Democratic Consolidation and Europeanization in Romania

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A One-Way Journey or a Return Ticket?

Edited by

Sergiu Mişcoiu

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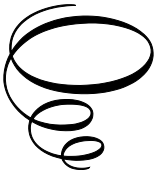

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE NEVER-ENDING STORY OF ROMANIAN TRANSITION

SERGIU MIȘCOIU AND CIPRIAN BOGDAN

Over the past thirty years, Central and East European countries have been confronted with processes of deep structural transformation in every major aspect of governance. Transition proved long, difficult, and full of uncertainties and obstacles. In the early 1990s, scholars such as Leslie Holmes pointed out the existence of two processes of transition, which were different from both a qualitative and a temporal perspective (Holmes 2001: 12-15). Firstly, there was a relatively rapid period of power transfer after the fall of the communist regimes (1989-1991). This first stage encompassed the mandatory elements of transition: negotiations between the communist parties and the representatives of the opposition and/or of the dissident groups; the restoration of political pluralism and of the fundamental rights and freedoms; the initial separation of powers and the first free elections. This early staged culminated with the adoption of the new constitutions that reinforced the freshly installed democratic regimes (Bryant and Mokrzycki 1994).

The next stage after the transfer of power varied more substantially from one country to another and was generally labelled a stage of "extensive transition and democratic consolidation." It generally entailed the restructuring of the industry and agriculture, a progressive orientation towards the West or the delineation between the different institutional competences and responsibilities in order to enhance their specialisation and to prevent abuses. During this stage, two major scenarios could be observed. On one hand, there were the countries where radical reforms had been implemented at an early stage in the transition process and were intensively applied soon afterwards. In these countries, the parties emerging out of the anti-communist and dissident movements won the first free elections organised after the fall of the communist regimes. These reformist movements, which were most frequently liberal, Christian-democratic, or conservative, led the ruling coalitions in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland and imposed programs of radical change both in the social-economic sphere and in the societal-political one. These measures were often dogmatically adopted as a part of a broader right-wing program supported by these parties and were perceived as a shock wave by many citizens of those countries, as they extensively destabilised the pre-existing societal structures and processes.

Besides the restructuring of entire productive sectors, the privatisation of virtually all the industrial branches, the liberalisation of production and consumption prices, the opening of frontiers and the liberalisation of the employment market proved to be very costly socially and demographically (Kramer 1995: 46). Such measures allowed for the resettlement of the Central and East European societies in the new liberal-capitalist framework. The formerly statist economies rapidly started to grow, becoming an "El Dorado" for foreign investments. By the mid-1990s, in spite of the immense

social costs, most Central European countries were definitely on the track of democratisation and westernisation (White *et al.* 1993).

By contrast, there were countries where the processes of transition were temporised or even postponed: Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, or post-Soviet states such as the Republic of Moldova or Ukraine. There, the parties founded on the structures of the former communist parties succeeded in (partially) winning the elections in the early 1990s and in tempering the processes of economic and, at times, political reforms (Waller *et al.* 1995: 88-95). The consensualist rhetoric undergirding the policy of small steps directed towards transforming the state-controlled economies into social market economies prevailed over a more radical type of discourse that advocated immediate reforms. In Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania, the nationalist left-wing parties, which were officially or unofficially the successors of precursor communist parties, shaped ruling coalitions that promoted slow reform policies and endorsed maintaining the old regime's structures and processes. These parties have often been described as "neo-communist" or "crypto-communist" by the opposition parties and the pro-Western press. The divide between anti- vs. neo- communists grew to be very sharp in transitional Central and East European societies (Pop-Elecheș and Tucker 2012: 102-103).

From a political-institutional perspective, even though liberal and democratic constitutions were adopted, the way in which they were enforced was selective and discretionary. Their very spirit was altered through subsequent laws and through their norms of application. In countries like Romania and Bulgaria the double lag – economic and political – forced the liberal governments of the late 1990s to finally implement the radical reforms. They became unpopular and by the end of the 1990s and

the early 2000s, the former socialist parties and the nationalist xenophobic ones had a spectacular comeback.

One of the main consequences of this was the postponement of Euro-Atlantic integration for the South-East European states even though the Central European countries had already accomplished that goal. Later on, this disparity was reflected in the different capacities of these groups of states to benefit from European integration and, especially, to access European funding. Thus, in the Czech Republic and Poland, the degree of absorption of the European structural funds became by 2010-2012 close or even superior to that of the 'old' member states. In the same years, Romania and Bulgaria reached only 10 to 25% of European programmes' accession.[1]

Several years after the Central and East European states' accession to the European Union, one could reassess the theories and interpretations of transition. To sum up, there were two major perspectives. On one hand, there was what we may call the progressive-linear theory of transition, consonant with Francis Fukuyama's thesis of the "end of history" (Fukuyama 1992). According to this interpretation, the fall of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe complied with a natural logic of history, which had proved the superiority of capitalist liberalism over any other type of regime (communism, fascism, religious fundamentalism etc.). Under these circumstances, the transition of the Central and East European countries to liberal-capitalist democracy belonged to the same inescapable logic of history: it was an irreversible and quasi-progressive process (Diamond 1996). Although the rhythms of reforms were clearly different, the transition process was deemed to be homogeneous and systemic, while

[1] http://www.fonduri-ue.ro/res/filepicker_users/cd25a597fd-62/rezultate/std_abs/Evolutie.rata.absorbtie.PO.mai.2012-05.iulie.2013.pdf

observed variations were explained in terms of different cultural-historical legacies. The proponents of this explanation admitted nevertheless the existence of some moments of relative stagnation in transition, as was the case in 1999-2000 or 2008-2010, when countries such as Romania, Slovakia or Bulgaria were hit by the effects of structural adjustments and of the worldwide economic crisis. But even these stagnation periods were seen to be part of the linear evolution of the progressive process of transition: such moments would represent lessons for understanding the deeper mechanism of transition, with its winners and losers, and would strengthen the need for better public education as regards the market economy and capitalism (Gunther *et al.* 1995).

On the other hand, this linear reading of transition was challenged by the twinned effects of the 2008 economic crisis and the European accession of the CEE countries. Paradoxically, these two phenomena led to national governments consolidating their positions in these countries, since they could now use the pretext of the crisis in order to apply rather harsh austerity measures without fearing the interruption of the accession process by the EU institutions. The turn of the late 2000s revealed the fragility of institutional frameworks and the inconsistency of democratic culture, casting serious doubt on the all-progressive thesis of transition. Instead, a second reading that explains transition as an oscillatory process, with deadlocks, setbacks, and even overt regression periods, seems to be much more appropriate and convincing. This nuanced and complex reading shows that there is virtually no ultimate institutional or cultural guarantee that could prevent an abusive (re)concentration of power. It also suggests that a transformation of society attuned to the dogma of neoliberal capitalism could be not just neutral but downright harmful for the long-time democratisation process.

In the following section, we will try to propose such a schematic reading of transition in relation with the post-1989 developments in Romania. We will try to stress both the common features and the specificity of Romania's case by revealing the most relevant tensions that emerged during transition processes. Focusing on the alternation between progression and cyclicity in democratisation and societal development, we will also use a multilevel approach that understands transition as a complex intersection between economic, political and cultural processes (Grugel 2002: 205).

Some historical premises

The Romanian "transition" is determined by contradictions and tensions that, in a sense, have been accompanying the evolution of the Romanian state and society since the nineteenth century. To oversimplify the whole process, we might say that there are three major interrelated tensions manifesting at *economic*, *political* and *cultural* level which resurfaced after 1989. (1) Thus, the *first* tension concerns the *political economy* of a (semi)peripheral country that has been constantly vulnerable and dependent on Western capitalist economies. More specifically, because of its marginal position, Romania's economic policies seem to be torn between two major strategic options: to integrate the country in the economic and financial processes dominated by the centre and, thus, *liberalise* the local economy as much as possible *or* to protect Romanian economy through *state intervention*, allowing it, for instance, to modernise and diversify its industrial production so as to catch up with the West.

The free-market approach was perfectly visible in the nineteenth century. In 1829, the Danubian Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia were allowed to sell grains to Western Europe without customs barriers. The newly born Romanian state (1859) was progressively transformed into a

major European exporter. Mirroring a larger European trend, the *laissez-faire* policies adopted by Romanian authorities signalled the integration of the new state in the "periphery" of Western economic processes (Murgescu 2011: 107).[2] This position meant, however, that Romania's exports of agricultural goods (mostly grain) could not compensate for its imports of more sophisticated goods coming from industrialised countries like Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, France etc. (Murgescu 2011: 111-114). But the free-market approach started to be questioned after the European economic crisis of 1877-1878 when the fall in grain prices put pressure on Romanian authorities to adopt more protectionist economic policies (Ban 2014: 29).

The shift towards protectionism relied on a hybrid social-economic model in which the protection of the local bourgeoisie and industrial production (usually, advocated by liberal governments) went hand in hand with a harsh neo-feudal system privileging the big landowners over an impoverished peasant class (conservative governments protected the economic interests of these owners) (Murgescu 2011: 125-127; Ban 2014: 29-32).[3] Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, an early Marxist intellectual, called this social system in which capitalism functioned alongside strong feudal elements "neo-serfdom." Although there was an important land reform in 1921, the interwar period was still caught up in the same contradiction between low productivity agriculture (Murgescu 2011: 241;

[2] Thus, according to Bogdan Murgescu, in the 19th century, Romanian Principalities were no longer the economic "periphery" of the Ottoman Empire, but of the Western world (Murgescu 2011: 107).

[3] Murgescu states that this unfortunate economic situation was not simply the result of Romania's peripheral position expressed in its dependence on agricultural exports in the capitalist "world system" (Wallerstein), but also of social and political internal factors (Murgescu 2011: 127-128).

Ban 2014: 32) and an emerging industry unable, despite state support, to be competitive and dynamic enough to absorb the rural work force (Ban 2014: 33).[4] After local communists backed by Soviet Union took power in 1945, Romanian economic strategy was focused on accelerating industrial production through state intervention alone. In the 1960s, Romanian communists rejected Moscow's plan to limit the country mostly to agricultural production and embarked on an aggressive industrialisation program instead. Despite economic improvements (Ban 2014: 49-55), Ceaușescu's fixation on industrial production and exports was accompanied by the marginalisation of internal consumption (Murgescu 2011: 371) heavily eroding the legitimacy of the regime and, thus, leading to its final demise in 1989.[5]

(2) The *second* major tension is related to the functioning of the *political* sphere as such. Because of both internal and external factors ranging from weak institutions to geopolitical volatility, Romanian politics was marked by the attempt to almost literally copy Western democratic *pluralism or*, on the contrary, *to monopolise* the political sphere through powerful leadership. In the nineteenth century, Moldavia and Wallachia started to gradually remove themselves from Ottoman domination and adopt liberal reforms inspired by Western Europe. In 1859, Moldavia and Wallachia were united under the rule of Alexandru Ioan-Cuza. However, in 1866, Cuza was dethroned and replaced with Prince Karl of Hohenzollern-

[4] The very embodiment of the protectionist economic strategy during the interwar period was Mihail Manoilescu. Impressed by Mussolini, he advocated not a bourgeois led industrial development (like, for instance, Ștefan Zeletin), but a bureaucratic one made possible by an authoritarian regime (Ban 2014: 37-38). His work proved to be influential in South America, especially in Brazil.

[5] The focus on exports was the result of Ceaușescu's desire to pay off Romania's external debts and, thus, to secure its economic independence after the oil crises of the 1970s.

Sigmaringen, who ruled under the name of Prince Carol of Romania. In the same year, Romanian political elites adopted a new constitution, which was a compromise between the two dominant camps, conservatives and liberals. Despite important limitations (for instance, the census voting, the right of the prince to veto legislation or the refusal to give citizenship to non-Christians targeting the Jewish community), the Constitution of 1866 featured significant progressive elements (the separation of powers in which the legislative power was dominant, the fundamental rights of citizens such as equality before the law, freedom of conscience, freedom of assembly etc.) (Hitchins 2013: 30-31).[6] After Transylvania and Bessarabia became parts of the Romanian state in 1918, there was a convoluted and painful process of negotiating the new political and social reality which crystalised in the adoption of a new Constitution in 1923. Among its most progressive principles was the expansion of the right to vote to all male population and the recognition of people's rights and freedoms regardless of their ethnicity, religion or social class.

Although, these two Constitutions were meant to express the principles of a parliamentary democracy based on political pluralism, in practice, there were constant and ruthless attempts to monopolise the political power by certain actors. Notwithstanding the absence of a genuine political culture in Romanian society, there was also another factor favouring this tendency: the Romanian king was still entitled to intervene in the political process. Since both the Constitution of 1866 and that of 1923 allowed the king to dissolve Parliament, he could appoint a new government

[6] The model of the 1866 Romanian Constitution was the Belgian Constitution adopted in 1831 (Hitchins 2013: 33).

that would organise new elections.[7] Oftentimes, this political strategy went hand in hand with that of using the state to shape the outcome of the elections. Instead of a democracy drawing its legitimacy from an elected legislative, the Romanian political system was constantly under siege because the executive intervened to produce a desired legislative majority (Hitchins 2013: 35, 416). As such, the dictatorship imposed by King Carol II in 1938 was not an aberration, but a radicalisation of an already existing tendency to monopolise the political process. After 1945, this tendency became the functioning principle of the political system itself. With no competition from other parties, communist Romania turned under Ceaușescu's rule into one of the most politically repressive and centralised regimes in the Soviet bloc.

(3) The *third* major tension concerns the *cultural* process of Romanian identity-building, which oscillated between the tendency to connect or synchronise with Western civilisation *and*, on the other hand, the nostalgic gaze at a national past in which the country had withstood internal and external "enemies." The 1848 Revolution coalesced the energies of radical Romanian intellectuals mobilised by the dream to bring a quasi-feudal society closer to the model of Western civilisation. Although the Revolution failed, its utopian energies had a lasting impact on the process of building Romanian identity. The young intellectuals who studied in Paris or other European cities became the messengers of what Eugen Lovinescu, an important Romanian literary critic of interwar period, would describe as "synchronisation" with Western values and civilisation.[8]

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[7] Carol I, for instance, favoured the conservatives over the liberals, usually appointing Prime Ministers from their ranks (Hitchins 2013: 42).

[8] Oftentimes, these intellectuals were called *pașoptiști* (participants in the 1848 Revolution) or more ironically *bonjouriști*, as a nod to their tendency to imitate French culture.

However, in the nineteenth century, there was a strong conservative reaction to this process of synchronisation. Titu Maiorescu, another important literary critic, labelled the tendency to adopt European values enthusiastically and indiscriminately as "forms without content" (*forme fără fond*), artificial constructs lacking an organic relationship with the local tradition. The same type of criticism was deployed by the national Romanian poet Mihai Eminescu, or by the historian and politician Nicolae Iorga. Both of them were concerned with the possible loss of Romanian identity (which they saw as being embodied by the rural world) under the pressures of modernisation and adaptation to the West. However, during the interwar period, the conservative reaction took a much darker turn with the rise of an anti-Semitic political organisation known as the *Legion of Archangel Michael,* which received the support of many young Romanian intellectuals, from Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran to Constantin Noica and others (Ornea 2015: 133-148). Ironically enough, in the 1960s the communist regime clearly favoured the conservative approach, aggressively hailing national identity as a means of staving off foreign influences.[9]

From neo-developmentalism to neoliberalism

After the fall of communism in 1989, Central and East European (CEE) countries embarked on a risky journey, the so-called "transition" from a state-controlled economy to a market-oriented one. Trying to copy the more successful Western economies, the only thing that CEE countries

[9] During Ceaușescu's regime, there was a cultural debate between "protochronism," with Edgar Papu as one of his proponents, and "synchronism." "Protochronism" claimed that many important cultural, scientific, technological discoveries had been anticipated or made by Romanian figures. Although most intellectuals rejected or derided protochronist ideas, the regime enthusiastically supported them because they provided an ideological instrument to justify xenophobic nationalism.

had to decide about was the strategy to get there: gradual change (Slovenia) or shock-therapy (the Baltic states, Poland or, later on, Hungary) (Aligică and Evans 2009: 75; Ban 2014).[10] Because of its highly centralised economy and lack of connections with Western economic debates, Romania had a rather peculiar route in the regional context (Aligică and Evans 2009). While most of the CEE countries opted for a swift and painful change towards a market economy, Romanian elites tried to follow what might be called a "neo-developmentalist" approach (Ban 2014: 115). Instead of imposing harsh neoliberal measures recommended by international organisations like IMF (macroeconomic stabilisation through fiscal discipline, financial liberalisation, extensive privatisation, etc.), the early Romanian governments implemented gradual changes in which policies to liberalise economy were mixed with policies protecting the dominant role of the state in economy. At a closer look, however, the neo-developmentalist approach was implemented differently. The early government led by Petre Roman (June 1990 – October 1991) was much more liberal and imposed austerity measures that generated a 13% fall of industrial production in 1991 alone. The next government led by Nicolae Văcăroiu (1992-1996) integrated some liberal policies (low inflation, low deficit, selective privatisation, etc.) within the larger Keynesian framework of a "mixed economy" in which the state was the dominant actor (in 1996, 84% of the Romanian workforce belonged to state companies) (Ban 2014: 141). In the regional context, Slovenia also opted for a Keynesian approach towards

[10] Agreeing with Iván Szelényi, Vladimir Pasti believes, however, that economic transition was not shaped by the political option between gradual change and shock-therapy, but by the interest and capacity of foreign capital to penetrate Central and East European countries and, more specifically, Romania. Thus, the main economic tension in Romanian transition was between foreign and local capital, with the former gradually imposing itself on the latter (Pasti 2006: 238-239, 247).

economic transition, but the results were strikingly different: despite enjoying economic growth between 1992 and 1996, Romanian economy had neither the bureaucratic consistency nor the redistributive capacity of its Slovenian counterpart (Ban 2014: 142-143). Other scholars believe that these early gradual reforms allowing the state to remain an important economic actor were doomed to fail because, unlike Slovenia, Romania well-nigh lacked economic "culture" and "institutions" (Dăianu 1999: 102) due to Ceaușescu's extremely rigid communist regime and to incoherent, often "populist" economic measures which had led to high inflation (Murgescu 2010: 465-466).

However, in 1996, the social democratic coalition lost the elections. Uncritically adopting the shock-therapy recommended by the IMF, the new centre-right government embarked on the path of unprecedented austerity measures and embraced the "most radical" neoliberal policies taken in the former Eastern Bloc: it shut down or sold most of the state-owned companies considered to be unsustainable, introduced large social cuts, etc. (Ban 2014: 160) and encouraged a dramatic economic setback. For instance, between 1996 and 2000, Romanian industrial production fell by 20% (Dăianu and Murgescu 2013:12). Although in 2000, a new social democratic coalition came to power, the goal of joining the European Union put pressure on the local government to impose further neoliberal measures, such as the privatisation of profitable state-owned companies (Dăianu and Murgescu 2013:12). It also tried to balance them against more friendly social policies. For instance, in 2003, a new labour code favouring workers was adopted (Ban 2014: 163-164).[11] In

[11] We shouldn't forget that the EU itself was an important agent in imposing neoliberal policies in Central and Eastern Europe (Vliegenthart and Overbeek 2009: 150-151). According to Vladimir Pasti, this shift was not so much the result of

2005, after a centre-right coalition won the elections, Romania implemented a flat tax of 16% in order to attract more direct foreign investments. It also carried through more radical policies than the IMF or EU had demanded from its once rebellious pupil. This strategy allowed Romanian economy to enjoy an impressive growth of its GDP, which soon turned, however, into a brutal reality. Because of the financial crisis of 2008, the economies of Romania and of the Baltic states (the most neoliberal countries in the region)[12] were the most affected. In 2009, the GDP of Estonia fell by 13%, while the Romanian one fell by 8%, largely because of their dependency on the decisions taken by foreign capital. After 2009, Romanian economy managed to recover by gradually returning once again to relatively high growths of its GDP.

In any case, such an economic tendency, partially fuelled by neoliberal policies, also exacerbated deep structural imbalances: despite some recent measures to boost wages, the level of inequality (between urban and rural areas or between the majority population and the Roma minority) remains one of the highest in Europe[13] while the risk of social exclusion is

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political processes, but also of economic ones, since foreign capital had started to dominate local capital in 2000 (Pasti 2006: 247).

[12] Using the theoretical tools provided by Karl Polanyi, Dorothee Bohle and Béla Greskovits identify three forms of capitalism emerging in Central and Eastern Europe after the collapse of communism: "a neoliberal type" (Baltic states), "an embedded neoliberal type" (Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Poland), and "a neocorporatist type" (Slovenia) (Bohle and Greskovits 2007: 443). After 1996, Romania could be placed in the "neoliberal" category together with the Baltic states, reflecting thus economic policies that had generated much higher social costs than in the other states from the region (Ban 2014: 205-206).

[13] Although Romania has managed to reduce its Gini coefficient in recent years (from 37.4 in 2015 to 33.1 in 2017), it is still among the highest in Europe. By comparison, in 2017, Hungary had 28.1, Poland 29.1, Slovenia 23.7 (Results available at
http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?wai=true&dataset=ilc_di12).
Moreover, Central and East European states with large minorities (Baltic states,

the second highest in European Union after Bulgaria.[14] Furthermore, with more than 3 million people living in other European countries, Romanian migration is also among the highest on the continent. It is hard to see how these imbalances might be addressed unless more socially inclusive policies were adopted so as to challenge the neoliberal approach still dominating Romanian politics.[15]

The elusiveness of democratic pluralism

After the bloody and highly publicised revolution that led to the fall of Ceaușescu's regime, Romania quickly became the black sheep of the former Eastern Bloc. In sharp contrast with most of the CEE countries trying, in an orderly and rather consensual fashion, to leave behind the monopoly of the communist parties and adopt democratic pluralism, the National Salvation Front (NSF), the new dominant political force that emerged from the Romanian revolution of 1989 under the leadership of Ion Iliescu discredited the country's image abroad because of its strategy to marginalise or even brutalise political opposition, epitomised by the events involving miners of June 1990. Although formally adopting a pluralist democratic system, NSF did not engage, like other dominant political parties from CEE, in real negotiations with opposition parties or civil groups. Instead, it tried more or less ruthlessly to silence them (Welsh 1994: 388; Grugel 2002: 202-203). The legacy of the most centralised and opaque

Romania, Bulgaria) tend to be more unequal than ethnically homogenous states (Bandelj and Mahutga: 2010).

[14] The risk of social exclusion is 31.2% in Romania (Results available at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/EDN-20201016-2).

[15] Despite the recent pandemic which has put pressure on the state to heavily intervene to safeguard economic activities, at least at the level of political discourse, the Romanian centre-right parties still favour a clear neoliberal approach in which inequality or poverty are to be solved through the expansion of the economic market.

communist system from Central and Eastern Europe was still alive in those messy years of early Romanian transition.

In 1993, NSF turned into the Party of Social Democracy in Romania, which stayed in power till 1996, when a new president, Emil Constantinescu, and a new centre-right coalition, Romanian Democratic Convention (RDC), were elected thanks to their promise to do away with the communist legacy.[16] Thus, while previous years had been dominated by a strong party that had tried to *monopolise* the political scene, between 1996 and 2000, the leitmotif of Romanian politics was *fragmentation* and uncertainty, given the multiple political forces within the RDC and their allies vying for power. To this was added the social dissatisfaction generated by the extremely brutal neoliberal measures of the new government.

Between 2000 and 2004, social democrats led by Ion Iliescu won the elections and tried once again to monopolise the political sphere by putting pressure not only on public institutions, but also on private media. In 2004, Traian Băsescu managed to defeat Adrian Năstase, the Romanian Prime Minister, in the presidential race by mixing the already familiar anti-communist narrative with a new one: the fight against corruption. A political maverick, Băsescu dominated the public agenda until 2014 by deploying highly divisive strategies and discourses to control hi opponents.[17] Lacking

[16] The centre-right coalition supported by civil society groups (e.g., the Group for Social Dialogue) forged the narrative of an intimate relationship between democracy and neoliberalism (Ban 2014: 95). All that stands in the way of this happy marriage is, of course, the communist legacy. Some authors believe that the constant revival of the anti-communist narrative serves a clear ideological purpose: to de-legitimise any form of resistance against neoliberal policies (Chelcea and Druță: 2016).

[17] Traian Băsescu's discursive strategy was based on a mix between "populism" and "neoliberalism." This was visible, for instance, in his attempt, reminiscent of Margaret Thatcher's strategy to defeat British labour unions, to turn the private sector against an "obese" state that simply profited from the wealth produced by the former. (Vesalon 2010: 207-208).

a strong, homogenous political force to back him, Băsescu used political fragmentation while also strengthening certain institutions (the Romanian secret services and the judiciary) in order to fight back his rivals. This kind of political approach generated a strong counter-reaction in 2016, when the social democrats won the parliamentary elections, after having lost the presidential ones in 2014 against the representative of the centre-right, Klaus Iohannis. By the all-too familiar logic "the winner takes it all," the new majority attempted to swiftly change laws targeting corruption and to subordinate the judiciary system, triggering in 2017 the largest protests in post-communist Romania. In 2019, Liviu Dragnea, the leader of the Social-Democratic Party and widely considered to be the mastermind behind the attempt to change anti-corruption laws was himself jailed.[18]

In the context of rather weak democratic institutions, Romania's post-communist political dynamic has been dominated by "*majoritarianism*": every winning party or coalition tends to impose its own policies, rarely attempting to negotiate a larger consensus around fundamental values or future development (Tismăneanu 1998).[19] With the exception of some important geopolitical goals (joining NATO and EU), Romanian political parties showed little interest in trying to engage with their ideological adversaries. Instead of democratic pluralism, in which ideological conflict is balanced out by fundamental agreements, Romanian political transition has been dominated by fragmentation and conflicts that might also partially explain the low level of trust in democratic institutions, such as Parliament,

[18] Since 2020 Romania has had a centre-right government.

[19] Vladimir Tismăneanu associates this "majoritarianism" with the communist tendency to exclude opposition and criticism, a reflex that was inherited by Romanian social democracy after 1989 (Tismăneanu 1998). But as seen above, the tendency to monopolise the political sphere is not specifically centre-left since it was also used by centre-right leaders like Traian Băsescu.

and the high level of trust in hierarchical institutions, such as the Orthodox Church, the Romanian Army or the secret services.

From nationalism to Europeanism. And back again?

Under the strict supervision of the Soviet Union, the early years of Communist rule in Romania were dominated by an internationalist discourse. After Stalin's death, the local Communist elites slowly distanced themselves from the Soviet Union and created a new blend between socialist and (inter-war) nationalist themes which was perfected during Ceaușescu's regime. Predictably, the fall of Communism created an identity void that was filled by the only remaining ingredient: nationalism (Verdery 1993; Gallagher 1996). The shady events from March 1990 when Romanians and Hungarians clashed in the city of Târgu Mureș offered to the newly emerged National Salvation Front a legitimacy boost fuelled by the fear that Hungary wanted to take back Transylvania from Romania. Till 1996, the dominant identity discourse was a combination of moderate nationalism, used both by social democrats and opposition parties, and xenophobic nationalism, epitomised by the Greater Romania Party (Verdery 1993; Gallagher 2001). Its leader, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, used a highly aggressive language – reminiscent of the inter-war far right discourse – targeting Hungarian, Jews or Roma minorities (Verdery 1993). Against this type of discourse, many intellectuals, some of them members of the Group for Social Dialogue,[20] offered an equally sharp alternative: between adhering to a nationalist ideology derived from the communist past[21] *and* unconditionally accepting

[20] The group was founded on 31 December 1989 and included important local intellectuals such as Gabriel Liiceanu, Andrei Pleșu, and Horia-Roman Patapievici, to name only a few.

[21] In fact, nationalism cannot be related solely to Romanian communism. The interwar period, which many local intellectuals idealise as the most prolific period

a pro-Western stance. In 1996, the Romanian Democratic Convention won the elections with this anti-communist/anti-nationalist discourse, which advocated total integration in the Western world and endorsed the goals of joining NATO and EU, while also adopting the austerity policies advocated by the IMF (Mișcoiu 2014). Thus, if the first six years of Romanian transition were mostly dominated by a nationalist discourse in which the others were usually to blame for Romania's misfortunes, the next four years were defined by uncritically portraying a Western world that was holding the key to all internal problems.

Though the centre-right coalition paid a high price for its neoliberal policies, the social democrats also adopted the pro-European and pro-American discourse after winning elections in 2000. Ironically enough, many centre-right intellectuals voted for Ion Iliescu, a former communist, against Corneliu Vadim Tudor in the presidential elections.[22] As a result of this newly emerging consensus, Romania joined NATO (2004) and the European Union (2007). The first cracks in this hegemony started to show in 2016, when the Social Democratic Party led by Liviu Dragnea reactivated some nationalist topics from the 1990s with a touch of Euroscepticism, a recipe used much more aggressively and successfully by Viktor Orbán in Hungary or Jaroslaw Kaczynski in Poland. For instance, in 2018, Dragnea attempted to legitimise his government by organising a referendum meant to define family as the union between a man and a woman. Although there has been rather widespread conservative consensus around this topic in Romania, the referendum eventually failed because of a low turnout.

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in Romanian history, was, in fact, marked by the rise of an extremely aggressive form of nationalist discourse.

[22] For instance, Alina Mungiu-Pippidi sharply criticised Ion Iliescu but publicly supported him against Vadim Tudor in 2000.

During the 1990s, nationalist discourse seemed to offer a homogenous and stable narrative, compensating for the massive social and political dislocations (Gallagher 1996) and legitimising the state as the dominant actor in society. The anti-communist/anti-nationalist narrative of the centre-right intellectuals and parties tried to de-legitimise state intervention as an expression of the totalitarian past and, instead, let the market forces take care of social processes. Although Liviu Dragnea was not able to create a more conservative and nationalist alternative to the dominant pro-European discourse, other combinations of nationalism and neoliberal policies might be reactivated by someone else in the near future, with the Roma minority as the most likely target of such an ideological hybrid, given their economic marginalisation and political underrepresentation.[23] The direct manifestation of this new radicalism came during the December 2020 parliamentary elections, when the newly-created Alliance for the Unity of the Romanians (AUR) won 9%.

About this volume's chapters

In his attempt to evaluate the level of consolidation reached by Romania's post-communist democracy, Ovidiu Vaida has looked into the recent history of Romanian politics. Being aware that a citizenship culture, as theorised by Merkel, is beyond reach and needs a longer time to be created, Vaida focuses instead on the other three levels discussed by Merkel: constitutional, representative, and behavioural consolidation. He relates these levels to various political trends shaping Romania's transition to

[23] Despite the ethnic tensions of the early 1990s, Romania has been rather successful in addressing the problem of the Hungarian minority by adopting laws that allow the preservation of its cultural identity. The situation of the Roma community is much more complicated. The major risk, in this case, is an overlap between ethnicity and poverty that might be manipulated by future political forces.

liberal democracy, such as the presence of a dominant party or the presidentialisation of the political system, but he also considers the role of local elections, the fragmentation of the local parties or the protests against political power. Resisting the tendency to oversimplify this whole process, Vaida concludes that Romania's democratic consolidation is marked by both setbacks and progress in a still volatile local context.

In their contribution to this volume, Mircea Maniu and Horațiu Dan use other theoretical lenses to point out that the main obstacle for economic, cultural and political development is the centralising tendency of the Romanian state. Because it has consistently eschewed implementing policies that would favour regionalisation, the Romanian state has missed important opportunities. A case in point is Cluj-Napoca, the second largest city in Romania after Bucharest. The authors apply a multilevel approach, combining an identity, institutional and economic perspective, to Cluj-Napoca in order to indicate the potential benefits of Romania's regionalisation. These, in fact, would reflect the subsidiarity principle of European Union.

Levente Salat analyses the system for the protection of ethnic minorities in Romania, which can very well pass for a success story and even for a model, in spite of its turbulent post-1989 beginnings. Salat shows the way national minorities preoccupied with their cultural survival have received recognition and support from the Romanian state, in legal, institutional, and financial terms. Still, as Levente Salat shows, the past couple of years have also demonstrated the shortages and the limits of the Romanian model. His paper explores some of the reasons which may have spurred unfavourable developments and outlines possible ways of improvement.

Finally, Ruxandra Ivan uses a foreign policy analysis to describe Romania's progressive shift after 1989 from a communist order dominated by the USSR to a liberal-capitalist one gravitating around the US. In doing so, she takes into consideration two types of factors: on the one hand, domestic and external factors (the ideological stances of government majorities and the conditionality of international organisations, most notably, EU and NATO), and on the other hand, psychological factors (historical legacies, culture, and national identity). Ivan concludes that Romania's shift towards the West was shaped, in the first post-communist years, by psychological motivations rooted in the historical tendency of idealising Western culture and civilisation. However, once Romania joined NATO and EU, the former factors – more specifically, the internalisation of the roles imposed by these organisations – became dominant in shaping Romania's foreign policy.

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