter & Whitcomb 2003; Sánchez-Fernández, Muñoz-Leiva & Montoro-Ríos 2012).

5.2 Descriptive statistics

This chapter introduces the descriptive statistics and the findings are discussed according to the four sections of the survey administered. These are socio-demographics, protest-related media use, offline and online protest participation and social capital.

5.2.1 Socio-demographics

The first survey section sought to identify who the protesters were in terms of sex, age, education and employment. The findings are presented in Table 5.1 and Figure 5.1. According to the survey, Facebook users who most attended the protests were in the age groups of 18–24 (33.9%) and 25–34 (44.6%), this being almost consistent with the age of the Moldova's overall Facebook users – the age group of 18–34 represents 64% of the total number of users (Gramatic 2015). The average (Mean) age of respondents was found to be 29 with a standard deviation (SD) of 9.11 (average age = 29±9.11). A slight majority

were males (58.1%) compared to females (41%), almost the opposite when compared to the Moldovan population of Facebook: 42% males, 58% females (Gramatic 2015). As for occupation, the largest group of participants were full-time employees (57%), slightly higher when comparing with the overall population (39.7 %) (National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova 2015) and the second largest being students (21%). The sample population is also highly educated. Almost half of the protest participants who answered the survey had a Bachelor degree (49.5%) and approximately 80% of the protest participants hold a higher education degree (Bachelor, Master and PhD).

Table 5.1: Socio-demographic summary by category (age, gender, employment, education, N = 186)

Age groups	Frequency	Percentage (%)
18–24	63	33.9
25–34	83	44.6
35–44	28	15.1
45–55	7	3.8
55–64	3	1.6
65–74	2	1.1
Gender		
Male	108	58.1
Female	75	40.3
No answer	3	1.6
Employment		
Full-time	106	57.0
employed	15	8.1
Temp. unemployed	23	12.4
Self-employed	2	1.1
Unemployed	39	21.0
Student	1	0.5
Other		
Education		
Lyceum	13	7.0
Vocational school	8	4.3
College	18	9.7
Bachelor degree	92	49.5
Master degree	50	26.9
PhD	5	2.7
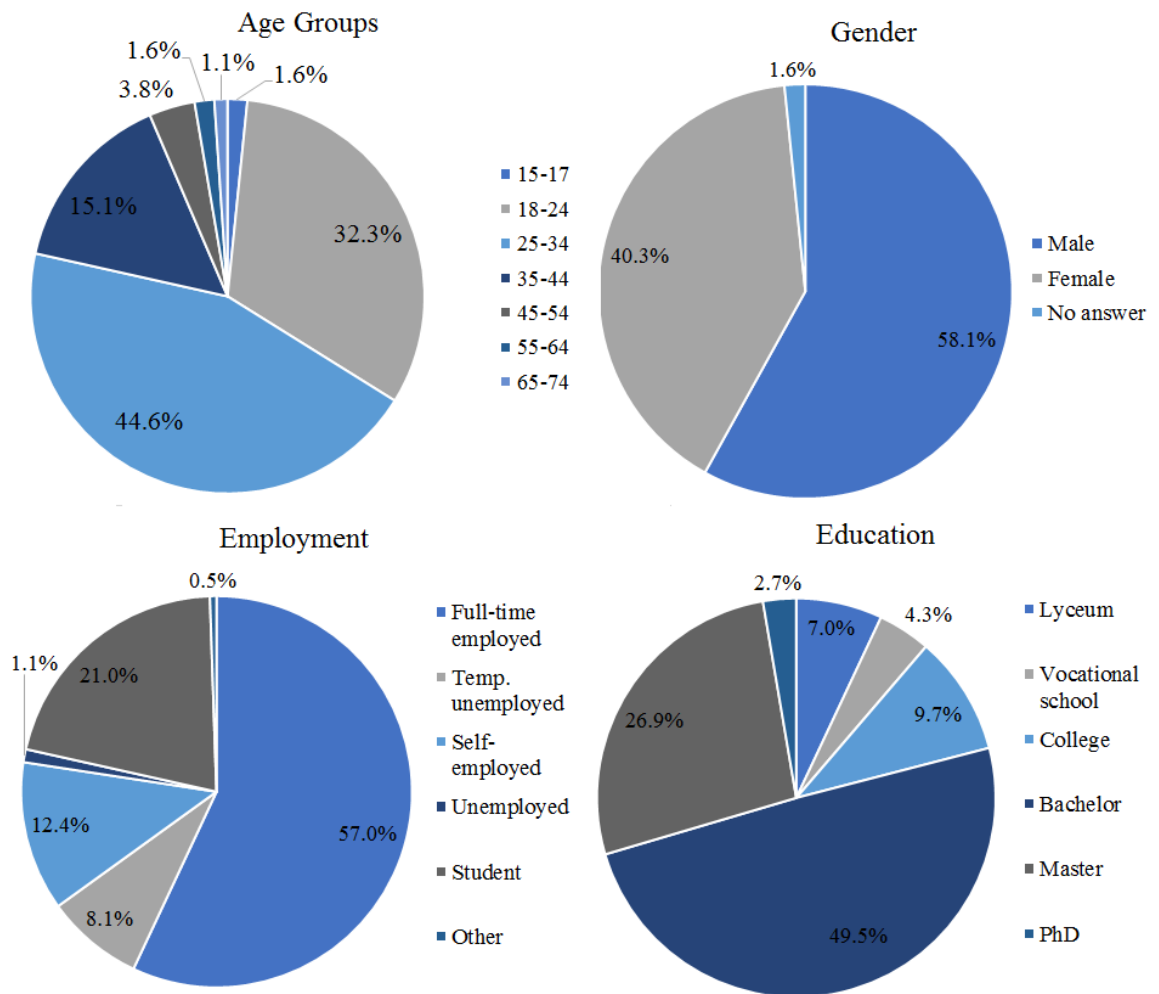
Figure 5.1: Socio-demographics by category (age, gender, education, employment, N=186)

5.2.2 Media use for protest-related information and news

The second section of the questionnaire gathered data about the participants' preferences for traditional or new media, which media they used for protest information and updates, and how or whether they used Facebook for protest-related activities.

Thus, the first question checked for the *frequency of different media uses as main sources of news* with a seven-point response where 1= never, 7 = more than once a day. Facebook and online portals were the media channels mostly used, where 73.7% of participants used Facebook and 54.3% used online portals more than once per day. Television followed, with 22.6% of respondents using it once a day and 15.1% more than once a day. Talking to friends and family in order to learn and exchange news was chosen by 20.4% of respondent who did it once a day, and the same number of participants (20.4%) did it

at least three times a week. The most chosen answer for Odnoklassniki (78.5%), Twitter (76.3%), newspaper (51.1%) and radio (25.8%) was never.

Regarding the *importance of different media channels for protest information, news and updates* (1 = not important, 5 = very important), Facebook and online news were considered as very important (Mode = 5) by 55.3% and 47.3% of participants respectively. Getting protest-related information by talking to friends was important (Mode = 4) to 41.5%, as was watching television for 34.9% of respondents. However, Odnoklassniki (75.8%), Twitter (74.2%), newspapers (43%) and radio (29.6%) were regarded as not important by the majority of respondents (Mode = 1).

The frequency of media use may be positively related to the importance of media for protest information and updates. To check this relationship, the Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated and the results are presented in Table 5.2. It demonstrated the following: the frequency of Facebook use was positively related to the importance of Facebook as a source of news and updates about the protests (r = .470), with the strength of the correlation being medium (r < .5), following Cohen (1988). This means that the importance of Facebook for protest news increased with time spent using Facebook. The same happens with other types of media channels, meaning that the more one used a certain media the more important it became for protest updates.

Table 5.2: Correlation between frequency of media use and its importance for protest related information

Frequency of use	Importance for protest information, news	
	Facebook	.470**
	Online	.584**
	Talking with friends	.330**
	TV	.514**
	Radio	.478**
	Newspaper	.500**
	Odnoklassniki	.683**
	Twitter	.583**

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)

The next question of this section asked participants *how they first learned about the protests*. The results are presented in Table 5.3. First, the participants were offered the

same options as in the previous question only that television was specified, and the names of different TV channels were presented. The respondents also had the choice to choose more than one answer. One hundred and eighty-five respondents ticked 455 boxes in total, meaning that they learned about the protest from different sources. As in the previous question where Facebook was the most followed media channel for news, it had also the highest score as the source used by the respondents to learn about the protests (30.5%). Television that was usually used once a day was also important to learn about the protests, however not all TV channels selected except one, JurnalTV (23.5%). Talking to friends and family was the source for 18.5% of participants and online news for 13.6%.

The other TV channels mentioned in the questionnaire were not important as sources from where the participants could learn about the protests. ProTV, a private generalist channel scored 5.9% while other TV channels that belonged to the media holding of Vladimir Plahotniuc (PublikaTV, PrimeTV, Canal2, and Canal3) and the national state television channel Moldova 1 corresponded to one or less per cent of the participants who used these to find out about the protests. The difference between JurnalTV and the other channels can be explained by the fact that JurnalTV was the only mainstream media that openly supported the protests and its organisers, and thus it served as a significant informational source for the participants. The other TV channels, and mainly those that are owned by Vladimir Plahotniuc, were on the contrary against the protests and offered less or disparaging coverage of the events. Considering other media channels, 2.9% of participants learned about the protests from radio and less than 1% from newspapers, Twitter and Odnoklassniki.

Table 5.3: How did you first learn about the protests that took place in 2015?

		Responses		Per cent of cases
		N	**Per cent**	
	Facebook	139	30.5%	75.1%
	JurnalTV	107	23.5%	57.8%
	Talking to friends	84	18.5%	45.4%
	Online	62	13.6%	33.5%
	ProTV	27	5.9%	14.6%
	Radio	13	2.9%	7.0%
How did you	Publika	6	1.3%	3.2%
first learn	Odnoklassniki	5	1.1%	2.7%
about the	PrimeTV	3	0.7%	1.6%
protests?	Newspaper	2	0.4%	1.1%
	Twitter	2	0.4%	1.1%
	Canal3	2	0.4%	1.1%
	Moldova1	1	0.2%	0.5%
	Canal2	1	0.2%	0.5%
	Missing	1	0.2%	0.5%
Total		455	100.0%	245.9%

Note: Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1

The following question touched upon the *representation of protests on television and Facebook*. Respondents were offered different possible adjectives (based on the literature on the representation of social movements in media (McLeod & Hertog 1999; Shoemaker 1984) and the choice to add their own description that could better describe the way television portrayed the events and how these were also seen on Facebook. More than 40% of respondents thought that the representation of protests on television was subjective, 30% thought it was negative, 22% that it was violent. Less than 20% of respondents thought that television covered the protests as being pointless (17%), dangerous (16%) and deviant (13%). These results are consistent with traditional studies on media and social movements, which point out that protests that have contrary viewpoints to those of the elite are inclined to receive unfavourable coverage (McLeod & Hertog 1992; Shoemaker 1984). In the case of the Moldovan protests, the movements were against corrupt politicians and government, that is the elite, and hence the negative coverage. Respondents' comments on their choices offered their own views on the reasons of this kind of coverage. A great majority emphasised the fact that the representation of protests depended on the TV channel. Hence, those controlled by politicians represented the protests as "dangerous for the society, state and stability" (surveyed participant 9), the news was hostile towards the protesters, "distorting the

reality" (surveyed participant 60) diminishing the number of participants and portraying them as "violent" (surveyed participant 107).

However, another 40% of respondents thought the depiction of protests was positive and almost 30% decided that it was encouraging others to join the movements and that the protesters were depicted as brave (18.3%) and objectively (19.4%). These response choices were explained by the fact that this positive representation was seen only mainly on JurnalTV, the TV channel that supported the protests. JurnalTV described the protests as "a popular movement against the oligarchs, a noble manifesto" according to one respondent (surveyed participant 10).

As for the way protests were seen on Facebook, almost 70% of respondents thought it was positive, 60% thought that it was encouraging people to take to the streets, 30% thought Facebook showed the impartial reality and that protesters were courageous (29.6%). Less than 14% of people thought it negative (14%), violent (11.8%), useless (8.6%), dangerous (7.5%) or deviant (5.4%). Respondents also added that it depended on the Facebook pages they followed and respectively there was a whole range of news, from positive to negative. However, Facebook was the place they could get more varied information and "consequently more unbiased than in the mainstream media" (surveyed participant 58).

The way television and Facebook portrayed the protests had an influence on the importance of these two media channels for respondents as sources of news and information about the movements. Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated, and the results showed that there was a negative weak correlation between the unfavourable representation of news on TV and the importance of TV as source of information about the protests.

Table 5.4: Correlation between the representation of protests on TV and Facebook and their importance as sources for news

		Television	Facebook
Representation of protest	Negative	−.026	−.044
	Positive	.189**	.228**
	Objective	.163*	.063
	Subjective	−.028	−.040
	Violent	−.048	.018
	Dangerous	−.102	−.072
	Useless	−.205**	.003
	Deviant	.054	.064
	Brave protesters	.269**	.025
	Encouraging to join	.289**	.168*

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed)

The more negative (r = −.026), violent (r = −0.048), subjective (r = −0.028), dangerous (r = −0.102), useless (r = −.205) the description of protests was on TV, the less important the TV was for protesters as a source of news. However, there was a significant positive relationship between the positive representation of protest-related news on TV and its importance as a source, although it was a weak correlation (r = .189). The same happened with Facebook: there was a weak negative correlation between the dismissive representation of protests on Facebook and its importance as source for information and updates about the protests (r = −.044) and a weak positive correlation between the favourable and impartial representation and its importance (r = .228). The results for this correlation are presented in Table 5.4 and illustrated in Figure 5.2.
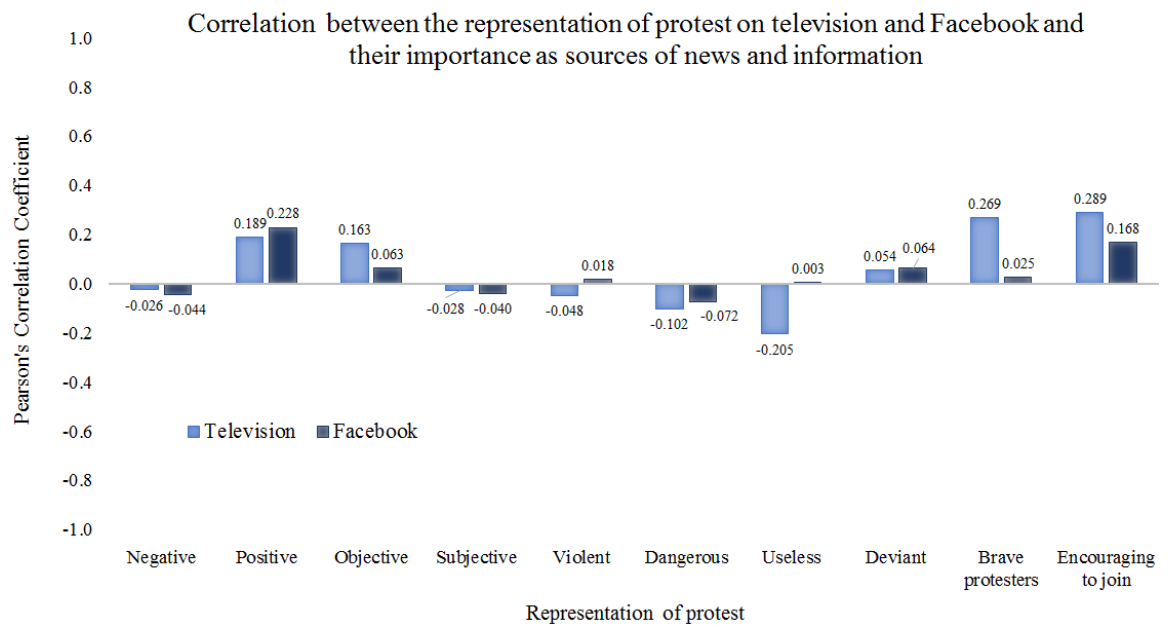
Figure 5.2: Correlation between the representation of protest on television and Facebook and the importance of these as sources of protest-related news and information

To sum up the above results, the following can be noted:

- Facebook as a media source for news was used more than once per day by almost 74% of the respondents. It had also the highest score as the source from where the respondents learned for the first time about the protests. In addition, it was the most important source for news, information and updates for the protesters.

- Online portals were followed more than once per day as sources for news and were on the same level as Facebook for importance for news updates. However, only 13.6% of the respondents learned about the protests from online portals in comparison to 30.5% who learned about them from Facebook and 23.5% from the TV channel JurnalTV.

- Television was used less often than Facebook and online pages to learn about socio-political events in general. Regarding protest news and updates, respondents stated that televidion was important for their use. And in particular JurnalTV, the general television channel, was the second most important source used by the respondents to learn about the protests.

- At least three times a week, respondents talked with friends and family members to get news in general. Close social ties were also important to learn about the protests (18.9%) and then share and get new updates about the protests.

- Other traditional media, such as newspapers and radio, as well as two social media pages used in Moldova (Twitter and Odnoklassniki) were never used as news sources in general. Besides, less than 1% of respondents learned about the protests from these media channels and they were considered not important at all for protest-related news.

5.2.3 Offline and online protest participation

This section of the questionnaire covered the types of online and offline protest activities the respondents were involved in during the Moldovan protests. The offline protest participation questions were about the *number of times respondents participated at protests* during 2015 and other *political activities they were engaged in*. Thus, the first question asked how many times respondents participated in street demonstrations. The statistics are summarised in Table 5.5, which showed that the most often number of times people took to the streets is two (Mode = 2) while the average number for protest participation is three (Mean = 3.10, SD = 2.656). This variable was used as the main dependent variable in the regression analyses to follow.

Table 5.5: Frequency of protest participation

Protest participation (how many times?)	
N Valid	184
Missing	2
Mean	3.10
Std. error of mean	.196
Median	2.50
Mode	2
Std. deviation	2.656
Variance	7.055
Skewness	1.066
Std. error of skewness	.179
Kurtosis	.703
Std. error of kurtosis	.356
Minimum	1
Maximum	10
Sum	571

Regarding the *types of activities participants engaged in during the protests of 2015*, five dichotomous questions (yes/no) were suggested (see Figure 5.3). The results showed that sharing protest-related information was the activity in which most of the respondents were involved – 75.8% out of 177 respondents. Convincing other people to join the demonstrations was nominated by 67.2% out of 178 respondents. Of 174 respondents, 18.8% went to a political debate that year, 9.1% out of 176 lived in the tents set up by the organisers of the protests and 8.1% people became members of a political party.
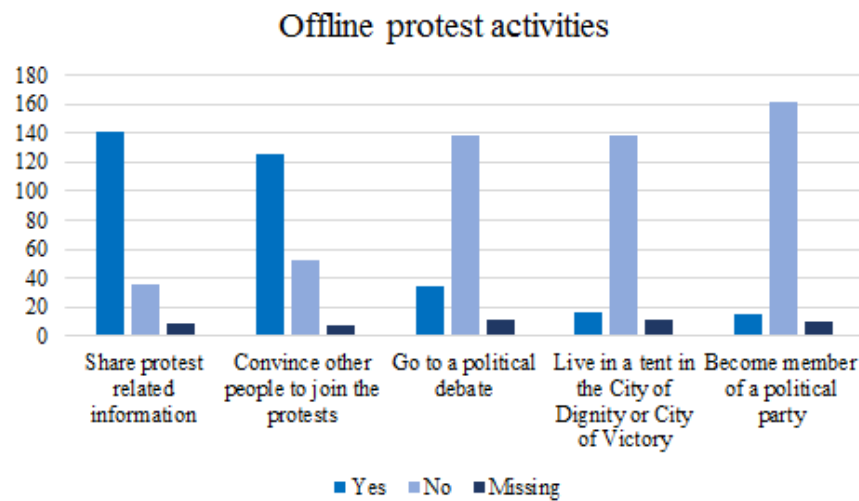
Figure 5.3: Types of offline protest activities participants engaged in during 2015

The second part of this section aimed to identify respondents' *Facebook interaction and online protest activities* (1 = never, 7 = more than once a week) and the results are presented in Figure 5.4. Thus, 70.4% of respondents reported to have used Facebook for protest-related news more than once a day and 19.4% once a day during the year of protests. Facebook was reportedly used by 82.8% of participants to share protest-related information, where 24.2% did it more than once a day and 12.9% once a month or less. Respondents claimed to have expressed their opinion about the protests on Facebook in 75.3% of cases (21% more than once a day, 14.5% once a month or less); 69.9% used Facebook to engage in discussion with their online community (21% more than once a day, 4.8 once a month or less); 57% used Facebook to stay in touch with other protesters or people interested to participate (29% more than once a day). These items were used to form the set measuring the underlying construct and mainly Facebook interaction (α = .872). This variable was treated as an independent one in the regression analyses presented in the next chapter.

Protest related Facebook use

Category	131	45	39	39	54
More than once a day	131	45	39	39	54
Once a day	36	32	26	28	21
At least three times a week	9	22	22	25	14
Once a week	4	19	16	21	10
Two or three times a month	2	12	10	8	5
Once a month or less	2	24	27	9	2
Never	2	31	43	53	75

■ Follow news about the protests
■ Share protest related information
■ Express opinion about the protests
■ Engage in discussion with Facebook friends
■ Stay in touch with other protesters or people interested in participating

Figure 5.4: Facebook protest-related interactions

5.2.4 Social capital

The social capital concept was considered according to its structural and cultural dimensions, that is social ties and trust. The social ties concept was measured in the online context on two dichotomies: bridging and bonding. The questions revolved around the online social relationships respondents had with their online community and their quality. Trust, the other component of social capital, was measured by two types, generalised and institutional trust.

For the construct of online social capital ($\alpha = .896$), measurements were adopted to gauge bridging and bonding social capital (see Figure 5.5) on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, comprising 10 items. The first four items constituted the online bonding social capital ($\alpha = .882$) and the other six indicated the online bridging social capital ($\alpha = .888$). Thus, in relation to bonding social capital on social media, 51.6% of respondents think that there are people on Facebook they can talk to when they feel lonely, 44.7% have people to talk about their intimate personal problems with, 43.6% have people on Facebook they trust to help solve their problems, and 40.9% can turn to people they have on Facebook for advice about making important decisions.
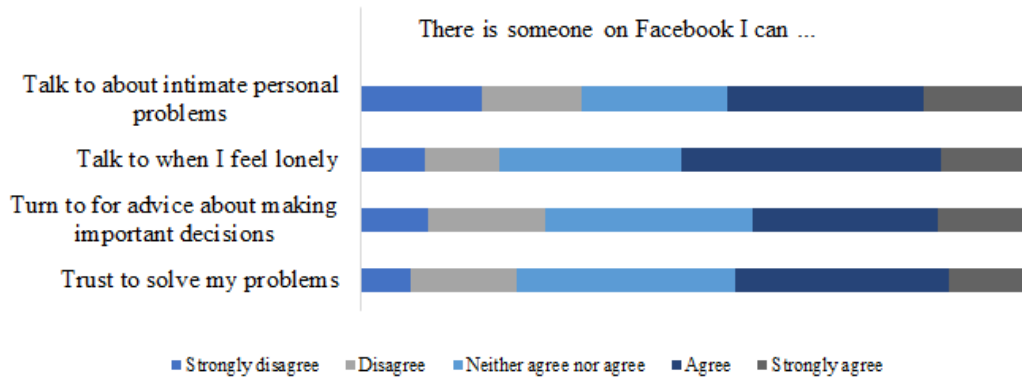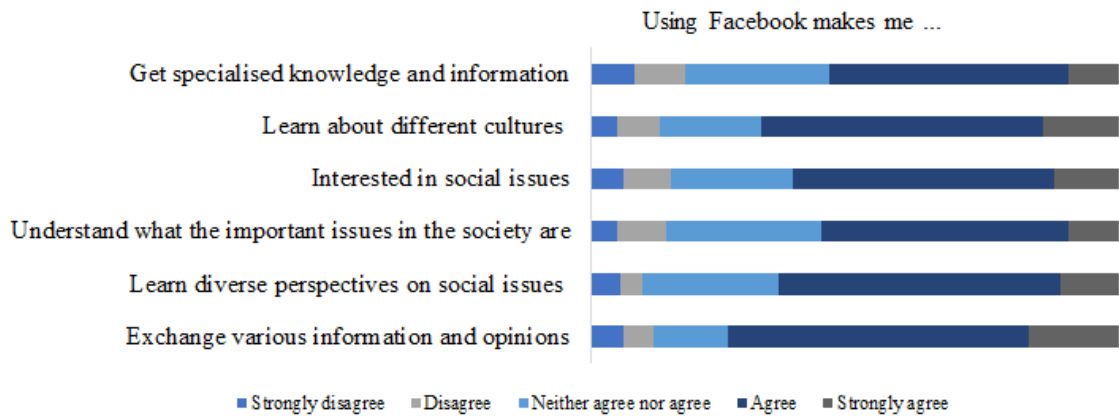
Figure 5.5: Online bonding and bridging social capital

As for online bridging social capital, 74.2% of respondents mainly agree that by interacting with people on Facebook they exchange information and opinions; 64.5% learn about different cultures and about different perspectives on social issues; 61.9% think that this interaction make them more interested in social issues; 56.5% agree that this makes them understand the important issues in society and 55% of respondents mainly agree that by using Facebook they can get specialised knowledge and information. Online social capital in general, and bridging and bonding in particular, were used as dependent variables in the regression analyses examining the relationship between Facebook use and online social capital (bridging and bonding) on the one hand and as independent variables used to predict the value of the dependent variable, protest participation, on the other. The hypotheses and results for the above-mentioned analyses are presented in more detail in Section 5.3.

Trust, the cultural aspect of social capital, was measured on two categories, generalised and institutional trust. Generalised trust ($\alpha = .674$) was used to capture the default level of trust respondents had in the society they lived. The respondents were asked on a Likert seven-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) whether they agreed or not with the suggested statements regarding trust and specifically: it is generally possible to trust others and people try to be helpful in general. Thus, the most chosen answer for both questions (Mode = 4) indicated that respondents were undecided regarding their views on generalised trust (29% for question one and 36.6% for question two). Nevertheless, almost 40% respondents were inclined to agree that it is generally possible to trust others (25.8% slightly agree, 9.7% agree, 4.3% strongly agree) and that people try to be helpful in general (26.9% slightly agree, 8.6% agree, 4.8 strongly agree).

With respect to institutional trust ($\alpha = .736$), trust in government, judicial system, politicians and mainstream media were chosen as its constituent items and were measured on a seven-point scale where 1 = distrust completely, 7 = trust completely. The results indicated that more than 80% of respondents distrust the Moldovan institutions. The low level of institutional trust is demonstrated by the following data: 93.6% of participants distrust politicians (66.7% of them distrust them completely); 93.5% distrust the judicial system (72% distrust it completely); 92% distrust the government (66.7% distrust it completely) and 81.7 distrust media (33.9% distrust it completely).

5.2.5 Who were the protesters?

The descriptive statistics helped to identify the main socio-demographic characteristics of the Facebook users who were involved in the Moldovan anti-government protests of 2015. The average age of protesters surveyed was 29, a slight majority were men with full-time jobs and half the respondents had a university undergraduate degree. Regarding their media consumption, Facebook and online news portals were regarded as very important sources of protest-related information. Almost 80% of protesters used Facebook more than once per day as a source of news and 30% claimed to have learned about the protests from a Facebook post, video, shared news, message, protest event invitation, etc. The information about protests on Facebook was regarded mainly as positive, impartial and encouraging to join the movement. Online news portals were used

by more than half of the respondents with the same frequency as Facebook and mainly more than once a day. However, only 13% of respondents used it to learn about the protests.

Getting protest information and news from friends and television was found to be of considerable importance for almost 20% of the respondents who, on average, used it once a day. Almost 20% of respondents learned about the protests as a result of discussion with their social connections and 30% by watching television. JurnalTV was the channel 23% of respondents used to learn about the protests while the other TV channels suggested in the survey were of minor importance. This discrepancy is also seen in how protests were depicted on television, according to the respondents. The percentage of those who consider the representation of protests as negative, violent, dangerous or deviant is almost identical to those who consider it positive, impartial and encouraging others to join. This is explained by the respondents as being related to the ownership of these TV channels and their support or disapproval of protests. Thus, JurnalTV was the only television that openly advocated for the protests and protesters while the other TV channels, mainly owned by the media holding of Vladimir Plahotniuc, discredited the events or did not present them at all.

With respect to actual protest participation, most of the respondents had protested at least three times. Apart from being present at demonstrations, sharing protest-related information with friends, family and strangers and convincing others to join the demonstrations were the most recurrent activities in which most of the protesters engaged during that protest year (around 70% of respondents). Also, 20% of respondents went to a political debate during that year, almost 10% participated in a sit-in action and 10% became members of political parties as a result of their participation in protests. In regard to online protest participation, 60–80% of the respondents claimed to have used Facebook to share protest-related information, express opinions about protests, discuss them with friends and keep in touch with other protesters, and almost 40% of them did so at least once a day during the protest period.

As far as online social capital, it is important to note that the variables of bridging and bonding social capital presented in this section were used as predictors of offline protest participation in the regression analyses presented in the section to follow. The data about trust, the other component of social capital, indicated that around 40% of respondents have moderate generalised trust and almost 80% of respondents had no trust in such institutions as government, judicial system, politicians or mass media.

5.3 Statistical analysis

To answer the research questions presented at the beginning of this chapter, several hypotheses were put forward and tested. The results are presented in this section, where the corresponding hypotheses precede each analysis.

5.3.1 Hypotheses

The main aim of the quantitative strand of this mixed methods research study was to explore the relationship between social media use and offline protest participation, and understand whether the path from online to offline was mediated by online social capital. This implies establishing which type of online ties – bonding or bridging – was more conducive to protest behaviour and therefore the following model is proposed, see Figure 5.6. It is mainly argued and expected that Facebook use is positively related to offline protest participation and this relationship is indirectly influenced by the maintenance of online bonding social capital, that is interaction with friends and family rather than online bridging social capital, or weak ties. Based on the literature discussed in Chapter 2, the explanation for this argument, as well as other hypotheses, is put forward in this section.
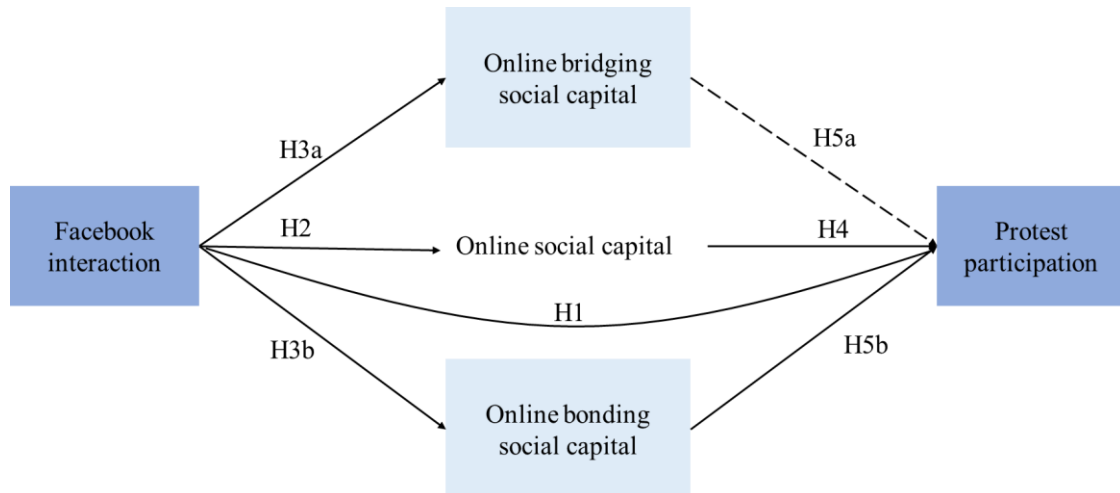
Figure 5.6: Suggested hypotheses to test the relationship between Facebook interaction and protest participation (H1); Facebook interaction and online social capital (H2), and online bridging social capital (H3a), and online bonding social capital (H3b); online social capital and protest participation (H4), and online bonding social capital and protest participation (H5b); online bridging social capital and protest participation (H5a). The continuous lines denote a statistically significant relationship and the dashed lines denote a non-significant relationship.

Previous research studies on Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, 15M, Ukrainian Euromaidan and the Chilean protests of 2011 demonstrated that social media use may play a crucial role in engaging people in protest activities both online and offline. Exposure to protest-related news (Bakshy, Messing & Adamic 2015); firsthand information from protest organisers and participants and access to mobilising information (Valenzuela 2013); engagement in online debate (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux & Zheng 2014; Valenzuela 2013; Xenos, Vromen & Loader 2014); and sharing, commenting and joining group activities in the online context are triggers for people to get involved in offline political activities. Therefore, the first hypothesis, based on well-established evidence in the literature, is:

H1: Facebook interaction is positively related to offline protest participation.

The Facebook interaction variable used in this analysis is constituted of different items that represent various activities in which Facebook users can engage. These mainly are: the use of Facebook for news, opinion expression, political discussion, to share protest-related information with others, and to stay in touch with other protesters. As discussed above, all these online activities are demonstrated to be antecedents of protest

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participation. Therefore, each activity that forms the Facebook interaction independent variable is tested separately and the following hypotheses are put forward (these are not represented in Figure 5.6 to avoid confusion):

H1a: The use of Facebook for news is positively related to offline protest participation

H1b: The use of Facebook for opinion expression is positively related to offline protest participation

H1c: The use of Facebook for political discussion is positively related to offline protest participation

H1d: Sharing protest related information on Facebook is positively related to offline protest participation

H1e: Staying in touch with other protesters on Facebook in positively related to offline protest participation.

To explain how or whether social media use could pave the way to traditional political participation, this study employed the concept of online social capital. The roles that social media may augment for participation (information, opinion expression, etc.) are transmitted or mediated through online social interactions. Social media use is considered vital in building social capital because it represents a platform where users can maintain established relationships and create new ones (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2007). Unlike traditional modes of networking, social media transcends natural barriers of space and time, and the frequency of interaction can be higher, easier and cheaper. These conditions create a favourable environment for the maintenance of bonding social capital, that is strong ties built among close friends and family members and creation of bridging social capital, the 'friend of a friend' type of relationship, as studies have demonstrated (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2007; Williams 2006). Thus, the next hypotheses are:

H2: Facebook interaction is positively related to online social capital

H3a Facebook interaction is positively related to online bridging social capital

H3b: Facebook interaction is positively related to online bonding social capital.

To examine whether the above proposed model works (see Figure 5.6), the next step is to study how or whether social capital built in the digital context can have any effect on

offline protest participation. Most research shows a strong relationship between offline social capital and political participation on the one hand, and online social capital and online political participation on the other. However, a limited number of studies tackled the relationship between online social capital and offline protest participation. A few studies, however, have signalled that online social capital predicts offline political participation (Gibson & McAllister 2013; Gil de Zúñiga, Barnidge & Scherman 2017; Skoric, Ying & Ng 2009). Thus, the next hypothesis put forward is:

> H4: There is a positive relationship between online social capital and offline protest participation.

However, we are more interested in the type of online social capital that leads to offline protest participation and mainly whether it is bonding or bridging. The few studies that examined the relationship between online social capital (bridging and bonding) and offline protest participation resulted in inconclusive findings (Gibson & McAllister 2013; Hwang & Kim 2015; Skoric, Ying & Ng 2009). Two of the three studies demonstrated that it was the bonding social capital that predicted offline participatory engagement and not bridging social capital (Gibson & McAllister 2013; Skoric, Ying & Ng 2009). This means that people relied on their online existing networks of close ties to undertake actual political participation. Valenzuela, Arriagada & Scherman (2014) explain this by the "strength of strong ties" hypothesis, claiming that the homogeneous bonding type of social ties can exert the social pressure important to adopt political behaviour.

However, the third study (Hwang & Kim 2015) reported that a well-constructed network of bridging ties was more likely to translate into offline protest participation, mainly because of the variety of resources these can provide when compared to bonding ties. Considering these studies but most importantly taking into account the Soviet legacy of the Moldovan society, the expectation was that online bonding social capital would be more important for protest participation. Because of the communist regime that was controlling every aspect of Soviet citizens' lives, people learned to trust only their close connections and put more emphasis on their families and friends rather than the public sphere (bonding ties). And although there have been many years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, bonding ties are still characteristic of post-Soviet societies. This argument is the main explanation for the hypothesis put forward and why even in the online context

people would draw on their strong social contacts rather than on their weak ties when deciding to engage in offline protest. Therefore, it is hypothesised:

H5a: There is no positive relationship between online bridging social capital and offline protest participation

H5b: There is a positive relationship between online bonding social capital and offline protest participation.

Although the main focus was on the impact of online social capital (bridging and bonding) on protest participation, trust – the other component of social capital – is also tested in this thesis. The following hypotheses thus test whether social media can be a favourable environment to build social and institutional trust conducive to participation. Adding trust as another predictor variable, the following updated model is suggested, see Figure 5.7:
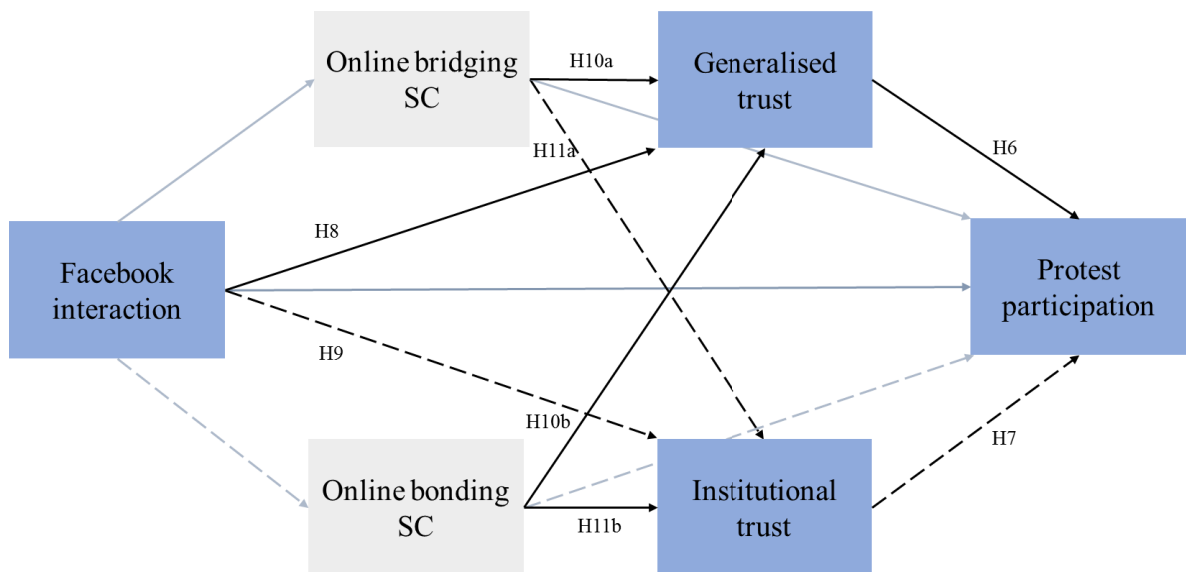
Figure 5.7: Suggested hypotheses to test the relationship between generalised trust (H6), institutional trust (H7) and protest participation; Facebook interaction and generalised trust (H8), and institutional trust (H9); online bridging (H10a), bonding social capital (H10b) and generalised trust; online bridging (H11a), bonding (H11b) social capital and institutional trust. The continuous lines indicate a statistically significant relationship and the dashed lines indicate a non-significant relationship. The grey lines represent the hypotheses suggested in the previous Figure 5.6.

First, trust is seen as one of the formative bases for development, prosperity and democratic directions of a society (Evans & Letki 2006; Newton 2001; Putnam 1993; Uslaner 2003). People with high trust have a feeling of connectedness and thus are more

confident to cooperate with each other to solve community problems. Trust is an asset formed as a result of social interactions and can help to enhance the organisation of coordinated actions. Studies have demonstrated that generalised and institutional trust are positively related to the likelihood of an individual getting involved in political activities (Crepaz, Jazayeri & Polk 2017; Hyun-soo Kim 2014; Inglehart 1999; Putnam 2000). Based on these insights from the literature and regarding first generalised trust, the following hypothesis is put forward:

H6: Generalised trust is positively associated with protest participation.

As for institutional trust, the argument suggested by Rossteutscher (2008) is applied, whereby "trust relates very clearly to confidence in government in non-democratic regimes"(p. 229). It means that in a non-democratic society, those who trust the government have no tendency to pursue democratic values and thus display passive civic and political engagement. However, those who do not trust a non-democratic regime are those who have higher democratic ideals and are more actively involved in protest political activities. Considering this argument and taking into account the Soviet legacy of Moldova, which indicates low level of trust in political institutions, the following hypothesis is suggested:

H7: Institutional trust is negatively related to protest participation.

Because we are mainly interested in the role of Facebook, the next hypotheses deal with Facebook interaction and levels of trust. Social media environment offers its users the possibility to get access to personal information of their friends and people they are following. They can thus see their friends' activities and intentions and decide with whom they can build trust. The more one knows about the other the more he/she can decide whether to trust them or not (Newton 1999). Therefore, it is hypothesised:

H8: Facebook interaction is positively related to generalised trust.

"Users of particular media tend to perceive democratic institutions as depicted by these sources" (Moy, Pfau & Kahlor 1999, p. 139). Mainstream media owned by politicians will present news so as to promote political trust and defend authority. However, the

unmediated nature of social media permits the flow of alternative news that might challenge the traditional viewpoints. The production of user-generated content and access to more diverse information provide access to news that is no longer based on the one produced by elites (Hermida, Lewis & Zamith 2014; Woodly 2008). Studies have showed that the information available on social media is linked with a lower trust in political institutions, "paving the way to anti-system and anti-politics attitudes" (Ceron 2015, p. 429). In line with these insights, the next hypothesis is suggested:

H9: Facebook interaction is negatively related to institutional trust.

Since the main focus is on bonding and bridging social capital, the next steps are related to the interaction of these two types of social capital and trust. Although these are two constituents of the same concept, trust is treated as the outcome of social relationships, a dependent variable. First, regarding generalised trust, it is known that Facebook use and interaction can offer its users a sense of belonging, and closer connection to the community via family, friends and the new people they meet online. Thus, users get more knowledge of the members with whom they interact and the people they follow, which can foster trust. In this context, the next hypotheses propose the following:

H10: Online bridging (a) and bonding (b) social capital are positively related to generalised trust.

Second, previous research on social capital and trust in government has demonstrated that the level of trust in government may vary depending on the type of social capital (Myeong & Seo 2016). The study showed that bridging social capital is positively related to trust in government while bonding social capital is not. However, the hypothesis suggested here is contrary to these findings. The main reason is that Myeong & Seo (2016) measured institutional trust in terms of civil services while this study evaluated trust in government, politicians, judicial system and mass media. The main argument is that weak ties bring in non-redundant sources of information and more diverse and alternative knowledge, and thus less state-controlled information, and as a result no positive relationship between bridging social capital and institutional trust. On the other hand, bonding social capital is characterised by strong ties within groups where resources they own overlap. The redundant knowledge possessed by strong ties blocks the entrance of alternative

information and thus increases the probability that there is a positive relationship between bonding social capital and institutional trust. Moreover, no study has investigated the relationship between online social capital and institutional trust. Can online environment and the relationships built there amplify or reduce institutional trust? Thus, it is hypothesised:

H11a: Online bridging social capital is negatively related to institutional trust
H11b: Online bonding social capital is positively related to institutional trust.

The following section present statistical results and explain whether the hypotheses put forward in this section were supported or rejected.

5.3.2 Regression analyses

To test the above hypotheses, simple linear regression analysis was performed. Each analysis generated a regression model estimating how well an independent variable is able to predict a dependent one while holding constant the control variables, that in this case were age, gender, education and occupation. After ensuring that the data met the assumptions of a regression analysis, the results are reported focusing on the main findings, and in particular the coefficient of determination denoted R-square (R^2), the standardised beta coefficient (β) and the statistical significance (p value). The R-square (R^2) shows how much of the variance in the dependent variable is explained by the model. The standardised beta coefficient (β) indicates which of the independent variables in the model make the strongest unique contribution to explain the variance of the dependent variable. In addition, it puts all the variables used in the model on the same scale so that variables can be easily compared. The statistical significance (p value) of the overall model is specified by the two-tailed p value. In this study, the value to determine the statistical significance is set to 0.05, meaning that a result is statistically significant if the p value is less than 0.05.

The first hypothesis predicted that there was a positive relationship between Facebook interaction and protest participation. Holding constant the variables of age, gender, education and occupation, the results of the first regression analysis support the

hypothesis and are presented in Table 5.6. The model accounted for 15% of the variation in offline protest participation, a medium-size effect according to Cohen (1988). Facebook interaction statistically significantly predicted offline protest participation (β = .282, p < .05) and makes the strongest unique contribution to explaining protest participation when the variance explained by all other variables in the model is controlled for. Among the host of controlling variables, only gender (β = .178, p < .05) had a significant relationship with protest participation.

Table 5.6: Regression model testing the relationship between Facebook interaction and protest participation

Independent variables	Dependent variable Protest participation	
	β	Sig.
H1		
Facebook interaction	.282	.000
Gender	.178	.007
Age	.043	.289
Education	.078	.156
Employment	.114	.070
R2	.151	
F	5.850	
Df	5.165	

The next hypotheses suggested a positive relationship between different Facebook activities and protest participation, and the results confirmed all the hypotheses. The use of Facebook for news (β = .190, p < .05), opinion expression (β = .137, p < .05), political discussion (β = .259, p < .05), sharing protest-related information (β = .257, p < .05) and to stay in touch with other protesters (β = .362, p < .05) was statistically significant with protest participation. In all the models, gender was also found significant. As for other controlling variables, only employment was found to be statistically significant in the models where the independent variables were the use of Facebook for news and opinion expression. More detailed results are presented in Table 5.7.

Table 5.7: Regression models for independent variables predicting protest participation

Independent variables	Dependent variable	
	Protest participation	
	β	Sig.
H1a		
Use of Facebook for news	.190	.005
Gender	−.176	.008
Age	.020	.398
Education	−.099	.100
Employment	−.132	.045
R2	.087	
F	3.349	
Df	5.175	
H1b		
Use of Facebook for opinion expression	.137	.034
Gender	−.158	.017
Age	.055	.243
Education	−.108	.083
Employment	−.139	.038
R2	.083	
F	3.124	
Df	5.172	
H1c		
Use of Facebook for political discussion	.259	.000
Gender	−.128	.045
Age	.052	.249
Education	−.070	.181
Employment	.109	.079
R2	.112	
F	4.346	
Df	5.172	
H1e		
Use of Facebook to share protest-related information	.257	.000
Gender	−.136	.030
Age	.031	.341
Education	−.070	.179
Employment	−.109	.119
R2	.112	
F	4.392	
Df	5.174	
H1f		
Use of Facebook to stay in touch with other protesters	.362	.000
Gender	−.195	.002
Age	.029	.348
Education	−.028	.362
Employment	−.094	.104
R2	.188	
F	7.895	
Df	5.170	

The second and third hypotheses sought to determine whether there was a positive relationship between Facebook interaction and online social capital first and online bridging and bonding social capital, second. The regression analyses showed that Facebook interaction was significantly related to online social capital ($\beta = .158$, $p < .05$) and makes the strongest unique contribution to the model. However, none of the controlling variables made a significant unique contribution to the prediction of online social capital. The whole model accounted only for 3% ($R^2 = .032$) of variance.

Regarding the relationship between Facebook interaction and online bridging and bonding social capital (H3), the results indicated that only online bridging social capital was significantly related to Facebook interaction, but the online bonding social capital was not. The standardised beta coefficient between Facebook interaction and online bridging social capital was $\beta = .187$ ($p < .05$) with $R^2 = .053$, while for online bonding social capital $\beta = .084$ ($p < .05$, $R^2 = .018$). In neither of the two models were the controlling variables statistically significant. These results confirm hypothesis H2 and H3a and rejects H3b because Facebook interaction is not significantly related to online bonding social capital. Since the three tested hypotheses relate to the ways Facebook interaction predicts online social capital, the results are presented in the same table, see Table 5.8.

Table 5.8: Regression models for variable (Facebook interaction) predicting online social capital (H2), online bridging social capital (H3a) and online bonding social capital (H3b)

	Dependent variables					
	Online social capital (H2)		**Online bridging social capital (H3a)**		**Online bonding social capital (H3b)**	
Independent variables	β	Sig.	β	Sig.	β	Sig.
Facebook interaction	.158	.021	.187	.008	.084	.141
Gender	.067	.194	.073	.168	.043	.291
Age	−.022	.391	.018	.094	−.062	.226
Education	−.041	.309	−.118	.073	.062	.228
Employment	.025	.378	−.020	.401	.072	.190
R2	.032		.053		.018	
F	1.098		1.877		.597	
Df	5.167		5.167		5.167	

The next hypothesis posited the statement that online social capital was positively related to offline protest participation (H4) and was supported by statistical results. Seven per cent ($R^2 = .68$) of the variance in protest participation is explained by the model. The β coefficient for online social capital is $\beta = .130$ ($p < .05$) and it is significantly related to offline protest participation. In this model, however, there is a controlling variable that is statistically significant, and this is gender ($\beta = -.182$, $p < .05$). As online social capital is positively related to offline protest participation, the next question is whether it is online bridging or bonding social capital. And it was mainly hypothesised that it would be the bonding social capital that would lead to offline protest participation (H5b) and not the online bridging social capital (H5a). However, the regression analysis having the online bonding social capital as predictor demonstrated that this was not statistically significantly related to offline political participation ($\beta = .100$, $p > .05$), thus refuting the proposed hypothesis. Considering bridging social capital ($R^2 = .068$), the regression analysis showed that it was statistically significantly related to offline political participation ($\beta = .130$, $p < .05$), again rejecting the proposed hypothesis that the relationship would not be significant. Among the controlling variables, only gender is making a significant contribution to the prediction of offline protest participation ($\beta = -.179$, $p < .05$).

Since hypotheses H4, H5a and H5b use different independent variables (online social capital, online bridging and bonding social capital) to predict the same dependent variable, protest participation, the results are presented in the same table, see Table 5.9.

Table 5.9: Regression models for variables (online social capital H4, online bonding social capital H5a, online bridging social capital H5b) predicting protest participation

	Dependent variable	
Independent variables	**Protest participation**	
	β	Sig.
H4		
Online social capital	.130	.039
Gender	−.181	.007
Age	.035	.327
Education	−.088	.129
Employment	−.129	.051
R2	.068	
F	2.573	
Df	5.175	
H5a		
Online bridging social capital	.130	.039
Gender	−.179	.007
Age	.030	.352
Education	−.077	.163
Employment	−.122	.061
R2	.063	
F	2.316	
Df	5.171	
H5b		
Online bonding social capital	.100	.089
Gender	−.179	.008
Age	.040	.306
Education	−.100	.101
Employment	−.132	.047
R2	.062	
F	2.294	
Df	6.175	

Hypotheses H6 and H7 are both related to the relationship between generalised and institutional trust with offline protest participation, and the results are presented in Table 5.10. The total variance in offline protest participation and generalised trust explained by the regression model is under 10% (R^2 = 8.3%). Although the contribution made by generalised trust is small, it is statistically significant, thus confirming hypothesis H6 ($β$ = .178, $p < .05$). In this model, gender is the only controlling variable that is significant too ($β$ = −.156, $p < .05$). Hypothesis 7 posited that there was no statistical significance between institutional trust and offline protest participation and the regression analysis confirmed this, $β$ = .008 ($p > .05$).

Table 5.10: Regression models for variables (generalised trust H6, institutional trust H7) predicting protest participation

Independent variables	Dependent variable	
	Protest participation	
	β	Sig.
H6		
Generalised trust	.178	.008
Gender	−.156	.017
Age	.025	.375
Education	−.074	.169
Employment	−.120	.063
R2	0.083	
F	3.160	
Df	5.175	
H7		
Institutional trust	.008	.459
Gender	−.172	.010
Age	.036	.325
Education	−.093	.118
Employment	−.124	.006
R2	.052	
F	1.911	
Df	5.175	

Hypotheses H8 and H9 deal with the relationship between Facebook interaction and generalised and institutional trust, proposing that Facebook use is positively related to generalised trust but negatively related with institutional trust. The results for these models are presented in Table 5.11. The variance in generalised trust explained by the Facebook use variable was small (R^2 = .042) but it was positively associated with Facebook interaction, thus supporting the hypothesis H8 (β = .133, $p < .05$). As for hypothesis H9, there is no statistical significance between Facebook use and institutional trust, which also validates the hypothesis (β = −.097, $p > .05$).

The next hypothesis H10 put forward the proposition that both online bridging and bonding social capital were positively related to generalised trust. Although social ties and trust are the two components of social capital, trust was treated as an outcome of social relationships in this case. Thus, linear regression analysis showed the following: both online bridging (β = .346, $p < .05$) and bonding social ties (β = .276, $p < .05$) predicting generalised trust was statistically significant. Bridging social capital accounted for 13.7% on the variation in generalised trust while bonding social capital accounted for

9.4%. Among the controlling variables, in H10 only education was significant ($\beta = -.133$, $p < .05$) while in H9, none of the independent controlling variables was significant. However, hypotheses H10a and H10b are both supported.

Hypotheses H11a and H11b both concerned the relationship between institutional trust and bridging and bonding social capital. H11a suggested an insignificant relationship between institutional trust and bridging social capital and the results supported this hypothesis ($\beta = .079$, $p > .05$). H11b suggested a positive significant relationship between institutional trust and bonding social capital and was also confirmed by statistical results. The standardised coefficient $\beta = .155$ and $p < .05$ confirmed that there is a statistical significant relationship between institutional trust and online bonding social capital. Among the controlling variables, none were shown to be significant in any of the regression models. The results for hypotheses H8, H9, H10, H11 and H12 are presented in Table 5.11.

Table 5.11: Regression models for variables (Facebook interaction H8 and H9, online bridging social capital H10a and H11, online bonding social capital H10b and H12) predicting generalised trust (1) and institutional trust (2).

Independent variables	Dependent variables			
	Generalised trust (1)		**Institutional trust (2)**	
	β	Sig.	β	Sig.
	H8		**H9**	
Facebook interaction	.133	.043	−.097	.108
Gender	−.091	.117	−.070	.186
Age	−.038	.321	.051	.268
Education	−.099	.113	−.026	.758
Employment	−.022	.394	.037	.328
R2	.042		.014	
F	1.456		.491	
Df	5.167		5.167	
	H10a		**H11a**	
Online bridging social capital	.346	.000	.079	.149
Gender	−.098	.082	−.048	.259
Age	−.043	.282	.049	.270
Education	−.070	.176	−.015	.425
Employment	−.028	.355	.033	.339
R2	.137		.011	
F	5.602		.388	
Df	5.177		5.177	
	H10b		**H11b**	
Online bonding social capital	.276	.000	.155	.020
Gender	−.095	.094	−.054	.234
Age	.068	.189	.059	.229
Education	−.133	.041	−.034	.331
Employment	−.058	.224	.020	.403
R2	.094		.023	
F	3.686		4.274	
Df	5.177		1.180	

Therefore, to update the suggested hypotheses as presented initially in Figure 5.7 in the previous section with the regression analysis results performed in this section, the following figure emerges, see Figure 5.8:
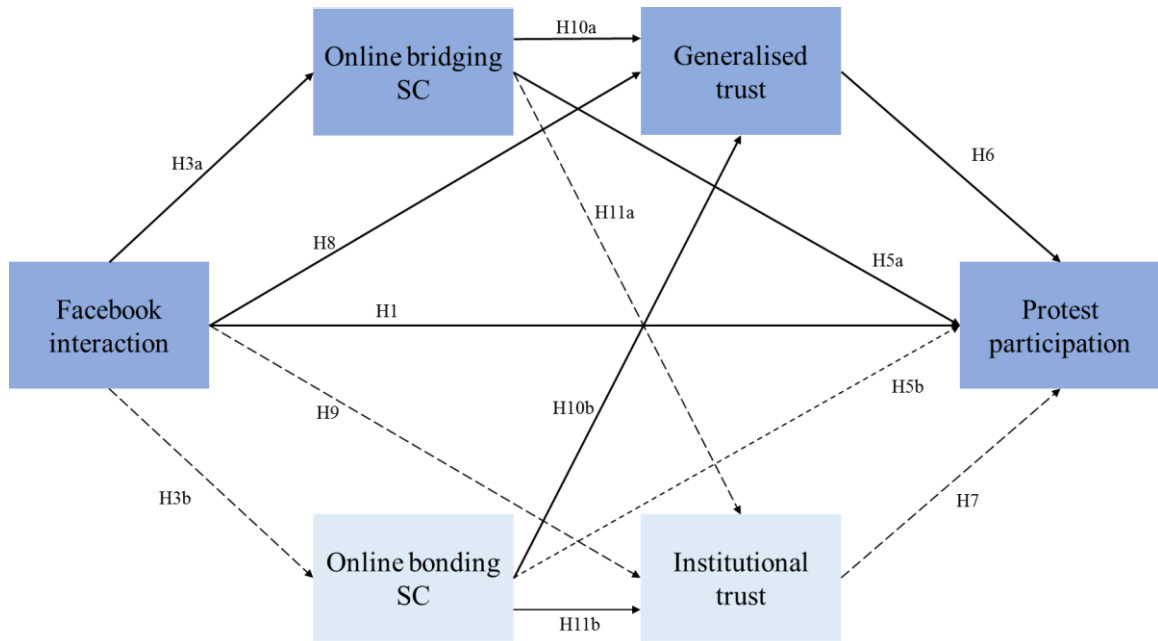
Figure 5.8: Regression analysis results. The continuous lines represent statistically significant relationships and the dashed lines indicate non-statistically significant relationships.

This figure indicates the results of the regression analyses performed in this section. The continuous lines in the figure represent relationships that were shown to be statistically significant and dashed lines denote non-statistically significant associations. To sum up the hypotheses analysed in this chapter and the results of the regression analyses:

- H1 posited that Facebook interaction would be positively related to offline protest participation and this was confirmed.

- H3a proposed that Facebook interaction would be positively related to online bridging social capital and H3b to online bonding social capital. H3a was confirmed and H3b refuted. The results demonstrated that Facebook interaction was positively related only to online bridging social capital and not bonding.

- H5a posited that there wouldn't be a positive relationship between online bridging social capital and offline protest participation and H5b that there would be a positive relationship between online bonding social capital and offline protest participation. Both hypotheses were refuted because regression analyses showed that online bridging social capital was positively related to participation while bonding was not.

- H6 posited a positive relation between generalised trust and protesting, which was confirmed.

- H7 proposed that there wouldn't be a positive relationship between institutional trust and protest participation, which was confirmed.

- H8 proposed a positive relationship between Facebook interaction and generalised trust, which was confirmed.

- H9 contended a negative relationship between Facebook interaction and institutional trust – this was confirmed.

- H10a proposed a positive relationship between online bridging social capital and generalised trust, as did H10b between online bonding social capital and generalised trust, and both were confirmed.

- H11a anticipated a negative relationship between online bridging social capital and institutional trust, which was confirmed. H11b posited a positive relationship between online bonding social capital and institutional trust; this was also confirmed.

5.3.3 Discussion of statistical results

This chapter explored the relationship between social media, social capital and protest participation in the context of the Moldovan anti-government protests. The statistical analyses demonstrated that (1) the use of Facebook was statistically significant with offline protest participation and (2) the mediating path that explains this relationship was the construction of online bridging social capital, (3) generalised trust and (4) institutional mistrust. For a better visualisation, the results are presented in Figure 5.9:
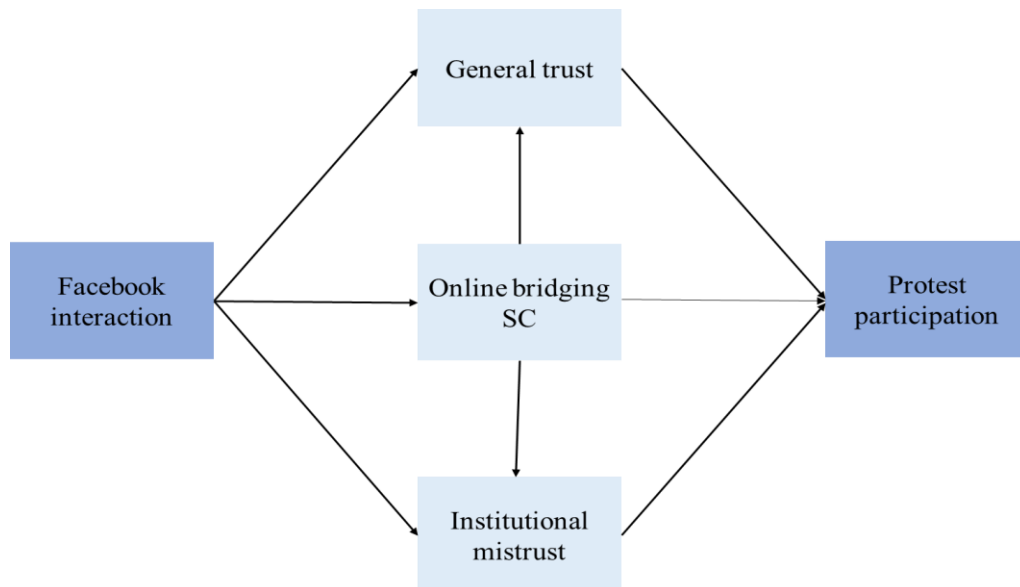
Figure 5.9: The relationship between Facebook interaction, online bridging social capital, generalised trust, institutional mistrust and protest participation.

First, the regression analysis demonstrated that Facebook use was significantly related to offline protest participation. This means that the use of Facebook for news, opinion expression, political discussion, sharing protest-related information and keeping in touch with other protesters were significant antecedents of offline protest participation, this being concordant with other research studies (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux & Zheng 2014; Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela 2011; Onuch 2015; Valenzuela 2013; Xenos, Vromen & Loader 2014). Second, the intervening process that explains the relationship between Facebook uses and offline protest participation was demonstrated to be online bridging social capital. There was neither a statistically significant relationship between Facebook use and online bonding social capital nor between online bonding social capital and offline protest participation.

These findings did not support the hypothesis that proposed a positive significant relationship between social media, online bonding social capital and protest participation. The argument that the persistence of bonding social ties from the Soviet era would transpose to the online environment and exert the necessary social support and pressure to undertake political participation did not hold true. The fact that there are high levels of bonding social capital offline as the literature indicates (Howard 2003) does not necessarily mean that the same will happen online, at least in regard to the type of social capital important for participation. The results demonstrated the opposite of what was

expected and mainly that in the Moldovan online context, exposure to bridging ties and the implication that these provide a flow of useful, varied and new information created more opportunities for Facebook users to engage in offline protests.

These findings are in line with only one of the three quantitative studies (Gibson & McAllister 2013; Hwang & Kim 2015; Skoric, Ying & Ng 2009) mentioned in the literature review; namely the study of Hwang & Kim (2015) that explored how social media use was related to the intention to participate in social movements among South Korean youth. This mentioned study also found that the intention to participate increased considerably with a well-constructed bridging online network because of the diversity of resources these ties provide. However, as it was mentioned earlier, the study of Hwang & Kim (2015) is different from this research because it focused on intention and not actual participation. To better understand why in this study participation resulted from online bridging social capital and not bonding, qualitative data analysis in the next chapter will elaborate further.

Third, regarding trust, the other component of social capital, the findings suggested that generalised trust was significantly related to protest participation, Facebook interaction, online bridging and bonding social capital. It means, first, that respondents who believed in the honesty and reliability of others were more confident to cooperate and thus participate in protests, this being consistent with other studies (Crepaz, Jazayeri & Polk 2017; Walther et al. 2008). Second, Facebook interaction was positively related to social trust, meaning that respondents trusted those with whom they interacted in their online community, as other study demonstrated (Skoric & Kwan 2011) and it referred to both their bonding and bridging ties.

As for institutional trust, the results showed it was not significantly related to protest participation, Facebook use and online bridging social capital. First, the analysis demonstrated that those who did not trust the official institutions were those who took to the streets. Mistrust in government, politicians, judicial system and mainstream media led people to express their discontent in demonstrations, this being consistent with Rossteutscher (2008) who argues that in non-democratic regimes, the non-trusting engage in political activities as a path towards democracy. This happened in the case of the Moldovan protests. Regarding institutional trust and Facebook use, the results showed

that they were not statistically significant, meaning that the information about state institutions that respondents found on Facebook was unconventional and thus different from the elite-based representation of events. This is consistent with other studies that claimed that social media use can pave the way to anti-system attitudes (Bekmagambetov et al. 2018; Ceron 2015). Online bridging social capital was not statistically significant with institutional trust, either. This might be explained by the fact that online bridging social capital is formed among individuals with diverse background and different visions, which helps to broaden the informational sources, giving access to alternative information about institutions and thus no relationship between the two. However, the relationship between institutional trust and online bonding social capital was statistically significant. This can be explained by the fact that as strong ties are characterised by exclusivity, they do not permit external information and it is more likely that they will circulate redundant information.

An important finding related to the relationship between social media, online bridging social capital, generalised trust and offline protest participation lies in the coefficient of determination, R-squared of the regression analyses. Specifically, the results suggest that although the relationships between social media use and online bridging social capital, and the latter with offline protest participation, were statistically significant, the R-square of the regression analyses revealed the associations were not strong. Only a small amount of variance in protest participation resulted from Facebook use and the construction of online bridging social capital. Facebook interaction accounted only for 5.3% of the explained variability in online bridging social capital, and online bridging social capital explained only 6.8% of variance in protest participation. It can be assumed that though online bridging social capital was found to be meaningful for protest participation, participation is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon and other factors not captured by this study may have influenced it.

Though the main emphasis of this study was the role of social media, the importance of online news portals, television and offline social ties cannot be overlooked as the survey suggested. Apart from Facebook, JurnalTV – the TV channel supportive of protest activity – and talking to friends and family were also key resources where respondents learned about the protests. Moreover, these sources were regarded by the respondents as important to get protest-related news and updates. This might explain why some

respondents found the necessary social support and pressure to protest from their offline environment and mainstream media which still holds an impressive weight for the Moldovan citizen, as the next chapter will discuss. Similarly, Facebook was used as an alternative source to meet new protesters, get other perspectives on what was happening, and engaged a certain cohort of respondents in the protest too.

5.4 Conclusion

As to the whole picture of the impact of Facebook on participation, the following can be concluded: there was a positive significant relationship between Facebook use and protest participation and one of the connecting links between the two was the creation of online bridging social capital, generalised trust and institutional mistrust. This means that those who interacted on Facebook with their bridging ties were more likely to obtain resources relevant to protesting (new and alternative information, to form opinions, etc.), and build trust among themselves and increase their mistrust in institutions; factors that consequently had the potential to lead to offline protest participation. However, although these relationships were demonstrated to be statistically significant, the R-square coefficients indicate that collectively, the independent variables explained the weak variance (of 2–15%) in the dependent variable. Nevertheless, studies that aim to explain human behaviour generally have low R-squared values, which means this study's findings still indicate a real relationship between Facebook use and protest participation. An important point to consider is that protest participation is a complex behaviour that is hard to predict. In addition to Facebook, there must have been other factors that influenced people's decision to join the Moldovan anti-government protests. To understand why Facebook made a small contribution to explain protest participation, and which other mechanisms led people to protest, a qualitative analysis based on interviews with protesters and activists follows in the next chapter. Boulianne (2015, p. 535) suggests that mixed methods research holds promise for illuminating this relationship.

CHAPTER 6: QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of the qualitative strand (Phase 2) of the mixed methods research design applied in this thesis. The findings are structured in three main sections. The first section analyses the reasons behind why and how activists and protesters used Facebook in relation to their online and offline protest participation. It also focuses on the participants' personal assessment of Facebook's significance for protest-related activities. This inquiry is framed by the following two questions:

(1.1) How and why did activists and protesters use Facebook for protest-related activities?

(1.2) Which Facebook protest-related roles were more important for protest participation according to protesters and activists?

The second section of this chapter examines which form of online social capital (bridging/bonding) had a greater impact on protest participation and whether Facebook users could build trust (social and institutional) relevant for participation. It analyses specifically which type of online social capital participants had to activate or construct in order to adopt a protest behaviour – the interaction with family members and friends and the thick trust and solidarity these relationships carry (online bonding social capital), or the interaction with people outside participants' immediate circle and the flow of innovative and alternative information that these relationships facilitate (online bridging social capital). It also focuses on the types of trust participants build in relation to their use of Facebook and its relevance for protest participation. This inquiry is introduced in concordance with the following research questions:

(2.1) Which online social capital (bridging/bonding) had a greater impact on protest participation and why?

(2.2) Could Facebook users build trust (social and institutional) that is relevant for participation?

The third section of the chapter focuses on the role of television and offline bonding relationships; according to the interviewees' insights, significant factors that influenced

protest participation. Although these factors are not linked directly to any of the research questions posed initially, they emerged as crucial factors for participation and are closely related to the use of social media. The chapter concludes with an overview on the impact of Facebook and its interaction with other social factors that can explain protest participation in the Moldovan anti-government protests of 2015. Although this chapter focuses mainly on qualitative findings, it also includes quantitative results, ultimately allowing the chapter to integrate both phases during this analysis.

6.1 The roles of Facebook in the Moldovan anti-government protests of 2015

As was mentioned in the methodology chapter, quantitative data were used to identify possible follow-up participants for the qualitative phase. Of the 190 respondents who completed the online survey, 26 agreed to be interviewed. Employing a purposeful sampling and on the basis of socio-demographic characteristics and several successive refusals, 16 participants were interviewed. These were people who participated at the protests of 2015 and had a Facebook account. Based on protesters' recommendation of information-rich activists and organisers, another four participants were contacted for interview: two members of the Dignity and Truth Platform and the organisers of the first protests; a singer; and a political analyst and journalist. A total of 20 interviews were conducted, with 14 males and six females. The average age of interviewees was 29 years old and ranged from 20 to 50. Two of the interviewed participants (Dinu Plîngău and Inga Grigoriu) consented to be named and their full names are used in the analysis while the rest are de-identified. Based on these 20 semi-structured interviews conducted with protesters and activists, a thematic analysis was conducted.

The first two qualitative questions of the study asked how protesters, activists and organisers used Facebook during protest and for what purposes. They also focused on their own understanding of the importance and impact of different Facebook roles on actual protest participation. The thematic analysis demonstrated that a great number of participants assessed Facebook as playing a significant role in facilitating and impacting their offline protest participation. These results are consistent with the quantitative findings of Phase 1, which demonstrated that Facebook interaction statistically significantly predicted offline protest participation. Thus, both quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrated that participation at protests was associated with social

media use, replicating the results of other research studies (Anduiza, Cristancho & Sabucedo 2014; Gerbaudo 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung & Valenzuela 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux & Zheng 2014; Howard & Hussain 2011; Khondker 2011; Onuch 2015; Scherman, Arriagada & Valenzuela 2015; Tufekci & Wilson 2012; Tumber & Webster 2006; Valenzuela 2013; Valenzuela, Arriagada & Scherman 2012).

Second, the analysis of protesters and activists' insights offered explanations about how exactly the use of Facebook contributed to the Moldovan protests of 2015. These are as follows:

- initiating the movement
- organisational purposes
- information and communication
- opinion formation and expression
- recruiting participants and drawing supporters
- collective identity formation
- fighting misinformation.

Each of the above-mentioned roles is discussed in more detail in the sections that follow.

6.1.1 Facebook as the tool to initiate the movement

A 21-year-old masters student, Dinu Plîngău, who was to become one of the most actively engaged activists and organisers of the Moldovan anti-government protests, claimed "the idea of the first protest was born on Facebook" (Dinu Plîngău). As president of the youth NGO Moldovan Youth Civic Movement, Dinu Plîngău and other organisation members decided to use Facebook to reach a larger audience for the event they were preparing. On 24 January 2015, they created a Facebook event entitled "Protesting in The Great National Assembly Square at 13.00. We say NO to the monstrous coalition. We say NO to lies and betrayals". The event was calling for people to participate in an apolitical, non-partisan movement to express the nation's discontent with the corrupt political elite. It gathered hundreds of posts where people debated the unstable political situation in Moldova and the need to take to the streets. In a day and a half, to the surprise of the organisers, almost 1000 people expressed their wish to participate. However, only around 200 people joined the offline movement, and Dinu Plîngău claimed the majority of participants were those

who learned about it from Facebook. Although the number of participants was fewer than indicated on Facebook, according to the main organiser, the movement marked the beginning of the largest protests in the country:

> The first protest […] took place on 25 January […]. No Platform existed back then [referring to Dignity and Truth Platform] […]. On our own initiative, a Facebook event was created, and people liked it and joined the event. And this is how the idea of the first protest came; we could manifest the revolt there and then send it to the streets. This particular idea has definitely appeared on Facebook. […] And everything amplified on Facebook; the first protest was exclusively organised through Facebook (Dinu Plîngău).

A propensity to protest already existed in the Moldovan society because people were feeling anger, frustration and resentment. Apart from this, JurnalTV was openly criticising the most important political events and politicians, focusing to a large extent on the banking scam and corrupted officials. However, it might be the case that people's grievances and constant news about the banking scam in the mainstream media were not sufficient factors to get people out on the streets. The same student mentioned that Facebook served as an impulse:

> JurnalTV had been talking about the government's corruption for a long time, about the banking scam, but there was no reaction. […] The stimulus to take to the streets appeared on Facebook; a very important factor. Facebook had the greatest impact – it created the idea of participation. Only after that, the other media started to publicise our events too (Dinu Plîngău).

Besides Dinu Plîngău, the other activists interviewed mentioned that the use of Facebook by the young raised a strong response in their audience and helped to start protesting activities. The success and significance of Facebook for the movement was explained in terms of a public sphere where common people could express their political discontent, a channel with alternative information and the framing of a "people's movement" (ID7) that allowed the construction of a "national identity" (ID1) with shared values and interests. Since these are important factors for protest participation that Facebook augmented, they will be discussed more thoroughly in the next sections.

6.1.2 Facebook as an organisational tool

Activists and organisers claimed that Facebook was used intensely as an organisational tool, first to put together and build the core team and second, for internal organisation, to help the organisers to carry out Platform's varied activities. For the 38-year-old entrepreneur Inga Grigoriu, one of the organisers of the second flash mob, Facebook played an important function in helping to meet other like-minded people and build the organising team of the coming protest events. She stated:

> You should know that we met each other namely on Facebook. I met determined people there and we decided to go through with it, since then there have been a great number of protests, flash mobs, actions (Inga Grigoriu).

Inga Grigoriu recalled receiving a Facebook notification in February 2015 that led her to a post created by a person she did not know at the time, Liviu Vovc. Witnessing online the rising discontent of people, Vovc created an event challenging users to see how many would actually participate in an offline flash mob. The Facebook post attracted Inga Grigoriu's attention and she decided to contact Liviu to offer her support and help. The two contacted Dinu Plîngău and appealed to his legal expertise on how to lodge a statement at the city hall about the intention to protest. The three coordinated the organisation of the flash mob through Facebook and subsequently met in person and attended the event together. They became friends and some of the most active and dedicated activists of the following protests (Dinu Plîngău, Inga Grigoriu). During the first and second flash mobs, many of the future members of the Dignity and Truth Platform met: Dinu Plîngău, who became later president of the Youth Dignity and Truth Platform; Inga Grigoriu and Liviu Vovc, the organisers of the second movement; Andrei Năstase, the future president of the Platform and journalists, analysts, lawyers and other citizens. The protests to follow took place with the backing of the Platform. Since several public figures joined the civic movement, the protests began to receive more attention from mainstream media and gain momentum. Thus, although there would be more diverse factors that influenced the creation of the protest movements, the interviewed activists (Dinu Plîngău, Inga Grigoriu, ID3) acknowledged that Facebook was the platform that connected them and helped to find more supporters. Similar findings are reported in other studies that emphasised how internet and social media facilitated the preparatory phase

of the protests by enabling activists to form networks (Breuer & Groshek 2014) and maintain engagement (Della Porta & Mosca 2005).

Facebook also served as a tool for internal organisation and mainly to mobilise, organise and sustain protest activities. First of all, the main administrators of the Platform's Facebook official page and protest-related groups were using Facebook to create events. These events offered such details as the time and location of the future protests, flash mobs and meetings, as well as what would be discussed during those events. Eighty-eight per cent of the surveyed participants in the first phase indicated that they could find information about the time, location and the demands of future protests on Facebook. The event function also allowed users to choose from "going", "interested" and "not going" and thus offer an estimate to the organisers of the numbers of attendees. Although organisers understood and acknowledged that not all those who indicated "going" would actually participate, this nevertheless served as a guide. They stated that usually 10 to 20% of those confirming attendance would participate in offline protests (Dinu Plîngău, Inga Grigoriu, ID7). The created events also invited people to debate and asked them to express their concerns and grievances. The organisers would analyse, gather the topics discussed and these would constitute and be integrated in their speeches during actual events (ID3, ID7). Facebook helped organisers and activists to voice the issues encountered by citizens and reach a larger audience.

A common element in all organisers' interviews was that Facebook was extensively used for internal logistical coordination and this was done in a cheap, quick and effective way. The members of the Platform made use of the chat function to coordinate events, press releases, content for their online pages and share tasks and responsibilities among other members. In addition, they used Facebook to coordinate activities with people outside the Platform who expressed their interest in getting involved and were keen to volunteer their time to promote the events. Thus, for instance, one organiser recalled how she coordinated a team formed on Facebook to share fliers with people on streets and take evening walks in the parks to talk to people and motivate them to join (Inga Grigoriu). Also, Facebook facilitated the creation of a database of potential participants. One of the organisers mentioned that they attached a phone number in some of their posts asking people to contact them in case they were interested to participate in future events (ID3). The result was a considerable set of data that included people all over the country and of all ages

who helped to increase the number of actual participants. Facebook thus became the "activists' toolkit" (Youmans & York 2012) used to reflect the social movement and the issues addressed, coordinate its physical organisation, reach people beyond their own circles and be broader in scope, as in different protests around the world (Bohdanova 2014; Juris 2012; Penney & Dadas 2014; Tufekci & Wilson 2012).

6.1.3 Facebook as an informational channel

Apart from setting up the base for future protests, the main role Facebook played since the very first protest and during all the protests' stages was that of an informational channel. For activists and organisers, Facebook provided an efficient vehicle to inform the online audience about their activities and planned events. For protesters, Facebook served as one of the most important sources of news as well as a tool to depict their own participation at protests. Indeed, this supports the quantitative findings of this study. The regression analysis that examined the relationship between Facebook as a source of news and information and offline protest participation showed that the use of Facebook for information consumption was a statistically significant predictor of offline protest participation, the results being concordant with other quantitative studies (Boulianne 2009; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung & Valenzuela 2012; Kenski & Stroud 2006; Tang & Lee 2013; Valenzuela 2013). The argument is that by getting exposed to mobilising news and information on Facebook, users become aware and acquire knowledge about political situations and this indirectly increase their likelihood of involvement (Boulianne 2016; Wolfsfeld, Yarchi & Samuel-Azran 2016). The following will therefore present a detailed analysis of the reasons participants appreciated the informational feature of Facebook.

First, as mentioned in the previous section, activists and organisers made extensive use of Facebook as their main platform and first source to inform, optimise and enhance their interaction with potential protesters by updating their online community about the development of protests, depicting their own involvement, and encouraging others to join. In the preparation phase, Facebook was used to promote events by informing people about the place and time of future events and political developments. This was done via Facebook events, personal posts and messages. During active street protests and flash mobs, activists used Facebook to reflect their participation by posting photos and live

streaming the events. And in the post-protest phase, activists were informing users how protests developed by explaining and illustrating their and others' participation and synthesising what they achieved by their participation. One of the activists' quotes skilfully summarise how they reflected their activities online:

> Every time we were creating an event, we were explaining the reasons, keeping everyone updated with news, explaining what was happening, who took a stand, how we manifested, what our position was […] We were reflecting our activity on Facebook and this is how we found our supporters there. We were sharing a "manifest" and were inviting each other to participate (Inga Grigoriu).

This played a significant role for protesters because as a 38-year-old lawyer affirmed, "There was a lot of information, when, who, what […] the date and time, where to go, who was coming, for what purpose" (ID2). Thus, the activists deemed as very important the fact that Facebook allowed them more opportunities for engagement through the transmission of mobilising and motivational information.

Second, since activists and organisers used Facebook to communicate their actions, one of the reasons protesters used Facebook was because it served as a source of information. First of all, a great number of participants claimed that they learned about the protests from Facebook. The survey employed in the quantitative phase indicated that almost 31% of respondents found out about the protests from Facebook and it scored the highest result among other suggested answers, such as different TV channels, other social media, radio, newspapers, etc. Several participants interviewed for the qualitative phase mentioned that it was impossible not to learn about the protests because "it was the most discussed and shared topic in Facebook then*"* (ID20). Another participant recalled that even though at that time he was not interested in participating, he "watched the news about the protest involuntarily, when it appeared on the wall" and added "want it or not, you learnt about it, as it was there" (ID19). These statements are in line with the argument that the use of social media for information is not only limited to those who deliberately seek it but it also involves those incidentally exposed to it (Tang & Lee 2013; Xenos, Vromen & Loader 2014). Still, a greater number of participants said that they learned about the protests because they received a Facebook notification, event invitation or personal

message from friends, members of some of the groups they had joined, or from people they did not know personally.

Therefore, access to information seemed an important reason to use Facebook. Seventy-four per cent of the surveyed respondents claimed that Facebook served as a source of news for them and 55% regarded it as a very important source. The importance of Facebook for news and information increased with time spent using Facebook, as demonstrated by the Pearson's correlation coefficient presented in the quantitative results chapter. A 33-year-old programmer believed that "the more access one has to social media, the more informed he/she is" (ID6) and that there was enough information in Facebook to decide whether to join the protest movements. Harkins & Petty (1987) demonstrated that when information is presented by multiple sources, then this information is regarded as more "worthy of diligent consideration than information from only one perspective" (p. 267). The informational avalanche on Facebook created the feeling that everyone was involved. Participants claimed that when connecting to Facebook, information and news about the protests were everywhere and the overwhelming flow of information was increasing. It created the impression that everyone shared, posted and was talking about the protests and these became the centre of all Facebook debate for a long period of time. Exposure to repeated information and messages of protest over a small time frame helped to activate users by creating a "collective effervescence" (González-Bailón et al. 2011, p. 5) that is most likely to be passed on to users. The following quotes from a 32-year-old singer and a 33-year-old programmer underline the exposure to repeated information present on Facebook:

> It was not hard to find out about protests. Social networks made it easy; probably there was not even a person who did not know about it. There were thousands of shares on Facebook (ID20).

> It was Facebook, yes. I do not remember exactly whether it was a group post, an event or just a news [item] but I knew because everyone in Facebook knew (ID6).

Although there are scholars who maintain that more information doesn't necessarily imply that users would be able to process and understand that information (Bimber 2003; Fuchs 2012b), participants emphasised that they could control which content appeared on

their Facebook wall. A 31-year-old freelance artist affirmed that what he mostly liked about Facebook was that he could choose to read or watch what interested him. Apart from the fact that he could customise what to see on his wall, the titles of some news articles also helped him to decide whether he was interested to read them. He perceived that as saving his time and choosing what really seemed appealing to him. The majority of participants confirmed this and added that Facebook allowed them to follow other news portals and public figures by "liking" or "following" their Facebook pages. For some, this feature made using Facebook more convenient than television. For instance, a 38-year-old entrepreneur stated that:

> I am not watching TV because I am setting my personal time as I need and want. I do not have that much time to waste watching TV. I cannot manage to watch news exactly when they are presented on TV and the option for me is to use online news portals. […] and Facebook leads me to information. For example, I am following JurnalTV, Independent, Agora, Ziarul de Gardă, Anticorupție, Rise by subscribing to their Facebook pages (ID11).

Another participant, a 27-year-old woman asserted the same. She said she did not "have the time to glue myself to the television [or have the nose in television all the time]" and preferred to watch news on Facebook through the news portals she trusted. She described this as being easier, quicker, more convenient and better suiting her time and interests:

> My mum doesn't have a Facebook account and she follows the news on TV. I use Facebook and news reaches me much quicker than my mum – she has to wait the news at 5 or 7 pm while I have it straightaway (ID15).

As for the news portals followed through Facebook, a great majority of respondents mentioned similar pages and some of them referred to the online version of some TV channels or newspapers. Interestingly, almost all of the participants mentioned that they were following namely JurnalTV through Facebook. This is, however, consistent with official survey data that indicate that in December 2015, the Facebook page of JurnalTV was the page with most local followers in Moldova (Gramatic 2015). In addition to the news received from the online portals participants followed through Facebook, they got news from their online friends too. This was described by several participants as an

advantage over television because it brought in "diversity in news" (ID17) and they could analyse different points of view on the same issue. Although several participants acknowledged the presence of "trolls" online (ID3, ID5, ID10, ID16), they still preferred social media. They argued that in spite of the misleading information spreading on Facebook, they still had more choices than watching "a captured" (ID4, ID9) and "politically affiliated" (ID13) television network. More than this, one of the participants implied that for those who did not have a Facebook account, it was difficult to get "correct" (ID7) news and information. Still, another 32-year-singer claimed that in the Moldovan media context, Facebook was the only free space, implying that it did not belong to any Moldovan politician:

> Facebook is theoretically the only free space we have so far. Ninety per cent of media is already in favour of power and they are not impartial at all (ID20).

A recurring theme in all responses that described the information acquired from Facebook as being "impartial" was related to its live-streaming function. Participants regarded the "direct" (ID1, ID4, ID7), "non-stop" (ID1), "unaltered" (ID1, ID4, ID11) characteristics of live streaming as "firsthand news" (ID15). It was important for them that Facebook allowed the representation of protests in real time and showed that it was the people who were protesting. There was no TV presenter, no script (ID1) and the information did not have to pass through the filter of media ownership. The ability of new media to bypass conventional gatekeepers is considered a significant change in protest activities (Garrett 2006; Mercea 2012; Myers 2000). Participants regarded the information circulating on Facebook as "depoliticised" (ID4). Facebook users trusted that their online connections would supply them with reliable and relevant information and fill in the gaps what mainstream media was avoiding or disparaging.

One of the participants even described Facebook as a "solution to overcome propaganda" (ID20) and this was mainly associated with the flow of alternative information. He claimed that the amalgam of sources coming from various news portals, public figures and thousands of protest participants helped to challenge the truth of those in power. It also facilitated the creation and distribution of more nonconformist information that allowed protesters to enter a more pluralistic form of debate. These arguments are consistent with several research works that emphasise the pronounced effect of social

media in relatively closed or authoritarian regimes, where the online public sphere creates opportunities otherwise lacking for dissenting voices to be heard (Diamond 2010; McGarty et al. 2014; Shirky 2011). If social media is important in Western democracies, in countries without a free and independent media it might be even more important, as argued by Boulianne (2018). For instance, in such post-Soviet countries as Russia and Ukraine, internet and online media are considered alternatives to controlled and co-opted media systems (Oates 2013; Oates & Lokot 2013).

Another important role Facebook live streaming played for several participants was that it helped "to overcome the fear of participation" (ID1, ID7, ID9, ID10). The participation at the violent protests that took place in 2009 against Moldovan fraudulent elections left a feeling of apprehension and people were still concerned about their participation at the protests of 2015. More than this, Moldovans were still marked by the revolution and, following war taking place in the neighbouring Ukraine and felt unsafe to participate (Inga Grigoriu). Besides, several media channels tried to compare the Moldovan protests with the Euromaidan. That is why the feeling of danger that participation could produce was suppressed by the live broadcasting of protests, according to several participants. The live streaming and unedited videos made it possible to show how the events were unfolding in real time and that there was no violence at all. Dinu Plîngău stated that, "after showing people a number of peaceful protests, they stopped being afraid". Also, for a 23-year-old student, being exposed to information obtained directly from someone who was personally involved offered credibility. The student stated:

> The importance of Facebook was mainly because the events were live streamed. If we compare these protests with 7 April [referring to the violent post-election protests of 2009] when television showed only bits of what was happening and how dangerous those protests were, people were afraid to take out to the streets. Now, when the protests are live, nonstop, the information is not altered. You analyse what you see, form your own opinion and go to protest (ID1).

And even if participants could not watch it the same moment the events were unfolding, they could still find it online and resume watching. For some participants, what motivated them to use Facebook for protest-related information was that they could get a "chronology of events" (ID1, ID12) and this helped them to stay updated and better

understand what actually happened. The efficiency of Facebook in disseminating timely and updated information was also emphasised by the same participants.

The fact that Facebook was used as a source for protest-related information influenced the frequency of its use as claimed by several users. Once the protests started, a number of participants argued that there was a shift in their use of Facebook and their time spent online increased. Moreover, others who did not have a Facebook account before created one. Hence, a report on social media use in Moldova shows that from the beginning to the end of 2015, there was a 25% increase of Facebook accounts (Gramatic 2015). Although it is evident that there have been different factors that could influence this growth, we might assume that the "maximum publicising" (ID1, ID2) of protest events in Facebook could also play a role and people created a profile "to keep pace with the world" (ID9), as one participant claimed.

Another interesting reason participants turned to Facebook was to get confirmation of some facts they would learn about offline, and approval for their actions. For instance, a 22-year-old student claimed that he would discuss protest activities with his friends and neighbours offline and then he would "connect to Facebook and verify" (ID3). Still another 33-year-old entrepreneur (ID4) said that he would watch news on TV and then log in to Facebook to check the opinions of his online friends. A number of participants actually mentioned that it was useful for them to see which exactly of their friends agreed or disagreed with a certain information by sharing, commenting or liking it. The source of a piece of information is a significant fact in determining its credibility (Sundar 2008, p. 84). A familiar source is more likely to be considered reliable (O'Keefe 1990) and one recommended by a known person to be automatically trusted (Metzger, Flanagin & Medders 2010). For motivational reasons, a validated, approved and trusted piece of information appeals directly (Ackland 2013) and it can help users "figure out how (and from whom) they can acquire additional information, encouragement, and support" (Jost et al. 2018, p. 110). The information coming from public figures and activists who used Facebook to express their opinions about protests or participation was also deemed trustworthy by several participants. Once more, they reiterated the significance of the customisation function of Facebook, which allowed them to follow people they liked and trusted. Research demonstrated that people tend to agree with those they like (Metzger & Flanagin 2013) and thus judge the knowledge coming from them as credible.

Apart from the fact that protesters got informed by using Facebook, they themselves were using it to communicate about their own participation to a broader network and connect with each other. The quantitative survey showed that 83% of respondents used Facebook to share political links, 70% of them talked about protests with their Facebook friends, and 65% encouraged their online friends to take actions. The qualitative interviews confirmed that participants used Facebook to generate their own content by live broadcasting their participation; posting photos, videos and texts; sharing politically relevant news; raising awareness of protests; as well as encouraging their friends to participate. A 31-year-old freelance artist recalled how he made caricatures and posters and posted them on his profile with messages oriented to his friends and followers:

> I used Facebook to comment, share and post my own creations. I am a kind of artist and I was drawing political caricatures and posters with the message "Come on people, it's high time we all take to the streets". [...] I hoped that many would see the poster, it would get to their heart and they would join the movement too. [...] And I think I could motivate and influence others, at least a few people, for sure … when you post this kind of content it impacts others' decision to participate (ID13).

A 34-year-old political analyst claimed that he used Facebook to communicate with the media and "sensitise" (ID16) the public opinion on certain issues. He acknowledged that he was known in the civil society community, and media would often appeal to him for opinions. However, the two participants affirmed that their online created content had the aim to motivate more people to get involved in protesting activities, the first by appealing to people's emotions through his drawings and the second through his "accurate" (ID16) information transmission. They perceived their overall online activity as a contribution to the movement. The above mentioned political analyst claimed:

> I am using Facebook as an instrument of communication, as a means to send messages, to sensitise on certain subjects or to express my opinion. […] I was publishing my position on Facebook – the arguments, the what and how – just take it and put it in your news. […] I was doing this to tell the truth, to inform, to show what is the essence of the problem, what can be done and who is responsible (ID16).

Users thus became "signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning" (Benford & Snow 2000) addressed to those who befriended or followed them. Their mutual effort to develop and create content also transformed them into "produsers" (Bruns 2008). A great number of participants mentioned also that in addition to their public activity, they also made use of Facebook Messenger to send personal messages to their connections. Thus they debated the protest events with their online community, sent invitations to events and personally encouraged participation by sharing motivational material with their friends. A 28-year-old financial consultant claimed that he even contacted people who he did not know to get information from the "first source" (ID19). The use of Facebook to also reflect protesters' own participation was rendered by a number of participants as "citizenship journalism" (ID1, ID13) in which they trusted more than mainstream media.

Another key theme that emerged from interviews was that Facebook allowed users to engage in multiple political activities and feel part of the movement when physical distance or busyness prevented their participation. One of the participants recalled that Facebook helped her to continue to perceive herself as a participant and maintain her activism when she could not attend protests because she had a newborn baby (ID15). The majority of interviewees also mentioned that Facebook was the most important news resource and communicational tool for the representatives of the Moldovan diaspora. The global nature of Facebook allowed Moldovans from different parts of the world to resonate with the political resentment in the country and send their encouragement and support to the protesters.

To sum up, one of the most important roles Facebook played during the Moldovan protests of 2015 was that of information creation and transmission. Facebook allowed people to produce, aggregate, manage, prioritise and share information for both internal and external uses. The affordability of live streaming, direct information from participants, alternatives to mainstream media framing and access to polarised information was regarded as compelling by participants. In this sense, Facebook's main contribution to the movement was to expose users to relevant political information that, according to several studies (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung & Valenzuela 2012; Shah et al. 2005), is a significant precedent of collective political participation. More than this, information and communication are fundamental to other significant aspects of collective action:

opinion formation, framing and collective identity creation, persuasion, coordination. These are discussed in more detail in the coming sections.

6.1.4 Facebook for opinion formation and expression

The informational function of Facebook is very closely related and underlines another role it had for protesters; specifically, that of opinion formation and expression. First, participants argued that the circulation of diverse, alternative, abundant and easy-to-follow informational streams helped them to form an opinion about what was happening. Seventy-four per cent of the surveyed respondents agreed that by using Facebook, they engaged in an exchange of opinions and almost 65% of them claimed that it helped them learn about different perspectives on social issues (indicated by two of the items used to measure online bridging capital). Secondly, Facebook was regarded as a space where participants could confidently and freely express their opinions about the protests, the ruling political elite and engage in debate. Eighty-three per cent of the surveyed participants indicated that they used Facebook to share protest-related information, 75% used Facebook to express their opinion about protests and 70% of respondents used it to talk about protests with their online friends. Besides, the regression analysis performed in the quantitative chapter demonstrated that the use of Facebook for opinion expression was statistically significantly predicting offline protest participation. These results are consistent with other research studies that demonstrate that online political talk is conducive to political engagement (Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela 2011; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril 2009; Valenzuela 2013). The premise is that exposure to political knowledge encourages reflection, elaboration and thus better informed people (Delli Carpini, Cook & Jacobs 2004) that in its turn fosters a sense of political efficacy (Eveland, Shah & Kwak 2003). Protesters noted:

> Yes, I was commenting on posts about protests. If I found someone to discuss with, then yes, I liked to engage in debate (ID7).

> It was more convenient to follow and analyse news on Facebook – you directly. […] You could form your own opinion by analysing what others said, seeing what was happening, not on TV where everything is distorted (ID1).

Participants have also mentioned that they expressed their opinions online by recirculating the content of others, appropriating and personalising it by adding their own thoughts to it or producing their own original content. The ease of using social media and creating content allowed them to express their opinion more freely and openly. They regarded the online environment as a free space where their dissenting voices could be expressed, in comparison to the controlled and self-censored mainstream media. Research has demonstrated the importance of political self-expression on social media for political participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux & Zheng 2014; Pingree 2007).

Another interesting characteristic of online opinion expression underlined by participants was that Facebook allowed them to see who of their online friends had the same opinion. Some of the participants mentioned that they even unfriended or asked others to unfollow or block them if they had different opinions about the essence of protests and their organisers. A 27-year-old woman eave emphasised:

> I was live streaming, posting photos, encouraging all my Facebook friends to come. 'I am here, friends, join me. […] if you do not have the same visions, it is better that you delete me from your friends list or block me, and goodbye'. I want to call friends those people who will be with me when I most need it, not only some acquaintances and, you know, my people supported me (ID15).

Being for or against protests created different opinion-based groups and those who shared an opinion embraced a similar social identity. "The self-definition as an opinion-based group member" (Bliuc et al. 2007, p. 29) is a strong predictor and helps to understand better political intentions. Because it is easy to articulate opinions in Facebook, participants could understand which of their friends belonged to the same opinion-based group and maintain friendship with those whose values define the group and imply consensus.

6.1.5 Facebook used to recruit participants and find supporters

The informational function of Facebook is closely related to its use as a motivational tool that simplifies the call for participation and recruitment of participants once the protests

were underway. Activists and organisers mentioned that they reflected their own and others' participation on Facebook to raise awareness in those not yet involved in the movement. For them, Facebook was a fast, cheap, reliable and inclusive tool that facilitated the ability to reach, recruit and organise participants. Inga Grigoriu, member of the Platform, recalled how Facebook helped to mobilise people for an unanticipated flash mob. The members of the Platform were in a forum when they received a message saying that the political class gathered at the parliament to invest the government. And since the activists and protesters did not sympathise with the idea, the forum was interrupted, and everyone went to the parliament to express disagreement. Inga Grigoriu added:

> […] we sent the call of participation through Facebook at the beginning – through TV it was impossible to reach an immediate effect. Many people, and especially the young, came to the parliament because they saw our call on Facebook and they were inviting each other also through Facebook. They just jumped and came.

Therefore, apart from the documentation and appealing representation of protests, Facebook was used to create events where activists would describe their program and requirements to the government and, for future protests, provide geospatial details. The activists' friends were invited and asked to circulate the event among their friends. The snowball effect reached thus a larger audience with a direct invitation from organisers and activists to attend the protests. Therefore, Facebook became a means to recruit participants since users were offered "an occasion for deciding" that meant "the calculation process involved in deciding whether to act" (Oliver 1989, p. 11). The invitation to participate spread by activists helped potential protesters overcome one of the barriers to protest participation as suggested by Verba, Schlozman & Brady (1995): particularly that people do not participate "because nobody asked them" (p. 15) . The circulation of the protest events in Facebook evidently made users become targets of mobilisation attempts. Although an invitation doesn't necessarily imply that the invited will undertake collective action, a recruitment invitation is demonstrated to be a predictor of protest participation (Schussman & Soule 2005; Snow, Zurcher & Ekland-Olson 1980).

6.1.6 Facebook used to build collective identity

Facebook facilitated the formation of a common social identity that was capable of challenging existing social orders by promoting unity and voicing protesters' grievances through participation. How protesters perceive a movement and interpret their own involvement is greatly influenced by its framing. As Ackland & O'Neil (2011) argue, frames are significant in the emergence of a collective identity because "their primary aim is […] symbolic: frames are used to communicate beliefs, a vision"(p. 180). The majority of participants mentioned that protests on Facebook were depicted as an unprecedented movement in Moldova's history that could unite people of different political ideological beliefs under one common cause. Activists and organisers avoided shaping their speeches into geopolitical or social identity divides: no pro-Russia, pro-Romania or pro-Europe. However, they shaped their discourse as a fight against the corrupt government and a movement that serves the interests of people. It was a "national movement" (ID1, ID7) "under the aegis of the civil society" (ID11) and the nation. What appealed more to a 23-year-old student was the framing of the movement as "the second National Assembly after the 90s" (ID1). He referred to the demonstration of 1989 called the *Grand National Assembly* that influenced the still Soviet Moldova to adopt a Latin-script Moldovan language as the state language. This achievement was seen as a first step to independence and renaissance of a national identity. Thus, this framing motivated the participant to take actions with the grand expectations as those achieved in 1989.

Participants also mentioned that by following their Facebook wall they had the impression that everyone was involved and talking about those protests. There was a "flow of positivism and optimism" (ID13)*,* "altruistic positive messages" (ID7), "others thinking the same as me and having the same values" (ID2) on Facebook. Seventy per cent of surveyed respondents claimed that the overall portrayal of protests on Facebook was positive and 60% thought that it was motivational. People realised that they were not alone in feeling dissatisfaction with the ruling political elite. A 23-year student and a 38-year lawyer claimed respectively:

> My friends said "Look, yesterday we saw on Facebook that our university friends went to the protest. Let's go too and see what it is happening" (ID1).

There was a publication on Facebook that gathered people with common values. It was a public reaction to the events that took place at that time and we united, formed an informal group and joined the movement (ID2).

Participants argued that through Facebook they could reach a large audience and felt how a "national identity" was created. They understood that many shared the same values, felt relatively deprived, were angry with the government and believed that together they could make a difference. They acquired the identity of an oppressed but "proud" nation that had the strength to fight the oppressors. The sense of group belonging and a common sense of "we-ness" (Snow 2001) led to the emergence of a collective identity, a crucial factor to make individuals join forces and undertake collective actions. Several empirical studies suggest that the more an individual identifies with a group, the more he/she is inclined to engage in protest actions with that group (Klandermans et al. 2002; Simon & Klandermans 2001; Stryker, Owens & White 2000).

6.1.7 Facebook used to fight misinformation

Although social media facilitated the organisational process of protests, it also brought challenges. The dissemination of mobilising and encouraging information was just as efficient as rumours and fake news. These findings are consistent with the arguments that highlight the double-edged effect that social media can have on democratisation (Fuchs 2012a; Morozov 2012). Both activists and protesters were talking about a constantly increasing number of trolls that were trying to compromise and suppress protest activities. They made use of terms such as "a great deal of" (ID3), "an empire" (ID11), "a factory" (ID5) to describe trolls' online presence. Dinu Plîngău, who was also one of the administrators of the Platform's Facebook page, claimed that with the start of the protests, the Moldovan online environment witnessed an extreme increase of fake profiles, flow of misinformation and aggressive, inflammatory and provocative messages. He attributed this to the "opposing camp that belongs to Plahotniuc", a statement that was supported by several other interviewed participants (ID3, ID11, ID16). Dinu Plîngău argued that the enthusiasm on Facebook made Vlad Plahotniuc create hundreds of bloggers and trolls to engage in "an aggressive fight", thus trying to monopolise the flow of information online as he did in mainstream media. Dinu Plîngău stated:

Misinformation and discredit invaded the online environment too. They saw that if in mainstream media they were winning by controlling many TV and radio channels, they were losing the fight online because it is not that easy to influence opinion here. Anyway, they created hundreds of trolls and it was impossible to delete all their messages. When one sees hundreds of negative comments below a post, this definitely influences the public opinion […] Trolls were on the behalf of the governing parties.

According to Inga Grigoriu, the offline fight moved and spread in the online environment. Protesters were talking about "lynching public figures", "media bombs" (ID10), "fakes" (ID5; ID16) and "dishonest messages" (ID3). The tactics used by trolls were to create "suspicious events with different time and location of future protests" (ID10), "fake profiles of the leaders of the movement" (ID11) as well as profiles of people who would leave derogatory comments on news or any posts related to the protests. The reasons for these hostile online behaviours were to "confound people", "gain time", "offer a scapegoat to calm people" (ID10), "to distort information" (ID11) and "influence others not to join the protests" (ID5). The activists argued that they tried to diminish the presence of fake profiles and misinformation by monitoring comments, posts, blocking fake profiles and by bringing awareness to users. For a 32-year-old singer who acknowledged the presence of the online trolls, the power of the people and their unity was greater and because of this, he thought they had an advantage over the fake profiles.

On the whole, the findings of the qualitative phase are in line with the quantitative results since both showed that the participation at the Moldovan anti-government protests was associated with the use of Facebook. The study proposed several explanations for this relationship, mainly the use of Facebook as: a tool of organisation, a source of news and information, a space to express opinions and engage in political debate, and to construct a collective identity. These patterns of Facebook use thus facilitated the process of recruitment; the acquisition and increase of awareness and knowledge of the social movement; elaboration of arguments and reflection on the information acquired; and the creation of the feeling of solidarity with a group that share grievances – all mediating mechanisms and significant preceding factors of protest participation.

6.2 Online social capital: Bridging or bonding?

The previous section delineated the mechanisms through which Facebook impacted offline participation in the Moldovan anti-government protests of 2015. These are: facilitation of the organisational process and recruitment of participants, creation of an informational and motivational channel, opinion formation and expression and collective identity construction. These functions were performed, mediated by and transmitted through social ties. Facebook is centred on people's connection, interaction and the resources they produce together, be it through managing existing relationships or building new ones (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2007; Steinfield, Ellison & Lampe 2008; Vitak, Ellison & Steinfield 2011; Williams 2006). Thus, considering the social attribute of Facebook and the roles it played in engaging people in protest participation, we must then reflect on the type of online social capital that led to protest participation. Was it online bridging or bonding social capital that influenced the formation of a participatory attitude and behaviour? Did the information received from online close social contacts exert stronger effect on political behaviour than information coming from weak social ties? To what extent did information and messages of social support and trust coming from online strong ties influence potential protester to decide whether or not to protest? Could alternative and new information coming from online weak ties help overcome the inhibition of protest participation? Although the quantitative phase already indicated that online bridging social capital was conducive to participation, this chapter focuses on the findings of the qualitative phase and explores whether these confirmed or refuted the quantitative findings by offering a more thorough explanation of this relationship.

Based on the analysis of the interview data, it was discovered that participants engaged with both their bonding and bridging social ties online, although to a different extent. The online bridging ties comprised protesters' interaction with their acquaintances and new people, connections that were established beyond their immediate circle of friends. The flow of protest-related, new, different and alternative information and knowledge was associated with the participants' larger network. The online bonding ties implied protesters' social relationship with their close friends and family members and thus a smaller, denser network. These ties were characterised mainly in terms of trusted information and mutual support by the participants.

However, interestingly for this particular case study and confirming the quantitative findings, participants gave more importance to their online bridging ties when referring to their offline protest participation. It is surprising because the opening hypothesis was that protesters would rely on their bonding ties when taking the decision to engage in offline protest activities. The hypothesis was based on the literature on social capital in the post-Soviet context that emphasises the influence of the Soviet legacy on the development and persistence of bonding social capital (Howard 2003; Lasinska 2013). As noted earlier, due to the totalitarian public experience of communism, the private sphere is still very important in the post-Soviet environment. People are still characterised by putting a strong emphasis on private ties and having a short radius of trust that spreads among close friends and families. Because of these characteristics, it was supposed that when taking the decision to engage in protest participation, people would rely on their bonding ties and the social and emotional support and feelings of security that these relationships bring. Thus, it was expected that this process would expand to Facebook, and individuals would turn to their strong ties in the online context too. It was also supposed that protesters would be less open to interact and trust information coming from their online weak ties. However, the surveys and the interviews results indicated that the proposed assumption did not apply to this case and it was actually weak ties that exerted a greater impact in the online context. When mentioning their bonding ties, participants were placing them in their offline world rather than online. A large number of respondents argued that the online presence of their bonding ties was actually redundant, and they preferred to appeal to their weak ties for innovative information. Therefore, having delineated the main deductions obtained from participants' insights, the following paragraphs will deal with each social capital separately to better understand this phenomenon. Since this is one of the main conclusions of this research study, it will be expanded in light of the results that stemmed from this analysis in the following discussion chapter.

A great majority of participants mentioned that they used Facebook to interact with their close ties in relation to protest participation. However, the interviews indicate that that interaction played a small role in participants' overall decision to join the movement. One participant explained this by the fact that the friends he interacted with online were already engaged in protests or had a strong interest to get involved. He described his online engagement with his close friends as discussing the protests they participated at,

sharing relevant information and organising their common participation at following protests. However, these constituted a small number of his friends. As for his other friends who were "not interested in politics" or "had a different political vision" (ID20), he preferred not to insist and let them decide by themselves. He stated:

> Yes, I was sending messages of encouragement to my friends. But, if you want to participate, you participate, if you do not want, do not do it. […] It is important to understand others and not get angry if some friends support you and others do not. You should not attack people who did not take a civic position by now (ID20).

On the contrary, another participant, a 27-year-old student, mentioned that it was very important that her close friends share her political vision and values. Through her Facebook posts she made her position very clear and she was expecting support from her friends. She insisted that those who think differently should block or unfriend her.

> My friends were reacting a lot on my posts. And, actually, there were people to whom I said, "Look, if you do not have the same visions, it is better that you delete me from your friends list or block me, and goodbye". I want to call friends those people who will be with me when I mostly need them, not only some acquaintances, and you know, my people supported me (ID15).

Several other participants also affirmed that the main reason they were interacting with their online bonding ties was because they had different views on participation at protests. They hoped that by reflecting their participation on Facebook and posting encouraging messages, they could convince their close friends to get involved. An interesting detail is that because of these differences with close ties, participants turned to Facebook to find likeminded people and extract useful and relative information from their online bridging ties. After learning about new protest opportunities from their online weak ties, the participants would then come back to their online bonding social ties with more "solid" (ID15) information. They regarded the results of their interaction with their online bridging ties as the base of a firmer argument used to mobilise their online close friends (ID15, ID16). Thus, online bridging social ties became the link between participants and their online bonding social ties.

Nevertheless, it has been only a few interviewed participants who emphasised the importance of online bonding ties and their impact for protest participation. Although almost all participants talked about shared values, trust, reciprocity, and social support as main characteristics of their relationships with friends and family members (ID18, ID15, ID17, ID19), they were placing these mainly in the offline world. The online presence of their bonding ties was redundant. Participants underlined the fact that it was nothing new about their close friends online that they did not know (ID12). The dense and homogeneous aspect of bonding ties created a closed space where the same information circulated. Because of this overlapping circle of friendships and information, respondents preferred to appeal to their online bridging ties. The arguments offered by the interviewed participants thus provide the explanation for the statistical results, which demonstrated that there was neither a positive significant relationship between Facebook use and online bonding social capital, nor between the latter and offline protest participation.

However, the statistical results discussed in the previous chapter showed that Facebook use was positively significantly predicting the construction of online bridging social capital and this was statistically significantly related to protest participation. And these findings are corroborated by the qualitative data. The main principle of bridging social capital is that it allows innovative, off-centre, dynamic flow of information and connection between two or more otherwise not connected groups. And a recurrent theme that emerged from interviews revolved around the topics of "new information" and "new people". The respondents regarded the online interaction with "people I rarely talk to" and "people unknown to me" (ID17) as bearers of "diverse" information that "I did not know before" (ID12). For instance, a 50-year-old accountant argued that she relied on many people and resources to learn about protests and Facebook was used in particular for its novel information. In the morning at work, she would engage in conversation with her friends and share the last news about protests they heard. Later, in the evening, she would discuss protests with her husband and children. Then she would connect to Facebook to get "news out of my circle of friends" (ID17) as she commented. She regarded the online "acquaintances" as helping her to "broaden the knowledge" (ID17) and receive information otherwise not achievable. Another 28-year-old resident doctor claimed similar things. For him, the main reason to use Facebook for protest-related information and actions was to interact with people from whom he could learn new and engaging facts. He stated:

Interacting with new people online I get new and interesting information. People I already know … there is nothing new to learn because we know each other very well already (ID12).

The information from "new people" was coming from an increased number of diverse sources respondents began following during the protest period. They argued that they started to "like" or "follow" Facebook pages that resonated with their interests and values. They also became members of the multiple groups that were created around protests. Several participants even customised their membership to receive updates every time someone in the group started a debate or posted protest-related news. For some participants, it was a serendipitous process: they saw by chance posts on their feed with information or call for engagement from others and decided to follow. Still for others, it was an intentional search. Those new sources included members of the Platform, activists, journalists, opinion leaders, actively involved protesters, public figures, news portals and different groups. The inclusion of diverse sources of information and opinions in respondents' daily news streams was done to "increase their understanding of what was happening" (ID17), to keep up-to-date and to gain awareness of other people's views. The ubiquitous and widely shared information among online bridging ties was perceived as "more than enough to decide whether to join the protest movements or not" (ID6), as one participant claimed.

The construction of a collective identity, another role afforded by Facebook use, was mainly associated with the bridging ties by the participants. In their assessment, the sense of belonging to a group that shares injustices, values and visions is connected to the larger audience of Facebook rather than bonding ties. Although participants argued that they associated their close ties with solidarity, online they were looking to what "others" (ID7, ID19), "people unknown to me" (ID2), "people from groups" (ID19), "acquaintances" (ID1, ID13, ID17) and "all those people online" (ID12) had to say about the protest. The framing of the movement as a fight of people against the corrupted political elite resulted in the creation of a "national identity" (ID4) that united people of different geopolitical visions. This drive for social identification extended over the strong ties and embraced groups of people otherwise not connected.

Another common element in respondents' answers was that they "became friends" (ID1, ID3, ID12, ID13) with people they did not know before on Facebook. Several participants mentioned that as a result of their engagement in online debates or following online discussions on different posts, they could find people with similar opinions and politically interested as they were. Based on this commonality, they sent friendship requests to each other and subsequently met in real life at protests. A 33-year-old entrepreneur recalled: "I connected to Facebook, made new friends and these were people who were going to protests very often and I went with them too" (ID3). Also, a 28-year-old resident doctor argued that the friendships he built with the people he met online and attended protests together persisted over time. He argued, "many of the friends I have now, I met in Facebook. We have common interests, go out together to know each other better" (ID12). The participant added that they still engaged in other political, social and recreational activities.

Accordingly, establishing close relationships with new people involves trusting them. Statistical results presented in the previous chapter showed that Facebook use statistically significantly predicted the construction of social trust and social trust was positively related to online bridging social capital and protest participation. When asked during the interviews about social trust, a great number of interviewees gave their answers in percentages. Their replies indicated and ranged between 50 to 80% of social trust. This means that online interaction created trust among weak ties and the belief in the reliability of one's extended network was helpful in engaging individuals in collective actions. Access to Facebook friends' profiles allowed users to learn about their personal backgrounds, interests, intentions and behaviours. Having the possibility to follow public figures one likes or customising one's news feed also involves choosing who and what to trust. A 34-year-old political analyst (ID16) considered that trust can be built after people interact with each other. He added that Facebook allowed to see "who is who" and that helped to understand if the person was trustworthy or not.

> I cannot say that I have 100% trust in people from Facebook. Well, you can form your trust only when you interact with them, when you see how he/she behaves, manifests, what he/she says and does, how sincere he/she is. Trust is formed only after you interact with the person. […] and it was really possible to do that on Facebook (ID16).

It is curious to note that participants spoke of trust in relation to their online bridging social ties. Reverting to the Soviet legacy of the Moldovan society, we would expect the presence of trust among close ties and less among weak ties. However, the research findings provide a different and unexpected insight. It indicates that social media use afforded wide reach to weak ties which in turn could build social trust, a significant antecedent of protest participation as studies have demonstrated (Crepaz, Jazayeri & Polk 2017; Walther et al. 2008). How and why online bridging social ties and trust exerted a stronger impact on offline protest participation rather than bonding social ties requires a more rigorous explanation that will be presented in the following section.

As for institutional trust, the statistical results of the previous phase demonstrated that Facebook use and online bridging social ties did not predict institutional trust and this, in its turn, did not predict participation either. This means that the resources users got from their Facebook bridging ties did not facilitate the improvement of users' trust in such institutions as government, judicial system, politicians and mass media. The mistrust in this case was the factor that promoted participation. The interviews confirmed these results since a great number of respondents described their trust in institutions by using the following words "none, minus, below zero" (ID12), "80% no trust" (ID10), "not at all" (ID15), "weak" (ID5, ID9, ID19). The resources users acquired by using social media to interact with the broader and diverse networks jeopardised trust in institutions and support for these. In politically regulated media states, social media and the information acquired from online weak ties may facilitate the entrance of more unconventional and new views and thus change the way attitudes and opinions are formed (Gainous, Wagner & Abbott 2015). Since knowledge and information available to individuals affect the formation of their attitudes (Bizer et al. 2006) and since social media increases the chance to be exposed to alternative or otherwise not achievable information, using Facebook may impact the negative attitude towards the status quo and political elite (Bekmagambetov et al. 2018; Gainous, Wagner & Ziegler 2018) and this may indirectly influence participation against the state. In a hybrid regime such as Moldova, those who do not trust the institutions are those who have democratic ideals and are more likely to engage in protest participation. This argument is concordant with the one suggested by Rossteutscher (2008, p. 229) who claims that "trust relates very clearly to confidence in non-democratic regimes" meaning that those who trust a non-democratic state are not interested in democracy and thus not in political participation.

6.2.1 Understanding the stronger impact of online bridging social capital

Due to past experiences, including 51 years of a totalitarian communist regime, people learned to trust only their close friends and family members (Khodyakov 2007; Sztompka 2004). The private ties supplied the safety, mutual support, reciprocity and feelings of solidarity that were difficult or impossible to achieve from engagement in the communist public sphere (Howard 2003). Because of this heritage, it was mainly argued that in order to undertake the risk of protesting, Moldovans would rely only on people they trust and whose social pressure to participate will be stronger because of the emotional aspect it bears. Along the same line, it was supposed that in the online context, the bonding ties would exert a greater impact on protest participation through the quality of its relationships rather than through the quantity of the weak ties and the resources these bring. Nevertheless, as the previous chapter demonstrated, the path from Facebook use towards protest participation was built through online bridging ties in the case of the Moldovan anti-government protests.

A frequent theme that emerged throughout the interviews with activists and protesters which could explain these unexpected and surprising results deals with the age of Facebook users. The majority of participants agreed that the significance of Facebook for participation is related and is mainly limited to young people:

> Facebook is used by active people, 12–40-year-old, tech-savvy, informed people and for them Facebook had definitely played an important role for mobilisation. The rest are watching TV (ID16).

> Look, I think we can divide people by age. For middle-aged people the main source was television; this is the reality. My mother, she is not even 50 but her main sources of information are television and me, and I do inform myself from Facebook (ID15).

These affirmations are consistent with the survey applied in this study, which demonstrated that the average age of those who responded was 29 years old. Apart from the fact that Facebook users were characterised as representing the young layer of the Moldovan society, they were described as the "most informed" and "knowledgeable" by

some respondents (ID6, ID15, ID20). Having access to internet and being digitally literate was regarded as important conditions to get access to alternative, "less manipulated information" (ID6, ID15), or even "free media" (ID20) as one participant put it. More than this, two of the activists and several protesters described a "Facebook generation" that has a "strong civic spirit" (ID11) and understood "the importance of civic duty" (ID7, ID9, ID10, ID16). Inga Grigoriu, one of the first organisers of the movements, argued that she felt very proud when hundreds of young people were contacting her to express their interest in participating and offering their resources and time to volunteer for the cause. Similarly, almost all interviewed participants claimed to have participated in volunteering activities in the last year.

All things considered, it seems that Facebook users are characterised as being young, informed, more curious, trustful, responsible and productive citizens. These characteristics do not describe a generation that relies on the Soviet-inherited social ties. Consequently, these young Facebook user participants might be categorised as the post-Soviet generation, a generation more open to trust and likely to rely on knowledge outside their immediate circle of friends. Thus, the main explanation for the significance of online bridging ties for protest participation lies in the age of participants. These are people born after the collapse of the Soviet Union and people who, although born before 1991, spent more years in an independent country rather than the Soviet republic. These are people who had to deal with a Soviet legacy indirectly through their parents and grandparents. And although they inherited many attitudinal and behavioural patterns from their family, they have been exposed to a more democratic world than their parents. They understand that they live now in a "different regime" from their parents, understand that they have the "right to express their opinions" and "many other freedoms" that can be helpful "to bring change" (ID4). A 22-year-old student summarised this by claiming that, "People under 35 understand this; those over do not and they do not have the confidence" (ID4).

Thus, it might be concluded that the impact of online bridging social capital on protest engagement was spread among the young group of protest participants; the young who represent the post-Soviet generation. This is a generation more open and trustful that preferred to rely on the novel and alternative resources of their online bridging ties. Although they did admit the significance of strong ties in order to adopt a political behaviour, their presence on Facebook was not considered essential and it was mainly

placed in the offline world among their parents, the Soviet generation. Since this is another essential finding of the interview analysis and it requires more clarification and specification, it will be presented in the following section that discusses offline interpersonal relationships and their role for protest participation.

Another very important and curious finding about the young and their use of Facebook is that they were the smallest age group that participated in offline protests. The majority of participants interviewed mentioned that the greatest number of protesters were actually middle-aged and elderly people and these age groups usually are passive or non-users of social media. And, according to the participants, offline bonding ties and television had a greater impact on them. A 20-year-old student recalled:

> If we take in general, there were more adults and elderly. The young so-so, not that many. Yes, there were young too but fewer (ID7).

A 33-year-old IT programmer confirmed, saying:

> Adults participated in a great number. This is what I did not like about these protests; there were few young people. Look, even if we compare it with Russia, recently they had some protests, only young participated. And here, home, more older people (ID6).

Although there are no official numbers to sustain these affirmations, 19 out of 20 interviewed participants agreed that the young represented between 10 to 20% of the total number of participants. Besides, a substantial number of news from 2015 emphasised that the young participated in a small number and journalists were asking, "Where are the young?" Interestingly, the same participants offered explanations for the small or, as some understood it, "passive" (ID15, ID20) involvement of the Moldovan youth in the protest activities. First, because of the violent protests of 2009, people were still afraid to engage in protest actions against the government. After the fraudulent elections in 2009, a pacific protest escalated into aggression and resulted in hundreds of young people being injured and several deaths. This event created apprehension and was one of the reasons that inhibited participation among the young. A 27-year-old student claimed:

Because of the big protest in 2009, 7 April […] where several were mistreated, beaten in the most despicable way, the young took fright. And although yes, they saw some changes, these were not enough to influence the young to participate again. I see this tendency now (ID15).

The second reason for the small number of youth's involvement in protest is related to their increasing number leaving the country. Participants argued that "our active and young people" (ID3, ID7, ID 16) are abroad. If before Moldovans were emigrating for a better-paid job, now the precarious and corrupt political situation is driving out of the country even those in a stable economic situation. On average, over 100 Moldovans leave the country on a daily basis (Guşan 2016). For instance, 64% of those who emigrated in 2016 were people under 40 years old and the numbers registered an increase of approximately 21% compared to 2015 (Biroul Migraţie şi Azil al Ministerului Afacerilor Interne al Republicii Moldova 2017). Apart from the fact that they are young, these are usually the qualified and highly educated people.

Still, Dinu Plîngău, the organiser of the first protest and the president of the youth department of the Platform, argued that the composition of participants was representative of the current Moldovan society and this does not mean that the young were passive. He added:

This is a very important thing I want to mention. I participated at all protests and television often subjectively was claiming that only old people participated. No, it is not like that. There were young people and old people, and people of 30 and 60 years old. People of all ages participated, it reflects our society […] because we now have few young people in Moldova, and if it is to take proportionally who is in the country and who came to the protests, it shows the real situation of the country.

Another 23-year-engineer stated similar things. He said:

I think it is representative of Moldova. The youth are abroad. The majority who stayed are 40 and 50 and they were mainly at protests (ID7).

Even though the participants recognised that the young were not the largest group of protesters, one of the activists claimed that those who participated were of an "exceptional quality with their own political visions" (ID11), "strong civic spirit" (ID9, ID11) and "a lucid mind" (ID15). A great number of participants gave credit to the young for organising the first protests and setting the start and base of future events.

Another role attributed to the young and their use of Facebook was that they constituted the first seeds of an informational chain that connected online with offline. Online bridging ties became the link between participants and their offline connections. Participants would turn to Facebook for innovative and alternative information not available through other sources and then they would pass the information further to their parents or people who did not use Facebook. The weak ties online and the information they brought would reach the offline bonding ties through word of mouth. A 23-year-old engineer considered that having a Facebook account meant to have access to the first source. After informing himself, he claimed to pass the information to his "friends and relatives offline" who, according to him, were "less informed" (ID7). He recalls that his grandfather, who was a very critical person and was interested in protests, was waiting his nephew's visits to get more "fresh", "new" and "firsthand" news (ID7). Another 27-year-old student reasserts the same. She argued that she was a source of news for her mother who is 50 years old and did not have a Facebook account. While her mother was waiting the evening news on television, news from a wide range of resources on Facebook would reach her daughter quicker. She then would call her mother and pass on the up-to-date information:

> We, who are younger and more active on Facebook, had the first information and would distribute it to others. Everything started on Facebook, and then personal relations would take care to pass the information further. […] My mother, she is 50 years old, and she informs herself from television and from me, and I mainly from Facebook (ID15).

All in all, this chapter aimed at explaining why Facebook users acquired the necessary resources to undertake protest activities from their online bridging ties and not bonding ties, as was initially hypothesised. The explanation relates with the age of Facebook users who turned out to be the representatives of the young population. The young haven't been

described as affected by the Soviet legacy, at least in the online environment, since they found the presence of their informal private ties on Facebook redundant. On the contrary, they have been characterised as being educated, tech-savvy, of an exceptional quality, with own political visions, a strong civic spirit, open-minded. Thus, the qualities and the age of Facebook user protesters indicate a post-Soviet generation, a generation different from that of their parents. They are more curious and trustful to rely on acquaintances and unknown people to get access to a more dynamic and alternative information.

However, an interesting finding that emerged from the analysis is that the young were in reality the smallest group of protest participants. And, in this context where the young are the main users of social media in Moldova but they did not represent the majority of participants, we cannot overestimate the significance of Facebook for the overall protest participation. Because the greatest number of participants were the so-called Soviet generation who are passive or do not use Facebook at all, there might have been other factors that triggered their decision to participate. Although our main objective was to study the role of social media for protest participation, we cannot overlook the significance of offline close ties and television, as all interviewed participants mentioned. Because these represent equally or even more important factors than Facebook, the next section will present a comprehensive explanation of the role of offline interpersonal interaction and television.

6.3 Other factors: the importance of television and offline bonding social ties

The significance of television and offline bonding social ties for the middle-aged and elderly people was a continuous thematic thread throughout the interviews and two paramount factors that influenced participation. Participants often spoke of a generation that "still has the Soviet thinking" (ID15). They included there their parents, grandparents and friends born in the Soviet Union or those who spent most years of their lives in the communist regime. This generation was described in terms of close friends, family, my people, a friend in need is a friend indeed, respect, trust, and solidarity. These are characteristics of reliance on informal social ties that were developed in the Soviet era. The Soviet generation was also presented as heavy television users. Although participants affirmed that they and their families were aware that Moldovan press was politically controlled and had low levels of trust towards it, they still appealed to it. As one

participant put it, "it is about habit" (ID4); many people still use television as their primary source of news because they were used to the Soviet propaganda, they did not know about independent or free media before. "Fortunately," as another participant (ID3) claimed, there was JurnalTV that supported the protesters and was uncovering corrupt politicians. Because television and offline informal ties emerged as key resources for protest engagement for the Soviet generation, each will be discussed thoroughly in the sections that follow.

6.3.1 The role of television in the protest

Television was an important source of protest-related information for people aged over 40, as respondents claimed. Official statistics show that almost 70% of Moldovan citizens follows socio-political news on television (Macovei et al. 2017). These are important numbers to take into account when the country is facing large protests and people seek knowledge and information about them. And although, there is very low trust in mainstream media in general and people talk of a captured media, its use and impact for protest remained significant, as protesters claimed. However, it is important to delineate that protesters referred to different media outlets when pointing out "low trust" and "significant". According to the protesters, in 2015 media was divided into those that supported the protests and those that did not. The former refers to JurnalTV and the latter to all media outlets controlled by Vlad Plahotniuc or other politicians. Several participants talked about a neutral media too, but because it represents a very small number, the following will focus on what respondents elaborated more.

A great number of interviewees mentioned a Moldovan captured media and openly or indirectly referred to Vlad Plahotniuc as the one who stayed behind it. One participant referred to his media as "we all know who these channels belong to" (ID13) while another used a diminutive Russian word for Vlad Plahotniuc's last name "Plahis" to refer to the manipulative characteristic of his outlets (*Plahis* in Russian would mean "bad") (ID16). Participants talked about his media as being "bought, politically affiliated" (ID13), "captured" (ID9, ID11), "controlled" (ID4, ID16), "non-existent" and "not free" (ID1, ID20*)*. They affirmed that propaganda, misinformation and lies were common guests of his TV channel news. And because Vlad Plahotniuc was one of the politicians protested

against, the participants claimed that his TV channels tried to discredit the protest and protesters and influence public opinion through a negative portrayal of the protest events. A recurring key theme related to protest representation that emerged from interviews was that of disparagement. First, news on the controlled media often minimised the number of protesters. One participating 27-year-old student recalled "if for example we were 50,000, they would say that only 10,000 participated" (ID15). Another participant, a 38-year-old lawyer, said:

> no one could give a real number, but they were always giving a smaller number … to demonstrate their numbers they would use a ruler to count how many people fit on a square metre; it was ridiculous" (ID2).

Another way to disparage the protesting movement was to trivialise the protesters' claims and goals and underestimate the leaders of the movement. A 34-year-old political analyst compared the denigration on television with "media lynching". He added:

> They were throwing dirt on participants and their demands. Every authoritarian regime tries to denigrate the opposition and this happened with us too. If before regimes were trying to silence the opposition through terror, now they are doing it through manipulation in media, it is all about media lynching (ID16).

The framing of the protests on Plahotniuc's media became quite often "pretentious" (ID5) and "provoking" (ID8, ID9, ID11, ID19) as participants mentioned. The protests were presented in the manner of a "frozen conflict" (ID1), "coup" (ID12), "chaos" (ID12), "anarchy" (ID12), "populist movement" (ID14) or a movement that would bring "disintegration" (ID11), thus speculating on foreseen violence.

Inga Grigoriu's quotes summarise concisely the derogatory representation of protests on controlled media:

> For instance, the media holding group that owns a great number of stations started to talk about unionism, the disintegration of Republic of Moldova and its annexation to Romania […] these manipulations were done on purpose to make people question who we are and send the message that we are promoting violence and could endanger people's lives (Inga Grigoriu).

According to the participants, the negative representation was done with the purpose to influence public opinion and protect vested interests. The dismissive framing tried to tire people and save time by bringing discord between participants and discourage the participation of those not yet involved. Interviewees' insights are consonant with research studies on the news coverage of protests. It has been found that social movements that challenge the status quo are identified as deviant and their legitimacy undermined (Gitlin 1980; McLeod & Hertog 1992; Shoemaker 1984), exactly as it happened in the media coverage of the Moldovan protests.

It is clear that this kind of representation cannot motivate the large audience to take action. Nevertheless, when protesters referred to the great significance of television for the movement, the majority of them referred to JurnalTV. However, JurnalTV is owned and financed by another controversial businessman and former politician, Victor Țopa. Vlad Plahotniuc and Victor Țopa were business partners and due to serious misunderstandings, they started to use their media outlets to conduct campaigns of denigration against each other. Țopa accused Plahotniuc of raider attacks and in turn Plahotniuc accused Țopa of blackmail and succeeded in sentencing him to prison. Thus, several participants claimed that JurnalTV was also a partisan channel. It was described as leading "a campaign against Plahotniuc" (ID16) and an "anti-government policy" (ID7, ID14) that was "exaggerated", sometimes became "aggressive" (ID7, ID16) and Moldova was portrayed as "a dictatorial state led by Plahotniuc" (ID11).

However, despite these allegations, because JurnalTV became the main supporter of the protest and its leaders, it came to be perceived as very significant for protest participation. Participants said that the majority of its TV shows and informational programs in 2015 revolved around protests and the corrupt politicians involved in the banking scam. JurnalTV's shows and news were directed to promote the protest events and its participants, to reflect every activity of the Platform, to offer mobilisation information and to call for participation. The live broadcasting of protests and the involvement of some of JurnalTV's journalists in the protesting events gave more integrity to this channel, according to some interviewed participants. The respondents regarded the information from JurnalTV as "credible" (ID19), "impartial" (ID1, ID4, ID6, ID11, ID15), "trustworthy" (ID1, ID3, ID7) and "motivational" (ID10, ID12, ID15). They claimed that JurnalTV was "promoting an anti-government policy" (ID4, ID7) in a

"constructive manner" (ID7) and the framing of the movement as "honest citizens who have a common cause and resistance" (ID3) motivated participation. Several participants claimed it was "incontestable" (ID16) and "absolute" (ID3) that JurnalTV had "the biggest impact" (ID11) in promoting the protest events. One participant even added that he had "zero trust in politicians, government and media, but 100% trust in JurnalTV" (ID3). The quotes below support the idea that JurnalTV had a significant role in promoting the protests and served as an impulse for participation.

> JurnalTV played the role of the promoter; a very big role. I can even say that it had the biggest impact in informing people. The majority of people who came to protest were adults over 35 and they got informed from TV news. And you know only JurnalTV stayed with us till the end (ID11).

> People who attended protests, the majority, you know, are not on Facebook or use it very seldom. JurnalTV was a strong factor of mobilisation. It became the most popular channel in the country (ID10).

> The events that were happening: the government undermined its authority, the theft of the billion, increased electricity prices, devaluation of leu [national currency unit] […] The impulse came from JurnalTV, it was the little drop that set the balance to a mass protest (ID3).

The quotes of a 33-year-old entrepreneur and a 34-year-old political analyst underline the fact that television in general, and JurnalTV in particular, was used by middle-aged and elderly people.

> The impact? Of course television. Currently in Moldova, TV has a bigger impact than Facebook and other media. The grannies from the countryside, north, south – they do not all have internet. That's the real situation (ID3).

> For middle-aged people, the main instrument was JurnalTV; that is incontestable. They reflected the events most actively, they were present there for us […] many people watch JurnalTV now and they learned about the theft and who was

involved from there. That motivated people. The first source for older people was TV definitely; polls show this too (ID16).

Participants claimed that because not everyone had access to internet and not everyone knows how to use it, JurnalTV became the most objective accessible source of news for passive or non-users of Facebook and thus the Soviet generation (ID7, ID9, ID11, ID15, ID16).

6.3.2 The importance of offline bonding ties for protest participation

As mentioned before, a prominent theme that emerged from interviews is the role of offline bonding social ties and interpersonal communication as motivators to engage in protest activities. Participants would refer specifically to their bonding ties when talking about social interaction and relationships in their offline world. Although this describes all age groups to a certain extent, middle-aged and especially the elderly counted on peer-to-peer relationships to adopt a positive attitude towards political protest. The reliance on strong social ties to get motivated and act politically can be perceived as a communist legacy. The experiences of the past influenced people's current behaviour and that is why people trusted more their close social ties than any other sources when undertaking risky actions, such as participation at protests. The importance of offline bonding social ties in exerting influence to undertake protest actions consisted in the following mechanisms: interpersonal talk with close friends, family; shared values; because other friends were already involved and invited to participate; out of respect for the social status of those who asked to participate.

First of all, political talk is considered an antecedent of democratic engagement (Delli Carpini, Cook & Jacobs 2004). Moreover, when the talk happens between people who trust each other and consider themselves intimate friends, the effect increases. Participants mentioned that they engaged in political talk with their friends, family, neighbours and co-workers and tried to convince and motivate each other to participate in protests:

> I announced everyone with whom I communicate – friends, neighbours, godparents, anyone I would meet […] I urged them to participate and change something in this country of ours. And they listened (ID15).

> A person makes the effort to protest and defend his idea. When he comes home, he expresses what he thinks and says, "let's do it together". And in this way, 2000 becomes 5000 and so on (ID7).

Participants regarded their conversations as influential mainly because they knew each other very well and could trust the information they were sharing among them. They also talked about the importance of shared values and similar opinions. One participant claimed that it couldn't be even questioned whether one should support her close family members. She added:

> My mum is a hardcore activist and it was logical that I would support her, moreover, we have the same visions. And yes, we went together to protest. I will tell you more, I was pregnant but I accompanied her at protests even during the winter. And I really think we achieved a lot with our participation (ID15).

A great number of participants also mentioned how groups of families and friends were together organising their participation. One participant emphasised the gatherings his friends were organising on weekends to share meals and a convenient opportunity to discuss protests or arrange future participation:

> You know, on Saturdays Moldovans gather together and they discuss about what is happening in the country and say, "Tomorrow is Sunday and there is a new protest, why not go? We care, let's go", and this is what I saw in many families (ID4).

Another respondent described how he and his friends would take turns to drive each other to the city where the protests were happening. He also recalled that before several large protests, the public and intercity transport was cancelled in an attempt to diminish the number of participants, and people were driving their neighbours and friends who did not have any means of transport to get to the city. He claimed that this happened in many

groups of his friends and that he was astonished by the strong cooperation and support among friends and families.

> There was a problem with transport on the day of the protest, which is why people were helping each other and took their neighbours if they had more space in the car (Dinu Plîngău).

Another impact on potential protesters to undertake political action was because their offline close friends were involved. Knowing that someone from their immediate circle engaged in protests served as a sign of approval and incentive. A 23-year-old engineer described it as a "contagion" (ID7). He stated:

> Some of my university friends were not interested to get involved but then I suggested them, "Let's do it", they said, "Yes" and they did it because I did. Afterwards, they became more active […] my friends from the village, I talked to them too. Once I organised a tour and they came with me […] if one feels that he did something for his community, he wants to share it with his people. He does his best to support his ideas so that more people know about it (ID7).

Participants also talked about their interaction with school and university friends as well as co-workers and neighbours. Although we would expect these to represent more the large bridging network, participants would always talk about them in terms of friendship. For instance, villages in Moldova represent very close communities where everyone knows each other. People are friends with their neighbours, they take turns and help each other to work the fields, they invite each other to the most important events in their families and they become grandparents to each other's children; a very common and widely shared tradition in Moldovan society. One of the interviewed participants described very effectively the Moldovan villages by saying, "If a man in the village knew, half of the village knew it too" (ID10). Therefore, the informational chain would expand over the close family members and include the neighbours that lived next door which, in their turn, would pass mobilising information to the next houses, etc.

Regarding school and university friends, a number of participants argued that they would often discuss the topic of protests and would try to involve in conversations those not

interested and thus include them in their groups. Sometimes instead of holding a class, teachers would let students engage in debate about their protest participation or protests in general. One of the participants affirmed that those conversations were inspirational and that was the main reason he decided to join his university friends. Another student mentioned that his decision to participate came out of respect for his teacher who would share his experience of participation with his students. He regarded the teacher as a holder of knowledge and an authority strong enough to influence his willingness to engage in protest activities. The student emphasised that it was an honour for him to have eloquent and knowledgeable teacher.

> You know the most solid teacher always help to form a civic spirit. They encouraged us to participate. Other groups, for example, did not participate; they were misinformed. But we, we had the honour to have solid teachers. They were like authority to us, they knew what they talked about, not just beating about the bush. They had arguments (ID7).

The insights on the other side of the teaching process comes from a teacher who mentioned how he organised his colleagues and how they went together to the protests. He spoke of a feeling of solidarity that resulted after their participation and how it united the teaching team.

> There was a period in the autumn of 2015, when me as a teacher succeeded in motivating and gathering the majority of the teaching staff. We participated together at that protest […] and managed to bring more people later (ID18).

Social status of those who tried to recruit was regarded as another stimulus to motivate people to get involved in protest activities. For example, a 27-year-old participant claimed timidly that her mother as a medical worker could exert a certain influence on her patients to join the movement. She added that people listened to her because she inspired respect and trust.

> Look, my mum is a medical worker in the commune where we live, she had an influence. I do not know how to say this, but people came out of respect to her. She told them to come and see with their own eyes, listen to what people say there

[…] And her patients and some of co-workers came. Even her boss who is from a different political party and people with different thinking came. She was saying that the protests were not organised by any political party, it was for the people, for the country's cause and they trusted her (ID15).

The competence and deference accorded to people who hold important positions in the community hold weight and often such people are regarded as opinion influencers.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter aimed at discussing how Facebook use could instigate offline protest participation. Nevertheless, the analysis demonstrated that it was a complex interaction of different factors that influenced Moldovan citizens' decision to engage in protest activities. Precisely, it was the interrelationship between Facebook use, online bridging social capital, television and offline bonding social ties. Interestingly, each factor served as a source of protest-related information and influence for different age groups. Although none of these sources describe exclusively a certain age group, it has been observed that each group had a source or two that described them better. For instance, Facebook users are mainly the representatives of the young protest participants. Their use of Facebook allowed them to get exposure to political relevant information, opportunities for engagement in protest-related information exchange and discussion and the creation of a collective identity; all significant factors to adopt a political and participatory behaviour. All these functions were mediated by the construction of online bridging social capital. Because online bridging ties imply that participants were sufficiently trustful to interact with the broader online network to get new and alternative information and knowledge otherwise not available, the users were described as the post-Soviet generation. They were not looking to acquire support and information from their close ties online; they were actually finding their digital presence redundant. Their curiosity and openness led them seek and trust information that did not overlap with what they could get from their strong ties. Although Facebook was used mainly by the young, it had an indirect impact on those who were passive or non-users of social media. Facebook users served as the seeds of an informational chain. A great number of interviewed participants considered themselves more informed after using Facebook and that is why they were transmitting their knowledge to their friends and families offline. In this way, they could establish a link

between online bridging and offline bonding ties and demonstrate how Facebook users influenced participation of non-users.

However, non-users of Facebook mainly relied on television and offline bonding ties. Because of the age and reliance on strong private ties, this group was categorised and described as the Soviet generation. It includes people born in Soviet Moldova and those who spent most of their life in that period. Thus, participants argued that they trusted JurnalTV and its anti-government policy helped promote and mobilise protesters. It was the most followed source of protest-related news for middle-aged and older people. Besides television, a more solid impact to participate came from offline bonding ties. The interviewees spoke of interpersonal communication with their friends and family members and how they engaged in debates about protest, how they shared knowledge among them and how they motivated each other's participation.

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION

The main goal of this research project is to study the relationship between social media use and political participation. Specifically, it aimed at understanding how Moldovan people made use of Facebook during the anti-government protests of 2015 and whether the use of Facebook had any impact in engaging people in offline protest participation. The concepts of online bridging and bonding social capital emerged as useful lens through which to examine this relationship. This chapter thus considers how the unique nature of the post-Soviet context influenced the use of social media and political participation, sometimes supporting and sometimes diverging from previous research. This phenomenon is explored across three major findings. First, the chapter explores the link between online bridging social capital and offline protest participation and emphasises how contextualised this relationship is. The findings indicate how the Soviet heritage of the Moldovan society shaped the need to build bridging social capital online and how this aided participation. Second, it elaborates on the interrelationship between online bridging and offline bonding social capital before going on to discuss interactions between old and new media. Third, the chapter features a diagrammatic model that summarises the way the relationship between the main factors that influenced participation is complex, dynamic and multifaceted.

7.1 How does Facebook activity lead to protest participation?

As has been demonstrated in Chapter 5, Facebook use was statistically significantly related to online bridging social capital and to offline protest participation. The qualitative phase of the study (Chapter 6) corroborated the statistical results and offered several reasons why Facebook users created online bridging social capital and how this led to offline protest participation. The resources that Facebook augmented for protest participation, as presented in Chapter 6 and supported by other studies, were in great part associated with participants' online bridging connections. These were: an organisational tool (Anduiza, Cristancho & Sabucedo 2014; Gerbaudo 2017; Micó & Casero-Ripollés 2014; Onuch 2015); a source of information (Bekmagambetov et al. 2018; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung & Valenzuela 2012; Jost et al. 2018; Valenzuela 2013); a channel for communication, opinion formation and expression (Diehl, Weeks & Zúñiga 2016; Gil de

Zúñiga, Molyneux & Zheng 2014; Kim, Hsu & Gil de Zúñiga 2013; Molyneux, Vasudevan & Gil de Zúñiga 2015); and a facilitator to construct a collective identity (Gerbaudo 2015).

A recurrent theme that emerged throughout the interviews revolved around the possibility of getting access to mobilising, novel and alternative knowledge resulting from participants' interaction with their broad online connections. Thus, based on interviewee's insights, explanations of why Facebook users decided to rely on the resources coming from their online weak and not strong networks in order to facilitate their offline protesting activities are: (1) a lack of or low level of bridging social capital offline that was compensated by its creation online; and (2) a high level of bonding social capital offline that did not create the need to be maintained online. Figure 7.1 illustrates how online bridging and offline bonding social capital impacted protest participation.
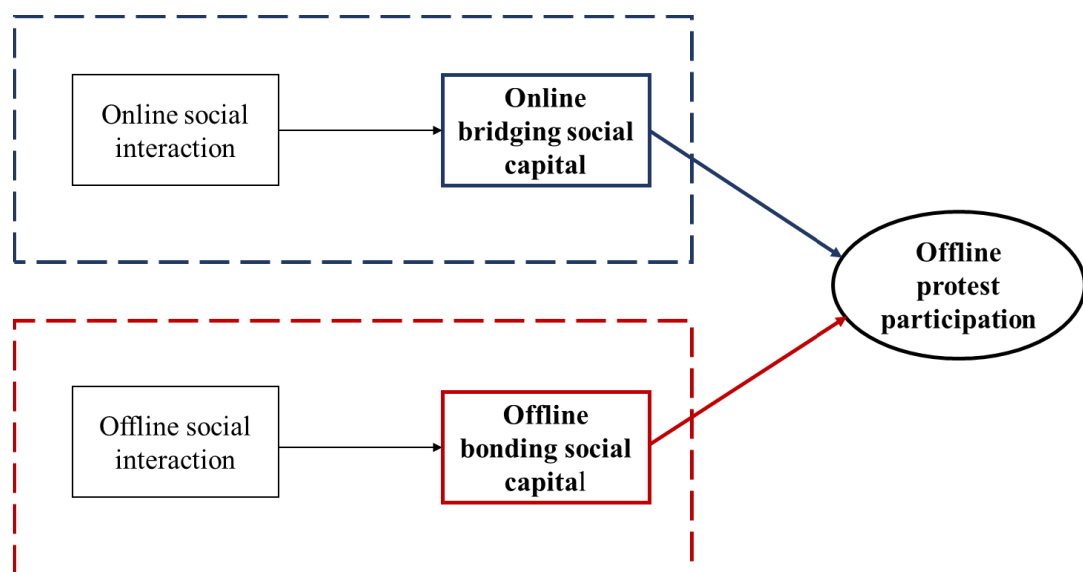
Figure 7.1: The impact of online bridging and offline bonding social capital on offline protest participation

First, people were looking online for what they were lacking or had little of offline. As discussed in Chapter 6, participants used Facebook to get access to novel, alternative, depoliticised information and messages, and other resources that were more difficult to get from mainstream media or offline. They were interested in finding out what others – the larger network – had to say about protests and get a better understanding of who was participating, and for what reasons, through the lens of those like themselves: "the citizens

themselves, honest people" (ID3). Facebook facilitated the acquisition of political knowledge and participation skills, along with the formation of social trust and institutional mistrust that enabled participants to become engaged in protests against political elites (Bekmagambetov et al. 2018; Ceron 2015).

Resources that were difficult to obtain offline resulted from the interaction with their bridging ties online. Moldova, as with other successor states of the Soviet regime, has been often characterised as a country where bridging social capital is low to non-existent (Howard 2003; Rose 1995, 2000a). Low membership of associations, little involvement in volunteering and social community projects, and low levels of social and institutional trust (Howard 2003; Khodyakov 2007) have resulted in fewer opportunities to meet and interact with people who are outside the usual circle one is involved with. This implies less access to various resources, such as the opportunities to exchange civic skills, acquire non-redundant knowledge, gather information, and build tolerance and social trust. However, the lack of a public sphere has engendered the development of a rich bonding relational social capital (Howard 2003; Pichler & Wallace 2007; Sztompka 2004; Uslaner 2004a). As the literature on social capital in the post-Soviet context suggests and the results of this research project confirm, families and close groups of friends are the key institutions on which people rely offline. Nevertheless, since bonding social ties imply strong relationships where members are interconnected and interact frequently, the overlapping of the information and skills that circulate among hinders the availability of alternative views. More than this, a great part of the Moldovan press is in the hands of the political elites and therefore editorial and journalistic practices are affected by political orientations, values and interests (Cebotari 2015; Litra 2016). This ownership also hampers the access to non-mainstream information. A national study realised in 2018 showed that 85% of people believe that news in Moldova is politically influenced and 44% do not trust any mass media (Magenta Consulting 2018).

This context therefore contributed to the need to look for a space that could provide people with alternative, non-redundant and diverse information that would stimulate political knowledge (Bakshy, Messing & Adamic 2015; Bekmagambetov et al. 2018) and increase the opportunities for mobilisation (Valenzuela 2013). This space was Facebook, which allowed for the creation of bridging social capital online and could compensate for its lack offline. According to Kitts (2000), "If transmission of novel information is a key

mechanism of disseminating activism, then weak ties should be more effective than strong ties" (p. 249). This seems to have been the case of the Moldovan Facebook community. Participant ID12's quote summarises this argument: "Interacting with new people online I get new and interesting information. People I already know … there is nothing new to learn because we know each other very well already."

The relationships that bridging networks developed on Facebook helped users to get access to "objective" (ID7); "new", "unknown to me", "out of my circle of friends" (ID17), "depoliticized", "alternative" (ID11), "unaltered information" (IID1) that was useful in reducing the "superfluous information" (ID11) coming from offline close connections. The knowledge acquired from the broad online community was rendered practicable to "increase their understanding of what was happening" (ID17); "learn what happens in the country" (ID4); "analyse different pieces of information" (ID7); and "broaden the knowledge" (ID17). It was also "convenient … [to] make own conclusions" (ID1) and even "more than enough to decide whether to join the protest movements or not" (ID6).

Facebook, therefore, may be well suited for accruing bridging social capital and compensating for its lack offline, and for having a real impact in real world, as happened in the case of the Moldovan anti-government protests. These findings are consistent with the quantitative study conducted by Hwang & Kim (2015), who also demonstrated that online bridging social capital was crucial for participation since "this implies more diverse resources available for the user to refer to" (Hwang & Kim 2015, p. 486). The authors emphasise the importance of a large network for the ability to expand the mobilisation potential and gain various informational resources.

However, the findings of this research contrast with studies conducted by Skoric, Ying & Ng (2009) and Gibson & McAllister (2013), who showed that online bonding, not bridging, social capital mattered for offline participation. Skoric, Ying & Ng (2009), who based their study on the Singaporean community, argued that online bridging social capital did not encourage offline political participation because of participants' lack of trust in people who were beyond their circle of close friends. Their finding differs from that of the current study, where the quantitative phase demonstrated that online bridging social capital was statistically significantly related to social trust (Chapter 5). Moreover,

the fact that Facebook users were open to trust the resources coming from online weak ties became a distinguishing characteristic of the post-Soviet generation (Chapter 6).

Gibson & McAllister (2013) in their Australian study supposed that the development of online bridging networks did not impact political engagement because these ties represented connections that were too weak to influence 'real world' activism, and they called for future research to explore the impact of bridging ties. Responding to this call, the findings of this current study demonstrate the opposite result: the impact of social media on participation was transmitted through the development of bridging ties and there was "strength" in these ties, as suggested by Granovetter (1973). This strength consisted in the access to mobilising and alternative resources that would be overlapping if found among bonding ties, not provided by the politically monopolised media, or "difficult to access offline because of barriers created by the authorities" (Ryabinska 2013).

The fact that participants built bridging social capital on Facebook does not mean that social support and thick trust originating from strong ties were not important for participation. Bonding social capital definitely played a significant role in facilitating collaborative action, but not online. These findings contrast with previous research studies that demonstrated that social media can also lead to online bonding social capital (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2007; Steinfield, Ellison & Lampe 2008; Vitak, Ellison & Steinfield 2011; Williams 2006). These studies explain that social media strengthen pre-existing offline ties and that the familiarity and feeling of togetherness that these bring online is predictive of offline participation (Gibson & McAllister 2013; Skoric, Ying & Ng 2009).

In the case study of Moldova the results are distinct since participants did not need to maintain their offline strong ties online. The majority of participants reiterated the importance of social approval, support and trust built among tightly knit networks, but they were placing their bonding ties offline. The presence of bonding ties online became redundant, at least in regard to protest participation, as this study has demonstrated. Participants confirmed that they interacted with their family and close friends online regarding protests, but they emphasised that this did not have an impact on their participation. They explained that they already knew about their close friends' views on protests or about their participation. Even if they were using Facebook to exchange

information or organise their common participation, the presence of close ties online did not bring anything new. Online, bonding social ties meant the same information, and as participant ID3 mentioned, "What new things could I learn about old friends …, no, nothing new, we've learned about each other already." On Facebook, participants were looking for novelty and alternative views, and the presence of participants' family members or close friends online could not provide this since strong ties meant overlapping, and therefore repetitive, information.

Offline, however, participants relied on the resources that bonding ties could provide in abundance. Although the quantitative phase of this study focused exclusively on online social capital, and there are no statistical results that could prove a positive relationship between offline social capital (bridging/bonding) and protest participation, the qualitative interviews emphasised the importance of offline bonding social capital for participation. Participants spoke of parents, close friends, university friends, and colleagues, along with the importance of trust, reciprocity, feelings of solidarity, mutual help and support, shared values and views on the protest, cooperation and being there for each other. As Somma (2009) claims: "If the recruiter is strongly tied to the target, the former may try to lower the barriers that the latter might face for attending the protest event in many specific ways." (p. 297). Several participants highlighted the family gatherings they organised in weekends where they would engage in debate about the protests and use these occasions to motivate and convince others to join the movement (ID4, ID1). Others said they had seen many groups of families and friends come together by sharing transport and that the feeling of solidarity (ID18) within those groups helped "2000 become 5000" (ID7).

Participants also mentioned that having friends already involved in the protests had influenced their decision to participate since they received support and they could trust the information coming from them. This finding is supported by the claim suggested by Passy (2001) who emphasised that "when recruiters are close friends …, potential participants tend to trust them" (p. 181). Trust is considered a significant antecedent of protest participation (Almond & Verba 1963; Crepaz, Jazayeri & Polk 2017; Walther et al. 2008). Still other participants emphasised the significance of social status and respect towards those that recruited them, and how this impacted their decision to undertake collective action. The mayor of the village, the professor from the university, or the medical worker in the local commune, were regarded as arbiters of information

credibility, authority and trust. And although these connections could act as bridging networks because they represent people of different social backgrounds and ages, in Moldova these are very small and tight communities. Being part of a community where there is daily interaction over a long period of time creates the feeling of belonging, and the network becomes homogeneous and exclusive. Chapter 6 elaborates more on the importance of offline bonding social capital for protest participation.

On the whole, these findings indicate, first, that social capital existing online is defined by social capital present offline, as Kobayashi, Ikeda & Miyata (2006, p. 604) argue. The fact that Moldovan people build bridging social capital online is not solely the result of online interactions; this is embedded and moulded by the offline context and the scarcity of bridging social capital offline. Besides, this indicates that the quantity and quality of social capital created online is not similar to the one existing offline. Facebook was used to compensate for deficits in offline bridging social capital but did not lead to bonding social capital, which was in abundance offline.

Second, contrary to discussions from previous research that emphasise the fact that bridging ties online are too weak to result in actual political or civic engagement (Gladwell 2010), this study has demonstrated the opposite. Weak ties online, as suggested by Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela (2011), allow people to overcome barriers that are preventing them from accessing protest-related resources in their offline sphere. The dense offline networks and politically monopolised media in Moldova were overcome by the weak ties built on Facebook, one of the primary drivers of alternative, novel and diverse information useful in expanding the mobilisation potential.

7.1.1 The new vanguard: Facebook and the young post-Soviet generation

A significant though expected finding about the impact of Facebook on protest participation and the construction of online bridging social capital deals with the ages of Facebook users. The effect of Facebook use on participation was mainly limited to young Moldovans. Although the young shared the resources they got online with their offline community, the direct impact of Facebook was mainly spread among them; they were not the most active protest participants but were still crucial to the birth of the protests. The

quantitative survey applied in this study shows that the average age of the respondents was 29 years. Besides, the majority of interviewed participants claimed that Facebook's role in protest participation was limited to the young people since they are the heaviest users of social media. Participant ID16 summarised this argument: "Facebook is used by active people, 12 to 35-year-olds, and tech-savvy."

These results are corroborated by a public survey performed at the end of 2015 that confirmed that 64% of the Facebook users were situated in the age group of 18 to 34 years (Gramatic 2015). The fact that social media use is concentrated among young people has influenced the direction of many studies that focused on the relationship of social media and political participation, with a specific emphasis on the young people (Bennett 2008; Bode 2012; Conroy, Feezell & Guerrero 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung & Valenzuela 2012; Valenzuela, Arriagada & Scherman 2014; Xenos, Vromen & Loader 2014). The impact of social media on political participation is particularly accentuated in the younger generation since they are more likely to get exposed to deliberate and incidental political news and thus more likely to obtain the benefits from it (Shah et al. 2001; Skoric, Ying & Ng 2009) and eventually increase their political engagement (Bode 2017).

However, political apathy among the young is considered in decline in more established democracies (Henn, Weinstein & Wring 2002; Zukin et al. 2006), not to mention the post-Soviet countries where political participation has always been considered low. In Moldova, a recent study conducted in 2017 indicated that the young show a low interest in civic and political engagement, even below the average of the general population. Called "the silent majority" (Voicu & Cojocariu 2017, p. 21), the young in Moldova are primarily preoccupied with solving their socio-economic problems. They are described as being dominated by pessimism, discontent and conservatism, thus reproducing the prejudices and intolerances of the previous generations (Voicu & Cojocariu 2017). Several interviewed participants confirmed that the young were the dominant users of Facebook but the smallest age group of protest participants. They described the young as passive and emphasised how 'slacktivist' they were. Participant ID3 summarised this by saying "Unfortunately, our young people are passive. They say they will come and it's not like that. Probably the Moldovan spirit. We do not have that spark." Political apathy being a national characteristic was reiterated by participant ID6, who claimed, "We are such a nation, we are passive."

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According to the study participants, the reasons for the young peoples' low level of political participation was the widespread cynicism they felt towards politicians and the government, the violent protests of 2009 that left an apprehension towards participation, and the extensive migration among the young. First, the young perceive the institutions as very corrupt and self-serving, and they are sceptical about their relating to young people's issues. Walker & Stephenson (2012) confirm that the object of the Moldovan's youth resentment is the state, "which is widely perceived to have abandoned its responsibilities to its citizens" (p. 7), and that the scepticism and the feeling of powerlessness to change things influences the youth's low political engagement.

Second, the majority of participants agreed that the violent protests of 2009 left the young with anxiety and fear about engaging in any other protests against the ruling elite. And third, many respondents suggested that the low numbers of young protesters were due to the increasing number of young emigrants leaving the country. They argued that the majority of active young people "are abroad" (ID3, ID7, ID16). The young represent 64% of those who emigrated in 2016 (Biroul Migraţie şi Azil al Ministerului Afacerilor Interne al Republicii Moldova 2017). Apart from the fact that they are young, these people are usually qualified and highly educated. Chapter 6 elaborates more on the interviewed participants' explanations for the low youth participation at protests.

Nevertheless, one of the interviewed activists, Dinu Plîngău, linked the small number of young protesters to emigration (the young being the largest group of Moldovans who are migrating) and not to political indifference. He stated that the protesters of 2015 were a representative sample of the actual demographic situation in the country (ID10), and participant ID7 confirmed that the "the majority who stayed are 40 and 50 and they were mainly at protests". This argument is supported by official data, which emphasise the fact that in 2018, young people (18 to 35) represented 30% of the stable population in the country (Consiliul Naţional al Tineretului din Moldova 2019). Another activist, ID11, perceived migration as also bringing benefits: being exposed to different cultures helped the young understand what it means to be a citizen and "[those] who studied abroad, they returned home and want to share their experiences".

Although many research participants concurred that the young people were the smallest age group at protests, they acknowledged the importance of their participation. ID5

claimed that it was difficult to say that the young were passive because they were the initiators of the movement: "Well, you cannot say that the young are very indifferent, it was the young who started the protests." ID10 added: "The protests were born on Facebook." The dominant role of the young and the widespread use of social media as a political tool and action is situated at the forefront of recent social movements (Tereshchenko 2012) and especially in the third wave democracies (Valenzuela, Arriagada & Scherman 2012).

ID11 underlined the fact the in 2015, when the protests started, the civic activism in Moldova was "on the ground" and many people could not understand how someone could volunteer their time on weekends when the protests usually took place. She added that Facebook helped to explain the importance of having a participatory democracy with a broad network and was convinced that "the hope will revive this year, young people are mobilising and are becoming more active". The communicational and informational feature of Facebook allowed to describe the young Facebook users as "the most informed" (ID6, ID15, ID20) and "knowledgeable" and having more access to alternative, "less manipulated" (ID6, ID15) information. This non-mainstream information helped users understand that they had the "right to express their opinions … to bring change" (ID4), and "have visions on how Moldova should look like in the future … and want to affirm themselves" (ID11). These conclusions are consistent with a study conducted by Cărăuş & Godarsky (2015), who argue that internet in Moldova is used by young "as an empowering tool" and for its "genuine news" (Cărăuş & Godarsky 2015, p. 48). Large numbers of these young people aspire towards a Western model of democracy.

All things considered, these findings impede to expand the significance of Facebook for the protest participation, since Facebook almost exclusively describes the young cohort and therefore generalisations to those who are not using this platform cannot be made. More than this, the importance of Facebook lies in its congruence with other factors, such as offline bonding social capital and television, as the results demonstrated. Nevertheless, though Facebook had a small impact on protest participation, in a country with a monopolised media and low levels of offline bridging social capital, Facebook promises to become a favourable environment to help young people to embrace democratic values and become more receptive to different opinions and non-orthodox knowledge. It can act as a trigger and motivate the young to get more involved. As ID13 explained, the "flow

of positivism and optimism" that was spread on Facebook was contagious. Even those uninterested and unengaged were more likely to be exposed to new information online than offline. Since these findings indicate that users built online bridging social capital, this means that they could learn information that they had not originally sought, and it is enough to know only "a handful of interested and engaged others in order to be regularly presented with incidental cues and information about political issues that could result in greater engagement, especially during times of high political activity" (Xenos, Vromen & Loader 2014, p. 154).

Facebook use among the young also underlines the changing media preferences and attitudes of the post-Soviet generation. If we look at Figure 7.2, a version of Figure 7.1 that includes the post-Soviet generation, we see a different pathway to protest participation.
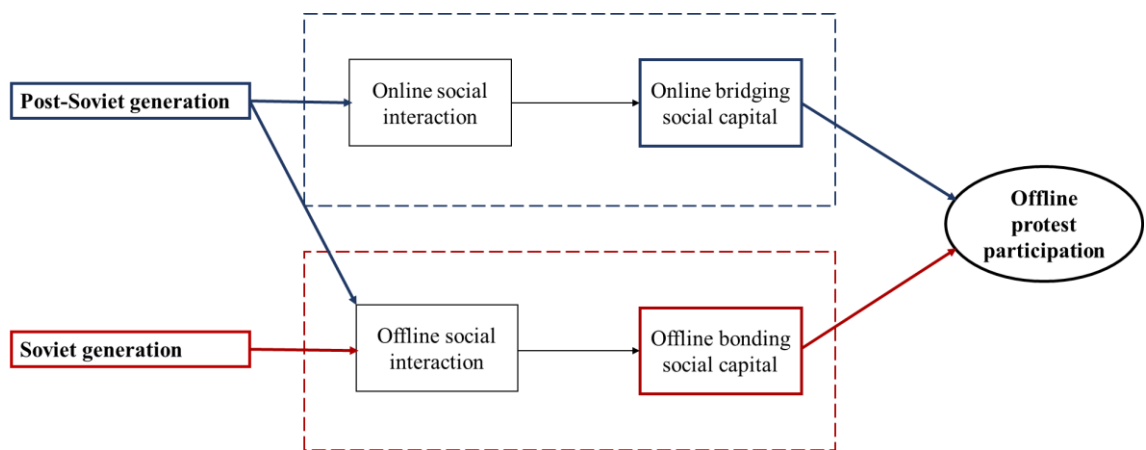
Figure 7.2: Generations and social capital => protest participation

It is not only age that indicates a post-Soviet generation, it is participants' awareness, that there is a distinction between the young and their parents or friends with a "Soviet thinking" (ID15). The young prefer the new media as their primary sources of socio-political information and especially for accessing alternative information. Besides, they are also more curious, more trustful and more open to engage with their heterogeneous online networks and thus build online bridging social capital. The impact of online bridging social capital on offline protest participation therefore describes almost exclusively the post-Soviet generation, the young active users of social media. Offline bonding social capital, on the contrary, became a source for protest participation for both

the post-Soviet and the Soviet generation, although with a stronger emphasis on the Soviet generation. People born in the Soviet Union are not generally users of social media as this study demonstrated and they do not build bridging social capital, either offline or online. Therefore, they rely on what they are used to and mostly have offline, specifically bonding social capital.

7.2 Online bridging and offline bonding social capital: the relationship

The main reason for participants to accrue bridging social capital online was to get access to the resources that circulated among the bridging ties, and the interactions and resources that are less common offline or sometimes not available, such as novel, alternative, and mobilising information and political knowledge. Such resources acquired online were eventually shared with the participants' strong offline ties, thus establishing a relationship between online bridging social capital and offline bonding social capital. A great majority of participants described how those with access to internet became the first seeds of an informational chain that was spread offline to their strong ties. ID15 claimed:

> We, the young and the most active on Facebook had the information and then we were sharing it with the others offline. … Everything was beginning on Facebook, and the personal relations took care to send the information further. … as soon as I would learn something new, I would pass the information to my mother (ID15).

ID7 reiterated this idea by emphasising how the young used Facebook and were passing the knowledge further to non-users: "Those over 40 do not use Facebook. […] I think, kids, the young started to talk with the adults, as I did with my grandfather." ID9 said, "If someone did not have Facebook, I would inform him/her", and suggested that by circulating mobilising information from online to offline, there was no way the majority would not react. These young, active users of Facebook were thus passing non-available information offline to those who did not have a Facebook account, the majority of whom represented the Soviet generation – people who relied more on strong offline networks and television. So, if we expand the previous figures to form Figure 7.3 by adding the indirect impact of online bridging social capital on offline bonding social interaction, we see how online weak ties connect to offline strong ties.
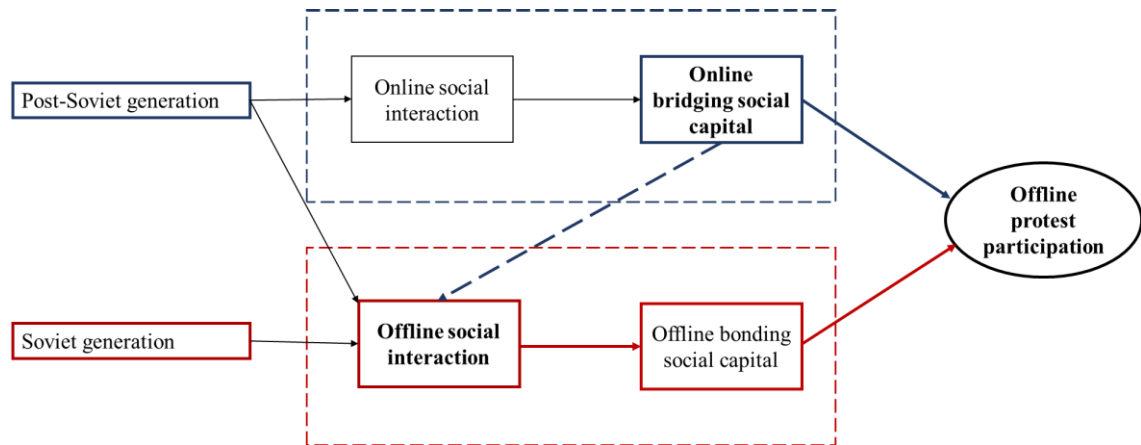
Figure 7.3: Indirect impact of online bridging social capital on offline bonding social interaction

These findings highlight the interconnected relationship between online and offline (context), bridging and bonding (types of social capital), and the Soviet and post-Soviet cohort (generation). And although these dimensions seem to be binaries, they also overlap.

(1) Context: Users shared the resources they found online with their offline community, which indicates a spill over effect (Kobayashi, Ikeda & Miyata 2006). This supports the argument that online and offline can no longer be treated as separate entities. The duality between the virtual and the real must be ignored (Jurgenson 2012) since online permeates and augments offline (Carty 2010; Harlow & Harp 2012). The two dimensions are intertwined; they exist within the same world.

(2) Types of social capital: Facebook users became a channel through which they were passing the resources they obtained from online bridging ties to their offline bonding ties. Since the information one finds reliable online is passed offline and since the individual is trusted among his close friends offline, the information he/she introduces becomes trusted too. This means that bridging and bonding are related, and they might be more effective when combined. If offline, strong ties channelled such resources as emotional support, social incentives, shared values and high trust; online - weak ties made available mobilising and alternative information and political knowledge that was lacking offline. When the availability of resources acquired online are added to those accrued offline, individuals have even more resources at their disposal when deciding to get politically involved. According to Putnam (2000) this represents an

ideal setting, since bonding and bridging social capital operate in conjunction with each other, although from two different contexts (online/offline).

(3) Generation: The relationship between online bridging social capital and offline bonding social capital indicates an interrelationship between the post-Soviet and the Soviet generations. The young post-Soviet, who are more open and trusting, rely on resources coming from online heterogeneous ties but still share these resources with the less trustful, inward-looking, older Soviet generation.

7.3 Blending new and old: Facebook and television

Although the focus of this research project was mainly on the role of social media, television also turned out to be a very important source of mobilising information. The majority of participants acknowledged that the great part of the Moldovan media is politically captured, and that they were heavily exposed to misinformation, bias and disparaging representation of the protests and protesters. Nevertheless, in this politicised media environment, they found a few mainstream TV channels that, according to them, were either neutral and objective or very supportive of the protests. The TV channel most often mentioned by participants was JurnalTV. Participants appreciated JurnalTV for its live transmission of protests, continuous news updates about the events, and political shows that satirically covered the most important events related to the Moldovan government's efforts to diminish and impede participation. And although participants ID7 and ID16 emphasised that JurnalTV was quite aggressive in its coverage of the protests and very critical of anyone who was against these, the fact that protests were its most constant topic of discussion, and other channels either avoided talking about them or trivialised them, meant that it became more trusted than the other channels. ID10 claimed, "When JurnalTV started to cover the protests, it became the most popular TV channel in the country." The findings of Chapter 6 present a more detailed picture on the importance of television for protest participation. This current section, however, deals more with the interaction of the new and old media and how, through television, non-users of social media could learn what was happening in the online environment.

Although television was a source of socio-political information for both the young and the old, the majority of the young claimed to have followed the online version of JurnalTV

via liking its Facebook page. The young claimed to almost never switch on television and watch it "as (they) were doing it before". Understandably, the Facebook page of JurnalTV had the largest number of followers at the end of 2015 (Gramatic 2015). It was mainly the older generation that used television in the traditional way as a source of news relevant to the protests. ID16 explained "people of third age, they do not use social media, they watch television," and ID3 said "Currently in Moldova, television has a bigger impact than Facebook … because the grannies from the villages, the north, the south, they do not have internet." Although the Soviet generation is characterised as the heaviest users of television and non-users of social media, they could still learn what was happening on social media. A great number of interviewees argued that television news would constantly cover what was happening online and who was commenting on the protests on Facebook. This following of television through Facebook and the covering of the Facebook community in the traditional TV news speaks of a circular flow of information that connects the old and the new media. If to the previous figures we add television as another factor that impacted participation and indicate its interrelationship with social media, we have Figure 7.4.
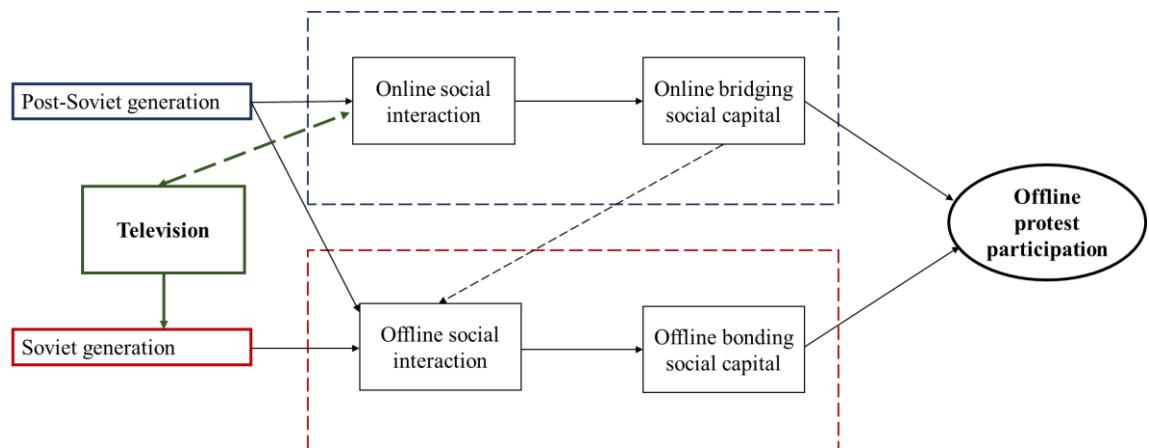
Figure 7.4: Adding television as another factor that impacted participation

This interrelationship between the new and the old, as represented in Figure 7.4 by the double-headed arrow, allows us to treat media from an integrative point of view and as moving. It amalgamates the logics of traditional and social media that operated simultaneously (Chadwick 2013): two "interpenetrating communication flows" (Cottle 2011, p. 652). These two modes of information dissemination collaborated and thus the young, active users of social media would learn how traditional media covered the protesting events through Facebook, and the older people – the main audience of

mainstream media – would learn how protests were depicted online, since television often would integrate and rely on social media in the coverage of the protests.

7.4 Conclusion

In this Moldovan study, where there is a low level of bridging social capital offline and a politically controlled media, social media became the space where users found mobilising, novel, diverse and alternative information and political knowledge that in their turn influenced opinion formation and expression, facilitated the formation of a collective identity, social trust and institutional mistrust, and put the necessary participatory skills at the protesters' disposal. The acquisition of these resources was made possible through users' interactions with their online bridging social ties – the type of ties that are difficult to obtain offline. Therefore, in contexts where the media system impedes the circulation of unconventional information and social interactions offline are so tightly knit that they do not allow the entrance of novelty and civic skills, social media can be helpful in bypassing these hindrances. They can facilitate protest participation by accumulating resources that are difficult to obtain through other known means. And although this study has demonstrated that social media impact on protesting behaviour is mainly limited to the young population and these were protesting in fewer numbers than other age groups, social media may be seen as a promising tool that can gradually impact political engagement in countries such as Moldova where media is partially free and there is a widespread apathy towards political participation. This thesis does not ascribe the mobilisation of movement to social media, but it does support the idea that social media changed the nature of protests. As Cottle (2011) argues:

> The argument … is not so much about whether new social media did, or did not perform a determining role in the events in question but rather how exactly media systems and new communication networks complexly interacted, entered into and shaped them (p. 651).

Although the focus of this study is on social media, other factors, mainly offline bonding social capital and television, were found to be crucial for protest participation, which means that the effect of social media rests on both its connection with the traditional media and its offline context. Adding all the factors together, different binaries appear

where the elements within each group stand in a dialogic position. Figure 7.5 summarises the various factors and their interrelationships that impacted offline protest participation.
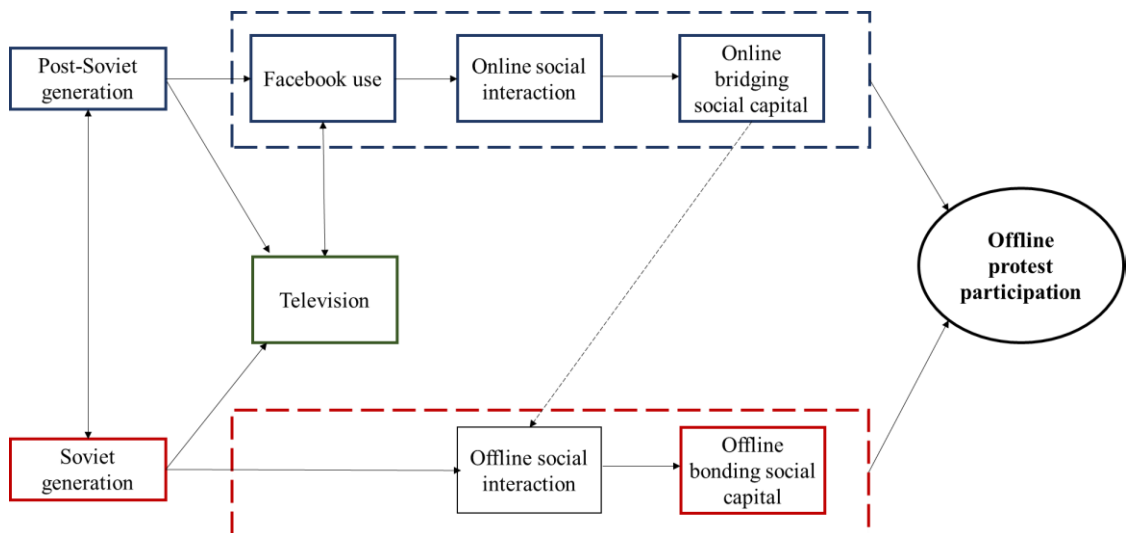

Figure 7.5: Factors that influenced offline protest participation

In Figure 7.5 it is possible to trace (1) the context which comprises online and offline, (2) the types of social capital developed in each context, that is, online bridging and offline bonding, (3) media preference, which refers to Facebook and television and the interplay of all these elements that describe to a different extent each age demographic (4), the Soviet and the post-Soviet generations.

The use of Facebook and the construction of online bridging social capital almost exclusively describes the post-Soviet generation. Young people are described as post-Soviet, not only because of their age range, but mainly because of their receptiveness to engage and build social trust with weak ties and their openness and curiosity. Although they also claimed to have relied on their offline private ties for social support and the internet version of some television channels, the offline bonding social capital and the traditional use of television had a stronger impact on the Soviet generation. The findings confirm that Moldova as a post-Soviet country is still characterised by the persistence of informal social ties and a very strong bonding social capital. In terms of media preference, the Soviet generation are still the passive audience that consumes what is offered.

Nevertheless, this study found that the Soviet generation had indirect access to the resources the young obtain from social media. As a result of the young peoples'

interactions with their bridging social ties online, they could access novel, alternative and mobilising information that was further passed to their offline bonding ties. In this way, the Soviet generation could add the resources they received from the users of social media to those they already had offline. Another way the Soviet generation obtained information from the online environment was through the hybrid media system (Chadwick 2013), which implies that television often appropriated social media content and covered what the users of social media had to say about the protest.

On the whole, if it is to relate these findings to the debate on the democratising effect of social media discussed in the literature review chapter, this thesis demonstrates that no claims can be made of a revolutionary (Gainous & Wagner 2014; Shirky 2011) or dystopic (Christensen 2011b; Morozov 2009a; Morozov 2009e; Morozov 2012) impact by social media on participation in Moldovan protests. Although the results indicate that social media had impacted participation, it was neither the main mechanism behind mobilisation nor its main impediment (though trolls and misinformation on Facebook were mentioned by participants). Participation at protests cannot be ascribed solely to technology, since this represents a contextualised phenomenon and claiming otherwise would mean having to explain complex social relations through "the fetishism of things", as Fuchs (2012a, p. 386) argues.

In this thesis, the role of social media for participation was conceptualised in terms of instruments, social networks and resources. The instruments were "the information infrastructure and tools" used by social networks; the social networks were "the people … that produce and consume digital content" and acquire resources; and the resources were "the content that takes the digital form of personal messages, news, ideas, and cultural products (Howard & Parks 2012, p. 362). These elements were studied in a specific context that influenced and shaped who would use the tools and what resources they would get. And as demonstrated by this study, the context emphasised a generational gap in regard to the users of social media, moulded the resources those users were seeking online, and explained how the mobilising potential of social media rested on integrating online and offline, new and mainstream, media.

This conclusion impedes the drawing of boundaries between technology and society, online and offline, but views their interrelationship as dynamic, multifaceted, fluid and

constantly evolving. This thesis argues for an ambivalent approach (Kidd & McIntosh 2016) in regard to the potential of social media for participation, and it supports the ideas of those scholars who claim that technology is embedded in society (Fuchs 2012a, 2017), that "those traditional social, political, and economic arrangements remain the meaningful catalyst for social movements and not the new tools of social media" by themselves (Morozov 2012, p. 339), and that broad general arguments on the democratising effect of new media for participation should be avoided (Cottle 2011, p. 652).

Anduiza, Jensen & Jorba (2012) argue that factors such as digital divides, media systems and institutional settings mediate the impact of social media on political engagement. This argument is supported in this study because the findings demonstrated not only an intergenerational divide in terms of media use, but also how the partially free, politically controlled mainstream media in a hybrid institutional regime affected how social media were used for protest participation. The questions that should be made, then, are: How do social contexts condition the use of social media? How does social media shape society in multiple ways? How do the effects of social media on participation differ in accordance with the political context and the nature of its use? (Boulianne 2017), and how do the virtual and physical become gradually mutually constitutive? (Juris 2012, p. 260). These questions will be referred to in the next, concluding chapter.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

This thesis examined how social media use might promote offline protest participation through a detailed mixed methods study of the Moldovan anti-government protests of 2015. In doing so, it makes a major contribution to research in the field of new media and political engagement by focusing on how social media influenced protest activity in post-Soviet societies, an understudied region in the literature. This also makes a contribution to the debate on the democratising effects of social media by exploring this phenomenon in the non-Western context. This chapter outlines the conclusions of this research study. First, it summarises the main findings and explains how the research questions posed at the beginning of this study were answered. Then it discusses the main limitations and introduces an outline of future research directions.

8.1 Summary of key findings

The main research question posed in this thesis was about the impact of social media use on offline protest participation. The aim of this question was to obtain an in-depth understanding of the potential of social media for political engagement in a post-Soviet Moldovan context, a hybrid regime with a partially free media, weak civil society and relatively unregulated online environment. To answer this question, two sub-questions were considered:

1. What was the role of Facebook in engaging people in offline protest participation?
2. Was the role Facebook played for participation mediated by online bridging or bonding social capital?

The questions were answered through a mixed methods research design and the findings can be summarised as follows:

- The use of Facebook influenced and motivated users' decision to take part in protests. Its use became a means to capitalise on the following Facebook resources and mechanisms that were significant precedents of adopting protest behaviour: organisational and mobilising capacity; access to novel, varied and alternative information; an online public sphere where information, communication and

political debate facilitated the creation of opinions about political issues; and construction of a collective identity. These mechanisms represent patterns of social media use that became prominent in protests around the world, thus confirming other research studies (Diehl, Weeks & Zúñiga 2016; Gerbaudo 2015; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung & Valenzuela 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux & Zheng 2014; Kim, Hsu & Gil de Zúñiga 2013; Valenzuela 2013).

- The availability of these resources was achieved through and as a result of Facebook users' interaction with their online weak ties, implying that online bridging social capital became the link between Facebook use and offline protest engagement. This finding was unexpected and surprising because Moldova, as with many other successor states of the Soviet Union, has a low level of bridging social capital but a high level of bonding social capital (Howard 2003; Lasinska 2013). An initial assumption was that even online, people would count on the resources acquired from their strong ties when deciding to engage in protests. However, both phases of the mixed methods design indicated the opposite. Instead, Facebook users built online what they lacked offline (online bridging social capital) and offline, they relied on what they had the most of (offline bonding social capital). The fact that users built bridging social capital online also characterises a young, more curious and trustful post-Soviet generation, which matches Western contexts in its digital skills and democratic orientations. These findings thus confirm that social media may gradually become an alternative source of information and communication in a politicised and monopolised media system. It could also be an arena in which to foster online bridging social capital for a participatory democracy in a post-Soviet environment otherwise lacking it.

- However, while Facebook was found to be positively and significantly related to online bridging social capital and protest participation, the results also showed that its potential for participation was small. First of all, the relationship between Facebook use, online bridging social capital and offline protest participation was not large (as indicated by weak variance), and other predictors not included in this study might have influenced participation. Besides, the impact of social media on participation refers to and describes young people. As a result, this doesn't allow us to make inferences about the protesting behaviour of those outside this group.

And although the interviewed participants claimed that the first protest initiatives came from a group of young people and that Facebook was their main tool for organisation and information, the young were the age group that actually took to the streets in smaller numbers.

- Nevertheless, although small in number, the young served as the connecting bridge between online weak ties (online bridging social capital) and offline strong ties (offline bonding social capital), which, in great part, represented the Soviet generation or those people who did not use social media, did not have many possibilities to build bridging social ties offline and were relying mainly on their bonding ties and television in terms of protest information and participation. Young users of social media were passing on the knowledge they obtained online to their friends offline. In this way, social media became significant for those who did not have a Facebook account or were not using the internet, since they were connected in person with those who were. Blurring the lines between online and offline also implied more resources that might augment participation, although to a different extent among users and non-users. Besides, the importance of Facebook for participation rested in its close relationship with more traditional media channels. Participants claimed that television helped extend protests and give protesters more visibility by making use of Facebook content. In their news bulletins television channels would often quote activists' and organisers' messages spread on Facebook, share mobilising information of future protests or discuss what "people talk on the internet about". On the other side, active Facebook users would follow television news through their counterpart Facebook pages.

On the whole, results of this thesis offer several important contributions to scholarship about the relationship between social media and social movements:

- First, this study lends support to the literature that explains how social interactions maintained online, and the resources that these bring, can permeate offline and facilitate political engagement (Bakker & Vreese 2011; Eltantawy & Wiest 2011; Gil de Zúñiga, Barnidge & Scherman 2017; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung & Valenzuela 2012; Howard et al. 2011; Onuch 2015; Valenzuela 2013). Importantly, the study

deepens our understanding of how protesters and activists approach social media to organise movements and recruit new participants, how they create and distribute mobilising information and political knowledge, and how they identify themselves with an online large group that share grievances and the desire to bring change. In addition, this thesis advances our understanding of how social media can provide protesters with critical sources of information in contexts where media are partially free and politically controlled, as demonstrated in other post-Soviet regions (Bekmagambetov et al. 2018; Oates 2013; Oates & Lokot 2013; Onuch 2015).

- Second, the study provides a contribution to the under-researched area of online social capital as an antecedent of protest participation and the inconclusive findings of these studies. Contrary to Gibson & McAllister (2013) and Skoric, Ying & Ng (2009) but supporting Hwang & Kim (2015), this study showed that those who adhered to social media to connect with bridging ties and capitalise on the resources these bring were more likely to become interested and engaged in offline protests. The thesis also demonstrated that the type of social capital developed online was determined by the offline context (Kobayashi, Ikeda & Miyata 2006) and, more specifically, lack of bridging social capital offline. This points to the need for discerning between different types of social capital and the contexts where these are developed – online and offline – but also acknowledging that these are mutually constitutive.

- These findings also contribute to the debate on the democratising effect of social media by emphasising its complexity and supporting the ambivalent approach (Fuchs 2012a; Kidd 2017; Kidd & McIntosh 2016). This means first that social media usage is endogenous to community characteristics and contextual factors, and the interplay of different online and offline political and social factors shaped its importance for participation. Second, social media was significant for participation, however this was limited to young Moldovans. Besides, it also proved to constrain movement by creating trolls and spreading fake information. This impedes us making any hyperbolic claims about the effect of social media on participation (Castells 2015; Shirky 2011; Sorkin 2012) but to instead see it as

intricate and contextually dependent. A more balanced and cautious approach is needed when studying the relationship between social media and politics.

- ▪ The dissertation also provides a contribution to the under-researched post-Soviet space and answers calls for more research on "transitioning systems" (Boulianne 2018). It advances our understanding of how social media can pose challenges to anti-democratic post-Soviet political leaders, and empower citizens with new ways of engaging in politics. And although this study demonstrated that the Soviet legacy still weighs on the rapidly changing political and digital situation in the region, it also showed that social media has the capability to enable people to build the type of social capital eroded by the same Soviet system, and has implications for digitally enabled protests.

8.2 After the 2015 protests

While this study demonstrated that social media did not by itself cause political change nor did it impose big constraints, it has definitely become an effective tool for citizens to renegotiate power and influence political events in Moldova. In almost four years since the protests analysed in this thesis, the number of Facebook users in Moldova more than doubled (455,000 users in 2015 and 1,100,000 in 2019), reaching more than one million users (Gramatic 2015, 2019). It has also become the first online informational source for almost 40% of the population (Gramatic 2019).

This study demonstrated that the young were the main users of social media but they represented the smallest age group that participated at the protests of 2015. However, there have been several initiatives since which have seen young Moldovans promote a participatory democracy with the help of social media. This supports the ideas that Facebook can be favourable in facilitating engagement among the young and that political interest and activism in Moldova could be changing and growing. For instance, in the summer of 2018, a group of young people initiated a permanent protest movement called *OccupyGuguță*. Making reference to Occupy Wall Street, the movement protested in the capital's central park against the demolition of a cafeteria to build a business centre. After, the movement became engaged in other creative protesting events against financial crimes, justice and politics (Sprinceana 2018). The community relies heavily on their

Facebook page to share their activities and motivate others to join. Another civic movement called *Free Moldova*, created by the young Moldovan diaspora, appeared the same summer. The organisation aims to fight propaganda, misinformation and corruption on a public level through activism (FreeMoldova 2019a). Although the organisation was established by the Moldovan diaspora, it aims to engage local young in different projects. For instance, before the parliamentary elections of 2019, *Free Moldova* organised an "anti-propaganda caravan" consisting of young volunteers who would travel to more than 250 cities and villages to inform citizens on the importance and the process of voting (FreeMoldova 2019b). The organisation has become known through Facebook and it is sponsored by crowdfunding. Still, another initiative came from a group of young people who, as a result of their participation at a hackathon in Chișinău and sponsored by Moldova's Independent Journalism Centre (Internews 2019), developed a platform called *Trolless* (Trolless 2019). The platform helps Facebook users identity trolls and fake accounts online. For instance, before the Moldovan parliamentary elections of February 2019, Facebook removed almost 170 Facebook accounts and 30 pages for engaging in "coordinated inauthentic behaviour" based on *Trolless* platform reports (Gleicher 2019). The accounts were supporting different political parties through fake information and some of them were found to be linked to government employees (Gleicher 2019). Though this is an example where social media is used by authorities for their political games, it is also an example of young people who fight back using the same social media.

Regarding the general political situation in Moldova, the country witnessed significant changes that brought the organisers and activists of the protests of 2015 at the forefront of the political stage. After the parliamentary elections of February 2019 and a political blockage, in June 2019 the oligarchic regime of Vlad Plahotniuc was removed from power (Behrendt & Lentine 2019; Centrul de Resurse Juridice din Moldova 2019; Gherasimov & Groza 2019). Vlad Plahotniuc and Ilan Shor, one of the main suspects of the bank fraud, fled the country (Agora 2019; Ciocan 2019). Many high-ranking officials that were close to Plahotniuc or considered corrupt were dismissed or resigned (Barbăroșie 2019; Călugăreanu 2019). The new government was headed by Maia Sandu, one of the main participants and organisers of the 2015 protests. Additionally, 25 of the new parliament's members represent some of the main organisers of the protests of 2015 and, together with the Party of Socialists of Moldova, formed a majority in the parliament (Parlamentul Republicii Moldova 2019). Two of the interviewed participants in this thesis

(Dinu Plîngău and Inga Grigoriu) are among those who form the new parliament (Parlamentul Republicii Moldova 2019). Dinu Plîngău, the organiser of the first protest, became the youngest parliament member and the first in the country's history who was born in Republic of Moldova and not the Soviet Union (Jurnal.md 2019; Unimedia 2019), thus being a representative of the post-Soviet generation mentioned in this thesis. Nevertheless, in November 2019, the government led by Maia Sandu was dismissed after losing a no-confidence vote pushed by the Party of Socialists and supported by the Party of Democrats. According to Gherasimov (2019) "this is a recipe for further political instability" especially now when parties are preparing their electorate for the new presidential elections of 2020.

Although ascribing these political changes to social media use would mean succumbing to a technological determinism and contradicting the ambivalent approach adopted in this thesis, social media use became one of the factors that indirectly influenced change. And while it is still early to predict a democratic path for Moldova and opinions diverge, the fall of Plahotniuc's regime, new members in the parliament is an opportunity to settle on genuine reforms. When interviewed for this study, Dinu Plîngău claimed that "the idea of the first protest was born on Facebook", thus confirming that there is potential for a participatory democracy with social media use. Since currently there is an immense digital divide based on the age of social media users, it would be interesting to investigate whether the role of social media for political participation will change or increase over time, especially as the Soviet generation is succeeded by the post-Soviet generation that represents "the first cohort to have 'grown up' with online social networking" (Best, Manktelow & Taylor 2014, p. 28).

8.3 Limitations of study

While this study makes several contributions to the understanding of the relationship between social media and protest participation, as with any research, it has some limitations that need to be considered and that offer the opportunity for further research. The first main limitation of this study is that it focuses on the impact of one specific social media platform (Facebook) on participation in a protest (anti-government protests) in one country (Moldova) and therefore it is difficult to make its findings immediately generalisable. The case of the Moldovan anti-government protests was selected because

it describes a context where the greatest part of the media is politically monopolised, where those who own media companies are corrupt politicians protested against, and the online environment remains one of the few spaces relatively free and unregulated that could hold the most promise for a shift towards a more politically involved society. It might be worthwhile to replicate this study in other similar post-Soviet contexts to see how or whether the advent of social media is breaking up the monopoly exercised by media institutions and politicians, and how it can promote political and civic participation in those contexts. It might also be useful to replicate this study in other hybrid regimes with other social media platforms or contexts where the freedom of the press and the internet restrictions are skewed, and the differences are bigger than in the case of Moldova. Replicating this study and validating the findings in other contexts would thus make it possible to start generalising the results.

The second shortcoming of this study relates to the sample bias of social media users, that is participants surveyed and interviewed in both phases of this research. The sampling for both phases was based on Facebook users and therefore the results cannot be generalised to those who are not using this social network. The results obtained from this sampling can be different from and only partially representative of the general population. Hence, the conclusions related to the protest participation of Facebook non-users (which in part represent the Soviet generation) and their stock of social capital are mainly made through the perspectives and descriptions provided by social media users. Consequently, the study provided a potentially simplified understanding of what influenced protest participation. Another limitation related to the sample of participants is that many of them might represent already politically active and engaged actors, thus underlying the reproduction of offline inequalities in political participation. Although this might have been the case, a great number of participants emphasised that the use of Facebook and meeting new people online helped them develop more interest in, better understanding of and more engagement with the political process. In any case, in further studies, it would be appropriate to extend the sample and include views of both users and non-users of social media and thus have a more nuanced view on the real potential of social media for participation and thus overcome this shortcoming.

Another limitation is related to the languages used for the collection of data. While this study is presented in English, the surveys and interviews were collected in Romanian and,

in a few cases, Russian. The closed questions of the survey did not present any difficulties in the analysis, however the qualitative interviews contained idiomatic and cultural expressions that were more difficult to translate. Although every attempt was made to retain the local nuances and explanations for some culturally bound expressions and phrases provided, some idiosyncrasies of the Romanian and Russian languages could be lost in translation.

8.4 Future research

Apart from the recommendations for future research mentioned alongside the limitations provided above, there are other directions for future research that can be considered. First, it might be useful for future research to understand how activists themselves made use of social media for protest-related purposes and compare it with the way protesters perceived its impact on their participation. A new study can thus provide a clearer elucidation of how activists' intention to promote participation through social media is having an impact on protest participants. Fuchs (2012b) claims that the only way to grasp the impact of new media on social movements is to talk to activists themselves and understand how they make use of it. In this thesis, interviews with both protesters and activists were conducted and the results demonstrated that activists intended to supply the Facebook community with mobilising and political information, to spread the enthusiasm of participation and ease the recruitment, and protesters confirmed to have received these resources and being invited to participate. However, this hasn't been the aim of this study and the findings suggested above are based on four interviews with activists and 16 with protesters. Hence, a larger and more even balance of interviews with activists and protesters could better identify and explain any causative relationship.

At the same time, it would be useful to focus on the opportunities social media offers to state actors in other hybrid regimes for spreading fake news and misinformation. In this research, participants confirmed to be aware of an increasing number of trolls online, a fact confirmed later by the Facebook Head of Cybersecurity Policy, who found that some of the trolls' profiles were linked to employees of the Moldovan government (Gleicher 2019). This kind of research can help future activists and protesters mitigate impediments to social movement organisations, especially when social media platforms are considered main conduits of fake news (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017).

Future works could also benefit from more recent research on the concept of social capital in the post-Soviet space generally, additional studies on online social capital in this context and on the online/offline divide. This study demonstrated that in terms of protest engagement, the social capital acquired online in higher amounts (bridging) is different from the one that is abundant offline (bonding). This was explained by the fact that online participants were seeking what they had little of, or even lacked, offline. It may be worthwhile to replicate this study in other post-Soviet countries and investigate the types of social capital built online and compare with its counterpart offline. Future work can also address whether there is a spill over effect of the social capital obtained online on the same type of social capital built offline and vice versa. This means for instance, to test whether the online interaction with weak ties, and the acquisition of resources from this type of relationships, can influence people's interaction with bridging ties offline. There is also opportunity for further study on the topic of trust and mainly if social media is a favourable space to build trust relevant to motivating participation.

Last but not least, further research could also consider the impact of other social networking sites on social capital and participation. Although most social networking sites share common elements, they differ in terms of "structural variations around visibility and access" (boyd & Ellison 2007, p. 213). For instance, a study conducted by Valenzuela, Correa & Gil de Zúñiga (2018) demonstrated that stronger ties on Facebook are more effective in driving political engagement compared to Twitter where weaker ties mattered more. Scholars explain the results by the different affordances each social networking site provides and emphasise the importance of distinguishing between these two platforms. In the case of Moldova and other post-Soviet countries, it would be worthy to study the impact of other widely used networking sites such as Odnoklassniki and VKontakte, and even messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, Viber and Telegram. Previous research demonstrated that the platform itself matters in terms of affecting and changing political attitudes (Gainous, Wagner & Abbott 2015). Therefore, considering these suggestions, future research will help to move scholarly literature towards a more grounded understanding of how social media and the affordances it provides can affect political participation, and that its effects are not uniform across contexts and time.

<center>***</center>

Although writing this dissertation has undoubtedly been challenging for me, it has also been an insightful process for reconnecting with Moldova, and better understanding and appreciating my home country. This journey taught me that although the ideological heritage of the Soviet past is still present in Moldova, there have also been significant changes and people are making efforts to carve out new identities and build a fairer country. The young and the old gained an awareness of themselves as political actors and learned new ways of looking for more independent information, contribute their resources to collective action, and engage in politics in new ways. And although social media turned to be one of many other factors that influenced participation and it is intricately intertwined with these, its rapid adoption and widespread use can hopefully contribute towards a more inclusive and participatory society in the near future.

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