The Romanian political system – consequence of the evolution of the party system

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Abstract

Romania's internal political development after 1989 was marked by structuring its own party system, and for a long time the state came to be regarded as an asset of the parties, developing a real phenomenon of "particracy".

The Romanian party system is the natural consequence of the voting systems used and it reflects the evolution of the society as a whole throughout the post-revolutionary period. Today, we can consider the Romanian political party system as one that gradually took part in a process of stabilization and polarization.

The overall performances of the Romanian political system marked by political clientelism, are directly proportional with the low confidence of the citizens in the political parties and parliament, to which the phenomenon of migration policy and poor professional quality of people elected at local and national levels is added.

The concentration of the political power by a handful of politicians lead to the emergence of the oligarchic forms in the party system, this feature increasing the restriction of the professional elites to engage in politics.

These legacies of the political regime, in which the administrative inability of the state is due to the structuring of the party system, must be removed through a deep administrative reform doubled by a political one that develops a system which increases voters' capacity to sanction political parties and their practices.

Keywords: general election, political alliances, democracy, political doctrines, electorate, political elite, European integration, migration policy, oligarchy parliament, political parties, political pluralism, the party system, political system.

What role do political parties and the party system play in the structural changes within the political, economic and social development of Romania in the last 25 years? The answer must be found in the connection between the election mechanism and the efficiency of governances, as components of different types of partisan systems that have marked our post-revolution history. The defining element that has crossed the regimes that the Romanian state knew in over 150 years of political history, has always been the same: the weakness of the state institutions, including all political structures and the predominance of
the persons who embody them or who lead them, whether we discuss about the democracy of a forms without substance of the modern era, the mimed (M. Dogan, 1987) democracy between the two wars or the contemporary reality. If the specialty literature tends to identify the parties with some public goods, in the case of Romania, the state appears as an asset of the parties. Political patronage derives precisely from the obedience to the party or coalition in power and the leaders who lead or represent them. Moreover, especially after 2000, there was the phenomenon of "particracy" in which the main functions of the administrative and social system are developed or at least conditioned by political parties as sinecures for various clientele or family clan interests.

In the period since the events of December 1989 until today, the young Romanian democracy, based on political pluralism and free elections, has reached the age of majority but this does not entitle us to believe that full maturity of the political system in our country is reached. Even though Romania joined the European Union on 1 January 2007, the most important moment of its post-communist history, and the implications of the European integration are multiple, its course was not smooth, on the contrary, until it became a stable democracy that meets the criteria in Copenhagen, first the democratic one, which includes the policy towards minorities and the decentralization process. There were hesitations, stagnation due to miners' strikes, sinuous political and economic transformations, critical signals on official diplomatic channels and international media, setbacks and more or less relevant progress.

The vast majority of these gaps were due to the immature Romanian political class as an essential component of the Romanian partisan phenomenon, arising at first from the former communist party members, or the remains of the former historical parties.

The party system in Romania is the undeniable product of the voting system. If we refer to the early 90’s we see that personalism in a party prevailed against a party based on a large number of affiliates, the majority of parties being born and remaining attached to the political ambitions of some individuals. This is the main reason for which, in the election of 20 May 1990, more political parties (64) obtained each less than 1% of the valid votes. On the other hand, the individual landscape of the party scene is built in terms of identity through the logic of attributing quality models by national and international actors. The Romanian political parties were organized around a leader, but not without crystallizing different interests, especially the reference to the communist past or reform. We can consider the Romanian political party system, despite its many internal changes, as a system that enrolled gradually in the process of stabilization and internal alignment, like the other countries emerging from totalitarian morass, when after a chaotic and important flow phase, there is a clear trend of


3See, The periodic report regarding Romania’s progress in the adherence process (2002) and „The periodic report regarding Romania’s progresses on the way to adherence“, on the site www.mie.ro (15 July 2004).
organization and stabilizing of the partisan systems" (J.-M. De Waele, 1999). Based on this finding, decrypting the party system allowed us to identify hybrid categories of partisan structuring and, through qualitative analysis, to stake out their development. Thus during the chaotic period marked by the first output of the free elections from 1990 to 1992, the party system is one of a hegemonic vocation, being in a progressive and continuous rebalancing process. From 1992 to 1996 there has been a diversity of hybrid coalitions because of its moderate tendencies of quantitative reduction and, at the same time, the emphasis on polarization. The next stage corresponds, based on the 2000 elections to pluralism with an individual tendency that keeps the previous hybrid status, number reduction and maintains polarization. After 2004 we returned to a bipolar system, because of the existence of the two political or electoral coalitions. With the elections in November 2008 we reach a fairly consolidated pluralism, but its stability was maintained by frequent recruitment of MPs, a period also characterized by the absence of PRM in Parliament. The year 2012 brings the most emphatic election victory of a political alliance, USL gaining over 60 % of the seats, which determined that the party system was characterized by its domination until separation in February 2014. During this period the party system registers the presence of other anti-system parties, PP-DD, slowly tending towards dissolution, being also helped by the migration of their own elected persons, lacking doctrine substance and its own program.

The patronage practices and the weak administrative capacity of the former communist states led us to identify two explanatory variables closely related to the manner and degree of institutionalization of political parties:

a. The political and partisan evolution tied to the first post-communist elections (A. Ionescu, 2009)

b. The partisan type of competition developed in the 90’s

In Central and Eastern Europe, the state restructuring and the party organizing are simultaneous processes. Therefore, in the early 90’s, in the Romanian case, in a dominant party system, the opposition was too weak and too divided to hold them responsible for patronage and corruption. For the second part of this decade, in a not so well contoured system, in which there were too many parties, both in government and in opposition, it has become difficult for voters to identify and penalize in elections those who were engaged in corrupt practices and patronage.4

If many Romanian party system analyses published so far, show a strong instability and a low degree of institutionalization until 2000, however, the authors observed a relative stabilization and development since 2001. Following our empirical study, two types of conclusions can be drawn:

1) in the Romanian parties there is an overall reduction of ideological distance between the parties arising from a post-nomenclature-like structure and parties using the anticommunist label as a guarantee of quality

2) we are witnessing a gradual stabilization of parties and party system after 1989

The role of political parties and of the party system in Romanian politics is in a


process of rapid stabilization, but still precarious and fragile. At the party level, stabilization coincides with building partisan organizations, specifically the construction of legitimacy among members, a programmatic maturity and a progressive reduction of the number of the support parties or of the pseudo–parties populating the major coalition parties in the early *90’s. We are thus witnessing the emergence of the relatively stable parties which form organizations, programs, and, in general, goals similar to those of their Western counterparts. But this image of stability that is associated without connection with the operation of political parties, encounters significant deficiencies related to the conduct of the artificial political identity arising from quality models awarded by the European or international federations of parties and by the organizational structures dependent on the leader's authority. Romanian parties aspire to be copies of the fellow Westerners, deliberately imitating models valued by them, even if, empirically, these Western identity and organizational sheets demonstrate the difficulty of similar effective functioning. Setting up the multi-party system was an important event of the first stage on the way of the Romanian society towards democracy. The party system in Romania has also been hit by childhood diseases affecting emerging democracies. Among the symptoms of this disease, found in most post-communist states, three occurred acutely. Firstly, the party system knew in the period 1990-1991 a great expansion in number, leading to the registration of over 150 political parties, with the most diverse and exotic names. (A. Radu, 1995) It was normal to happen so after more than four decades of dictatorship where freedom of political association was suspended. Based on the Political Parties Law (no.27 of 1996) a second birth of the multiparty system took place, the number of legally registered political parties being reduced to 50 due to the conditions they had to meet. This quantity aspect is important only so far as it provides us with important clues about the genesis of the party system (A. Radu, 2000). We consider more findings with summary title are important, namely:

- The Romanian party system has developed based on two roots, on the one hand FSN, from which the left parties were born, and on the other, the interwar period parties, from which the historical parties have emerged;

- The personal factor, the ambitions and egos of some people have determined the multiplication of the party system up to the dimensions outlined above. This expansion was also due to frequent divisions;

- After 1996, the party system has followed a trend of concentration, there were very numerous mergers by absorption in the extra–parliamentary space, the parties trying to join forces in order to enter the Parliament.

The second inconvenient of the Romanian party system is the lack of relevance of the doctrinal and ideological orientations. The crystallization process of the party system around a classical doctrine was animated by factors that were exogenous to political parties: the pressure of the civil society, the media mainly, the need to join the European political families. Gradually, the political families with Western correspondences crystallized: social democracy, liberalism, nationalism, Christian democracy and environmentalism. However, the parties are not the only responsible for their ideological eclecticism. Society was not sufficiently demanding to determine, by citizens’ vote, a clearing of the options. A feature of the political life in transition was the important role of the party leader. The parties were structured around a strong and charismatic personality. The dependence of parties on their leaders, presidential candidates in Romania, caused a lack of interest in doctrinal debates. What mattered, in the end, was their ability to get votes and organization mobility in the campaign.

The most criticized aspect of the Romanian partidism is related neither to the number of parties nor to their doctrinal consistency but to their internal organization and how this is
reflected on the overall performance of the political system. Although the political parties provide through the competition between them the representation of the interests of society (an essential condition of democracy), inside they are not organized by following transparent rules. The criteria for promotion within the parties are not clear and predictable, so the idea of a career plan within a party is a utopia. The proportional election has the advantage of an accurate representation of minority trends in society, which is a very important quality, but the elections on lists increased the power of high party bureaucrats who have the final word in arranging the election lists. The hope that the uninominal system will remove party oligarchy and promote a new political class from the category of young people who studied and specialized abroad proved to be in vain, the distribution of seats stirring enough controversy, even increasing the number of parliamentary seats. The party manifestation that we should mostly blame is political clientism, expressed in a double sense: the politicization of the public administration system with people named by political criteria, by simple algorithm or political affiliation and the predominant promotion of those members who are in relationships of the type manager-client with the party bureaucracy. Obviously, such an organization of the public system, with political parasites, caused, naturally, an adversity reaction of the society against the political establishment, rightly accused of corruption. The preeminence of belonging to different political groups before the professional criteria is one of the important causes of the citizens’ low confidence in the political parties. This phenomenon also meant increasing the size of the state apparatus, requiring as many positions as possible to meet “obligations” or political pressure. Given that responsibility, from that of a mere clerk to the ministerial one passes “through the party,” the idea of public service for the benefit of citizens has been established with difficulty. Therefore, the reform of the public administration cannot be sustainable if it does not change the relationship between parties and society, and this relationship must become truly transparent.

Another blameworthy phenomenon, which put a negative print on the political class, is that of political migration. In a broader systemic sense, the stability of the party system means moving from factionalism and fluidity towards polyarchical maturity6, which is characterized by the predictability in representing the interests of the society and the way it is constituted. The absence of a legitimate opposition within the communist system, in the form of dissent, also marked the establishment of the democratic political system because political life in Romania polarized and the transition started by the left and the powerful political and symbolic conflict with the anti-communist right also influenced the architecture of the institutional system, characterized by originality and equivoque. The development on modern bases of the party system in Romania has been crushed under the weight of two legacies, the revolutionary one and the interwar one. Romania has thus a left legitimized through the revolution and a right flawed by the interwar legacy. The birth of a genuine Democratic Party system, based on current doctrinal values was thus delayed. The Romanian party system does not have an influential post-communist party, which seeks its legitimacy in the values of a civic, tolerant nation, open to globalization. Within the Romanian parties formed after 1989, the followers of some interwar current were forced to cohabit with people having the right modern ex-communist beliefs, authentic Social Democrats, anti-communist, civic liberals. From this state of cohabitation resulted the weakness of the Romanian policy, with splits not only between parties but also within them. The polycentric nature of the parties faced the authoritarian centralist tendencies of the high party bureaucrats, the most obvious result of the lack of

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6 For the definition of poliarchy, see R. DAHL, Poliarchies: Participation and Opposition, Iași, Institutul European, 2000
attractiveness of political life for many members of the professional elite.

The party system took oligarchic shapes, its manifestations consisting of a control on the circulation of elites within the parties. The concentration of the political power by a small number of politicians had the effect of stabilizing the leadership of political parties, the most important parties rarely changing their presidency. The poor professional quality of many of those who are in politics was reflected in the poor competitiveness of the political system, which was so arranged as to facilitate the transition kleptocracy. The instruments of assets control were created late and under external pressure, but they remained unused. The lack of control of the personal wealth of politicians leads to the fact that they could manage the company resources according to obscure criteria. Thus, the essential function of the political system, which of control and resource redistribution, was flawed and remained opaque. The natural question is whether “The Romanian political system is in crisis”. Of course, the diagnosis of crisis can be put by having the marks of normality. Can the western political system be a model, when the political elites and the European Union media have been speaking in the last two decades of a crisis of democracy? If by crisis we understand that politics becomes oligarchic, this phenomenon must be related to the social structures that produce it.

Romania has known the phenomenon of local barons because it has a social structure radically different from that of the old Europe. The local barons built their power on the lack of effective power of the state, whose authority was quickly eroded by the disorganization that followed the unexpected fall of communism. The local oligarchs are the most visible phenomenon of a society of survival, strongly polarized, in which the local castles seize the state authority and promise its redistribution following the criterion of personal loyalty. And this local oligarchy, concentrated more on the party who held the power most (FSN / FDSN / PDSR / PSD), was essential for the exercise of power by the party central leadership as it provided them with financial and political resources (votes). The local policy is the pre-modern and sophisticated dimension of the political system. The national interface of politics, the one that interacts with the international system is different, it has formally democratic aspects, but the roots of its power are still trapped in the logic of a society of survival, unequal and less permeable to change. Only the change of a society through the contact of its most disadvantaged representatives with another model of society, following the temporary migration to the West, accelerated after 2002, creates the conditions for a change of substance of the bases of the Romanian political system. The criterion for international democratic recognition became even more powerful than the popular will, a radical-extremist party, PRM, being excluded from the government game, as well as PP-DD, after 2012.

The party system turned out, for many reasons, to be only partially functional. It did, however, succeed to manage the Romanian society and to offer it a gradual rhythm of democratization and modernization, a rhythm that was unequal in dynamic in depth. We will critically examine this conclusion, using both quantitative and qualitative data. By counting 169 parties submitting lists of candidates for the parliamentary elections from 1990 to 2004, we find that, given the fact that from 1996 elections to the ones in 2004, only the alliances that have participated in the election won, "no political party in the post communist Romania has gone alone in the elections five times " (C. Preda, 2008). In 2008, with a new electoral system, in single-member constituencies, the number of parties that submitted applications reached 200, but the winner is still an alliance: PSD - PC. (C. Preda, 2008). Since the same alliance had participated in the elections in the same formula twice, in 2000: PSD + PUR and in 2004, the party system seemed to really move towards a stability that would gradually strengthen the political parties’ responsibility. If we look at the actual number of parties, in 25 years, our political system has experienced
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The same thing happens with the ideological changes. Still in terms of the mobility of the parliamentary political elites, the Romanian public sphere knows a virulent debate regarding the political migration of the lawmakers. In terms of the representation in the supreme forum, it was argued that the decision of an elected person to change the party that supported him or her in the elections can be interpreted as a phenomenon that reveals the nullity of the imperative mandate. On the other hand, the magnitude of the phenomenon determined the formation, in 2010, of a new parliamentary group, belonging to the UNPR, party who never presented candidates in the elections. They were all voted with the support of other parties, but still part of the ruling coalition.

**Conclusions**

The analysis of the Romanian party system shows that its great dynamics does not allow the characterization of the political competition as robust. The number of parties in parliament decreases and the dominance of one party disappear, so voters have a really limited and clear number of options. The electoral and parliamentary volatility of the parties, but especially the inconsistency of the alliances, whether it is about the ruling coalition or the electoral alliances that present common candidates in the elections and the internal instability of the parties rendered by the phenomenon of political migration, makes it impossible to follow a party policy.

In addition, the ideological dynamic of the parties, the speed and ease with which they are redefined, reduces the possibility for voters to predict the policies that the parties they vote for will adopt.

The administrative incapacity of the state appears as being maintained by the partisan competition model and if so, increasing its capacity cannot be reduced to the administration and civil service reform, but this reform must be accompanied by a political reform in which voters develop their capacity to sanction political parties and their corrupt practices, therefore the entire party system.
Appendix 1


Grey background = electoral alliances. Underlined = parties or alliances that are part of the governing coalition. Written in grey = parties that do not pass the electoral threshold and do not enter the Parliament.
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