

Statement of Oleg Brega
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from the Republic of Moldova

before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
(U.S. Helsinki Commission)

Briefing: **“Twitter against Tyrants: New Media in Authoritarian Regimes”**

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I'm Oleg Brega, 35 years old, a filmmaker and journalist from the Republic of Moldova. I represent civil society of this country, because I'm involved in several different NGOs, the most known of which, here and abroad, is the Hyde Park Association, a group of young people promoting freedom of expression, human rights in general.

7 years ago we organized a popular radio talk-show with the same name, which was closed down by the authorities.

After that we acted as an officially registered NGO, organizing weekly meetings in the central park of Chisinau, issuing a small newspaper with people's opinions. We have received grants from Norway and USA for supporting our activities.

But two years ago we decided to dissolve officially the organization because of the pressure from the authorities. It was a form of our protest against the permanent harassment, arrests, and illegal ceasing of the peaceful demonstrations, and interminable trial processes. In the same time, we stopped all our public activities on the streets, and we continued to be active only on the Internet, through the public blog *Curaj.Net*. There anybody could and still can express opinions, make announcements, report abuses.

In April 2009, I was employed as cameraman by a local private and independent television outlet, Jurnal TV, broadcasting only on the Internet.

I assisted at the vote counting on the Election Day and I also filmed the first protests against the results of the elections.

My brother, Ghenadie, another filmmaker, freelance journalist, former president of the Hyde Park, was one of the organizers of the public demonstrations on the next day after the elections. He, together with other young people invited everybody to come with candles at 6 PM on 6th of April in the central square of Chisinau, to show our disappointment and disagreement with the election results and against the way the election was conducted.

They used, in those available 6 hours, not only Twitter (some not at all, i.e. I made a Twitter account only after the so called *Twitter Revolution*) but all other available social networks and new media: Facebook, Netlog, especially Russian Odnoklassniki (my brother had there groups of thousands of subscribers, which he announced immediately about the intentions to protest), but the most important was the instant mobile messaging service. I send many SMSs and received during that day some SMSs from unknown persons, inviting me to the protest.

Some were sent from the websites of the mobile companies, which some permit to send unlimited or others at least 20 messages per day for free. Also, the internet messaging as, Skype, MSN, Meebo were fully used. My list of friends on Yahoo Messenger, for example, has at least 500 addresses, and I used it to send in one minute short information with a link to the message about the demonstrations. It was spread instantly by my friends to other thousands of addresses.

These tools, together with many blogs, online forums, mailing lists and e-groups permitted to inform the most active people in Moldova about the action. This explains why a huge crowd was gathered on 6th of April in the center of the city. Most of the population couldn't accept that a political party (the communists), after 8 years of bad governing was able to take a half of the votes, to have again the majority in the Parliament.

But, probably, not only that initiative group, called "I'm anti-communist!", was a real organizer. In the same day, after the closure of the peaceful demonstration, when the organizers invited people to go home and prepare for the next day's meeting (initiated by the opposition parties), there were many provocations and violent actions. Nevertheless, the meeting ended before midnight, without damages, without arrested or injured people. On the next day, on 7th of April, the organizers came late in the central square, with only megaphones and a small acoustic instillation. But, somebody else took control of the crowd, influence its behavior, and in a few hours, the Presidency and Parliament buildings, also some police cars, fire trucks, TV station's car were destroyed, a lot of policemen, especially unprepared, inexperienced soldiers were injured in the street fighting, and it was almost impossible for the real organizers of peaceful protests (from the opposition parties) to stop the violence.

The authorities, police chiefs did nothing to stop violence, instead gave contradictory orders, provoked protesters, and, finally, after midnight, they ordered violent mass arrests. Hundreds of persons, even those who did not participated at protests were beaten. At least, three persons have died during that operation as a result of injuries.

In the following days, the Moldovan Government decided to close borders with Romania, to limit access of the foreign press, and to initiate in the state controlled media a campaign of accusation against the opposition and leaders of civil society.

Although demonstrations on 6-7 April didn't change the results of elections, the behavior of the authorities made it impossible any collaboration within the Parliament between the Communist Party and the opposition parties. Communist MPs lacked one vote to elect a new president of the country, and, according to the electoral code, this triggered new parliamentary elections.

On July 29th, Moldova voted for a non communist majority, which formed a new governmental coalition, more democratic and pro-western, pro-Europe. It holds now most of the executive power in the state, and these days they are trying to elect a new, democratic president.