



Soaita, A. M. and Wind, B. (2020) Urban narratives on the changing nature of social capital in post-communist Romania. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 72(4), pp. 712-738.

(doi: [10.1080/09668136.2020.1718064](https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2020.1718064))

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Europe-Asia Studies, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2020.1718064>

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Urban Narratives on the Changing Nature of Social Capital in Post-Communist Romania

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Abstract

Drawing on 69 interviews and information from the World Values Surveys, we examine discursive understandings of social capital in Romania. We evidence two dominant explanatory metanarratives on the weakness of social capital ('communism' and 'ethnocentric individualism') and dilemmas regarding generational and urban/rural differences, which our mixed-methods approach helps decode. Contemporary processes of institutionalisation and commodification have further weakened practices of social capital but such processes are socially approved for their potential of breaking with lingering practices of corruption, bribery and favoritism, and of achieving institutional fairness. Convergence with mature democracies is unlikely not because of passive legacies or ill-adapted actors but because people have different aspirations, well suited to the context of post-communist transformation.

Special thanks to the 69 informants who generously offered their time and views; and to the editor and peer reviewers for their insightful comments. The qualitative part of this research was conducted as part of the first author's PhD research at King's College London and affectionate thanks go to her supervisor, Professor Chris Hamnett. The qualitative/quantitative collaboration started when both authors were affiliated with Tilburg University, the Netherlands.

THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL REFERS TO INDIVIDUALS' ABILITY TO 'GET THINGS done' by engaging in more or less territorial communities. The street demonstrations, industrial actions and citizens' assemblies that sprang up around the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe promised the emergence of vibrant civic societies, rich in social capital. Such actions, however, remained short-lived. The weakness of post-communist civil societies (Howard 2003) has been evidenced through analyses of international surveys, which have above all investigated organisational membership and attitudes to trust. Persistent communist legacies of civic passivity and widespread distrust have been key explanations (Howard 2000, 2003; Rose 2009). The extent of corruption and support given at times to uncivil organisations resulted in a further portrayal of social capital in post-communist countries as not only scarce but negative, uncivil or anti-modern (Rose 1998; Dowley & Silver 2002; Mungiu-Pippidi 2005; Sotiropoulos 2005).

A different, and ultimately smaller, branch of scholarship in anthropological and cultural studies advanced a more nuanced understanding of how the concept of social capital is actually enacted through social activities (Ledeneva 1998; Burawoy & Verdery 1999). While not necessarily denying the thesis of weak social capital in post-communist societies, these scholars describe the ways in which the prior social order is transformed through partial continuities, rejection of the past and the creation of new institutions. An emerging scholarship on urban post-communist movements adds to these insights (Jacobsson 2015; Pleyers & Sava 2015). We hold that the study of social capital in post-communist societies has much to gain from the cross-fertilisation of these disciplinary and methodological fields, allowing social capital dynamics to be understood as simultaneously shaped by holistic processes, middle-range structuring forces and local practices and discourses.

By bringing original insights from a case study conducted in a paradigmatic post-communist city in conjunction with information from three waves of World Values Survey (Inglehart *et al.* 2014), we aim to examine local understandings of the changing nature of social capital in Romania. We bring a particular focus on discourse and employ a holistic definition of social capital, following Portes's (2000) distinction between its individual and collective forms. The former refers to individuals' abilities to benefit from resources because of their embeddedness in small social groups (Bourdieu 1985); the latter refers to individuals' engagements in the open structures of civil society (Putnam *et al.* 1994).

The relevance of our study is three-fold. First, its timing is particularly relevant because theoretically enough time (Rose *et al.*, 2008) has elapsed since the collapse of communism for the new institutional environment

to become sufficiently robust and cultural values to change. Our mixed-methods approach allows us to assemble a relevant analytical timeframe for understanding the dynamics between social practices and explanatory discourses and beliefs. Second, we answer calls to shift debates away from still dominant quantitative accounts towards the examination of beliefs and of local definitions of social capital in order to nuance broad-brush arguments (Mihaylova 2004). Unravelling the narrative lines of dominant discourses, that is what is believed and said, is important given their ontologically performative power (Atkinson & Delamont 2006). Finally, by showing that past experiences of communism remain a critical explanatory factor for the current levels and nature of social capital in Romania, we contribute to the ongoing theorisation of post-communism as a relevant condition as to how everyday life is lived and explained (Stenning 2005) rather than a purely descriptive label which we no longer need (Tuvikene 2016; Mandic 2018).

The article continues as follows. Section 2 outlines key characteristics of the constituents of social capital, and their applications within post-communist scholarship. The description of our research design in section 3 is followed by three empirical sections. Based on qualitative data, sections 4 and 5 expose local understandings of the changing nature of individual and collective social capital, respectively. Subsequently, we contrast some of these metanarratives to cross-country, World Values Survey (WVS)-based analyses organised by prior political regimes in section 6. Section 7 concludes by refuting expectations of convergence in the nature of social capital between post-communist and older democracies, not because of passive legacies or ill-adapted actors but because of people's different aspirations which are well suited to the context of post-communist transformation. Our study thus demonstrates the time-bounded dynamics of weakening social capital in Romania, a process that is both forward- and backward-looking.

The constituents of social capital

Understood as individuals' abilities to benefit from resources because of their social embeddedness, the concept of social capital came to be understood in two ways (Portes 2000). From a sociological perspective, Bourdieu (1985) and Coleman (1988) understood social capital as actual or potential resources linked to one's durable social ties within relatively small groups. Coming from political studies, Putnam and his colleagues (1994 pp.67) have redefined social capital as 'features of social organisation' that help 'coordination and cooperation for mutual benefits', becoming a public good synonymous with 'civicness' and civic society and thus pertaining to the large

communities of regions and nations. While these definitions come from somewhat different epistemological positions, they are not necessarily adversarial if their different focus is made explicit. Following Portes (2000) we refer to the former as individual and the latter as collective social capital.

Social capital consists of three elements: social networks; linked/embedded resources; and shared norms facilitating both the network's maintenance and resource exchange. Scholars of individual social capital accord them relatively equal weight (Bourdieu 1985; Coleman 1988; Portes 1998) whereas those of collective social capital emphasise the role of social networks and norms with resources being co-produced as public goods (Putnam *et al.* 1994; Paldam 2000). Other scholars reject the general comprehensiveness of the concept and narrow it down to trust (Fukuyama 1996; Mungiu-Pippidi 2015), solidarity (Adler & Kwon 2002) or resources (Callois & Aubert 2007).

Social networks are intrinsic to any form of social capital; their configuration matters. Depending on purpose—neighbourhood safety or finding a job—network closure or openness may be more beneficial (Granovetter 1973; Coleman 1988). It has been argued that horizontal networks encourage civic attitudes, skills and equal access to resources, whereas vertical networks develop relations of clientelism (Putnam *et al.* 1994). A combined outcome of network closure and directionality results in bonding or bridging social capital, the latter seemingly more helpful for individual or group socio-economic advancements (Narayan 1999; Woolcock & Narayan 2000).

Resources stand for any form of tangible benefits. Bourdieu (1985) stressed the fungibility of any form of capital—economic, social, cultural or symbolic—hence social capital needs to be analysed with an awareness of other forms of capital in order to reveal more than it conceals (Butler & Robson 2001; Andres & Round 2015). Ultimately, the desirability of resources underpins actors' motivation to join specific social networks. It has been argued that social capital is equally accessible to everyone (Putnam *et al.* 1994), but this argument appears to be at odds with the exclusivity of some resources (Fine 1999; DeFilippis 2001).

Shared norms and values are crucial for social capital to function. In closed groups, norms can be socially conditioned while open structures run higher risks from free riders, thus needing external enforcement through corporate or legal actors (Coleman 1988, 1993). Trust, reciprocity and reputation are the core norms of collective action within rational choice theories (Ostrom 2000; Paldam 2000). Other scholars stress the role of solidarity, social norms and beliefs (Putnam *et al.* 1994; Adler & Kwon 2002; Dekker & Uslaner 2003).

Individual social capital has been viewed as having both positive and negative consequences whereas collective social capital is conceptualised as always beneficial (Putnam *et al.* 1994; Fukuyama 1996). Portes (1998)

distinguishes between negative and positive social capital in terms of consequences. Recognised negative effects include the exclusion of outsiders, excessive social obligations, the restriction of individual freedom and downward levelling norms. This distinction between positive and negative social capital has become critical to studies of racist, terrorist and mafia networks (Rubio 1997; Ostrom 2000), and also for studies of post-communist transformation.

Social capital under communism and after

It has been argued that communist legacies still influence the constituents of social capital notwithstanding some regional variations (Ledeneva 1998; Kornai 2000; Badescu & Sum 2005; Mungiu-Pippidi 2015). First, communist regimes ran shortage economies whereby scarce consumer goods were distributed as favours and privileges or in exchange for bribes through closed networks. Such practices have endured if not flourished since the fall of communism, spawning widespread corruption and tax evasion in the post-communist space (Wallace & Latcheva 2006; Uslaner 2010). Second, compulsory membership in centralised organisations and ritualistic mass mobilisations during communism have underpinned social attitudes of non-engagement (Howard 2003). Finally, communist control over the personal lives of individual spawned a defensive society, leaving legacies of distrust and passivity (Kornai 1992; Rose 2009). Using cross-country survey data, political scholars (Howard 2002; Bernhard & Karakoc 2007) have shown that communism, as a totalitarian regime, destroyed the fabric of society more deeply and enduringly than other forms of authoritarianism ever did. Questions remain, however, regarding whether the passage of time may fuel convergence towards the rich associational life of older democracies (Burean & Badescu 2014; Reinprecht 2017).

Anthropological and cultural studies have nuanced these quantitative findings. For instance, Ledeneva (1998) unpacks the softer rhetoric of friendship and solidarity employed in the use of 'connections'. Likewise, Yurchak (2005) and Burawoy and Verdery (1999) give a more complex reading of everyday communist life and the ways in which local communities in Russian and Romanian towns and villages acted to restore pre-communist rights on property and/or preserve collective ownership while navigating structural processes of change. Drawing on the work of Castells (1983), new studies on post-communist urban movements (Svasek 2006; Jacobsson 2015; Pleyers & Sava 2015; Ross 2015; Dolenc *et al.* 2017), while not denying the thesis on the weakness of collective social capital, have noted, nonetheless, some resurgence in protest activities. Calls for shifting debates away from dominantly quantitative approaches towards examining local beliefs and definitions of social capital have

intensified. By cross-fertilising quantitative and qualitative approaches, we wish to contribute to these debates on the changing nature of social capital in urban, post-communist Romania.

It is useful to recall here the theoretical assumptions on the genesis of social capital and their implications for post-communist change (Wolleaek & Selle 2007). Some scholars see social capital as being entirely socially based on face-to-face interaction, the structure of social norms and values being passed on through historical time, coalescing in national traits (Putnam *et al.* 1994; Dahrendorf 2000). Less deterministically, institutional theorists have stressed the significance of the political, legal and institutional environments wherein interaction takes place, arguing that generational turnover suffices for breaking out of path-dependency (Howard 2000; Dekker & Uslaner 2003). However, formulating the theory of lifetime learning in contexts of sudden, tremendous change, Mishler and Rose (2007) have shown that post-communist citizens across all age groups have progressively adapted their behaviour to a new institutional context.¹

Research design

This mixed-method study draws on qualitative data collected during 2007–2008 and information from the third (1995–1998), fifth (2005–2009) and sixth (2012–2014) waves of the WVS.² This approach provides an analytical timeframe of about 15 years and some unique analytical and theoretical opportunities.

Our rich qualitative data allow us to build on Bourdieu's (1985) and Portes's (2000) holistic views of social capital that existing quantitative data cannot substantiate. The data were collected a decade ago, when Romania had accomplished its economic and institutional transition and become an EU member state. At that point, economic growth had reached its peak before the 2009-10 economic crisis, and enough years had elapsed since the fall of communism for changes in social capital to have occurred. Discourses are also slow to change and we believe that the data are still relevant today. Furthermore, our approach allows us to test some of these narratives against generalisable quantitative data over a 15-year period to 2012, the most recent year available in the WVS.

The qualitative data

The data was sourced from a larger project centred on residents' housing problems and responses in two housing

¹ See also Rose *et al.* (2008).

² Open access data, see Inglehart *et al.* (2014).

types, the fully privatised communist high-rise estates and the suburban, post-communist self/owner-build houses (Soaita, 2010). An important part of this study focused on residents’ experiences of participation in the management of their housing—at the level of dwelling, street, neighbourhood and the city—as well as residents’ engagement with the structures of local governance and civil society. Data were collected from September 2007 to June 2008.

Pitesti (170,000 inhabitants) was selected as a case study, being a typical communist city in terms of massive post-World War II urban and industrial growth. Having received significant foreign direct investment, Pitesti can be seen as a ‘successful’ post-communist Romanian city (Benedek 2006). While both quantitative and qualitative data were collected—250 questionnaires (stratified sample) and 69 semi-structured interviews (purposeful sample)—we draw here mainly on the latter. Sampling strategies reflected the project aims and focused on four subgroups: block residents, self-builders, housing professionals (i.e. architects and planners and decision-makers. From the 150 surveyed block residents and 100 surveyed self-builders, 91 and 59 respectively agreed to be interviewed; overall, 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted in each group (purposeful sampling on key socioeconomic variables (Soaita, 2012, 2013, 2014). The 48 interviews involved 28 block residents and 32 self-builders. Additionally, 12 interviews were conducted with housing professionals (age-stratified sampling) and nine with municipal decision-makers (convenience sampling). Table 1 details some key characteristics by subsample. All participants declared their ethnicity as Romanian, including one block resident who had moved from the Republic of Moldova in 2003.

Table 1. The qualitative sample

	<i>Aged 18-39</i>	<i>Aged 40-60</i>	<i>Aged 61-74</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Pre university</i>	<i>University or more</i>
Block residents	4	14	6	10	14	15	9
Self-builders	10	11	3	9	15	7	17
Professionals	4	5	3	8	4	-	12
Decision-makers*	1	8	-	4	5	1	8
Total	19	38	12	31	38	23	46

Note: Only for anchor participants, excluding family members in the 10 multi-person interviews (four with bloc residents and six with self-builders). * The Mayor, two (out of three) Vice-Mayors, and six (out of 23) Councillors who were nominated in relevant commissions.

All participants were invited to reflect on and give examples of ‘people coming together to solve their problems, express opinions or just to socialise’; to consider ‘whether there were any differences between rural/urban places, communist/post-communist times, people of different lifestyles, age, education, ethnicity or by any other factors’; and to explain ‘why things are as they are’.

Whether participants were interviewed as residents, professionals or decision-makers, it became obvious during data collection and analysis that responses did not differ by role or type of residence. Participants clearly answered these questions from their broader positionality as citizens rather than their narrower roles of residents of a certain type of housing or practitioners of a certain type of profession; this reminds us that self-identity is multi-dimensional and negotiated across different epistemic frames of belonging such as family, professional group and citizenship (Lawler 2014). Therefore, we will use data from all interviews without differentiating between sampling subgroups.

Conducted in Romanian, interviews lasted on average 90 minutes. Data were transcribed and coded thematically (using NVivo) based on the principles of Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2014) that is, a bottom-up approach seeking to understand participants’ perspectives while remaining alert to the social construction of beliefs. Informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity were thoroughly maintained.

The quantitative data

We will contrast the qualitative narratives with information from the third, fifth and sixth waves of the WVS, establishing an analytical timeframe of approximately 15 years. The last wave marks over 20 years since the fall of most communist regimes in Eastern Europe, a period in which, theoretically, new institutions have become robust and able to affect social capital’s values and practices. In total, the 18 countries that participated in all three waves are included, allowing us to examine the dynamics of social capital by prior-political regimes, as established by Bernhard and Karakoc (2007). Our variables of interest represent three elements of collective social capital: organisational membership, participation in protest and social trust, epitomising chiefly Putnam’s (1995), Castells’s (1983) and Fukuyama’s (1996) views, respectively. We will present descriptive analyses of their dynamics over time by countries and prior political-regimes. For the case of Romania, we also present OLS and logistic regression analyses to show the individual-level determinants of social capital in all three waves, such as age, gender,

educational level, household income and the degree of urbanisation of the residential environment. The operationalisation of variables is discussed in the quantitative section. Our discussion proceeds by presenting in the following two sections the qualitative findings on individual and collective social capital, respectively; the quantitative section follows.

Individual social capital: past and present

Among many respondents, Mr I.I. saw the Romanian post-communist society as first and foremost a possessor of negative social capital and lacking positive social capital:

There is an ill will in using functions, positions, money and nepotism, all for only perverse purposes. When it comes to two wealthy people, they use social networks to make a perverse deal. ‘Let’s help my nephew, poor thing, as he drove into someone on a pedestrian crossing, at 100 kilometres per hour’! Conversely, no one takes an initiative such as ‘Let’s come together to plant some trees on our street’. No, there is not such a good thing [as collective action to plant trees on one’s street]!³

According to a 2014 European Commission report (EC 2014), 94% of Romanians believed corruption was widespread and 25% had experienced it. However, this participant’s scepticism reflected not only general perceptions but also his unsuccessful personal efforts to organise a neighbours’ group in order to collectively provide water and sewage to their self-built houses in what was, in the 1990s, suburban, unserviced land. His was an example of a failed instrumental form of social capital (Coleman 1993). Have individuals, families and communities in Romania always been weak in terms of individual social capital? Given the historical timeframe we develop to explore this question, the next section will necessarily privilege our older participants’ accounts since their subjective memories are linked to lived experiences. Age balance will be restored later in the article.

The communist past: nostalgia and enmity

Traditionally, Romania has been a predominantly rural society (Ronnas 1984): the urbanisation rate increased from 23% to 54% between 1948 and 1989, and remained constant ever since. As a result, urban–rural ties were preserved

³ Mr I.I.; Interview with Mr I.I., 56 years-old and Mrs I.E, 52 years-old, Pitesti, 16-Mar-2008.

within families during communism and after (Andrusz *et al.* 1996). Among others, Miss S.G. recalled her mother's village where social life was organised by shared values and rules, therefore rich in normative social capital (Coleman 1988):

In our village it was considered that it was your duty to keep clean the stretch of the road alongside your plot, up to the middle of the road, and no one ever questioned it. There were other very clear rules, for instance, how to build your house in relation to your neighbour's for mutual benefit.⁴

Rural traditions of reciprocal help have survived, such as *claca*, similar to the Italian *aiutarella* (Putnam *et al.* 1994):

Everyone knows what *claca* is! I come and help you, you come and help me! Today we harvest my crop, tomorrow we harvest yours. Today we dig your garden, tomorrow we fix my fence. It's still practised but more rarely and only in villages.⁵

Originally a privilege of the landed classes—the right to demand unpaid peasant work, and thus a vertical instrument of power—*claca* was reinvented by the end of the nineteenth century as a horizontal and instrumental form of social capital. The communist state successfully captured it in rural areas:

Schools and bridges were built like that by villagers while the municipality brought building materials. The mayor mobilised people, with a rake, with a brush, and they cleaned streets, painted white tree trunks, fences, and cleaned ditches. But I haven't heard of anything like that recently.⁶

While such practices were maintained in many villages during the communist period, they did not long survive their transfer to the new socialist cities. Moreover, the maintenance of comparable normative practices in reputable urban areas was short-lived, as noted by some of our respondents:

⁴ Interview with Miss S.G., 50 years-old, Pitesti, 24-May-2008.

⁵ Interview with Mr P.S., 48 years-old, Pitesti, 29-Mar-2008.

⁶ Interview with Mr D.I., 64 years-old, Pitesti, 30-Jan-2008.

When I moved to the city, communism had just started. There still was a neighbouring group on our street for baking bread. But two years on, when I returned from military service, many things changed; such traditions were not welcomed by authorities.⁷

In Bucharest my parents and their neighbours contributed individually to the common welfare: they planted flowers and tidied up the green, brushed away fallen leaves, cleaned the snow so that no passer-by would slip ... These were old traditions that were kept until 1970, 1973 but after 1977, they died! They stopped! [Interviewer: Why?] I don't know, I don't have an explanation, but they suddenly stopped!⁸

The sudden disappearance of such traditional practices may have been connected with the urbanisation drive of the 1970s and the influx of newcomers as well as to Ceaușescu's increasing control over society. Traditional forms of individual social capital disappeared without new forms emerging. Social capital enables actors to access benefits or resources that would be otherwise unavailable. However, the command economy produced extensive shortages, particularly extreme during Ceaușescu's austerity programme in the 1980s (Ronnas 1984; Åslund 2007; Soaita, 2010). The benefits accessed through individual social capital were not privileged information, public safety or clean streets but basic necessities that were by then severely rationed. The exchange did not just allocate benefits but misallocated acutely scarce resources. Social capital was constructed hierarchically between those occupying privileged positions on the resource chains—the political-economic elite and key guardians, such as shopkeepers—and those negotiating access. An individual's workplace or position became a key determinant of their power. As opposed to Russia (Ledeneva 1998), the use of 'connections' was bitterly remembered and condemned by most participants, which is not surprising, given the acute shortages in Ceaușescu's Romania:

Corresponding to the traffic of influence [*trafic de influență*]⁹ that one could mobilise, the 'connections' one had, one could get or not a flat. Oh, such a dirty traffic of influence existed around housing allocation!

⁷ Interview with Mr B.I., 68 years-old, Pitesti, 2-Oct-2007.

⁸ Interview with Mrs M.G., 65 years-old, Pitesti, 20-Apr-2008.

⁹ The social practice of using one's social network/'connections' to reach persons of authority in order to obtain preferential treatment either in exchange of a bribe or of future reciprocity. A 'heavy traffic' means one is well connected and asks frequently for all kind of favors; a 'dirty traffic' means additional immorality through the

And believe it or not, even for eggs, meat or books! I refused to use ‘recommendations’ or ‘interventions’ then and I refuse now! As long as I live, I refuse to use such dirty, amoral means!¹⁰

While bleak narratives were dominant, a few participants believed access was equal and goods plentiful; one participant argued that privileged access to resources was simply equivalent to a wage differential, a view supported by political economists (Kornai 1992).

The post-communist transition: continuity and change

It has been argued that in slow and disorganised transitions, old vertical power relations and power structures that have carried over from communism provide opportunities for former elites to capture the new socioeconomic order (Åslund 2007). This was apparent in Romania:

The same people remained in every important position, whether small or large, privatised or public firms. They kept their exclusive networks and traded among themselves. It was rare that a newcomer could break in. Same people, same mentality.¹¹

The economic transition resulted in the loss or gain of individual social capital since this was tied to the workplace. Those who lost their jobs were negatively affected, whereas membership of a labour union in the state sector led to unexpected gains. Unionism developed powerful forms of institutionalised social capital during the 1990s (Keil & Keil 2002) but, by remaining specific to certain public sectors, they produced not only economic inequalities between unionised and non-unionised, public and private sectors, but -a sense of social unfairness, hence a ‘moral’ justification to get illegal income by whatever means:

We had a strong union and for several years, I had a salary comparable to that of a minister. Was this normal? Therefore, the minister got the excuse to steal, to be greased, to ‘close the eyes’ [not to observe

nature of what is preferentially obtained, e.g. basic food or medicine versus a book. The expression has its own Wikipedia page

¹⁰ Interview with Mr S.A., 54 years-old, Pitesti, 4-Jul-2008.

¹¹ Interview with Mr C.I., 59 years-old, Pitesti, 5-Jan-2008.

that he/she or others are being bribed]. The practice of corruption was transmitted to the society at large, making every public employee easy to bribe and any entrepreneur, a tax avoider.¹²

Practices of top-level corruption and bribery best demonstrate the fungibility of negative social capital into overt economic capital. Their widespread reach in post-communist societies has been explained by institutional failure (Mungiu-Pippidi 2015), incomplete commodification (Åslund 2007) and social norms of gratitude (Kornai 2000). Participants condemned such practice but admitted giving (and some receiving) a bribe, ‘gift’ or an ‘attention’ [*o atenție*] with the hope of getting preferential treatment or just as expressions of gratitude. The blurred boundary between gratitude and bribery is clearly evidenced below:

In my opinion, you need to give *o atenție* anytime someone helps you with a problem, you thank them for their help. Even if that is his job, this [the gift] is my pleasure [to give]. Not as a condition [for him to do his job], I can’t stand that, but as my pleasure [to thank him after he did his job]. To give you a bunch of flowers, a pack of coffee, or whatever else is my pleasure [to give], it means I want to thank you for what you did even if it was your job to do so anyway. This is not bribery, even though maybe I hope that my problem will be solved a little faster.¹³

While forms of negative individual social capital were seen as dominant, unveiling new forms of social capital was part of this enquiry. This research did not find innovative forms of social capital but evidenced the changing nature of existing practices, stemming from processes of commodification and institutionalisation—a link observed by Coleman (1993). The case of religious practices exemplify the former and Rotational Credit Associations¹⁴ (RCAs) and bureaucratisation the latter.

Based on strong norms of reciprocity, wedding, baptism and wake practices render visible the horizontal social networks possessed by families, the first two being openly linked to resources *via* financial gifts, given publicly during the reception. These practices have become increasingly commodified in terms of venues:

¹² Interview with Mr G.C., 57 years-old, Pitesti, 21-Dec-2007.

¹³ Interview with Mrs D.E., 39 years-old, 15-Mar-2008.

¹⁴ In a RCA, each member saves monthly an equal amount of money into a common fund, with a single member withdrawing in turn the lump sum each month; the process continues until everyone receives their lump sum. They were common in communism among small groups of work colleagues, being exclusively based on trust.

restaurants have replaced family gardens or communal halls for wedding receptions; specialised, very basic and affordable restaurants have supplanted wake feasting at home. The commodification of weddings through higher monetary gifts is lamented as ‘a loss of the true spirit of the event’ and ‘unbearable social obligations’¹⁵, although the ‘softer’ commodification of wake suppers is appreciated for ‘lifting a burden in time of distress’.¹⁶

Likewise, RCAs, which had been common within close groups in the workplace during communism, had to adapt to the post-communist rampant inflation of the 1990s. RCAs underwent a process of institutionalisation by expanding across institutions and substituting norms of trust by formal regulations. The new, larger credit associations have lost the bonded and personalised social capital of a RCA:

Oh, don’t believe that a RCA now is the same thing as before! Only the name is the same, otherwise it is just like a bank! You even pay interest ... but I prefer it now, you don’t anymore owe gratitude but only money.¹⁷

However, processes of commodification and institutionalisation have undermined not only positive but also negative forms of social capital. The most significant change has occurred in public and private administrations.

I see local authority institutions that work: every paper is registered, whether it is a claim, a suggestion or a complaint. Since 1998–2000 there has been a clear management of information. Things are not hidden under the carpet anymore. I give no gifts, no bribes.¹⁸

A common theme across the interviews was the unresolved dilemma of whether and how social capital differs between rural and urban places; we will return to this in our quantitative empirical section. While there were a few nostalgic communitarians, freedom from social obligations was pragmatically embraced by most participants:

¹⁵ Mrs I.S.; Interview with Mr I.C., 36 years-old and Mrs I.S., 38 years-old, Pitesti, 24-Apr-2008.

¹⁶ Interview with Mr S.S., 40 years-old, Pitesti, 4-Oct-2007.

¹⁷ Interview with Mrs S.M., female, 40 years old, Pitesti, 10-Oct-2007.

¹⁸ Interview with Mr U.A., 36 years-old, Pitesti, 12-Feb-2008.

In my parents' small town and in villages, people are closer, while here everyone is for themselves only. For instance, coming from abroad, they bring gifts for family and friends; they frequently pay visits. Here they don't, but there is more freedom. I have no expectations of others but neither do they have any of me! We have so little spare time, why should I spend it on social obligations?¹⁹

Collective social capital: explanatory narratives of non-engagement

When the framework of analysis moves from small groups to collective forms of social capital, then its weakness cannot be more conspicuous than by its absence:

Citizens' involvement in urban affairs is a big zero!²⁰

There may be a lot of NGOs, Amnesty International, but what can I say? There is a kind of insularity, what's mine is mine, what's yours is yours. We build giant walls not as much between houses but amongst ourselves; that's our culture of participation.²¹

While the existence of civic organisations is key to enable collective action, any such organisation remains ineffective without support from both members and the public. Among all surveyed residents, (n=250), rates of organisational membership were very low: only 9% had ever taken part in any active organisations; 12% were involved in small groups of close neighbours (including the homeowner's association of their block), and participation in larger neighbourhood associations was non-existent.²² However, extremely low levels of organisational membership do not reflect apathy. Engagement through the local authority structures was significantly higher, with just over half of our interviewees having done so, by means of letters, telephone calls, e-mails and meetings.²³

¹⁹ Interview with Mrs P.A., 34 years-old, Pitesti, 10-Apr-2008.

²⁰ Interview with Miss T.T., 51 years-old, Pitesti, 24-Mar-2008.

²¹ Mr A.P.; Interview with Mr A.P., 33 years-old and Mrs A.M., 35 years-old, Pitesti, 5-Jul-2008.

²² Among the 48 interviewed residents, 12 paid 'idle' memberships in trade unions and professional associations; and 18 participants were absolutely opposed to ever joining any type of organisation.

²³ These were related to various local issues in the neighbourhood (e.g. children's playgrounds, footpaths, green spaces, homeless people, parking, public lighting, stray dogs, traffic signs, problems with utilities, or to the

How did participants explain their own and their fellow citizens' reluctance to engage in forms of collective social capital? In this study the metanarrative of the communist past was one of the two strongest explanatory determinants given by respondents for the current culture of non-participation. This could be seen in terms of both continuities and breaks with the past. Continuity refers to enduring social passivity, as observed across age groups:

One was always told: 'You stay put and quiet and I'll give you what you need'; you just go to work [as this is what I think you need]; if I tell you, do 'patriotic work', you do patriotic work; if I tell you 'meeting', you go to a meeting; if I tell you 'applaud', you applaud; if I tell you 'choir', you sing. You just do what I say.²⁴

Before you had no right to choose, they chose for you! Now, it's different. We formulate our goals and the ways to accomplish them. But what if you don't go to vote, if you don't participate, if you don't express your opinions, if you don't meet, if you don't gather together, if you don't keep in contact, if you don't communicate, if you don't complain? Again, should someone else do all these for you? Again, what do you actually expect from the City Hall or District Council? From the prefect, the mayor, the ministry? And *you*? [What do *you* do for yourself?]²⁵

Breaking with the past was referred to in terms of a quite amiable rejection of collectivism. The dislike of joining any type of organisation as a reaction against past compulsory, formalistic participation in organised activities was intertwined with approval for the new freedom not to participate, also observed by Howard (2000):

Oh, I don't miss that time, they were well organised in keeping us busy, supervised so that we didn't get rid of Ceauşescu. There were plenty of activities, football, theatre, choir, painting, ballet and patriotic work: in spring we dug, in autumn we harvested! From childhood to adulthood, one was regimented as a 'Homeland

larger scale of the city (e.g. city parks, corruption, local budget, planning transparency, public land restitution to prior owners that affected the neighbourhood or the city).

²⁴ Interview with Mr B.L., 68 years-old, Pitesti, 2-Oct-2007.

²⁵ Interview with Mr U.A., 36 years-old, Pitesti, 12-Feb-2008.

Falcon’[*Șoimii Patriei*, young children’s organisation], Pioneer, Communist Youth and a Communist Party member. All compulsory, of course, so I am happy to stay away now.²⁶

The other strong explanatory determinant of non-participation was a rich and bitter metanarrative of Romanian ethnocentric individualism. Many participants believed that civic disengagement was a national cultural trait of insular individualism, unlikely to ever change. Structural determinants, even when observed, were not perceived as causative:

I believe Romanians could never unite to act for their collective interest. As a policeman I need two witnesses for car accidents. ‘Have you seen anything?’ I ask. ‘Yes, but I must go, I’m busy.’ They are not interested, they don’t want to get involved! Perhaps they are right because if they do, they are dragged in the court without at least being paid for the day spent there. And the boss is not at all pleased!²⁷

Such ethnocentric explanations of non-participation are not disconnected from pervasive nationalistic discourses during communism and after. Many nationalist mythologies contrast a glorious national identity of the past with a present characterised by insular, materialistic, illicit individualism (Chen 2007; Boia 2017), seen as the hallmark of the disorganised Romanian transition:

At every step nowadays somebody tries to fool you. One rings the doorbell and shows you a ‘hospital medical record’ or a ‘building permit’ to ask for money for a sick child or a church to be built. Many people don’t keep their word. As a friend once explained to me, ‘I gave you my word and I can take it back!’ And there is a fight for everything: money, business, jobs, promotions. A friend would knock you down so that they can move up! People have become very selfish, greedy and disrespectful. This new freedom was very wrongly understood.²⁸

Explanations of weak social capital by ethnocentric individualism may well qualify as a self-fulfilling prophecy. For

²⁶ Interview with Mrs D.L., 50 years-old, Pitesti, 11-Feb-2008.

²⁷ Interview with Mr F.M., 35 years-old, Pitesti, 19-Jan-2008.

²⁸ Interview with Mrs C.M., 46 years-old, Pitesti, 10-Dec-2007.

instance, such beliefs have spawned widespread distrust (explored at length in Soaita, 2010, penalising promoters of collective actions:

People do not want to get involved in any common action. No! They always believe that the only reason you have taken the initiative is that you have something to gain.²⁹

I believe our nation is very selfish. Even if one would like to take the initiative, there would be someone saying ‘oh, he only does it for money’ or for whatever personal interest, not for the ‘common good’. And when distrust spreads, everything gets spoilt!³⁰

Indeed, WVS documented a slight fall in social trust in Romania between 1998 and 2005, which preceded our qualitative fieldwork, with an acute plunge by 2012, reaching one of the lowest levels worldwide. Likewise, analyses of recent protest movements (Mercea 2014; Onuch & Sasse 2016; Ana 2017) have shown that activists have failed to have a broader impact on society. Participants also opted for non-participation because they believed their efforts would be ineffective:

There was public action to stop the construction of the high-rise headquarters near the historic cathedral in Bucharest, but what chance did it have of success? The high-rise was built even though the Pope in Rome protested! We end up as Don Quixote fighting against 30-storey profit-making! Thousands of signatures were collected, and...??? [the participant gives a long inquisitive, disappointed look] Cheers for the organisers, though.³¹

This rational, instrumentalist view of public action may prove an engine for change since street demonstrations achieved governmental change in 2012 and 2015 and anti-corruption legislation in 2017 (Magrudean 2017); yet such a view may also reinforce non-participants’ judgments of public action being too strongly biased, agenda-based or even illegitimate (Crețan 2015).

²⁹ Mrs C.G.; Interview with Mr C.A., 36 years-old and Mrs C.G., 34 years-old, Pitesti, 20-Dec-2007.

³⁰ Interview with Mrs A.E., 27 years-old, Pitesti, 14-Feb-2008.

³¹ Interview with Miss T.T., 51 years-old, Pitesti, 24-Mar-2008.

Studies of democratisation have demonstrated the important role played by political elites (Åslund 2007, Mungiu-Pippidi 2015), a point emphasised by one resident (but also by the mayor, a supporter of citizens' participation):

You made the law, very good! But the law should be guarded! Implemented! Respected! If someone has broken it, take that case to trial. Whatever sentence is given, keep it, don't water it down. Prime ministers, ministers, go and ask: where did you get this land from? My mother bought it. Where did she get the money from? Her grandmother. And her? Bit by bit, trim down the circle [of corruption], if you want to!³²

An emerging discourse based around a new sets of values related to modernity and liberalism opposed direct engagement in collective actions; collective social capital was ultimately seen as an undesired return to a not so distant past, whether rural/pre-modern or communist/collectivist:

Collective participation as in villages is old fashioned, it is not feasible anymore, it can't solve the problems people have now. And then, back to networking? Back to privilege? No, this is not the way forwards. Better that you fill in a form and wait your turn.³³

Many participants opted for commodified and institutionalised structures that facilitated individually institutionalised rather than group action, because 'it offers a fairer choice'³⁴ and breaks up forms of negative social capital inasmuch as citizens can exert democratic control and demand accountability. Indeed, the promotion of biased agendas and the exclusion of the least privileged are two of the major criticisms of social capital (DeFilippis 2001). One of the least well-off participants in this study saw poverty and growing inequality as causes of non-participation, both characteristic of the transition period:

No, I have not heard of collective initiatives, no, no. And who could do such a thing? One does what one can, alone, in his garden or within his walls. Before, yes, people would gather to build a monument, dig a

³² Interview with Mr P.I., 52 years-old, Pitesti, 15-Feb-2008.

³³ Interview with Miss B.C., 47 years-old, Pitesti, 25-Apr-2008.

³⁴ Mr J.C.; Interview with Mr J.C., 38 years-old and Mrs J.E., 35 years-old, Pitesti, 15-Dec-2007.

fountain, repair a church but now you rarely hear of anything like that, if at all. We have become wicked, selfish. After revolution, well-connected people got money, cars, visits abroad. This created a separation, ruthless business people, and everything else started from there. Everybody now works 10–12 hours a day for a businessman for five million lei [£100] when you pay four million for utilities! This makes you automatically wicked, selfish, indifferent. That's what poverty does to collective action!³⁵

Commodification was welcomed by better-off participants, but for many deprived individuals it only exacerbated poverty and excluded them from collective engagement. Collective action requires spending time if not money, and time was in short supply given long working hours and hours spent dealing with inefficient public bureaucracies. Not surprisingly, the preferred forms of civic engagement were online signatures for support and telephone or online complaints or suggestions; in other words, 'home-based' civic engagement with which the relatively comfortable participants in this study were familiar:

I have never joined any organisation, union, group. I have no time: job, university, this master's degree I'm doing, and my baby! I am very busy; I have no time and neither does my husband. But we make suggestions via email; sign online petitions now and then, that's all we can do.³⁶

Overall, there was no agreement as to whether any age cohort was more civically active than others. Opinions fluctuated between children (because they were impressionable and had fun completing the task), young people (because they had not experienced communist life and apathy), the retired (because they had time) or the middle-aged (because they were interested and had knowledge and energy). Many respondents believed that a full generational turnover was needed to sustain novel forms of civil engagement:

With regard to the post-communist change in Romania, I am going to tell you the parable of Moses from the Bible. God told Moses 'Take your people and go to the Holy Land. You can get there in four years, but

³⁵ Mrs J.E.; Interview with Mr J.C. 38 years-old and Mrs J.E., 35 years-old, Pitesti, 15-Dec-2007.

³⁶ Interview with Mrs A.E., 27 years-old, Pitesti, 14-Feb-2008.

you must sleepwalk for 40, so that only those born in freedom set foot in the Holy Land! And when you get there, you and Aaron will die so that no one born in slavery will set foot in the Holy Land!'.³⁷

The community spirit is lacking in 90% of people. If we wish to strengthen this spirit of civic responsibility, mentalities must change and this can only start with children, because it's difficult to change a 60–70 year old, much more difficult.³⁸

However, more complex social dynamics were sometimes observed by both the 'young' and the 'old':

They tried to impose too many changes on us in a short time. Those over 45–50 still have certain remaining communist mentalities and it is harder for them to adapt, although somehow, they have also changed along with changes [in society]!³⁹

Habits of mind change only with generations. Until generations change, mentalities don't die. But we have two daughters. Fortunately, one has a keen sense of justice but the other looks around and sees a different kind of world, greased with nepotism, favours and 'connections'. We've raised them equally, but they've had different peer groups, different friends.⁴⁰

Schools were seen as appropriate sites of civic education where, nonetheless, the 'old' teach the 'young':

My daughter's teacher organised a Christmas collection. We gave toys, money and food for a Children's Home and an Old People's Home. She wanted children to see the other face of society, old people who have no one to care for them. I think this is very good, it forms character and influences future behaviour; children are very impressionable, they learn responsibility, I believe.⁴¹

³⁷ Interview with Mrs M.A., 58 years-old, Pitesti, 4-Jun-2008.

³⁸ Interview with Miss Z.A., 20 years-old, Pitesti, 12-Apr-2008.

³⁹ Interview with Mrs A.E., 27 years-old, Pitesti, 14-Feb-2008.

⁴⁰ Mrs. I.E.; Interview with Mr I.I. 56 years-old and Mrs I.E., 52 years-old, Pitesti 16-Mar-2008.

⁴¹ Interview with Mrs G.N., 32 years-old, Pitesti, 29-Jan-2008.

However, most participants tended to believe that personality, rather than any other individual factor, explains the choice to participate or not in collective action:

First and foremost is personality. There are people who do not wish to get involved, and others think it's useless 'so I'd better stay on my bench', 'You'd better sit quietly'. Others, confident people with big egos, they like to get involved. It depends on each individual. For instance, I don't wish to get involved in public action, I don't like it, I went at school, but I don't like it, I'm not open, trusting with others. I like home activities. But my sister is different, so it depends on each individual.⁴²

These social dilemmas may well express a society in flux. Remarkably, no other classic individual variables, apart from age, were shown to have significant explanatory power, nor sparked as much interest, although the first author consistently investigated lifestyle, education, ethnicity, income and any other possible factor.

Placing localised narratives in their broader comparative context

In order to contextualise and corroborate the exploratory metanarratives of change evidenced by our qualitative data, we investigate recent dynamics of social capital through the WVS, a longitudinal international comparative dataset of 100 countries and 400,000 respondents. We use information from the third, fifth and sixth waves—conducted in 1998, 2005 and 2012 in Romania, with 1,239, 1,776 and 1,503 respondents respectively—to elaborate upon dynamics in social capital over time and test some of our qualitative results. The data facilitate partial comparability: the WVS timeline is much shorter than the post-war timeline of our qualitative narratives. More importantly, interview and survey questions obviously differed, with the key implication that we need to draw critically on different conceptualisations of social capital and develop only partial comparisons. With this understanding, the WVS information allows us first, to contrast the key explanatory metanarratives of 'communism' and 'ethnocentric individualism' with non-participation by using the analytical framework of prior-political regimes (Bernhard & Karakoc 2007) and, second, to decipher the dilemmas of the urban–rural divide and generational differences in social capital *via* regression analyses for the case of Romania.

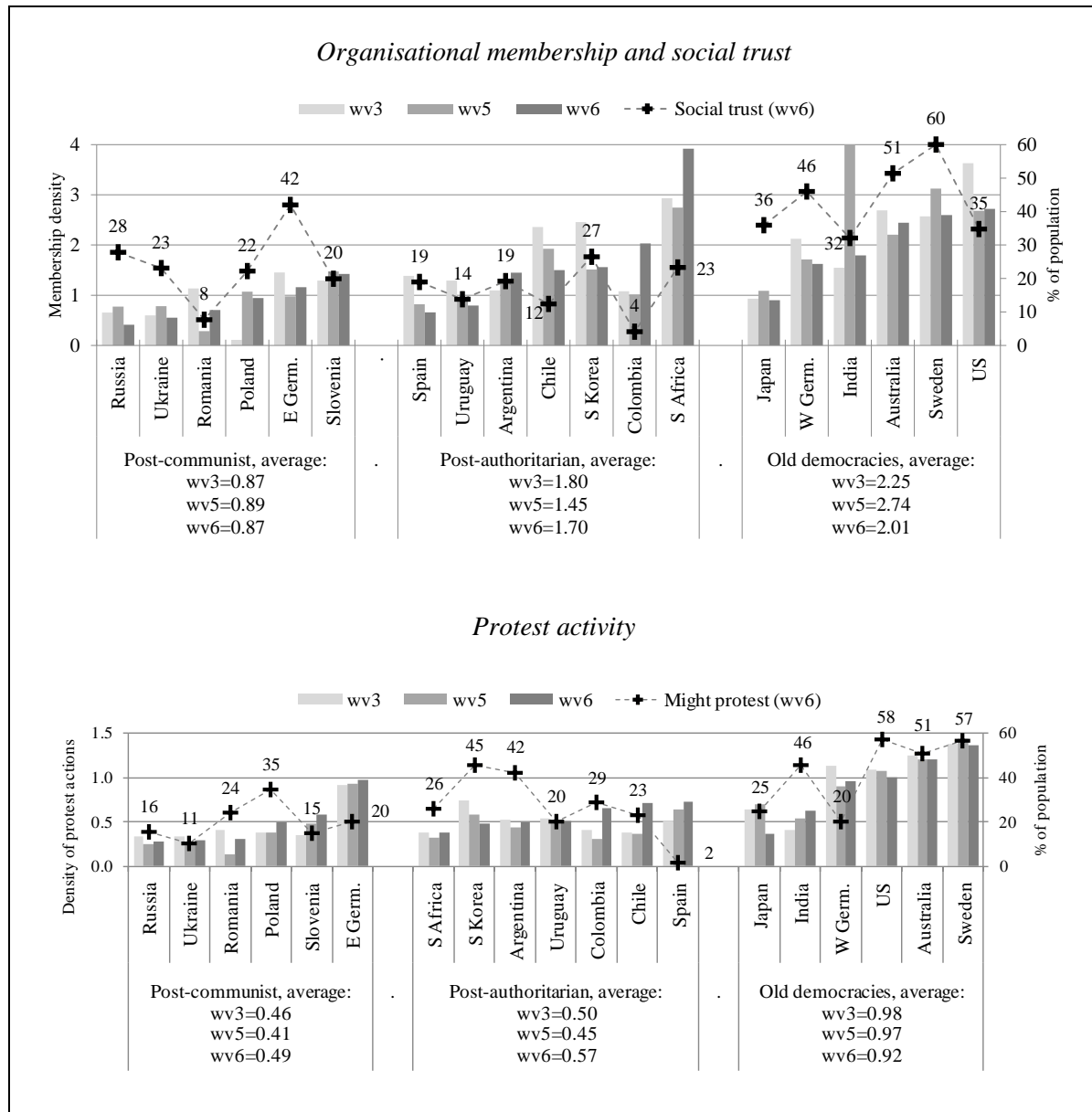
⁴² Interview with Miss O.A., 19 years-old, Pitesti, 8-Dec-2007.

Communism or Romanian ethnocentrism?

We will consider three widely accepted measures for some constituents of social capital. Following Putnam's (1995) approach, that is, an almost exclusive focus on social networks, we create an index of organisational memberships per person, similar to that of Howard (2002) and Bernhard and Karakoc (2007). The index expresses the number of organisation types (arts collective, labour union, political party, environmental group, professional association, charity, voluntary organisation, religious organisation, sports club) of which the respondent is a member. However, one of the strongest criticisms of Putnam's perspective is that he ignored contentious grassroots activity (Ekiert & Kubik 1998; Mayer 2003; Ekiert & Kubik 2014). Therefore, we also draw on Castells's (1983) view and complement the index of organisational membership with an index of protest activity per person, measured by the number of protest types (signing a petition, joining a boycott, participating in a demonstration or any another form of protest) that a respondent has engaged in during the previous year. Finally, we consider social (generalised) trust. While some scholars equate social trust to social capital (Fukuyama 1996; Mungiu-Pippidi 2005), in our Bourdieusian understanding, this is just one amongst many social norms that may constitute social capital in its positive or negative forms. Social trust is commonly operationalised as the percentage of respondents who think 'most people can be trusted' (compared to those who think that 'one needs to be very careful in dealing with people'). We should note that all three variables tend to refer to collective forms of social capital (Portes 2000). Figure 1 shows the average score on the first two dimensions of social capital for the three WVS waves and for the 18 available countries, clustered by their prior-political regime (social trust values are only shown for 2012).

The average number of organisational memberships (top panel) is below one in the post-communist countries in all waves, whereas in post-authoritarian countries the average ranges from 1.45 to 1.80 and in older democracies between 2.01 and 2.75. We note that Putnam's (1995) narrative of falling levels of organisational membership pertains to other states besides the United States (for example, Spain, Uruguay, Chile, West Germany) but we also see dynamics of fall-and-revival (Romania and East Germany) albeit at different levels and of different magnitudes. In term of protest activities (Figure 1, bottom panel), levels in the post-communist cluster were on average less than half those in older democracies, but relatively similar to those found in post-authoritarian states (East Germany being exceptionally active); they were notably more stable over time compared to those of organisational memberships. Most post-communist and post-authoritarian countries show a slight but statistically non-significant increase in protest activity between the two most recent waves. Qualitative studies (Svasek 2006;

Figure 1. Organisational membership, protest activity and social trust by prior-political regime types.



Source: authors' calculations. Note: Country classification and prior-political regimes follow Bernhard and Karakoc (2007) and Howard (2002).

Jacobsson 2015; Pleyers & Sava 2015) argue that post-communist civil societies encapsulate energies that are usually dismissed by quantitative accounts. However, the WVS data demonstrate that low levels of organisational membership in post-communist countries are not counterbalanced by protest activities. We also note preferences for organisational rather than protest activity in all country groups. Social trust in the post-communist and post-authoritarian clusters shows similar average levels, being well below those in the old democracies in each wave (see

Table A1 in the Appendix).⁴³ After wave 3 (1995–1999), however, the first two clusters developed outliers. In the post-communist cluster, East Germany shows rapid and constant increases while Romania shows a deep plunge of 12% between 2005 and 2012. Fast and constant falls resulted in Colombia becoming an outlier in its cluster, the only country showing lower levels of trust than Romania in 2012.

On the whole, while there is variation within regimes, levels of collective social capital are still strongly correlated with a communist past, even 20 years after regime change, particularly in relation to organisational membership; and with either a communist or authoritarian past in terms of protest activity and social trust. On the one hand, this corroborates our qualitative metanarrative of ‘communism’ being an explanatory factor of non-participation. On the other hand, Romania does not stand apart from its post-communist peers—although we note a closer affinity between Russia and Ukraine. This context lends no support to the metanarrative of ‘ethnocentric individualism’. Given the timeline of our qualitative and quantitative data, the 2012 plunge in social trust suggests that individualism as a pervasive discourse may have acted as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The urban–rural and generational dilemmas

Our qualitative analysis confirmed an unsolved dilemma regarding persistent divergence or increasing convergence in practices of social capital between urban and rural areas based on different norms of sociability and different problems needing to be addressed. Likewise, qualitative analysis showed there was no agreement whether any age cohort was more or less engaged in any form of social capital. This age-dilemma accords with academic debates regarding the genesis of social capital through early-life socialisation and its response to institutional change.

To shed some light on these societal dilemmas and to better understand practices of social capital in Romania across urbanisation, age, gender, educational attainment and income, we conducted regression analyses for the same three constituents of collective social capital: organisational membership, protest activities and social trust, these being treated as dependent variables (descriptive statistics are presented in Table A2 in the Appendix). As the first two dependent variables are indices (ratio variables), OLS regression techniques are used. For the last one (a binary variable; the percentage of respondents who thought people were generally trustworthy *versus* those who thought that ‘one can never be too careful’) logistic regression analyses are presented. The two main independent

⁴³ Across waves, the post-communist cluster averages increased from 21% to 24%; the post-authoritarian ones decreased from 22% to 17% whereas those for the older democracies increased from 41% to 43%.

Table 2. Regression analyses: the case of Romania

	<i>Organisational membership</i>			<i>Protest activity</i>			<i>Social trust</i>		
	<i>Wave 3</i> <i>1998</i>	<i>Wave 5</i> <i>2005</i>	<i>Wave 6</i> <i>2012</i>	<i>Wave 3</i> <i>1998</i>	<i>Wave 5</i> <i>2005</i>	<i>Wave 6</i> <i>2012</i>	<i>Wave 3</i> <i>1998</i>	<i>Wave 5</i> <i>2005</i>	<i>Wave 6</i> <i>2012</i>
<i>Urbanisation</i>									
Village	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Town	0.04	0.006	-0,230**	0.035	-0.043	0.029	1,793***	1,357	0,340***
City	-0,473***	-0,151***	-0.102	-0.055	0,071***	0,118***	1,173	0,655**	0.737
Age	0.005	0.001	-0,006**	0,003**	0.001	0,002*	0.996	1,010**	0.994
<i>Gender</i>									
Male	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Female	0.022	-0,068*	-0.09	-0,116***	-0,081***	-0,116***	0.878	0.879	0,703*
<i>Education</i>									
Primary	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Secondary	0,376***	0.082	-0,226*	0,159***	0.028	0,094**	0.845	0.832	1,131
University	0.242	0,367***	-0.015	0,310***	0,118***	0,339***	0.776	0.816	1,972
<i>Hsd. income</i>									
Low	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Middle	0,430***	0.086	0,279**	0.088	0.001	0.005	1,256	0.828	1,188
High	0.101	0,206***	0,332***	0.351	0,081**	0.004	1,253	0.909	1,857*
Constant	0,690***	0.108	0,999***	0.111	0.025	0.018	0,286***	0,209***	0,085***
R-squared	0.03	0.05	0.02	0.04	0.05	0.07	0.01	0.02	0.04

Significance levels: *** p<0.001, ** p<0.010, * p<0.050

variables are: age and the degree of urbanisation of the residential environment. We differentiate between villages (<5,000 inhabitants), towns (5,001–50,000 inhabitants) and cities (>50,001 inhabitants). The classification is based on the widely used threshold of 50,000 to classify urban areas (OECD 2012), updated for the urban landscape of Romania, which is made up of many small towns (Benedek 2006). Furthermore, in all analyses, we control for the following individual characteristics: gender (male or female), educational levels (primary school or none; secondary education; university education), and household income (three equal-sized groups: low, middle and high). Please note that the R^2 of all presented models is very low (below 10% of the variance is explained) due to the low score for Romanian respondents' engagement across these aspects of social capital.

First, Table 2 shows that the difference in levels of organisational membership between cities and villages areas was statistically significant in 1998 and 2005—with higher levels in villages than cities—but not in 2012. However, in 2012, towns show significantly lower levels of organisational membership than villages. Over the period under study, organisational membership in villages fell sharply, whereas it declined only slightly in cities and towns, thus supporting the narrative of recent loss of social capital in rural areas. These differential developments in cities, towns and villages are partly explained by the type of organisational membership that is dominant in each context. The membership of religious and labour organisations was the dominant form of organisational membership in 1998, still high in 2005 but more equally balanced across the board by 2012. As these forms of organisational membership are more common in less urbanised areas, the decline is more pronounced here. Conversely, protest activity is concentrated in urbanised areas. There was no statistically significant difference between villages and cities in 1998, when protest activities were more intense; however, between 2005 and 2012, protest activities were increasingly concentrated in urban environments, as in the rest of the world (Castells 1983), even after controlling for other co-variables, such as gender, education and income (Table 2). Patterns across different forms of protest in which individuals from villages, town and cities took part were almost identical; the difference was in the density of engagement. We also observed that demonstrations were more common in 1998 and 2005, while petitions became more popular in 2012, corroborating our qualitative findings in terms of preferred modalities of participation. Interestingly, social trust is positively associated with living in a town, compared to a village. Although social trust was significantly higher in cities compared to villages in 2005, the overall pattern indicates that town residents are on average more trusting. We suggest that the size of a town allows for meeting new people while being surrounded by familiar faces. Although levels of social trust seem higher in towns, note that across the board, Romanians are

less trusting than the inhabitants of nearly all other European countries, including the post-communist ones.

Second, Table 2 shows that age has a small or non-significant effect on organisational membership or protest activity. Overall, this supports the theory of life-time learning (Mishler & Rose 2007; Rose *et al.* 2008): in response to a fast-changing environment, learning occurs both up and down family generations and across ages. After controlling for other co-variants, older respondents seem to be slightly more trusting (but only for 2005 the difference was statistically significant).

Although our objective is to tease out the urban–rural and intergenerational dilemmas raised through the qualitative interviews, we will comment below on the effects of gender, education and household income. Interestingly, gender is an important predictor of protest activity: women protest less than men across the years. Educational level is strongly associated with both the number of organisational memberships and engagement in protest activities. Table 2 shows that, in all years surveyed, individuals with a middle or high education had a significantly higher chance of being a member of one or more organisations, compared with those with a low education. Lower levels of organisational membership might have a negative impact on the size of the social network and life chances of those with lower educational attainments. In all three waves, individuals with a high or medium educational level are more likely to participate in protests than those with a low educational level. Highly educated individuals might have somewhat higher levels of social trust, but the results are not statistically significant, levels of trust being low across the board. Household income seems an important predictor for the number of organisational memberships only: people with higher incomes are better integrated in business, political and civil society organisations. Indeed, they have more financial means to afford organisational memberships.

Concluding remarks

This article examined the changing nature of social capital in the post-communist space by unravelling local understandings and cross-fertilising different methodological approaches, with a particular focus on discourse. More exactly, we aimed to identify the explanatory narratives of change that penetrate urban discourses in post-communist Romania in conjunction with WVS information. To do so, we used a holistic definition of social capital and Portes's (2000) distinction between its individual and collective forms.

We substantiated a pervasive metanarrative of 'communism' whereby the weakness of social capital was explained by communist legacies (such as dislike of past formalistic practices) as well as by breaks with the

communist past (such as taking the freedom not to participate and refusing to engage in negative forms of social capital. We noted harsh narratives around negative individual forms of social capital, past and present, suggesting that citizens' disbelief in the benefits of social capital are more pronounced in Romania than in Russia (Ledeneva 1998). Popular views and discourses do not support the idea that the communist past is now seen as 'normality' (Rusu 2017).

A similarly powerful explanatory metanarrative was that of 'ethnocentric individualism'. While liberal individualism and modernity were viewed as liberating forces from collectivistic ideologies of communism or rural traditions, most narratives provided a negative portrayal of insular individualism centred on an ethnocentric vision—that is pertaining exclusively to Romania—of predatory capitalism, which expressed disillusionment with the post-communist transition.

Besides these two metanarratives, other explanatory factors substantiated by our analysis were inscribed within rational-choice perspectives (Coleman 1993). Explanations for further loss of social capital centred on processes of commodification and institutionalisation, positively seen as features of modernity, both encouraging a welcomed provision of services through markets and a consequential liberation from social obligations. Perceptions of inefficiency also deterred the formation of social capital. However, the relative success of protest movements since 2012 may galvanise civic engagement in the future. Analysing this new wave of street protests, particularly their perception by non-participants, is one of our recommendations for further research.

Drawing on quantitative analyses across countries and prior-political regimes, we were able to corroborate the pervasive explanatory metanarrative of 'communism' but not necessarily that of 'ethnocentric individualism' (which we framed as a self-fulfilling prophecy) since countries' similarities within and between prior-political regimes were relatively robust and Romania was not an outlier. Quantitative analyses also shed light on the discursive dilemmas of urban–rural and generational differences in levels of social capital. Regarding the former, we were able to corroborate the narrative of loss of social capital in rural communities, particularly in terms of organisational membership, indicating a process of convergence between urban and rural areas (though protest activity is increasingly associated with urban residence). Disentangling the intertwined effects of communism and urbanisation on social capital over the communist period is a worthwhile theme for future memory studies.

The rich generational dilemma raised by qualitative analysis was not supported by quantitative analyses. Regression results showed that over the period 1998–2012, age had a very limited impact on levels of organisational

membership or protest activity, thus supporting Mishler and Rose's (2007) theory of life-time learning, a view supported also by Marin (2017). Our mixed approach enables us to reject deterministic cultural theories of slow generational change (Putnam *et al.* 1994). We have shown that it was not the effect of passive cultural legacies but active breaks with a still remembered past as well as institutional continuities and failures that rendered the factor of prior-political regime still sufficiently robust in 2012. The case of East Germany, where faster institutional development is associated with levels of social capital similar to older democracies, also casts doubt on uncritical cultural or generational claims.

Considering the perceived prevalence of negative forms of social capital under communism and after, it is not surprising that convinced nostalgic communitarians were absent from this study. Our respondents preferred sourcing a service through markets rather than *via* bribes or favours. Likewise, they preferred 'home-based' forms of civil engagement facilitated by technology affordability, which were seen as the way forwards. However, in order to empower rather than isolate, 'home-based' civic engagement requires effective mechanisms for institutional transparency and, paradoxically, an effective interface for third-party delivery (Mossberger *et al.* 2007). Future research into the relationships of power in structures of e-governance would be welcomed.

Overall, by showing that past experiences of communism remain a critical explanatory factor for the current levels and nature of social capital in Romania, we contribute to the ongoing theorisation of post-communism as a still relevant condition of people's everyday lives, albeit hybrid and partial (Stenning 2005). Thus, we reject contrary views of post-communism being now an irrelevant label with which we can dispense (Mandic 2018) or an abstract concept that ignores variation and specificity across the post-Soviet space (Tuvikene 2016). Our study also draws attention to the fact that cultural approaches to the conceptualisation of social capital can be helpful, and that the disentanglement of dominant narratives in popular discourses has much to contribute. We thus refute expectations of convergence in the nature of social capital between the post-communist states and older democracies not because of passive legacies or ill-adapted actors but because of peoples' different aspirations that are well suited to the context of post-communist transformation. However, cultural approaches cannot adequately account for the many ways in which structural processes of change, notably the massive impact of commodification, institutionalisation and technology—to which people of all ages and generations adapt faster than commonly assumed—affect the ways in which social capital is practised and valued.

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Annex

Table 3 Social trust (% of respondents who agreed that ‘most people can be trusted’)

<i>Cluster</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>wv3</i>	<i>wv5</i>	<i>wv6</i>
<i>Post-communist,</i> <i>average:</i> <i>wv3=21.2</i> <i>wv5=22.7</i> <i>wv6=23.8</i>	Russia	23.2	24.6	27.8
	Ukraine	28.8	24.5	23.0
	Romania	17.9	19.3	7.7
	Poland	16.9	18.1	22.2
	East Germany	24.9	32.1	42.3
	Slovenia	15.3	17.5	19.9
<i>Post-authoritarian,</i> <i>average:</i> <i>wv3=22.3</i> <i>wv5=19.4</i> <i>wv6=16.9</i>	Spain	28.7	19.8	19.0
	Uruguay	21.1	24.6	13.8
	Argentina	17.1	17.4	19.2
	Chile	20.9	12.4	12.4
	S Korea	30.3	28.0	26.5
	Colombia	22.8	14.3	4.1
	South Africa	15.4	n.a.	23.3
<i>Old democracies,</i> <i>average:</i> <i>wv3=41.0</i> <i>wv5=41.6</i> <i>wv6=43.4</i>	Japan	39.8	36.6	35.9
	West Germany	41.8	42.3	46.0
	India	32.8	20.7	32.1
	Australia	39.6	45.6	51.4
	Sweden	56.6	65.2	60.1
	United States	35.2	39.1	34.8

Table 4 Descriptive statistics

<i>Variable</i>	<i>No. obs.</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>St. deviation</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
Organisational membership (index)	4,518	0.65	1.37	0	9
Protest activity (index)	4,518	0.22	0.56	0	3
Social trust	4,360	0.15	0.36	0	1
Age	4,515	53.63	17.45	18	107
Urbanisation level	4,507			0	2
Village (<5,000 inhabitants)	2,023				
Town (5,001-50,000 inhabitants)	669				
City (>50,001 inhabitants).	1,815				
Gender	4,518			0	1
Female	2,440				
Male	2,078				
Educational level	4,455			0	2
Low (primary or lower)	1,118				
Middle (secondary)	2,427				
High (university)	910				
Household income	4,310			0	2
Low (lowest tertile)	1,585				
Middle (middle tertile)	1,379				
High (highest tertile)	1,346				