

# Media Picture Politics: a Communicational Analysis of the Romanian Media Public Space

**Corina Daba-Buzoianu\***

*National University of Political Studies and Public Administration*

**Cristina Cîrțiță-Buzoianu\*\***

*“Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău*

**Abstract:** *Our paper implies a comparative analysis of the Romanian media public space in the years 2011 and 2012, by pointing out the process, actors and themes of the communication. We inquire whether we have real communication autonomy in the public space and how public space’ actors relate with journalists and politicians. We are interested in understanding how citizens and opinion leaders succeed to communicate and state their position, but also what are the themes they choose. The methodology is content analysis, with which we investigated the content of the messages within the media public space in Romania, the actors and the mechanisms of the communication. Also, our study implies a communication analysis of the public space, as it uses a content analysis method specific to public relations, communications lifecycle, developed by David Michaelson and Toni L. Griffin, in order to analyse the efficiency of the communication. Our study shows that there is a strong connection between the themes communicated by public space’s actors and the topics spread out by the media. Moreover, we see that media is dominated by political messages, which have an important influence on the message content of the public space’ actors, who don’t seem to succeed in imposing new themes, or to generate a real debate on the issue at matter. Finally, our paper reconsiders the debate on the public space and the media public space, for a better understanding of their dynamics and communication mechanisms.*

**Keywords:** media, media public space, communications lifecycle, communication analysis.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** mass media, spațiu public mediatic, ciclul comunicării, analiză comunicățională.

## Introduction

Do we have real communication autonomy in public space in Romania? Do Romanian public space’s actors succeed to impose themes and to conduct the public debate? When referring to Romania, we

must consider that we are dealing with a post-communist society and an emerging civil society, thus we have to understand the communication process accordingly. In analysing the public space in Romania, and, particularly, the media public space, we must have in mind the fact that public

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\* National University of Political Studies and Public Administration Str. Povernei 6, București, România. E-mail: corina.buzoianu@comunicare.ro.

\*\* “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău, Calea Mărășești, 157, Bacău, România. E-mail: buzoianu.cristina@ub.ro.

debate needs social mechanisms that facilitate communication and interaction, mechanisms that are constructed throughout time, in democracies.

Romania, the country of no protests in 2011, explodes in strong civil disobedience at the beginning of 2012. We have to wonder if the public debate influenced the social events and the street protests, or the civil disobedience changed the public space and its communication. We aim to answer this inquiry by focusing on the Romanian media public space, and by investigating the actors and messages within the media discourse. This study is part of a research project in which we aim to investigate the Romanian society, its particularities and dynamics along several years (Daba-Buzoianu and Cîrțiță-Buzoianu, 2011; Cîrțiță-Buzoianu, 2012). We are interested in analysing the actors, as we intend to understand the connection between the content and the communicator, by showing who communicated in the Romanian media and on what matters, in 2011 and 2012. Therefore, in our study we analysed the communication process in the media public space in Romania, by investigating the actors and the topics. Based on a quantitative, and on certain points a qualitative analysis, our study aims to underline the fact that, in Romania, politics have an important influence on the way communication in public space is being structured. This fact has its roots in the weak civil society that characterizes post-communist societies. Although it is not assimilated into the political discourse, currently, communication in public space is connected to political matters, as they are spread-out by the media. Moreover, we can say that the messages regard a certain image of the Romanians, and, in a great majority, this image has important negative elements. By spreading out negative messages about Romanians, and by catching up political issues, media have a negative impact on the

development of public space and civil society.

The current paper looks at the Romanian public space through the content analysis methodology. More precisely, we identified the themes and the actors of the Romanian public space covered by the media, in 2011 and 2012. In order to do this, we monitored three daily newspapers “Adevărul”, “Jurnalul Național” and “Evenimentul zilei”. Moreover, as it will be shown below, we were interested in the efficiency of communication with the help of a method developed by Michaelson and Griffin, *communications lifecycle*. No doubt, we considered the major role of the context, and, therefore, we analysed the data according to the events that took place in 2011 and 2012.

### **Theoretical considerations**

In order to elaborate on the issue of public space, first, we’ll consider, together with Claude Lévi-Strauss’s, that a society is a group of people who communicate (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, 296). Therefore, communication is the key element in understanding a society, its public space and its reactions. Secondly, as we live in a world covered by media, we’ll consider the fact that communication is being influenced by the media message, especially from the content point of view. Public debate is centred and focused on what media spreads-out, as there are few public spaces that succeed to impose new themes and to influence the media agenda. Public space implies interaction, which has an important role in facilitating dialogue and debate. Obviously, there is an inner connexion between public space and democracy, connexion that regards interaction between social actors with different opinions and interests (Beciu, 2011). As we shall reveal in the current paper, our study points out

how it is possible to evaluate communication in the public space and what are its mechanisms. Although, there are many important theories about public space, in a great majority the discussion is centred around how public space should be, and rarely on what happens, in fact. McGuigan points out that in a real democracy, "citizens have to be correctly informed about issues and must have access to critical-rational debates with consequences for public policies" (McGuigan, 2010, 15). Public space should be a space of mediation between civil society and the state, a space of constructive debate, of disagreement and contradiction, as Dacheux says (Dacheux, 2008, 11). If we were to limit our research to Romanian's 2011 public space, we would probably disagree with Dacheux and McGuigan, and we could state that their points of view are quite far from the Romanian reality. But, after seeing the same Romania in 2012, we read these theories differently. Romania, from the country where protests never really take place transforms in a society with significant civil disobedience, a country where debate is possible in social space. At the beginning of 2012, public space in Romania starts to be a realm of public debate, the emergence of public opinion, a symbolic space of democracy. And we have to ask how it is possible that Dacheux and McGuigan are right in the context of public space in Romania, in 2012, but wrong in 2011. No doubt, Dacheux and McGuigan are right regardless of the events, as they speak of how public space should be, describing a desirable space of public debate. The fact that Romanian society contradicts them does not mean that their definitions are invalid, or that we had no public space in 2011. It means that, in reality, public space is a complex symbolic realm, that its mechanisms are dynamic and that the lack of democratic tradition has a huge influence on the public debate.

Moreover, as we could not deny the fact that Romania is a democratic state, we have to ask why the above definitions have limited application in Romania. Well, again, we must add to the researchers' perspectives, the dynamics of public space, inner elements that can energize a reaction, or, on the contrary, that can facilitate reactive attitude. As in the case of societies, public space is a complex phenomenon and it would be a mistake if we were to limit its definition only to what it should be or do. From this point of view, our approach comes closer to Peter Dahlgren's perspective, as he discusses about a functional public space, which he sees as a constellation of communication spaces that allow information to be spread-out and facilitate debates (Dahlgren, 2005). Although it is the realm of multiple identities and is conditioned by the dynamics of the events (Bastien and Neveu, 1999), public space gathers social forces and represents a negotiation which succeeds to reduce to a common denominator different interests. No doubt, we are not talking about unification, but of certain harmonization. In fact, it gathers social forces around an idea, without interfering with the fact that in the public space coexist contradictory ideas, aspect revealed extremely well in Romania, in 2012.

Nowadays, the literature on public space vividly discusses about media public space (Wolton, 2008; Beciu, 2011), as public space can hardly be put aside from the media. According to Camelia Beciu, media have become an essential condition for public space. Newspapers, magazines, television and radio represent the media of public sphere, says Habermas (Habermas, 1997, 105). To these, let us not forget the online media, an essential part of the media public space, and perhaps one of the most important of all, as it really facilitates debate and contradiction.

In our study we are discussing the media public space, by underlining its

particularities in Romania. In fact, we analyse the way communication in public space is being structured, who are the actors and which are the topics, and if we can discuss about an efficiency of communication. So, regardless of the events and perspectives, we must ask about the efficiency of communication (Michaelson and Griffin, 2005) in public space, and investigate the mechanisms that generate real public debate and real interaction between citizens, on one hand, and politicians and state, on the other hand.

## Methodology

In order to analyse the media public space, we used the content analysis, by investigating the content of the messages within the press articles that referred to the issue. In this respect, we monitored all the press articles that connected to the Romanian public space. We monitored three important daily newspapers in Romania, „Adevărul”, „Evenimentul zilei” and „Jurnalul Național”, between 2011 and 2012, by identifying the main themes communicated in the mediatized public space, and the actors. We have chosen these newspapers because, during the monitored period, they were the most circulated newspapers in Romania. In 2011, we monitored 324 articles and 412 articles in 2012. In 2012 we found more articles in the mediatized public space, due to the major protests that took place. As actors of the public space we considered the opinion leaders and the citizens, regardless if they have a public *persona*. By opinion leaders we mean citizens with visibility in the press, sociologists, historians and other cultural personalities, and union representatives. Also, we monitored journalists and politicians, as we wanted to see the actors/themes distribution. All messages were introduced into seven topics:

Education, Health, Job loss, Salary cuts, Labour code, Gas price, and Political corruption. The theme Education refers to the educational system in Romania, with direct connection to the National Educational Law and the theme Health refers to the health system in Romania. The Job loss and Salary cuts are themes generated from the austerity measures of the Government. Here we also considered all the protests on these topics. The Labour code is a theme that refers to the new labour code proposed by the Government at that time. The sixth theme, Gas price is connected to the raise of the gas price in Romania. In this theme we considered also the articles generated by the protests of the drivers in direct connection to the raise of the gas price. The political corruption is a general theme, as it refers to the whole political class, with no differences between the opposition and those in power. All these topics are part of the main categories Romanian mediatized public space. All themes and actors were, then, analysed with due consideration to the content of the message and its form.

Moreover, we considered the efficiency of the communication and, therefore, we used media content analysis applied in public relations through a method developed by David Michaelson and Toni L. Griffin, communications lifecycle (Michaelson and Griffin, 2005). The two authors state that one of the major aspects in analysing the content of the message should be the link of the message to the communication objectives. In this case, we analyse the efficiency of the communication in public space in Romania, from the point of view of the intentionality of the communication. In 2005, the two researchers proposed at the *Institute of Public Relations*, a new model for investigating the content of the media message. Michaelson and Griffin's communications lifecycle refers to the message by taking into consideration the intentionality of communication. The

method was very useful, as it helped us to look at the media public space in different terms, and to interpret the data from the point of view of communication efficiency. As Michaelson and Griffin mention in their model, the elements of the communications lifecycle regard the “awareness of the issue; the capacity to build sufficient knowledge and understanding about the issue, and the capacity to create a level of interest in the preference of the issue or at least a recognition of its relevance to the message recipient” (Michaelson and Griffin, 2005, 8). In all our analysis in which we used communications lifecycle we considered that awareness of the issue implies the multiplication of the message through several sources. The capacity to build sufficient knowledge and understanding about the issue was verified based on the quality and quantity of the information in public space. The capacity to create a level of interest in the preference was analysed by comparing the themes communicated by citizens and opinion leaders, on one hand, to those of journalists and politicians, on another hand. The point was to see if and how we have new messages imposed by citizens and opinion leaders.

## Context

Before analysing the data, we consider that certain events must be underlined, for a better understanding of the issue. First, we must consider our analysis in a wider context, both national and international. At a national level, we must point out that Romania is a country with a lack of democratic tradition, if we were to consider the fall of communism in the early '90. We are dealing with an emerging civil society and civic spirit. The Romanian public space can be characterized by limited civic initiatives and weak street protests. In fact, as many media articles show, it is the lack of reaction and of real civic activism that

dominates the Romanian post-communist society (Daba-Buzoianu and Cîrțiță-Buzoianu, 2012). At an international level, we must mention that 2011 and 2012 were dominated by important street demonstrations and civil disobedience throughout Europe, due to the austerity measures. The events that took place in Greece and in Western Europe, in France, Spain and Italy, are part of a movement that jerked Europe.

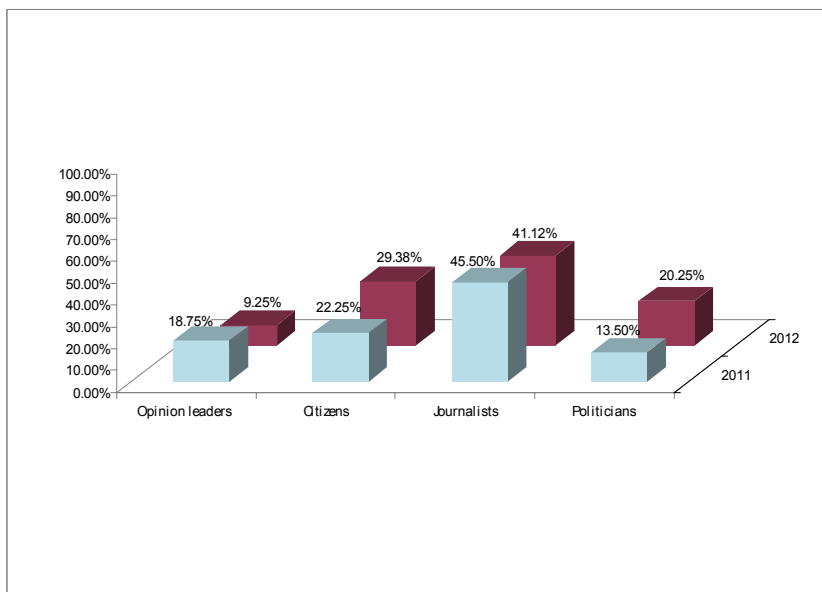
In 2011, although Romania faced more than six protests, none had serious social impact or consequences at a higher level. The extreme action of Adrian Sobaru, an employee of the Public Television who jumped from the balcony during a plenary session of the Parliament, the protests of the drivers, of the employees of the National Archives, of the Postal Services, and the Internal Affairs Ministry had a minor impact on the communication on public space. The same happened with the protests organized by unions. These protests don't seem to be able to generate social cohesion and solidarity and get to have no real efficiency. In 2012, something changes in the public apathy and on the 12th of January we have the start of the first real protest, since the '89 revolution. In Târgu Mureș starts the protest in support for doctor Raed Arafat, an opponent of the new health system, strongly endorsed by the president Traian Băsescu. In a few days, the protest reaches fifty-one cities throughout Romania. Although Arafat did not support the protests and he even reprimanded his office in the Health Ministry, the protests grow every day, becoming more intense and more violent. With a large array of social, economic and political issues, the protests were a true society relief, a moment when society unloaded years of passivity. Although the 2012 protests generated the fall of the Boc government, the protesters did not stop and continued few more weeks, until the red code for snowstorms started. As Cătălin Augustin Stoica shows, there is a consistent

difference between the 2012 protests and former street manifestations in Romania, due to the great diversity of protestors and themes (Stoica, 2012, 28). While we can say that 2011 is a typical year for the Romanian public space, we are not overreacting when stating that 2012 started with very atypical street demonstration and protests, but ended more or less in a usual way.

### **Data analysis**

A general overview of the data gathered while monitoring reveals the dynamics of the media public space, but also certain patterns of the communication process. First, we must mention the fact that there are important differences between 2011 and 2012 regarding the media public space, its structuring, actors and themes. Second, let us underline that we have a contradiction in the reaction and the events that took place in the public space. It is interesting to see the fact that, although we had, in 2011, over six street and labour protests, none had real impact on communication and none actually meant something for the political discourse and action. Nevertheless, in 2012 we had only one protest, but of a real significance and with visible consequences at social and political levels. In terms of media coverage, the protests that took place in 2012 were much more visible than all the 2011 protests. The multitude of comments from different categories of actors and all the messages sent shaped a lively and powerful public space. The increase of citizens' messages points out their clear intention in being visible and in stating their position.

Regarding the distribution of actors according to the visibility hierarchy, we can say that there are no significant differences between the two years (Figure 1). Both in 2011 and in 2012, journalists were, by far, the actors who communicated the most (45.50% in 2011, and 41.12% in 2012), followed by the citizens (22.25% in 2011 and almost 30% in 2012). Both categories arise in visibility during the protests. It is important to note that in 2011 journalists were, by far, the actors of the media public space, as they constantly had reactions to the political decisions, trying to be the spokesperson of the citizens. In 2011, journalists substitute the civil society, but in 2012, in a great majority, they comment the actions and messages of the citizens. So, from main actors in 2011, in 2012, journalists become main commenters and judges. Although citizens are visible in the public space in 2011, as we shall see, their communication does not have a major impact, nor can be considered efficient, according to the communications lifecycle. This is mainly because of the lack of social cohesion and solidarity, the civil manifestations being fragmented and sporadic. Moreover, many of the protests that took place in 2011 were ironized. The protest of the drivers, for instance, has small visibility in the media, and the few articles referred to the fact that the drivers paid in small change and filled-up only one litter of gas. The action was ridiculed and given small attention, as it was considered not a real protest, being inefficient and with no real purpose and means. The labour conflicts and protests were put, more or less, in the same light, as the protestors did not succeed to assert and to enforce the decision makers.



**Figure 1:** *Actors in Romanian press in 2011/2012.*

Unlike 2011, 2012 shows an increase in visibility for citizens, who have 7.13% more messages in the second year, obviously due to the wide spread of the protests and to the fact that we have many media articles which present the opinions of the protestors. At the other side, we have opinion leaders who have lower visibility in 2012 than in 2011. Politicians are more visible in 2012, mainly in the last part of the year, when we have the electoral campaign. During the protests, politicians preferred to communicate less, as they didn't want to be visible, in a context of public resentment and disobedience. Therefore, in 2011, and at the beginning of the 2012 politicians had a reactive communication. The governing party avoided public comments; meanwhile the opposition took advantage of the public resentment. In 2012, the opposition became more visible and send much more messages, mainly due to the coming elections in June and December.

In 2012, there are significant changes in the media visibility of the politicians, but

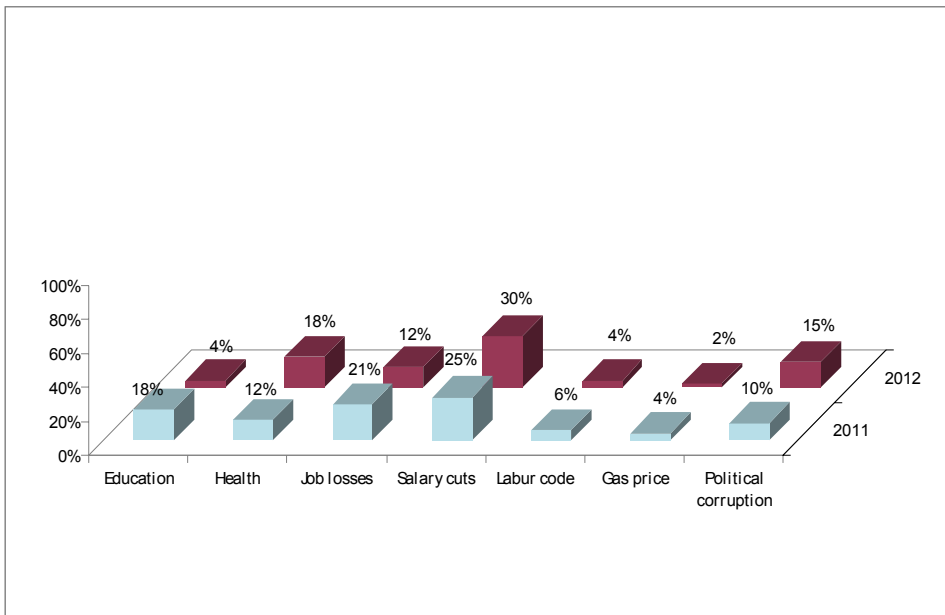
also of the opinion leaders, who communicate less. We have to wonder why is it that in a year with so important events (major protests all over the country and parliamentary elections) opinion leaders have less media visibility. By investigating carefully the media articles we can see that opinion leaders are still present with their comments and opinions. What really happens is that citizens, especially protestors, take over communication, and civil society is, thus, represented by its own members. Also, let us mention that opinion leaders were very visible during the protests and the electoral campaign.

In respect to the themes communicated in the media public space in 2011 and 2012, we have both a quantitative and qualitative dynamic. Themes like Education, Job losses, Labour code and Gas price are much more visible and on debate, in 2011. It is quite easy to understand this fact, as these themes connect to the austerity measures. Moreover, we have the National Education Law which was adopted at the beginning of 2011, with a

visibility of 18% in 2011 and of 4% in 2012. So, communication in public space shapes its content according to the political agenda, by reacting to the political decisions. As shown in our previous studies (Daba-Buzoianu and Cîrțiță-Buzoianu, 2011; Daba-Buzoianu and Cîrțiță-Buzoianu, 2012), public space, whether is media public space or not, is based on political issues. It is a structural dependence that is generated by the passive civil society and the lack or weak civic initiative.

As it is shown in Figure 2, in 2012, we have only three themes which increase in visibility. Especially during the protests,

we encounter messages that involve a negative characterization of the Romanians and, implicitly, a negative image of them. Politicians, from the governing party, and journalists and opinion leaders supporting them tend to blame the protests due to the street violence. So, not only that they give less support to the citizens in expressing their discontent, but they blame them. What is interesting to see is that citizens vividly express their proudness of being Romanian, at the same time blaming the politicians. So, in this case, it wouldn't be adequate to say that public space encouraged dialogue and debate.



**Figure 2:** Themes communicated in Romanian press in 2011/2012.

When analysing the data, we can easily see that the topics within the media public space in Romania are very much connected to political measures, so it is quite difficult to say that we have autonomous public space communication. In fact, we are dealing with a reaction of the civil society to the measures and decisions from the institutional and political level. And this

phenomenon can be encountered both in 2011 and in 2012. The civic explosion in the public space in 2012 is connected only to the visibility of citizens and the events that took place and which had huge media coverage. But we don't see new themes or new content in the themes. Citizens with media visibility and the protestors themselves chose to catch up topics and

issues already in the media and political debate, succeeding to reinforce the media and political communication. The reaction of the citizens that decided to protest had an important visibility during the events, but less attention until the end of the year. Moreover, subjects debated during the protests continued to be on the media discourse, but now we have journalists and politicians as main actors.

If we consider the effectiveness of the communication in public space in Romania with the help of communications lifecycle, we can say that we encounter an important visibility of the citizens and opinion leaders, especially on matters of general interest, or on usual events. Therefore, in most of the cases we can say that there is an awareness of the issue, although not all the messages were picked up and covered by the press. Moreover, the irony found in some press articles towards the protestors influenced the awareness upon the issue, in terms of an implicit negative representation.

Although we see significant visibility of citizens and opinion leaders, it is quite difficult to discuss about a real capacity to build sufficient knowledge and understanding about the issue. The main reason is because the public space's actors do not succeed in imposing new themes, and only manage to react to a subject already in the debate, that was framed by its sender, mainly the politician, and afterwards, by the journalist who spread it out. So, from the point of view of the visibility and media coverage we could say that this indicator is fulfilled, but from the content point of view, we have to admit the insufficient accomplishment. In direct connexion to all these above, we can add that, although the public space's actors manage to create a certain level of interest, and on certain points, even a great level of interest, their communication is merely effective due to the lack of continuity, consistency and capacity to arise social solidarity. No

doubt, we should not forget that 2012 represents a new dimension of communication in public space in Romania.

## Conclusions

Our research revealed not only a series of particularities regarding the Romanian media public space, but also the influence that media coverage has in structuring the public space. The current study points out that public space is complex and dynamic, and can be understood as an arena of voices and opinions, because it gathers different individuals with common, but also distinct interests and attitudes. Therefore, when referring to public space, we must first have in mind the fact that is not a space of unity in thought or speech, but a realm of free expression and diversity. Nevertheless, we can easily see similarities in opinions and reactions, but they can be psychologically and sociologically explained through mental contagion and social mimesis. To these, we must add the impact and influence that media have, as journalists facilitate the spread-out of ideas and events. Let us underline here the fact that, by presenting an event, media categorizes it and, implicitly, gives it a representation. This is the main cause of polarization within the public space, as media facilitate the acceptance or rejection. Media public space is full of images and judgements.

Considering the above and having in mind the fact that the Romanian public space was quite far from implying a debate, as it implied mutual accusations and conflicts, we might say that it is very difficult to validate the various definitions of public space. In the case of Romania, in a great majority, public space did not imply constructive debate and did not generate a better understanding or influence on the public and political policy. But, if we were to extend the definitions and consider the fact that public space is a process and a

dynamic system, than we could see it as a realm of interactions of ideas, of freedom of speech, which may, sometimes, generate contradictions and direct confrontation.

Our study pointed out that the Romanian media public space is dominated by a reactive communication and that its actors respond to political issues. Even though, as we saw, the Romanian media public space has the capacity to state a position against politicians, it is difficult to

say that it has the capacity to generate new themes or to influence, in long term, the decision makers. The lack of civic initiative and democratic tradition has a major impact on the public space and a negative influence on its communication. What happened at the beginning of 2012 is, with no doubt, authentic and real, but an isolated phenomena, as the influence did not continue after the protests.

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