Electoral geography and the post-socialist city: Is the pre-world war II urban tissue still important? Evidence from Bucharest at the Romanian parliamentary elections of 2016

Gutoiu, Giorgian

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Giorgian Gutoiu
Faculty of Political Science
University of Bucharest
Romania

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Abstract

Context is essential for electoral geography. However, most electoral geography studies place little emphasis on constructing a theoretical framework informed by the geographical nature of the context. The present paper takes issue with these. In this regard, for understanding the geographical context of interest a thorough theoretical and factual representation is provided. Bucharest, a former socialist city, is described through its division between the historical pre-socialist urban tissue and the socialist developments. The hypothesis suggests electoral patterns overlapping this socio-spatial division. This is investigated at the Romanian parliamentary election of 2016. Spatial econometrics are used to analyze electoral data at the level of 278 polling locations in Bucharest. A strong polarization is found between the old town and the other places in Bucharest. Final discussions speak about the still important socialist past for cities and politics.

Keywords: electoral geography, Eastern Europe, Bucharest, urban geography, spatial analysis, Romanian parliamentary election

Corresponding Author: Giorgian Gutoiu, PhD student
Affiliation: Faculty of Political Science, University of Bucharest
Address: Calea Plevnei no. 59, 010223 Bucharest, Romania
e-mail: geogutoiu@gmail.com

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the study of electoral geography has developed into three main research areas: the geography of voting, the geography of electoral systems and the geography of gerrymandering (Leib and Quinton 2011). This paper is placed in the first category. Geography of voting produced the largest number of studies in the subfield and is generally been concerned with the study of an election or series of elections in order to show how one's place of residence influences the voting decision (van der Wusten et Mamadouh 2014). However, these studies failed to give consensual explanations how and why geography matters to the voter (Cox 1969; O'Loughlin, Flint and Anselin 1994; Johnston and Pattie 2006; Agnew and Shin 2008; Schurr 2013).

This paper provides a framework where the geographical context is essential for electoral geography and therefore its theoretical and methodological presentation is a prerequisite to the actual analysis of electoral data. Therefore, the research takes issue with other studies dealing with electoral behavior in geographic context, for which local spatial patterns appear only as a deviation from the national trend (Agnew 1996a). Although such studies trace micro influences on the voting decision, they regard geography merely as a secondary phenomenon (Agnew 1990, 20). In the present study geography is employed as a context where political behavior is formed through a relation of dependence with a system of constraints that exists from locale scale to world system (Agnew 1996b, 132) producing a socialization in place (Agnew 2002, 15). Spatial electoral patterns are created through political, social, economic processes mediated in different geographic contexts.

For the present research the city of Bucharest at the 2016 parliamentary election serves as a geographic context. Its electoral geography is expected to overlap the socio-spatiality of the city. Within the contemporary Romanian capital, a major socio-spatial division exists between the old town and the other territories of the city. The analysis employs spatial econometrics and electoral results for the 278 polling locations in Bucharest. The approach does not intend to represent a methodological or theoretical narrowing in electoral geography by inducing a limited perspective of urban level and local analysis but rather it regards the urban space as highly important for contemporary research in social sciences, as urbanization is increasingly more global and important for worldwide social, economic, political and ecological processes (Brenner and Schmidt 2015).

The first section of this paper provides the research setting by discussing the socio-spatial evolution of Bucharest during the last century, the political context of the 2016 Romanian parliamentary election and the statistical tools employed for data analysis. Attention then turns to the actual results of the analysis. Finally, the implications of the findings are discussed and some conclusions are offered.

2. Research Settings

2.1 Socio-spatial Contrasts in present day Bucharest

The main argument presented in this section is that the old town of Bucharest (the pre-World War II administrative limits) holds a socio-spatial distinctiveness in post-socialism as a result of former socialist developments (Stenning and Horschelmann 2008). Between 1948 and 1989, the Romanian capital developed as a socialist city. This represents a highly different pattern of evolution than those for the Western capitalist cities (Zarecor 2018). Within the planned economy of socialist regimes, cities were a mean towards the end, being imagined as a monolith and element of an inclusive economic system mirroring the state ideology (Kotkin 1997, 30). More important to the present discussion are the spatial developments of the socialist city. There are some major features that describe the spatiality of such

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cities (Szelenyi 1996). The socialist cities are denser than the Western ones. All public projects were planned on large areas. The excessive expansion of industrial spaces accompanied the scarcity of commercial places. Since all property was state owned, the spatial extent of the projects represented no issue. The built areas were planned as economic production units, by combining collective residences, industrial sites, green spaces and places of public services (Maxim 2009).

In Bucharest, the urban fabric preceding the socialist era was only partially replaced. The socialist transformations prevailed outside the old town. Consequently, after 1948 the administrative area grew from 78 km^2 to 229 km^2. After the regime's fall the city stopped expanding its area. **Figure 1** shows these historical periods. A more central territory is also mapped, yet serving only as a benchmark. Here are clustered almost all of Bucharest's pre-1900s buildings. During the socialist era, the territory outside the old town is either occupied with socialist units of collective housing or incorporates former semi-urban settlements. The spatial expansion is carried out simultaneously with a demographic one. The population grows from one million in 1948 to nearly two million in 1992. This was a result of pro-natal, urbanization and industrialization state policies. Between 1938 and 1970 the working class grew from 46.000 to 297.000. The vast majority of this population was clustered in apartment blocks erected outside the old town. Within the same building working class individuals lived together with teachers, doctors, artists or priests. The majority of this population came from rural areas near the capital and from the southern part of the country.
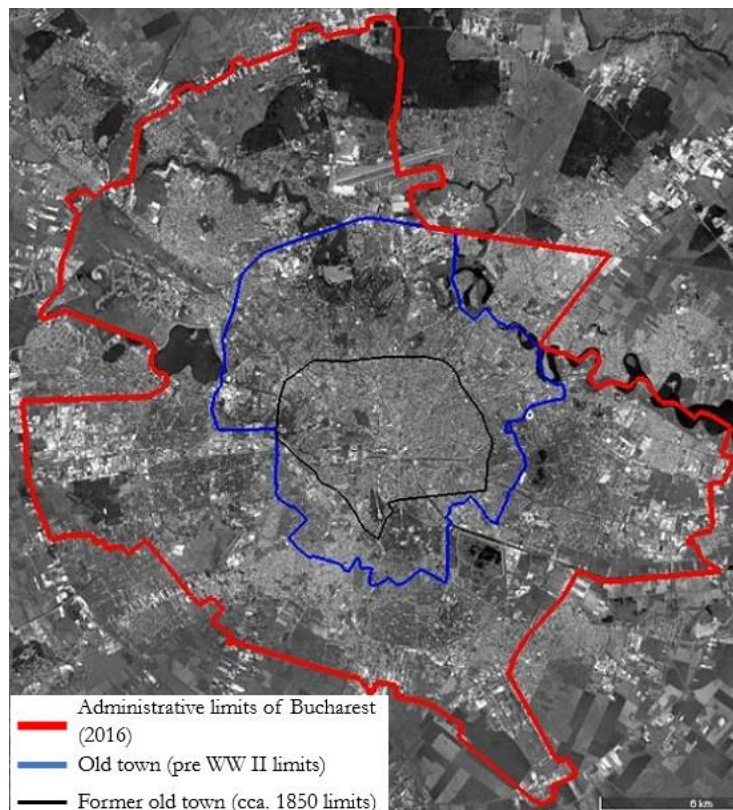
Figure 1.
Aerial view of Bucharest and its historic tissues (*Source*: Google Earth)

Because the state ideology glorified unity, the old town will preserve its political importance, as it is located at the center of the city. During the socialist regime, the main political, public and cultural buildings are still concentrated in the central parts of the city. Apartment blocks were also built in the old town, yet they differed from the ones in other places because of their superior quality of used materials and the larger area of the living space. With the exception of villas in low density which were occupied by the elites of the socialist regime, the other dwellings of the former urban tissue will experience continuously degradation. These places were remnants of the old bourgeois state and were to be destroyed, both socially and spatially. Uniformization was a state policy not only for collective housings but also for former bourgeois neighborhoods. Dwellings were nationalized and former owners either left their homes or they were forced to live with clandestine tenants accepted by the authorities. In the north were clustered pre-War villas. Here the space was designed for middle or upper social strata leisure activities.

Throughout the socialist era, up until the 1980s apartment blocks were either built on former boulevards, on small areas or as fillings. However, by the beginning of the 1980s, a large-scale reconstruction of the old town was in place. The autocratic leader of the regime, Nicolae Ceausescu, sought to completely erase the former urban tissue and replace it with large collective housings. At the heart of the city a new civic center is built, surrounded by large boulevards and esplanades (Cavalcanti 1997). Such developments prevailed in the center and the southern areas of the old town. Nevertheless, at the end of the regime, in 1989, the transformation will be only partial. In many places, the old urban tissue will coexist with the socialist one, thus creating segregation and contrasts.

After 1989, Bucharest, like the other cities in the region, will evolve under the project of neoliberalism (Stanilov 2007b). The decline in total number of skilled industrial workers was followed by an increase in the labor market flexibility. White collar occupations expanded. On the former industrial sites, modern commercial and business centers were built (Nae and Erdeli 2008). The social filtering became a function of the land values, with the highest prices concentrated in the old town and towards the north (Rufat and Suditu 2008). The Central Business District and the vast majority of modern office buildings are clustered in the old town (mainly in the north). Currently many spaces within the old town are gradually gentrified (Ghyka 2015a). At the outskirts of the city, western patterns of low density suburbanization followed after 1989 (Suditu 2009). However, these are not so significant when compared with the existing socialist constructions. The socialist apartment blocks account for 80% of the total number of dwellings. The post-socialist upper class is clustered in spacious pre-war villas or high quality and central apartment buildings from the 80s. After 1989 Bucharest is the main destination for internal migration (Suditu 2011; Suditu et al. 2014). During this period the city's GDP grew continuously well above the national average (Eurostat 2016, 94).

The younger population is concentrated mainly in the socialist apartment blocks located in western, southern or eastern parts outside of the old town. As in other socialist cities, the apartment blocks became gradually differentiated (Temelova et al. 2011). Most of the lower social categories are aggregated in the outer parts of the city, either in former industrial neighborhoods with high density and poor quality apartment blocks or in rural-type housings in the peripheral areas built after the demise of the socialist regime. The highest social vulnerability is displayed outside the old town in the south-western and eastern Bucharest with clusters of older, low income, poor educated population, high density and poor public services (Armas and Gavris 2016).

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2.2 Political Context and Electoral Data

Romania has a multiparty system, described through a particular high level of fluidity and stability (Soare et al. 2013). The parliamentary parties direct a process of cartelization to prevent new entries (Gherghina et al. 2011; Popescu and Soare 2014). Political parties play a major role in the Romanian polity. They make full use of state resources, occupy the political competition and manage a top-down political mobilization by pushing their agenda and interests (Soare 2014). Parties are not just electoral vehicles since they are actively involved capturing and distributing state resources. In this instance the electoral geography can be seen as geography of party-led gratification (Agnew and Shin 2008, 52).

Left and right does not hold an explanatory power in Romanian politics, since positions within the system are still determined by the national-communist past, maintaining for more than two decades political conflicts between the Social Democratic Party (PSD – Partidul Social Democrat) with conservative and isolationist stances and its opposition with Western and liberal positions (Gussi 2011). PSD is the main successor of the former Romanian communist state-party (Pop-Eleches 1999; 2008). The opposition towards PSD is central to the Romanian political competition and its intensity was always a factor of polarized politics. A short-lived centered competition developed at the time of party system Europeanization yet it gradually disappeared after EU accession in 2007 (Soare 2012). In Romanian politics, links between MPs and their constituencies are weak. Recruitment of state officials is rarely done by paying attention to the public image of the candidate (Stefan and Grecu 2014).

A proportional electoral system was used at the parliamentary election of 11 December 2016. Constituencies were organized for each county, for Bucharest and one for abroad. Also an electoral threshold of 5% was used. New rigorous rules for campaigning and party funding were introduced for a fairer election. However, these made the political communication during the campaign rather vague and with little impact. At this election the competition was polarized between the PSD and the main opposition parties, namely the National Liberal Party (PNL – Partidul National Liberal) and the Save Romania Union party (USR – Uniunea Salvati Romania). PSD used a moderate aggressive anti-globalization, nationalistic and conservative rhetoric and promised an economic growth rather unrealistic in its projections, thus drawing sympathies mostly from marginal socio-demographic groups. PNL and USR engaged in an anti-corruption rhetoric against PSD, and with liberal, pro-globalization stances. USR, a new party formed a year before, used more radical stances than PNL, which was less credible as an opposition party because of its past alliances with PSD.

Following the local elections held a few months earlier, PSD was in poll position to win also the general election. At the local elections, PSD won 41% and PNL 33% of local councils seats. The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE - Alianta Liberalilor si Democratilor), which came in the third position, only won 6% of the seats. PSD's dominant position was strengthened by a landslide victory in Bucharest. **Table 1** shows the results at the national level and in Bucharest at the 2016 parliamentary election. Except for the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR - Uniunea Democrata Maghiara din Romania), which is a regional party of ethnic Hungarians concentrated in Transylvania, for all the other parties mentioned in **Table 1** spatial analysis is conducted on their electoral results in Bucharest. USR started as a regional party based in Bucharest. This explains the large difference in votes for USR between the National and Bucharest. The People's Movement Party (PMP – Partidul Miscarea Populara) and ALDE are small parties. However, both are included in the analysis in order to obtain more in depth conclusions. For all these five political parties, differences in electoral support between the old town and the rest of Bucharest are expected. Previous studies on Western cities have shown differences between inner-city residents more inclined toward left-wing parties and suburbanites with greater predisposition toward right-wing parties (Cox 1968; Walks 2004; 2005; 2013; Maeschalk

2013). As I argued here, such spatial electoral patterns are not expected in Bucharest as the city had a historical evolution different from the Western ones.

Table 1. Results at the 2016 parliamentary election

	Bucharest	National
PSD	38.25%	45.48%
USR	25.14%	8.87%
PNL	11.95%	20.04%
PMP	7.17%	5.35%
ALDE	6.19%	5.62%
UDMR	0.20%	6.19%

## 2.3 Spatial Econometrics for Electoral Geography

Spatial statistics are employed for electoral data analysis. Such tools are necessary due to the special nature of geographic data (Cliff and Ord 1973; Griffith 1987; O'Sullivan and Unwin 2010). Observations are spatially correlated because of their proximity. Such data are extracted from observations located in geographical areas, i.e. administrative units, census tracts, electoral precincts or, in this case, the polling locations in Bucharest. Clustered values imply the existence of what is formally called spatial autocorrelation (or spatial dependence). Accounting for spatial autocorrelation within the electoral results helps understand some socio-geographic processes (e.g. neighborhood effect, diffusion of political information) or place-based structures (e.g. social, institutional networks) which are important for political behavior (Agnew and Shin 2008, 54).

All of the 278 polling locations are mapped in **Figure 2.** Each observation is represented as a point indicating the exact location in space. The observations are divided between those in the old town and those in the rest of the city. An observation is considered within the old town only if all of its neighbors are also placed within this territory. Neighboring observations are those from the first ring around the central location. This definition and its use is part of the spatial modelling employed for spatial analysis.

First, the degree of spatial autocorrelation is computed at a global level for all of Bucharest. This creates a measure of the potential political polarization existing across the entire city. In order to assess the extent in which support at a location is correlated with support at a neighboring location a statistic known as Moran's I is employed. The test provides a global value for the entire set of data. The formula for Moran's I is

$$I = \frac{N}{\sum 0} \cdot \frac{y'Wy}{y'y}$$

where: N is the number of observations, ∑O is the sum of all weights, *y* represents the vector of observations, and W*y* are the elements of the spatial weights matrix.
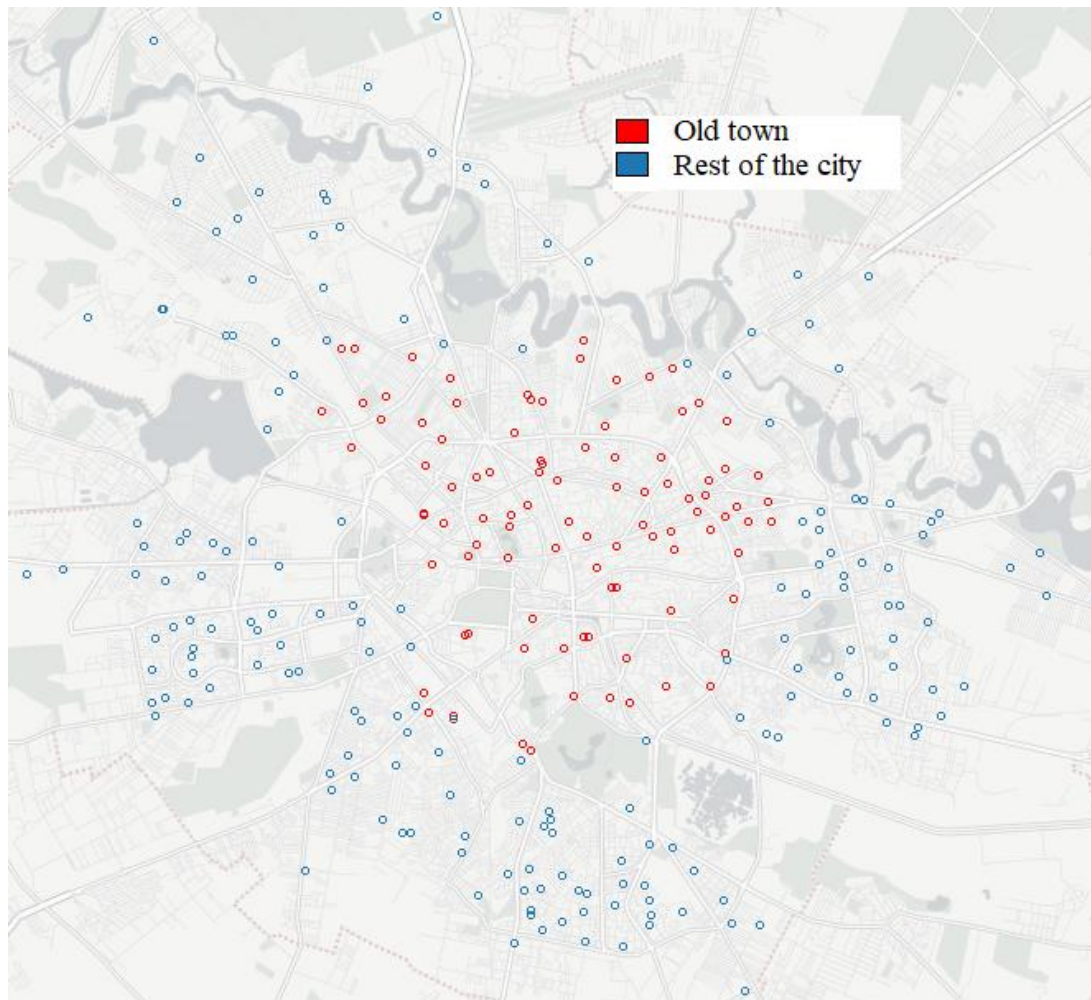
Figure 2.
The 278 polling locations in Bucharest.

A matrix of spatial weights is used to frame the contiguities between observations. The matrix is filled on the basis of a simple first-order contiguity. A spatial lag of the variable representing the average value in surrounding observations is constructed using this measure of contiguity. Moran's I takes values ranging from -1 to 1. Negative and significant values indicate a lack of spatial autocorrelation whilst positive and significant values indicate the existence of spatial autocorrelation. Significance is verified with the help of a z-score. At a significance level of 0.05, z-score is statistically significant when it less than -1.96 or greater than 1.96. This test shows whether the support for a political party is spatially clustered or it develops randomly.

However, Moran's I provides only a global measure. In order to account for local trends that capture differences between the old town and the rest of the city another measure is employed. *Local Indicators of Spatial Association* (*LISA*) detects local clusters (hot spots) and represents a basis for sensitivity analysis (spatial outliers) (Anselin 1995). I is computed for each observation *y* in the data (in relation to its neighbor *y'*). Calculations are performed using the univariate *LISA* command in **GeoDa** software. This statistical package was developed by Luc Anselin and his colleagues for spatial analysis.

As in the case of the Global I, the same spatial weight matrix is used. *LISA* indicates the areas with electoral support (high values at the core observation surrounded by high values) and the lack of electoral support (low values surrounded by low values). Outliers show good performances in areas with low support (high-low) or weak performances in areas with high support (high-low). Statistical significance is tested at a 0.05 level for each cluster or outlier.

3. Spatial Analysis and Results

Table 2 shows the results for each of the five parties of interest in each of the two areas of interest: the old town and the rest of the city. As an indication of political polarization relevant for the electoral geography differences between areas are higher for parties at the top of the hierarchy. PSD received more votes in the rest of the city, while the other parties performed better in the old town. However, in order to account for spatial patterns and local spatial trends, we turn our attention towards the spatial analysis.

Table 2. Results in Bucharest and its two geo-historical subdivisions

| | Bucharest | | |
	Old town	Rest of the city	Total
PSD	32.50%	40.42%	38.25%
USR	28.20%	23.99%	25.14%
PNL	12.61%	11.71%	11.95%
PMP	7.41%	7.08%	7.17%
ALDE	7.13%	5.83%	6.19%

Table 3 depicts the values of Global Moran's I alongside the test for statistical significance. Spatial autocorrelation is positive and significant for all five parties. Spatial autocorrelation is higher for PSD, USR and ALDE and lower for PNL and PMP. According to Moran's I in **Table 3**, the electoral geographies of these party show some major clusters, but local analyzes are further needed to identify how electoral support is spatially structured at a local level.

Table 3. Global Moran's I in Bucharest at 2016 parliamentary election

	Moran's I	z
PSD	0.70	19.82
USR	0.59	16.88
PNL	0.17	4.96
PMP	0.18	5.87
ALDE	0.51	14.45

Figure 3 shows the *LISA* cluster maps for all five political parties of interest. These indicate a strong polarization between the old town and the rest of the city.
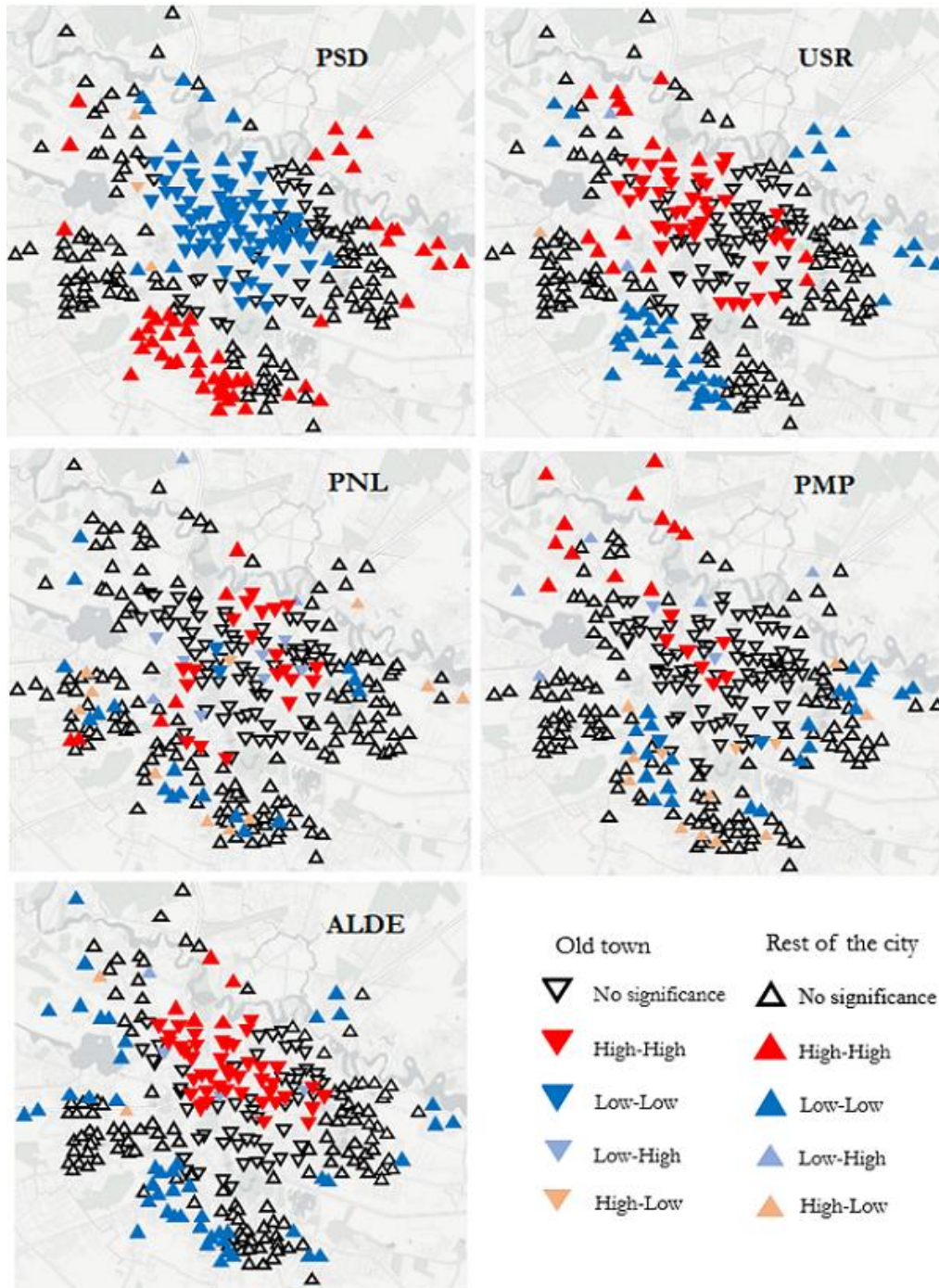

Figure 3.
LISA maps for the five main political parties at 2016 Romanian parliamentary election

The polarization is stronger for political parties also displaying high global spatial autocorrelation. PSD holds the highest spatial polarization. Clusters of support are concentrated outside of the old town, while within the area are spatially connected large areas of lower performances. For all the other four political parties, their maps show clusters in opposition to those of PSD. Among these four parties, maps are more polarized for USR and ALDE. These two parties gain a highly concentrated support in the old town and show a large number of low support clusters in the socialist city or the other peripheries. For PNL and PMP the spatial patterns are not clear cut, as these two parties have much less clusters. However, even for PNL and PMP, most of the high performance clusters are located within the old town or around it, in the richer areas of the north.

The spatial analysis confirmed the hypothesis. The old town displays different electoral behavior than the rest of the city. Only 10% of the observations within the old town are not clusters for any of the five parties. Meanwhile, the proportion for the rest of the city is 41%. Almost the whole area of the old town consists of hot spots with low or high support. The rest of the territory is only partially polarizing, being rather fragmented. Clusters are scattered throughout this outer area producing continuous patterns only in the south, south-west and the eastern periphery. The old town is a highly uniform space. Here, only 2% of observations have a spatial association regime other than the dominant one. Outside the old town, the spatial regimes are more diverse. 20% of observations have a spatial regime other than the dominant one. The spatial opposition between the old town and the rest of the city is relevant for all five parties.

Maps for USR, PNL, ALDE and PMP have fairly similar patterns. The parties are stronger in the old town and weaker in the rest of the city. On the other hand, PSD wins less support in the old town and scores higher performances outside this space. In all cases, the old town polarizes the geographical space.

3.1 Discussions

The analysis identified a spatial cleavage at the 2016 parliamentary election in Bucharest between the old town and the rest of the city. The paper has argued that this space cleavage came to fruition in the post-socialist period. This paper has only used electoral data from the most recent election. However, the paper also claims that the territorial division between the old town and the rest of Bucharest was present for the entire post-1989 period. Two reasons underpin this argument. First, there are fairly similar political cleavages. Second, the division between the old town and the rest of the city which resulted from the socialist era was enhanced during post-socialism. Both the political cleavage and the territorial division display a similar binary stance against the socialist past and its successors (the PSD and the socialist collective housings outside the old town).

The parties that opposed PSD gained more votes in the old town. I argue these two variables are strongly correlated. USR has the most polarized electoral geography between the two spaces. This party also engaged in the most prominent rhetoric against PSD and the political establishment. This type of discourse originated during the 1990s when the cleavage between the former communists and the democrat-liberals polarized the political space and the Romanian political geography (Giugal et al. 2011). Unlike the USR, PNL displays a less coherent electoral geography and with fewer clusters of support in the old town. PNL also tried to position itself against PSD. However, the party's history of electoral alliances and government coalitions together with the successor party and its attempts to overcome the cleavage of the socialist past made PNL a less credible opponent to PSD. The result was a less polarized electoral geography. PMP has the least polarized electoral geography and with the

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fewest clusters of support in the old town. PMP is known for its leader's, Traian Basescu, catch-all, personal and hands-on leadership style (Fesnic 2011). These positions account for the least polarized electoral geography and with the fewest clusters of support in the old town. However, this party also positions itself against PSD and some clusters of high support are located in historical areas. ALDE does not position itself against PSD, but this party represents a recent splinter from PNL and claims its electorate.

During the Revolution of 1989, in the 1990's and more recently after 2012, certain public spaces in the old town became sites of mass protests against the political establishment and political legacies of the socialist regime (Gussi 2002, Ghyka 2015b). Rejection of the socialist past is reflected also in the toponymy. During the socialist era, streets in the old town were renamed in order to serve the state's ideology. After the regime's fall, these streets returned to their previous names, were named after anti-communist fighters or more simply abandoned their socialist names for others ideological free (Light 2004). These changes varied across the city, but prevailed in the older parts of Bucharest, while in the socialist urban units the majority of the names that were reminders of the proletarian past were preserved (Light 2004, 166-168). The old town of Bucharest developed as an anti-socialist place and this can be viewed in the electoral behavior.

4. Conclusions

The paper has analyzed the electoral geography of Bucharest at the 2016 Romanian parliamentary election. The geographic context was presented as being essential to electoral geography. For this matter, Bucharest was introduced as a context where geographic, social and historical evolutions created place-based constraints on electoral behavior. The Romanian capital was represented as a typical former socialist city, displaying a major socio-spatial cleavage between the old town and the rest of the city (mainly its socialist built areas). The hypothesis expected an electoral geography that would overlap this socio-spatial cleavage. The spatial analysis of electoral data confirmed this statement.

At the 2016 parliamentary election, political parties that position themselves in opposition to PSD - the main successor of the former Romanian communist party - recorded better performances in the old town of Bucharest than they did in the rest of the city. On the other hand, PSD did poorly in this space and better in the rest of the city, which is a territory occupied with socialist collective housings and poor quality self-built constructions. The old town of Bucharest emerges as a place where political parties are successfully challenging PSD's domination. The conclusions suggest the socialist past is still important for both present cities and politics.

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