



# Open Data, Political Crisis and Guerrilla Cartography

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# Open Data, Political Crisis and Guerrilla Cartography

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## Abstract

Open data and the geoweb have emerged, along with the rhetoric of democratization and a promise that increased user participation would lead to more empowered citizens. Recently, European rules have attempted to make the availability and re-use of data from everywhere much easier. The EU Open Data rules are shifting issues from finding information to selecting the more relevant data and enabling new approaches to the real-time scrutiny of powerful institutions. However, geography, open data and the Internet are obviously not intrinsically subversive. Moving from transparency to accountability, and from critical thinking to political leverage, requires making sense of data and empowering people with it. This suggests that crowdsourcing geography is not so much about collaboratively distributing the production of data but instead about shifting the production of meaning from the few to the many, soliciting contributions for the critical analysis



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2 We do not feel like our employers own us. Because most of this work has been done in our spare time and late at night, our institutions have no relevance here. Both of us had previously taught at university level in Romania, before one of us left academia and has chosen to remain anonymous. We had the opportunity to live and work in various European countries, and we feel fortunate to have a multilingual, multicultural background. Our families also passed on to us their recollections of the many facets of oppression they have faced.

of data, openly distributing problem-solving and using the exchanges between people from different backgrounds all across the world to construct the interpretation. Crowdsourcing geography reduces information asymmetry and enables power strategies, deconstruction and counter-hegemonic initiatives to jump spatial scales, thereby allowing them to leverage public opinion on a global scale. This is an opportunity for guerrilla cartography, transforming data and geographical knowledge into real-time leverage and coming unexpectedly, because it can be launched from virtually any place, crowdsourced, and spawn followers around the world. However, shifting the production of meaning from the few to the many requires more trained brains than dot.com domains. What matters most is grasping 'dead' data, giving it 'live' meaning, producing reusable information just in time, rapidly transforming data into political leverage and sharing it in an efficient manner. This paper showcases the possibilities of crowdsourcing geography and guerrilla cartography by using the political crisis in Romania that took place during the summer of 2012.

**Keywords:** Open data, geoweb, crowdsourcing, cartography, European Union, Romania, elections, political crisis.

## Rezumat

Apariția datelor deschise și a structurii Geoweb a fost însoțită de un discurs pro-democratizare și de promisiunea că o participare mai mare a utilizatorilor va duce la creșterea nivelului de responsabilizare a cetățenilor. Recent, normele europene au încercat să faciliteze considerabil accesul la date și reutilizarea acestora de oriunde. Normele care guvernează politicile UE de deschidere a datelor deplasează centrul de greutate dinspre găsirea informațiilor înspre selectarea celor mai relevante date și spre facilitarea unor noi abordări ale controlului în timp real al instituțiilor care dețin puterea. Cu toate acestea, este evident că geografia, datele deschise și Internetul nu sunt subversive în sine. Trecerea de la transparență la responsabilizare și de la gândirea critică la influența politică necesită înțelegerea datelor și transformarea acestora în instrumente pentru cetățeni. Deducem de aici că externalizarea geografiei către public nu este doar o producere colectivă de date, ci mai ales deplasarea producerii de sens dinspre cei puțini înspre cei mulți, solicitarea de contribuții la analiza critică a datelor, distribuirea deschisă a soluționării problemelor, precum și utilizarea schimburilor dintre persoane cu profiluri diferite din întreaga lume pentru construirea interpretării. Externalizarea geografiei către public diminuează asimetria informațiilor și declanșează strategii de forță, inițiative deconstructive și anti-hegemonice care pot trece dintr-o dată la altă scară, permițând astfel opiniei publice să acționeze la scară globală. Acest fenomen reprezintă o oportunitate pentru cartografia de gherilă, prin transformarea datelor și a cunoștințelor geografice în pârguri în timp real, care iau prin surprindere, întrucât pot fi lansate practic din orice loc, externalizate către public și urmărite în întreaga lume. Cu toate acestea, deplasarea producerii de sens dinspre cei puțini înspre cei mulți necesită mai multe minți bine instruite decât rețele bine construite. Ceea ce contează cel mai mult este să obții date „moarte”, să le dai un

sens „viu”, să produci informații care pot fi utilizate din nou, să transformi rapid datele în pârguri politice și să le distribuie în mod eficace. Prezentul articol prezintă posibilitățile oferite de externalizarea geografiei către public și de cartografia de gherilă utilizând criza politică din România din vara anului 2012.

**Cuvintele cheie:** Date deschise, geoweb, crowdsourcing, cartografie, Uniunea Europeană, România, alegeri, criză politică.

August 2, 2012, 2:45 pm | 195 Comments

## I'm Outta Here

Note to the Europeans: you cannot have a crisis for the next couple of weeks, because I'm going on a long-scheduled family vacation — probably without internet access most of the time. Please wait until the last week of the month.

### Illustration 1: Blog post on [blogs.nytimes.com](http://blogs.nytimes.com), August 2, 2012.

Never post “I’m going on vacation without internet access. Please wait until the end of the summer.” Because it’s hard to unwire your brain once it has been trained a certain way, and because generally crises and disasters do not take breaks. Not only do they not wait until you return, but they might even follow you across the globe. Furthermore, the Open data and Open government movements are virtually empowering you to make use of your expertise anytime, anywhere, on almost any topic, especially in the case of a crisis in some remote location.

Exposing the public to the inner workings of power politics and reducing information asymmetry may prevent crisis and geopolitical havoc. However, even if open data may actually enforce transparency and increase the prospect of scrutinizing governments, corporations and organizations, the Internet's emancipatory horizon does not necessarily lead to greater accountability or a more engaged citizenry. While the existence of cyberspace as a terrain of political resistance already has a long history, disrupting the benign public images that powerful institutions project, and replacing them with skeptical public opinion will always take more than the click of a mouse.

This paper examines the Romanian political crisis during the summer of 2012 to show that crowdsourcing geography is not so much about collaboratively distributing the production of data but instead about shifting the production of meaning from the few to the many and soliciting contributions from different backgrounds all across the world for the critical analysis of data. Guerrilla cartography reduces information asymmetry and enables power strategies,

deconstruction and counter-hegemonic initiatives to jump spatial scales, thereby allowing them to leverage public opinion on a global scale.

### **From dead data to live leverage**

Recently, European rules have attempted to make the availability and re-use of data from everywhere much easier. The Infrastructure for Spatial Information in the European Community (INSPIRE) Directive is a European Union initiative from 2007 designed to make spatial and geographical information more accessible and interoperable across the EU (Directive 2007/2/EC). It complemented the Directive on the Re-use of Public Sector Information (PSI Directive) that provided a common legislative framework to make as much public data as possible available for re-use and allow mashups and new applications, both for commercial and non-commercial purposes (Directive 2003/98/CE). EU directives lay down certain end results that must be achieved in every EU member state: By 2008, all 27 member states had fully implemented the PSI Directive in their own national laws, and by 2013, member states had implemented the INSPIRE Directive and endorsed the revised EU Open Data rules from 2011. Those directives and revisions are key actions of the “Digital Agenda for Europe,” advertised as “Turning government data into gold” (IP/11/1524); many EU member states have launched Open Data portals, while others still offer discrete download possibilities or lobby to keep charging for the services. At the EU level, the [INSPIRE Geoportal](#) is now hosting almost 300,000 datasets from 21 European countries, with 34 spatial data themes ranging from coordinates, orthoimagery and elevation to soil use, cadastral parcels or statistical units and indicators. However, it is not enough to simply remove the barriers that hinder the re-use of public data and promote open data across Europe.

In fact, raw data availability, downloading infrastructures and interoperability are never enough to implement transparency and accountability, which are Brussels’ stated aims. The [European “Digital Agenda”](#) even goes one step further, as it claims to develop a so-called “e-government,” which is the belief that the Internet and Web-based technologies are delivering government information and services in a more efficient and cost-effective manner, that will enhance greater interaction and should therefore boost citizen participation. Actually, the large-scale spread of free information and open data through the Internet requires citizens, activists and organizations to take an active role. Data still has to be seized and processed to be used as a subversive power: Trained brains, not interlinked wires, are the tools that allow us to explain and take action against the geographies of power that structure our lives for the benefit of others. Thus, critical data analysis and cartography remain key issues in using open data to counter state and party ideologies and misinformation, and struggling against the seemingly inexorable march of state and capital power. Moving from transparency to accountability and from critical thinking to immediate political use requires making sense of data and empowering people with it, ultimately leading them to understand their environment and the political stakes. To some extent, this has always been the purpose of geography, or at least of a subversive geography, since the early works

of Elisée Reclus (Reclus, 1998), through Bunge's geographical expeditions (Bunge, 1971) and Lacoste's denunciation of the confiscation of geographical knowledge by the academia (Lacoste, 1976), to the current People's Geography Project (Mitchell, 2006). Reclus' anarchist geography and the later radical geography both share an emancipatory approach to geographical knowledge, discontent about the world they study and the prospect of changing it.

### **From open data to guerrilla cartography**

Obviously, geography, open data and the Internet are not subversive *per se*; it is therefore our responsibility to keep empowering people and demonstrating the possibilities that the world *can* be changed. In this tradition, critical cartography calls things into question, freeing geographical knowledge from the confines of academia and opening it to the people (Lacoste, 1976), addressing mapping as a political process and highlighting how it has historically been embedded in a nexus of power (Crampton et al., 2006). It is committed to critical thinking, especially the work of Michel Foucault on the art of voluntary inservitude, reflexive indocility and "insurrection of knowledge" as responses to the coercion of modern social institutions, the policing of society through regimes of truth, and the explosion of techniques of biopower to achieve the control of populations (Foucault, 2004). More recently, in reaction to the growing popularity of mapmaking software, radical cartography projects are choosing to highlight, not hide, the politics associated with mapmaking production (Gordon et al., 2008). Radical cartography produces unlikely maps that subvert conventional notions in order to promote social change; it can be seen as an attempt to challenge the ways in which the dominant ideology is produced and disseminated (Bourdieu et al., 2008). Open data represents a terrific opportunity for both critical and radical cartography to grab a wide range of topics and patiently address scores of social and political issues. However, critical thinking and challenging projects are not always enough, given the speed at which events often take place.

Yves Lacoste has shown that, in the face of a major crisis, geographical knowledge sometimes compels us to take direct action by packaging and circulating it to make it usable as a decisive political weapon (Lacoste, 2012). This is an inspiration for guerrilla cartography, transforming data and geographical knowledge into real-time leverage and doing so unexpectedly, because it can be launched from virtually anywhere by almost anyone, crowdsourced, and spawn followers around the world. Guerrilla cartography is not only about "fact checking" and unmasking the "lying in politics" but also about deploying geography as a strategic form of knowledge, challenging the internal consistency of governments and other powerful institutions, deconstructing doctrines and discourses by monitoring the events, and in the face of a crisis, contributing to real-time retro-engineering of spatial, political and power strategies. During the Vietnam War, Lacoste grasped the specific time when geography no longer fit with academia, classrooms and journals, and instead there has to be a greater attempt to outreach public awareness. Since his first attempt to bring global awareness of geography's

political and strategic issues to the public and the press, conditions have sharply improved and are seemingly much easier at present. The geoweb, open data and “Web 2.0” technologies have emerged, along with the rhetoric of ubiquity and democratization, and a promise that increased user participation would lead to more empowered citizens (Crampton, 2009). However, this promise has not always lived up to reality, even if the Internet, and in particular the blogosphere, social media and WikiLeaks, have remapped geopolitics in potentially emancipating ways (Springer et al., 2012). The increase in information from whistleblowers could complete open data and shift issues from finding information to selecting the most relevant data. In reality, access to online media does not automatically lead to more alert reading or critical thinking, and Web technologies do not always offer a greater abundance and diversity of information, even to those lucky enough to be connected. Nevertheless, precisely because cyberspace facilitates unfettered access to information, it is proving to be alarming to many governments, and the e-government doctrine remains jeopardized by Internet censorship, for example in the south of Eastern Europe (Warf, 2011).

### **Romania: from economic to political crisis**

What makes an individual turn from critical thinking to mobilizing an “insurrection of knowledge”? Numerous academics have theorized about their activist commitment and their role in social movements (Mason, 2013). In this case, the idea was to see how it only took a few days for a former communist country to give the impression of bouncing back to a democratic vacuum. Our first reflex was to check the bibliography and call colleagues and friends across Europe in order to grasp the reasons and the possible way forward. However, the magnitude of the events, the speed at which they were taking place and the disturbing silence of the international media propelled us from anticipation to organization.

In the summer of 2012, Romania faced a major crisis that eventually led to the military threatening to take to the streets and members of Parliament planning to dismantle the Constitutional Court in a dispute over the impeachment of the president. Romania had seemed for a while to avoid the economic crisis that had struck Europe, beginning in 2008. However, international institutions forced its conservative government to embrace an aggressive austerity policy in 2011. This led to public protests during the winter of 2011-2012 and to shifting alliances in the Parliament, where the Social Democrats surprisingly joined the National Liberals to form an opposition government in the spring. Their coalition subsequently won the local elections of June 2012 by a large margin and decided to impeach the center-right president on the grounds that political cohabitation was making Romania ungovernable.

## Chronology

- December 2004: Traian Băsescu is elected president of Romania on behalf of the Justice and Truth Alliance (center-right).
- December 2006: The president of Romania condemns the pre-1989 communist regime and starts lustration against the former communist secret police.
- January 2007: Romania joins the European Union, along with Bulgaria.
- April 2007: The Romanian parliament impeaches the country's president; however, Băsescu wins the subsequent referendum held in May 2007 and regains the full prerogatives of the presidency.
- December 2009: Băsescu is re-elected president of Romania by a small majority.
- January 2012: The country's healthcare reform triggers protests over austerity measures, some protests become violent, and Romania enters a period of government instability.
- April 2012: After a change in the parliamentary alliance, the president is forced to appoint an opponent as prime minister: Victor Ponta, leader of the Social Liberal Union (Social Democrats and National Liberals).
- June 2012: The Social Liberal Union wins the local elections, and the president and prime minister disagree over who is to represent Romania at the European Union summit.
- June 20, 2012: Adrian Năstase, a former Social Democrat prime minister and Victor Ponta's political mentor, is sentenced to two years in prison following his conviction in a corruption trial.
- July 3, 2012: The Romanian Parliament votes to dismiss the president of the Senate and the president of the Chamber of Deputies, and limits the powers of the Romanian Constitutional Court.
- July 6, 2012: Traian Băsescu, the president of Romania, is suspended by Parliament for the second time.
- July 29, 2012: Referendum on the impeachment of President Băsescu. A 50% participation threshold is necessary to validate the vote.
- August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012: Publication of the official results by the Central Electoral Bureau. The Romanian Constitutional Court asks for a delay before ruling on the validity of the referendum.
- August 6, 2012: The prime minister announces a cabinet reshuffle, replacing the ministers of public administration, interior, justice and foreign affairs. The Constitutional Court sends a letter to European institutions to expose the continuing "pressure and threats against individual judges."
- August 14, 2012: The General Prosecutor's Office and the National Anticorruption Direction start to investigate allegations of ballot fraud in over 15 (of 42) counties in Romania, and accusations of misconduct by the ministers of public administration and of interior in charge of organizing the referendum.
- August 21, 2012: The Constitutional Court eventually invalidates the July 29 impeachment referendum; politicians and military personnel continue their calls for people to take to the streets.
- August 27, 2012: The invalidation of the impeachment is finally proclaimed in Parliament and published in the Official Register. President Băsescu regains the full prerogatives of his office.
- August 30, 2012: The Party of European Socialists (PES) cancels its major congress due to be held in Bucharest on September 28-29, 2012.



On Sunday, July 29, 2012, 7.4 million Romanians voted for their president to be impeached. The results were challenged on several counts: First, Romanian citizens could vote where they were on holiday, even if their names did not appear on the electoral rolls. Also, the president's challengers had sabotaged the October 2011 census by persuading over 1 million Romanians to boycott it, casting serious doubts on the updates of the electoral rolls. And finally, while voter turnout had to be greater than 50% in order for the vote to be valid, the suspended President Băsescu had called for a boycott of the ballot on account of a suspicion of massive fraud. One side effect of organizing a referendum in the middle of the summer was having an advanced review of the geography of tourism in the country, but this particular issue is outside the scope of this paper.

Without reliable statistics, with possible electoral tourism and massive fraud accusations, it seemed almost impossible for the Romanian Constitutional Court to rule on the validity of the referendum. We had been teaching at university level in Romania for a while, and the lack of public reaction suggested to us that the transformation process we had expected was as yet unfinished. This is also why this political crisis compelled us to take direct action.

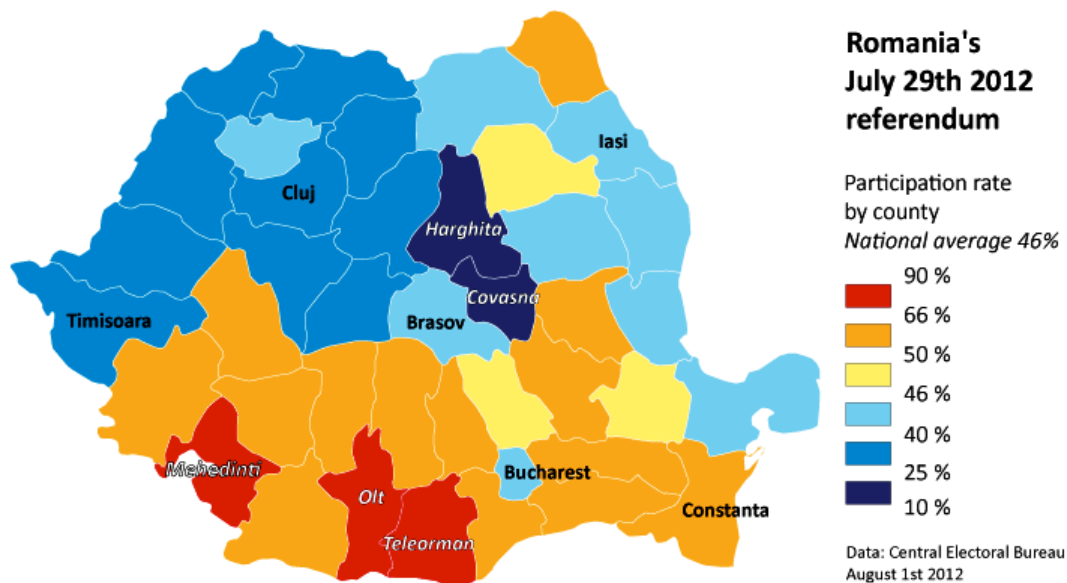
On election night, the government made an attempt to declare that the impeachment had been approved by a large margin. Later, it put the blame for the failure of the referendum on the low turnout of some minorities and Romanian expatriates. Finally, it denounced the reliability of the electoral rolls, repeatedly forcing the Constitutional Court to delay its ruling. Romania seemed to have two competing heads of state.

The results of the referendum were published online on August 1<sup>st</sup>, according to the European rules on open data. It appeared to be of paramount importance to monitor and verify the results of the impeachment referendum before the Constitutional Court had a chance to validate them. On the same day, we published an in-depth analysis and cartography of the results on a blog in the French press. Then, after weeks of political havoc, the General Prosecutor's Office started its investigation into the polling stations we had highlighted and, on August 27, the referendum was finally invalidated.

### **From small data to real-time geography**

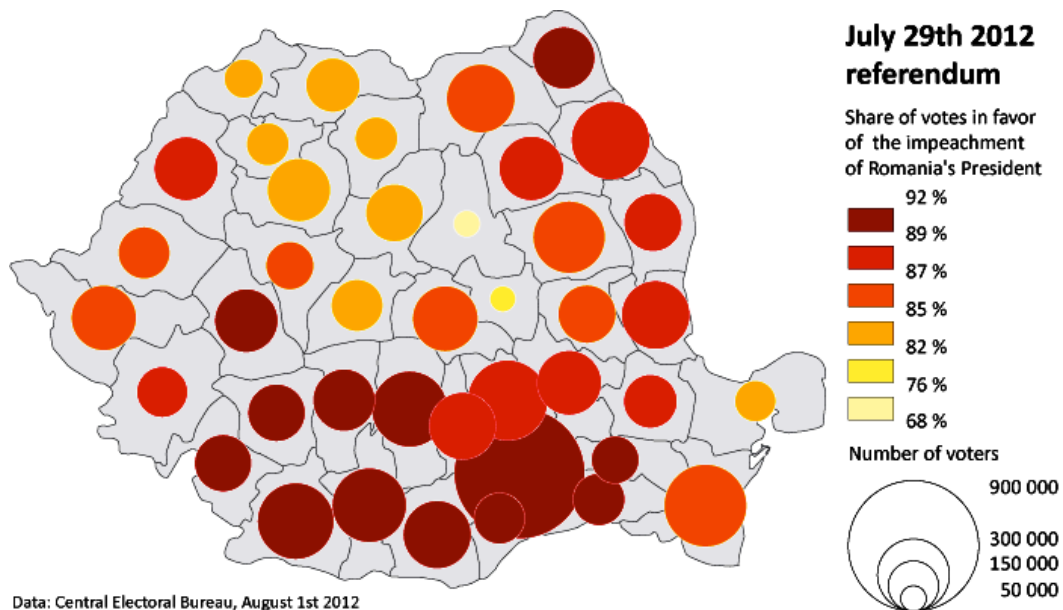
We knew the [address of the site](#) where the results would be published, as it was easy to find by using the results of the previous elections. All we had to do was wait and refresh the page at regular intervals. While we were waiting, we downloaded some results of the previous elections and of the last census, as well as some basemaps. The INSPIRE and PSI directives make such data easy to find and to download. Hence, we could ensure shorter reaction times: We just had to collect and apply the results as soon as they were published to start producing graphs, maps and analyses. On the day following the election, July 30, the Central Electoral Bureau started posting some partial results at the level of the 42

Romanian counties (*județe*) at 2 p.m. That same afternoon, we produced the first maps of the results and turnout; the Romanian press didn't until the next morning.



**Map 1: Participation rate to the July 29th referendum.**

We started sharing our maps on social media and had good feedback on the map of the participation rate, which showed that only the south of Romania had had over 50% turnout, and that the lower rates were in the center of the country, where the Hungarian minority is concentrated. With two laptops, we divided the activities of monitoring social media, Romanian press and live television online: one for the feeds of each side of the political chessboard. A startling characteristic of the Romanian press during that summer was that there was almost no debate: Each media outlet had taken sides, and each was exclusively presenting one perspective. That is why we chose to monitor both sides and discuss the flow over our screens and the noise floor of the clanging live streaming TVs in order to reconstruct the puzzle. One of the lessons of that summer's guerrilla cartography is that it is possible, using open data and social sciences tools, not only to produce a real-time critical deconstruction of an unfolding situation, but also to anticipate the course of events.



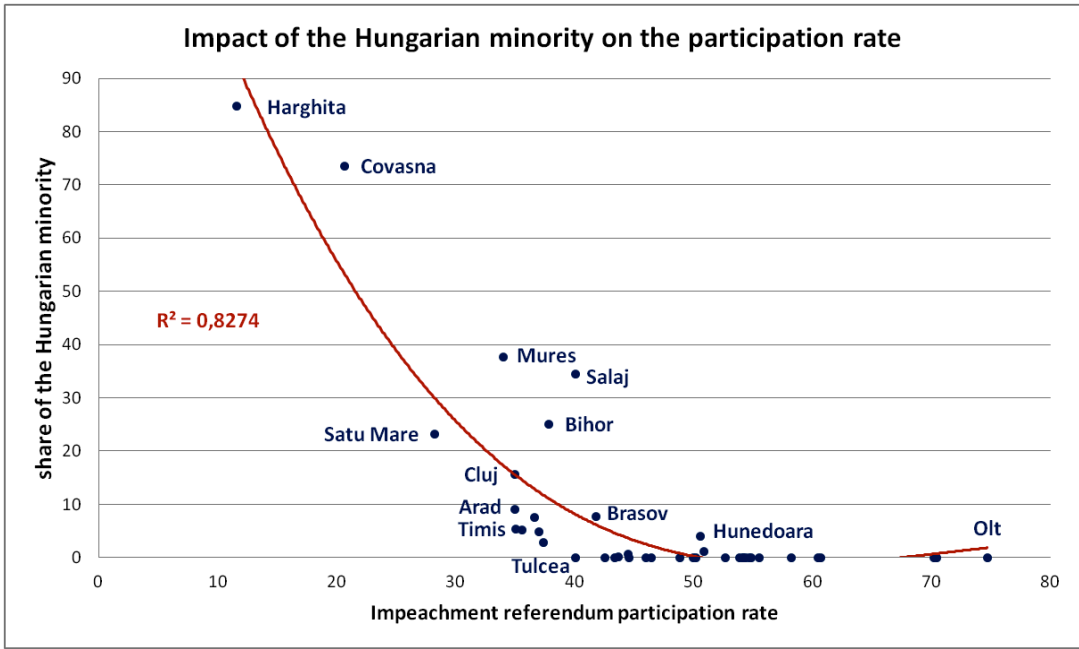
**Map 2: Final results of the July 29 referendum**

The first evening when partial results were coming in, the debates centered on the low turnout figures projected for the Hungarian minority and the Romanians expatriates voting abroad. The media were overwhelmed by a nationalistic discourse, depicting them as “internal enemies” and “traitors,” and they generally blamed them for the failure of the referendum (because of their abstentions). Eventually, *The Voice of Russia* played the discord and dissension to the point of declaring that “Romania is ruled from Budapest<sup>3</sup>.”

The same night, with the help of our maps and graphs of the partial results, we published an article (in French) explaining why the counties in the center of Romania had lower turnouts, showing that the correlation between the distribution of the Hungarian minority and the turnout was misleading, and highlighting that the partial results were not detailed enough for anyone to be analyzing the voting of minorities or expatriates yet.

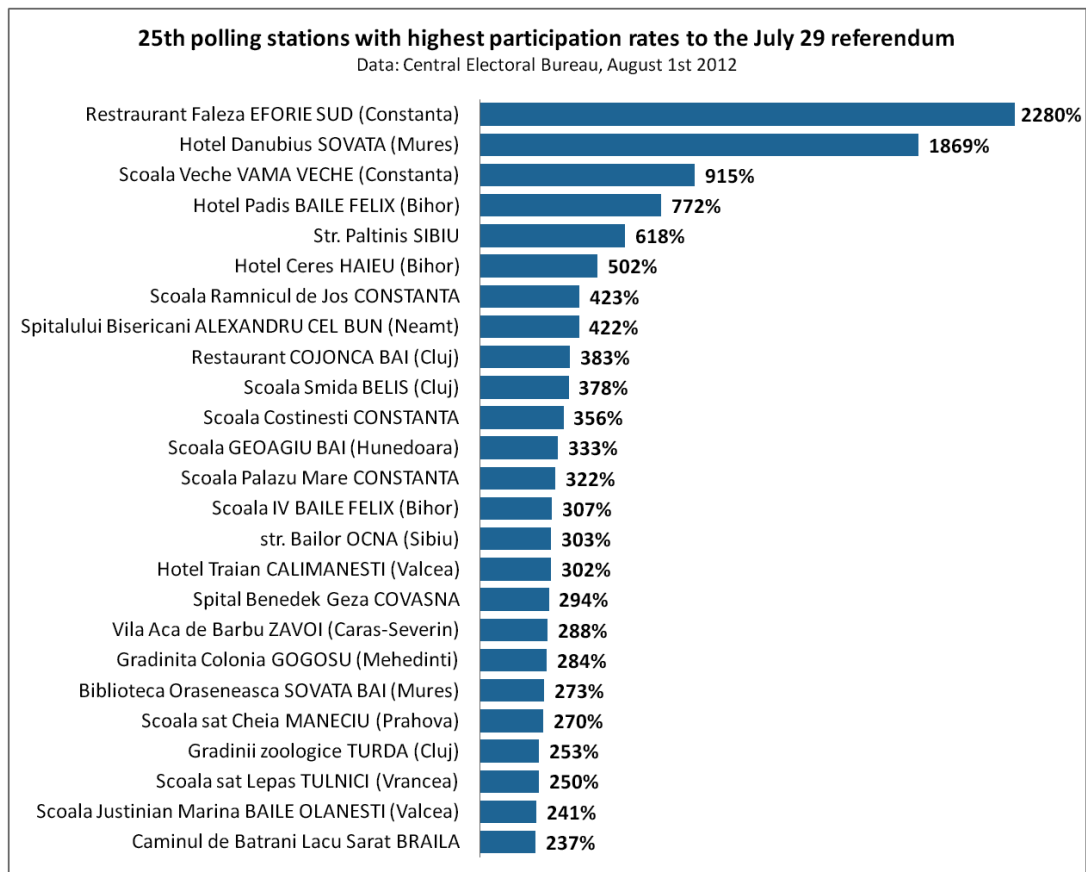
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<sup>3</sup> Bucharest is the capital of Romania, and Budapest is the capital of neighboring Hungary. *The Voice of Russia* was playing on the easy confusion between them, but also on the nationalistic tensions with the Hungarian minority in the center and north of Romania (that had been embedded in the Austria-Hungarian Empire until World War I).



**Graph 1: Misleading correlation between the Hungarian minority and the participation rate.**

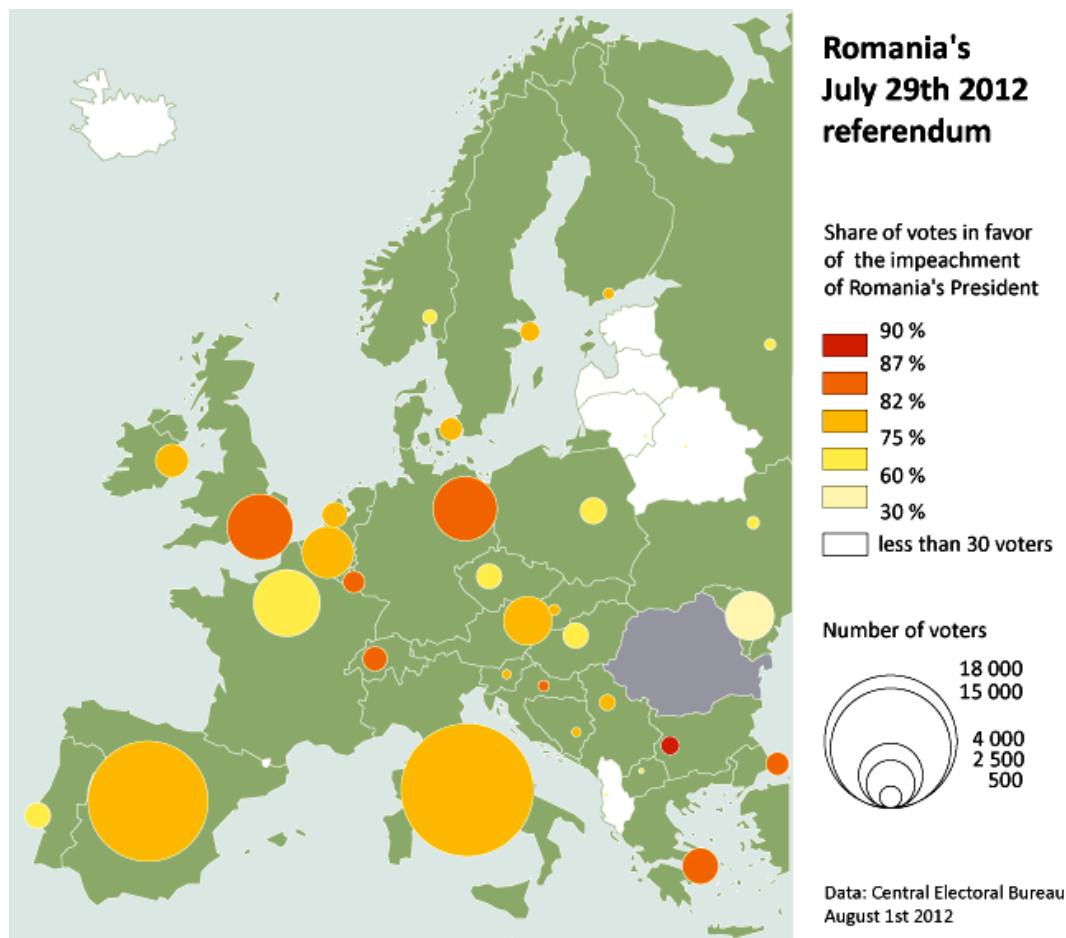
The next day, August 1<sup>st</sup>, at 10 a.m., the Central Electoral Bureau published the final election results online. We started processing the results, polling station by polling station, updating the previous day's maps and graphs, and then sending them out via social media bit by bit. The final results mentioned the number of people on the electoral roll, ballots received, ballots cast, votes in favor and votes against impeachment for each of the 18,000 polling stations in Romania and over 300 polling places abroad (mainly across Europe and in the United States). Around midday, we had produced and published the graphs of the polling stations with the highest turnouts (up to 2,280%), the polling stations with the most voters not registered on the electoral rolls, and of the comparison between the number of ballots received before the election, the number of people on the electoral roll and the number of ballots cast in various polling stations. Those graphs were astonishing, with turnout figures three- to tenfold the number of people registered to vote and thousands of voters not registered at all on the electoral rolls, all over Romania.



**Graph 2: Polling stations with highest participation rates in the July 29 referendum.**

Throughout the afternoon, we received strong feedback both from social media and by e-mail. This helped us to decide where to dig next, and from those intense exchanges emerged a crowdsourced geographical analysis of the results of the referendum. After discussions with friends, colleagues and former students both inside and outside Romania, we decided to tackle the tourism bias of the geography of the results. This so-called “electoral tourism” was allegedly due to the timing of the election in the middle of the summer and the opportunity for Romanians to vote at their holiday location (in Romania and abroad), even without being registered on the electoral roll. This decision by the social-liberal government was an attempt to increase turnout as much as possible, because participation had to reach the 50% threshold in order for the referendum to be valid. However, this exotic summer decision made the measurement of turnout very tricky. Therefore, we decided to exclude all the tourist destinations and all cities by the seaside and at the mountains from our analysis, because the government had a good excuse for sending vast amounts of supplementary ballots to those areas on the last Sunday of July. Likewise, we excluded all polling stations with fewer than 30 people on the electoral roll, because in these cases the impact of a few “occasional” voters was the highest. Nevertheless, the resulting graphs were still surprising, with hundreds of people not registered on the electoral rolls voting even in the most remote places

and with turnout of more than 200%, mainly in the south of the country. By late-afternoon, we decided to focus on the three counties in the south that had the highest average turnout (more than 70%, compared with the national average of 46%). Digging deeper into the results, we highlighted that hospitals, prisons, and isolated villages had participation rates of more than 120%. It was difficult to understand why they had received so many ballots in the first place. And in some municipalities, almost all the polling stations had not only received twice as many ballots as they had people inscribed on their electoral rolls, but they had also cast almost all the ballots they had received.



**Map 3: Results of the July 29 referendum: Romanians voting abroad in Europe.**

In the evening, the press and political debates were evading those issues to focus instead on abstention and the electoral lists. The final results seemed pretty clear: 7,400,000 Romanians voted for the impeachment of their president (87%), while only 950,000 voted against it (13%). The only issue was to see whether the participation rate for the referendum was above the 50% threshold established by the Constitution to validate the impeachment. According to the usual besieged polarization of the press and public discourses that summer in Romania, comments were focused in two directions. On the one hand, people supporting the center-right

president were stressing the overall turnout under 50%, stating that it invalidated the referendum and that the president would remain in office, because voters had heeded his call to abstain from voting. On the other hand, people supporting the social-liberal coalition government were highlighting the preliminary results of the last census to cast doubt on and denounce *ex post facto* the reliability of the electoral rolls by stating that with an up-to-date list the turnout would be above 50%, which would validate the move to impeach the president. However, those two perspectives were seriously biased: Turnout was roughly the same as in the previous referendum, and the electoral rolls were exactly the same as for the local elections in June 2012. Yet, the social-liberal government, which controlled the electoral rolls, had also won the local elections by a large majority but didn't challenge the validity of the very same rolls. Furthermore, these positions revealed that both sides were using subversive slogans in order to remain in charge or to seize power: refusal of suffrage vs. refusal of the census.

We were puzzled by the lack of critical perspectives, discussions and analyses: all sides were only standing more firmly by their convictions by talking past each other. We decided it was urgent to produce that missing critical perspective, at least before the Constitutional Court had a chance to rule on the validity of the results. That same evening, building on the maps and graphs we had produced almost on demand throughout the day, we wrote another paper to highlight the shortcomings on both sides: "[Has Romania fallen into the hands of anarchists?](#)". This was mainly a pedagogical piece of work, which presented the evidence that had been lacking in the debates and biased comments, and it offered historical perspective and geographic insights by deconstructing the arguments on both sides, one by one. It was more or less a summary of the explanations, discussions and analysis we had been sharing all day long, a kind of crowdsourced critical cartography. Although the paper was incomplete, we chose to leave it open and ended it by summing up all the loose ends and letting the readers build on it. It was mainly about momentum, as we were hoping to provide the impulse that would stimulate critical debate and perspectives among the broader possible audience.

### **Speaking from the hood and getting heard (or read)**

We started again sending out our maps, graphs and papers on social media, but mainly we were speaking to Romanian academics, acquaintances, expatriates and former students, i.e. the most easily findable members of the audience of a critical perspective of the events of that summer. However, it was imperative to offer an alternative perspective, contradictory discourses and a critical analysis of the events and issues to a much broader public, inside Romania, in Europe and beyond, to inform public opinion in Romania and its European partners in a way that would be truthful. This is what the press in Germany, Spain and in the United Kingdom had been doing since the end of June. But when the final results of the referendum were published, on August 1<sup>st</sup>, those journalists seemed to have gone on holiday, and the international press shifted its focus to the civil war in Syria and



the Olympic Games in London. In order to keep international coverage focused on the Romanian crisis and to hear a different, critical and nonpartisan voice continue speaking to Romanians, we had no choice but to take the reins ourselves.



Illustration 2: Front page of Mediapart (English edition), August 20, 2012.

We took advantage of an offer made by *Mediapart*, one of the leading titles in the French political and opinion press. Earlier in July, after two weeks of negotiations, *Le Monde* published an [open letter](#) we had persuaded some 50 colleagues across Europe to sign. The major French center-left newspaper even supported this open letter with a strongly worded editorial. The next day, during a press conference, the Romanian socialist prime minister accused *Le Monde* of paying people in order to discredit him. In the aftermath of this clash, *Mediapart* offered us the opportunity to cover the Romanian crisis and referendum on an [associated blog](#). Choosing *Mediapart* proved to be a really good move: We received the full support of an experienced editorial board, excellent visibility on their front page and an international audience. We were on a lucky streak, even though we were not fully aware of it, because the role of *Mediapart* in covering the French presidency's political scandals had made it a far-reaching, trusted media outlet. Moreover, the board kept its word and put every one of our papers on the front page of both its French and English online editions. This meant high visibility, good referencing and, above all, syndication in the news aggregator under the *Mediapart* label. All of a sudden, we had become the international press.



The screenshot shows the homepage of Adevărul.ro, a major Romanian news outlet. The main article headline is "Mediart: Acțiunile PSD, criza din România, un test pentru PSE înaintea congresului de la București". Below the headline, it states the date "4 august 2012, 14:19" and the author "Autor: | 1354 afișări". The article tags include "Mediart, PSD, guvernare, Congres, PSE, socialiști, UE, referendum, Barroso..". A large photograph of Victor Ponta, the Prime Minister of Romania at the time, is featured with the caption "Premierul Victor Ponta". To the right of the main article, there is a sidebar with social media links (Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Google+, RSS) and a section titled "Ultimă Oră" (Latest News) listing several news items with timestamps. Below that is a "Recomandările Adevărul.Ro" (Recommendations from Adevărul.Ro) section featuring three small articles with images of people.

Illustration 3: Adevărul (national Romanian press) commenting on our paper, August 4, 2012.

On the day following the election, we published in French our analysis of the partial results with maps and graph under the title “**Viktor (Orban) vs Victor (Ponta)?**” in *Mediart*. At first, it didn’t seem to truly widen our audience. So, after releasing in French our paper of August 1<sup>st</sup>, which looked at the final results and systematically deconstructed the arguments of both sides, we spent the rest of the night translating it into English. After publishing “**Has Romania fallen into the hands of anarchists?**,” we sent it out on social media, various academic mailing lists and to scholars from both sides of the Atlantic who had expressed their concerns regarding the situations in Hungary and Romania. That move provided favorable outcomes: presence in the Romanian local press, thanks to direct contact through social media with young Romanian journalists, a widening audience and feedback that facilitated the process of crowdsourcing the analysis, because the

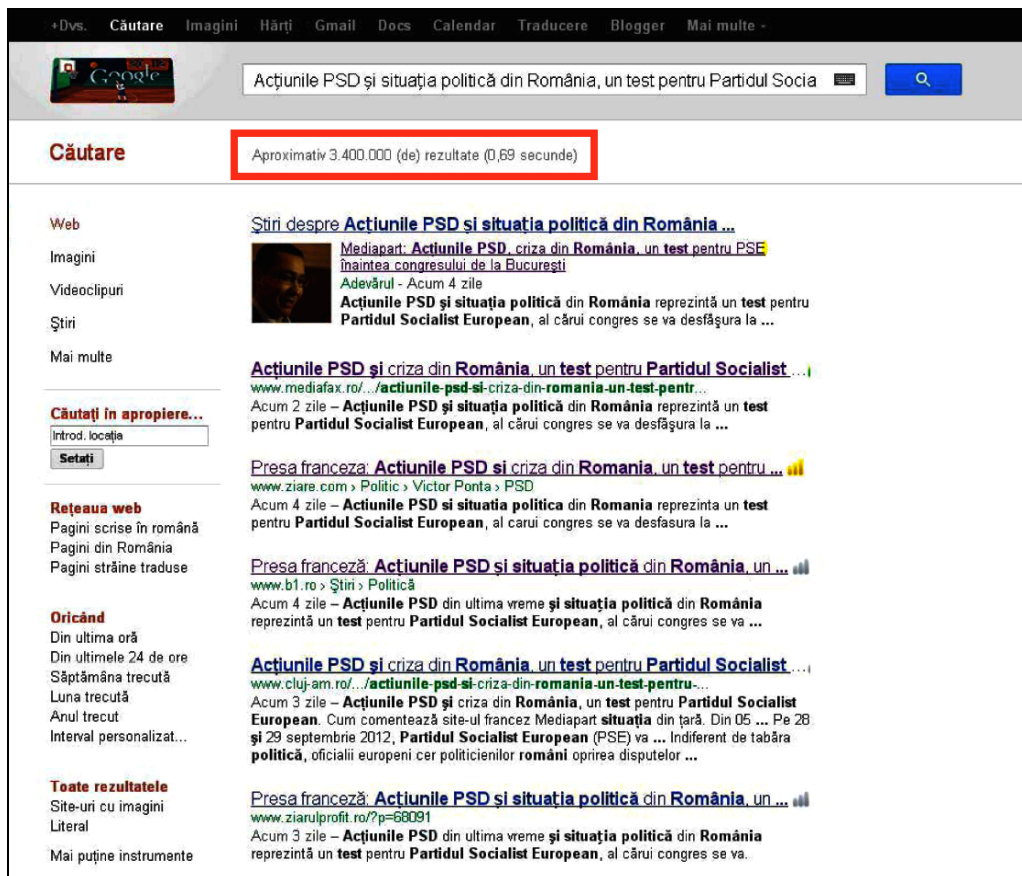
conclusion of our paper summed up the loose ends. On August 3, some feedback from Brussels helped us notice that the Party of European Socialists (PES) was about to hold its congress in Bucharest, by the end of September. Some feedback from Bucharest followed up on this mention by pointing out that the European Popular Party (EPP) was organizing its own European congress in Bucharest less than three weeks later. In fact, the two major European parties had both chosen Bucharest as their initial battleground to launch the campaign for the 2014 European elections. In Romania, the center-right president was affiliated with the EPP, and the Social Democrat prime minister to the PES. Thus, it was possible to put pressure on these two European parties to find a decent way out of the political crisis before their respective congresses. Finally, by dint of brainstorming and crowdsourcing the analysis, we had found a possible way out, a way in which we were able to proceed.



**Illustration 4: B1TV (national Romanian TV) commenting on our paper, August 4, 2012.**

We had caught the eye of the Romanian press, and we had finally found a solution, or at least the right button to press. We just had to say it loud and clear. We decided to write a short paper with a few key sentences that would be easy to grab hold of and quote in different languages. We spent the entire night from August 3 to 4 writing and rewriting in French, English and Romanian, in order to reach the shortest and clearest explanation of the Romanian political crisis and the issues raised by the clash of the congresses of the two major European parties in Bucharest: *“Financial abyss, speculative attacks, pressure on justice and elections*

without results, is it really what the EPP and the PES have to propose for Europe 2014?” We paid particular attention to the wording, in order to seek out shock formulas in all languages that would have the fewest words but the largest impact possible: “facing the crisis, do the European socialists prefer changes to the electoral lists or changes to the economic policy?” In the morning, we posted the paper in three languages and promoted it on social media as before, then through our growing mailing lists, thanks to all the feedback we were receiving: “Bucharest, a test for the Party of European Socialists”. The approach was startlingly successful.



**Illustration 5:** Some 3,400,000 Google.ro results for the Romanian title of our “Bucharest, a test for the Party of European Socialists (PES)” paper on August 8, 2012.

The local Romanian press passed it to the country’s national press, the press to the radio, and the TVs to the news aggregator. Suddenly, our article was soaring far into the Web. By the evening of August 4, Web search engines were already finding millions of references to the Romanian title of the paper. The Romanian press was calling us “the French press” and repeating the shock formulas we had been working on all night long, until they had been shared and in many directions and by different outlets. At this point, we thought that our job was over and that we could eventually take a few days off.

## The ethics of crowdsourced geography

On Monday, August 6, the Romanian prime minister announced a cabinet reshuffle to replace the ministers of public administration, interior and foreign affairs. The prime minister failed to find a suitable candidate for the Ministry of Justice and decided to appoint himself interim head of the ministry. A few days later, August 10, the Romanian General Prosecutor's Office opened criminal proceedings against the former ministers of public administration and of interior on charges of aggravated abuse of power against the public interest for having declared *after* the referendum that their ministries would not be able to verify the accuracy of the electoral rolls. And on August 14, the National Anticorruption Directorate seized all the electoral minutes and investigated as many as 260 allegations of ballot fraud, starting with the municipalities and localities we had pointed out as early as August 1<sup>st</sup>, the same day the results were announced.

However, since the publication of the official results on August 1<sup>st</sup>, the situation worsened, as the Constitutional Court requested several delays before ruling on the validity of the referendum. As a result of great pressure and fear, the Constitutional Court would vacillate for at least three weeks without rendering a verdict. On August 6, the court even sent a letter to the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe and to the European Commission to expose the continuing *"pressure and threats against individual judges."* During that time, it was no longer possible to know who the head of state was in Romania. Eventually, on August 12, the Union of Redundant Military Personnel threatened to *"call for disobedience and take to the streets to create chaos"* and *"ask for the abolition of the Constitutional Court of Romania."*

Meanwhile, and despite all the e-mails we were sending day after day to the journalists and boards from both sides of the Atlantic that had been writing critically on Romania until the end of July, the international press remained silent, or stuck with the Olympic Games and the war in Syria. Yet we were aware, from the feedback and from the events, that the international press was playing a key role putting the Romanian government under pressure and instilling confidence in the new generation of Romanian journalists, public servants and magistrates. That is why we went back to work.

Building on our audience and the strong feedback we were receiving, we moved to other issues and tried to unpack them, from the [Washington PR firms backing the Romanian government](#) and the efforts made by *The Voice of Russia to create chaos and confusion* in Romania through [legal issues and pressures](#) that the Constitutional Court was facing to the [underlying disputes over Romanian shale gas](#). Besides the dozen articles we had published on *Mediapart*, in both the site's French and English editions, we also tried some guerrilla tricks. We started to counteract the government propaganda on social media by systematically posting answers with opposing facts and links to our papers. That is how our accounts wound up getting blocked for two weeks. Engaging our followers, we asked help to

update on *Wikipedia* in as many languages as possible the pages of the two major European parties, the EPP and the PES. We had announced the congresses in Bucharest in at least seven different languages and warned of the negative issues arising from the situation in Romania, using as many hyperlinks as possible, including to our own papers, in order to strengthen the force of our contentions.

To ensure news dissemination and that as many people as possible would be at least fairly well informed, maybe critically concerned and even involved, we were committed to answering all questions, e-mails, posts or messages. But, since we didn't know who we were really talking to, whether they wrote in their own name or under a pseudonym, nor what their intentions were, we decided to make all our replies public by implementing them in our posts, responding to edits or providing answers in our next paper. We felt that as long as we were responding publicly, we could talk and exchange with virtually everyone (even if they were undercover), because the most important thing was to continue crowdsourcing the analysis. In our papers, posts and public replies, we tried to share all the hunches, hints and clues people were sending us, whether they were at the offices, next to the pool, by the seaside, busy hiking or on a cycling tour. However, that commitment to engage in almost real-time feedback became exhausting because of time differences and the mixing of languages. We requested some help to make public as many documents as possible; finally, we received some help from the nebulous web around the Pirate Party, by posting some files and finding a way through *WikiLeaks*, so that we could link to them in our papers and feed that crowdsourced geography.

In the end, things smoothed out without us fully understanding what had really helped (and what did not). When the Constitutional Court finally invalidated the impeachment referendum on August 21, politicians and military personnel persisted in their calls to take to the streets. However, on August 23, it was announced that the French Socialist Minister of Foreign Affairs had canceled his visit to Bucharest. The feedback we received from Brussels and Washington indicated that our papers had been considered interesting and useful. It can be reasonably assumed that international pressure eventually had an impact on the *volte-face* decision made by Parliament. On August 27, following a chaotic afternoon session and a second suspension of works, during which MEPs made many phone calls while being broadcast live on television, Parliament radically changed its position and, against all odds, ultimately accepted the failure of the impeachment proceedings.

On August 30, the Party of European Socialists (PES) announced the cancellation of its Bucharest congress and that it was moving its major European Congress to Brussels. We could therefore publish our last piece: "[The PES cancels its congress in Bucharest](#)". A very successful aspect was the simultaneous dissemination of our analyses in several languages. This ensured an increased impact, and it made it look like there was a much larger plurality of sources, which, in turn, increased reliability and made it more difficult to erase all the information.



One year later, several *Wikipedia* pages (in German, Italian, Romanian and Spanish) related to the European Socialists and this Congress still preserve the information, with links to our papers published at the time.

### **Conclusion: more trained brains than dot.com domains**

The INSPIRE and PSI Directives might be the most subversive European rules ever issued. Whilst the liberating power of cyberspace and open data is frequently overstated, the EU Open Data rules enable new approaches to scrutinizing powerful institutions in real time. The blogosphere and social media also give the capacity for critical and counter-hegemonic initiatives to jump the spatial scales, allowing them to leverage public opinion at the global scale. However, the cyberspace is not some inherently progressive force, and European rules are not inevitably widening the public sphere of debate, nor is their combination necessarily empowering EU citizens and fostering public awareness and activist engagement. These persistent myths rely on the confusion between data, information, knowledge, critical thinking and political leverage. Transparency does not necessarily lead to accountability nor to people's empowerment. That is because these are not the wires and the servers that make the information free, and because data or technology will not change the world by themselves. Shifting the production of meaning from the few to the many requires more trained brains than dot.com domains, as critical data analysis and guerrilla cartography remain key issues in taking action against the geographies of power and then facilitating counter-knowledge to navigate rhizomatic networks of power, from new to old media and back again. This is why "politics at a distance" is not a kind of "lazy activism": Cyber-activism is not about signing e-petitions; it takes time to challenge the geographies of power, and guerrilla cartography is actually exhausting. What matters most is to grasp the 'dead' data, give it 'live' meaning and give your voice carrying power. All you need is decent training, some linguistic skills, freeware and a good Internet connection, which makes for a strong case in favor of keeping nonstop open Internet access in public places and at university campuses (which we widely exploited in the different countries where we operated).

Guerrilla cartography is effective for the real-time monitoring of crises and electoral processes. Facilitating politics at a distance, as well as crowdsourced geography, the EU Open Data rules enable the monitoring of elections from outside the country, which may often appear to be more efficient, because of the possibility of undermining political pressures, protean Internet censorship and the monopoly of hegemonic media in order to effect real-time leverage. We were driven to that kind of action because this time was not about signing petitions: When a crisis strikes, critical thinking, community building and slacktivism usually underperform, given the speed at which events often take place. We were initially seeking to carry on imparting confidence to the new generation we had been teaching for a while in Romania. At some point, teaching social science and critical thinking is no longer enough: You have to go the extra mile and take direct action

in order to make it real, taking up teaching by doing. However, some of the main issues that remain include the processing of all the data, producing fast enough reusable information, rapidly transforming data into a tool of political leverage and sharing it efficiently. The trick would be to get ready long before any crisis strikes, and as geographers, teachers, researchers and/or activists, this is our social responsibility: To empower people with the tools to tackle the challenges they will eventually face.

*We wish to thank all those who made this possible, whether they were in Romania or on either side of the Atlantic, on holiday or at work. There are too many people to mention here, but we are convinced they didn't do it to be applauded; they did it because of what they believe and because of who they are.*

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