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## Protests in Moldova Explode, With Help of Twitter

By ELLEN BARRY

MOSCOW — A crowd of more than 10,000 young Moldovans materialized seemingly out of nowhere on Tuesday to protest against [Moldova's](#) Communist leadership, ransacking government buildings and clashing with the police.

The sea of young people reflected the deep generation gap that has developed in Moldova, and the protesters used their generation's tools, gathering the crowd by enlisting text-messaging, [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), the social messaging network.

The protesters created [their own searchable tag on Twitter](#), rallying Moldovans to join and propelling events in this small former Soviet state onto a Twitter list of newly popular topics, so people around the world could keep track.

By Tuesday night, the seat of government had been badly battered and scores of people had been injured. But riot police had regained control of the president's offices and Parliament Wednesday.

After hundreds of firsthand accounts flooded onto the Internet via Twitter, Internet service in Chisinau, the capital, was abruptly cut off.

There was no sign that the authorities would cede to any of the protesters' demands, and President Vladimir Voronin denounced the organizers as "fascists intoxicated with hatred."

But Mihai Fusu, 48, a theater director who spent much of the day on the edges of the crowd, said he believed that a reservoir of political energy had found its way into public life.

"Moldova is like a sealed jar, and youth want more access to Europe," he said. "Everyone knows that Moldova is the smallest, poorest and the most disgraceful country. And youth are talking about how they want freedom, Europe and a different life."

Young people have increasingly used the Internet to mobilize politically; cellphones and [text messages](#) helped swell protests in Ukraine in 2004, and in Belarus in 2006.

The immediate cause of the protests were parliamentary elections held on Sunday, in which Communists won 50 percent of the vote, enough to allow them to select a new president and amend the Constitution. Though the Communists were expected to win, their showing was stronger than expected, and opposition leaders accused the government of vote-rigging.

Election observers from the [European Union](#) and the [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe](#) had tentatively accepted the voting as fair, though they expressed some concern about interference from

the authorities. But the results were a deep disappointment in the capital, where Communist candidates lost the last round of municipal elections.

“In the air, there was a strong expectation of change, but that did not happen,” said Matti Sidoroff, a spokesman for the O.S.C.E.’s mission in Moldova.

Behind the confrontation is a split in Moldova’s population. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought benefits to much of Eastern Europe, but in Moldova it ushered in economic decline and instability. In 2001, angry citizens backed the return of the Communists and their social programs.

But Moldova remained desperately poor, and young people flocked overseas to work. They have looked to the West as the best path to economic stability and have defied Mr. Voronin’s government by urging closer integration with Romania.

The global financial crisis has eliminated overseas jobs, sending many of the young people back to Chisinau, their horizons suddenly narrowed, said Carroll Patterson, who is finishing his doctoral dissertation on economic changes in Moldova.

“I wouldn’t necessarily call it an anti-Communist movement,” Mr. Patterson said. “This really is a generational squeeze. It’s not really the Communists versus the opposition. It’s the grandmothers versus the grandkids.”

The protests apparently started on Monday, when organizers from two youth movements, Hyde Park and ThinkMoldova, began calling for people to gather at an event billed as “I am a not a Communist.” Natalia Morar, one of the leaders of ThinkMoldova, described the effort on her blog as “six people, 10 minutes for brainstorming and decision-making, several hours of disseminating information through networks, Facebook, blogs, SMSs and e-mails.”

“And 15,000 youths came out into the streets!” she wrote.

The participants at that first gathering, on Monday, dispersed peacefully. But demonstrations on Tuesday spun out of control. News coverage showed protesters throwing stones at the windows of Parliament and the presidential palace, removing furniture and lighting it on fire. Riot police officers shielded their heads as demonstrators pelted them with stones. The police then used water cannons and tear gas to disperse the crowd. Fires continued to burn late into the night.

Valery Obade, director of the Republican Hospital, said his staff had treated 76 people for injuries. Moldova’s national television channel also reported that a young woman died of carbon monoxide poisoning as a result of a fire set in the Parliament building, but it was impossible to independently confirm the report.

Mr. Voronin issued a statement saying the leaders of opposition parties were behind the rallies, which he called “an anticonstitutional coup.” In a television broadcast, he said the protests were “well designed, well thought out, coordinated, planned and paid for.”

Russia backed Mr. Voronin. Moscow’s embassy released a statement saying that “a group of militants” appeared in an otherwise peaceful crowd on Tuesday, urging them to attack government buildings. The

Kremlin released a statement saying President [Dmitri A. Medvedev](#) had spoken with Mr. Voronin about “the mass disorder unfolding on the pretext of disagreement with the election results.”

At a news briefing, a State Department spokesman, Robert A. Wood, also expressed concern about the violence, but he said policy makers in Washington had not yet assessed whether the elections had been free and fair.

Prominent opposition leaders came out Tuesday night to say that they had not played any role in organizing the demonstrations. Ms. Morar of ThinkMoldova distanced her organization from the violence, shifting the blame to opposition parties.

“Our initiative group bears no responsibility for the looting that occurred,” she wrote on her blog. “The young people who we gathered stand peacefully on the square.”

[Mihai Moscovici](#), 25, who provided updates in English all day over Twitter, painted a more nuanced picture. He said the gathering on Monday night drew only several hundred people. The protesters agreed to gather the next morning and began spreading the word through Facebook and Twitter, inventing a searchable tag for the stream of comments: #pman, which stands for Piata Marii Adunari Nationale, Chisinau’s central square. When Internet service was shut down, Mr. Moscovici said, he issued updates with his cellphone.

[Evgeny Morozov](#), a specialist in technology and politics at the Open Society Institute in New York, a group that works with democratic movements worldwide and has been active in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, said Facebook and Twitter had apparently played a major role in the protests.

“Nobody expected such a massive scale,” he said. “I don’t know of any other factor which could account for it.”

But on Tuesday night, with main government buildings seared by fire, violence had left everyone chastened.

Mr. Moscovici said the protests were never intended to turn in that direction. “The situation got beyond any expectations,” he said. “If it would have been planned in advance, they would have used Molotov cocktails or other bad stuff. Today they didn’t have any tools to fight back. The stones they got from the ground, from the pavement.”

*Nikolai Khalip and Michael Schwirtz contributed reporting from Moscow, and Noam Cohen from New York.*

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