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## **Introduction: Political Dynamics in Post-Communist Romania**

The contributions to this special issue describe and analyse the institutional and behavioural dynamics of the political processes that have occurred in Romania since 1989. The country is one of the largest of the East European members of the European Union (EU) with a population and territorial area exceeded only by that of Poland, and the idiosyncrasies of its economic, political and social transition make it an appealing case study of political dynamics in a new democracy. There are the circumstances of its elite continuity and the question of corruption to consider, the positions of minorities, the comparative lateness of its democratic achievements as well as its more recent social convulsions. Largely as a consequence of many of the problems associated with those matters, Romania was able to join the EU only in 2007, although its accession process had been initiated at the same time as in other countries which were admitted to the EU in 2004.

The authors of this special issue reflect on a number of the core developments in Romanian politics throughout the post-communist period, and each of their studies offers a valuable source of primary information about the Romanian political landscape, while together they form a useful basis for comparisons with other countries in Eastern Europe. Not all the articles cover the entire period since the regime change of 1989, but the perspective is longitudinal, it accounts for at least one decade, and through qualitative approaches it focuses on what happened and on why certain decisions were taken. The authors have structured their research from the more general topics identified as crucial to political developments in Romania, ranging from the actual processes of democratization, constitutional politics and institutional conflict, to particular matters concerning ethnic relations, the electoral system and party politics.

Earlier research has charted the bumpy road to democratization in Romania. A high degree of elite reproduction made the legacies of the previous regime more visible and coincided with the quasi-absence of major political and economic reforms in Romania until the mid-1990s.<sup>1</sup> During that period

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<sup>1</sup> According to previous, theoretically informed research, the change of system did hardly affect individuals of the elite, and those who were privileged under the communist regime

the government sought both to maintain public support by reducing the social costs of transition and to increase the control exerted by political elites over state resources. The result was an orientation towards the maintenance of the status quo by limiting the number of reforms. The 1996 legislative elections gave democratic forces the opportunity to gain access to government, but the great expectations excited by the change were not fulfilled in reality. The government's term in office was characterized by instability caused by conflict within the coalition, unpopular economic reforms and the dithering of state authorities. In general, establishing the rule of law remained an important problem as new corruption scandals emerged. Furthermore, the parliamentary and presidential elections which followed in 2000 raised concerns about the fragility of the country's democratization. Romania was the first East European country in which a radical right-wing party achieved relevant electoral success when the Greater Romania Party (*Partidul România Mare*, PRM) became the second largest party in Parliament with more than 20% of the seats. The vote for the radical right was seen mainly as a protest against an ineffective political establishment, current economic policies and the prevailing instability.<sup>2</sup>

In line with the problems of democratic transition and consolidation, Sergiu Mişcoiu seeks to understand direct and representative democracy in the country. He uses discourse theory to highlight the rhetoric about democracy and the people in the public discourse of the Romanian presidents, his major hypothesis being that the absence of the *demos* in Romania's decision-making processes eventually fuelled a rhetoric based on direct democracy. His analytical findings distinguish between two periods, one of democratic enthusiasm combined with authoritarian paternalism in the first ten years after communism; and another of hegemonic discourse in what he identifies as a second post-communist period. The discursive system established during Ion Iliescu's two terms in office as President from 1990-1996 and again from 2000-2004 sharpened a representative and sometimes technocratic perspective on politics which did not envisage the direct participation of the people. Beginning in 2004, the year that marked the beginning of a new type of politics in Romania, there came a new rhetoric of direct democracy associated with the idea of popular sovereignty, and it succeeded in establishing itself as a hegemonic discourse backed by Iliescu's initiatives and, for some time, by popular support.

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continued to be privileged after its removal. For details, see Istvan SZELENYI / Szonja SZELENYI, *Circulation or Reproduction of Elites during the Postcommunist Transformation of Eastern Europe: Introduction, Theory and Society* 24 (1995), no. 5, 615-638.

<sup>2</sup> Grigore POP-ELECHEŞ, *Whither Democracy? The Politics of Dejection in the 2000 Romanian Elections*, Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Working Paper Series, Berkeley 2001; Rogers BRUBAKER, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town*. Princeton 2006.

The existence of institutional conflict is quite common in post-communist Eastern Europe. Irrespective of the precise system of government, numerous conflicts emerged between Presidents and Prime Ministers, for example those between Havel and Klaus in the Czech Republic, Antall and Göncz in Hungary, Wałęsa and Pawlak in Poland, Kovacs and Mečiar in Slovakia. Indeed, in April 2004 President Rolandas Paksas of Lithuania became the first European leader to be removed from office, following an impeachment procedure which was the result of an institutional conflict with Parliament. Romania experienced both types of conflict. On the one hand, during the first decade there were conflicts exclusively between President and Prime Minister, such as those between Iliescu and Roman, or between Emil Constantinescu and Radu Vasile, which did not involve Parliament because the opponents were members of the same party. Then, in 2007 and again in 2012, during the second post-communist decade, conflicts emerged between President and Parliament during the period of cohabitation, when the parliamentary majority backed the Prime Minister.<sup>3</sup> Favourable referendum results enabled the President Traian Băsescu to survive both attempts at impeachment. One explanation for those conflicts was the active and often constitutionally questionable involvement of the President in party politics. He pushed his constitutional rights to the extreme and sometimes even acted according to a distinctly sketchy interpretation of the legislation. Some of the initiatives proposed by the President concerned institutional reforms, one of the most important among them being changes to the constitution.

Sorina Soare investigates the causes and consequences of the semi-presidential system for the development of democracy in Romania, exploring the process of constitution-building and its modifications through the lens of the President's place in the institutional system. Her analysis reveals subtleties of the Romanian system of semi-presidentialism which are revealed as being not necessarily bad for democratic performance. Her findings indicate that the hasty adoption of the 1991 Constitution and then the partial revision of it in 2003, different patterns of parliamentary majorities and the strong personalities of individual Presidents all produced different subtypes of semi-presidentialism, each with a different propensity for conflict. A sharp difference existed between relationships within the executive during the first and second decades after communism. Throughout the 1990s, both Romanian Presidents sought to formulate their own independent political agendas, trespassed on their Prime Ministers' powers, and tried to influence a legislature in which they belonged to the parliamentary majority. Their interpretations of their institutional role was encouraged both by constitutional ambiguities and by the fact that both Presidents were the leaders of the party or alliance which supported them in Parliament. The second post-communist

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<sup>3</sup> Sergiu GHERGHINA / Sergiu MIȘCOIU, The Failure of Cohabitation: Explaining the 2007 and 2012 Institutional Crises in Romania, *East European Politics & Societies* 27 (2013), no. 4, 668-684.

period brought periods of co-habitation and revealed a shift in both the type of conflict and in the solutions found. From the longitudinal perspective, there was a discontinuity in approach that sheds light on the complexities of executive relationships in the Romanian semi-presidential system in the context of fairly similar political actors.

One major reform on the political agenda of many East European countries has been change of the electoral system. In Romania, the initial choice of a closed-list proportional representation system was favoured to ensure proportionality and representation for ethnic minorities. However, support for electoral reform gained momentum after the first post-communist decade, in particular after the 2000 legislative election, and there were three major drivers for it. Those were the question of legitimacy in the change from a party-centred to a candidate-centred approach, the question of the quality of the elected representatives, and the ties between citizens and their representatives.<sup>4</sup> Electoral reform has been implemented since 2008 and combines voting in single member districts with proportional representation. Due to its design, the new system has been seen as making it even more difficult for newly created parties to reach Parliament. In theory, it is difficult for newly created parties to win many votes in single member districts against established parties with candidates having greater visibility. However, in practice the situation was different: the 2012 legislative election and the arrival in Parliament of a newly created party called the Dan Diaconescu's Popular Party (*Partidul Poporului Dan Diaconescu*, PPDD) showed no basis in fact for such an argument.

Dan Brett illustrates the relationship between the most salient variables in the political history of post-communist Romania. He refers to the role of institutional conflict and political parties, and his central argument is that while the potential for conflict had existed in Romania ever since regime change in 1989, it became more prominent only as a result of the changes that occurred to the party system after 2000, changes themselves triggered by modification of the electoral system. Complementarily to the discourse approach presented by Mişcoiu and to the formal division of power within the executive (Soare), Brett suggests that inter-party interactions of cooperation, competition, or coalescence and the organization of the most powerful Romanian political party, the Social Democratic Party (*Partidul Social Democrat*, PSD) together offer valid explanations for intra-executive conflicts over the last ten years. Brett's main analytical findings illustrate how the semi-presidential form of government has created a great deal of room for manoeuvre for the PSD, which exploits state resources to compensate for its partial detachment from society. The mechanism is rather similar to those identified in other European party systems over the last

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<sup>4</sup> Sergiu GHERGHINA / George JIGLĂU, Where Does the Mechanism Collapse? Understanding the 2008 Electoral System, *Representation* 48 (2012), no. 4, 445-459.

decades and fulfils many of the criteria for a cartel party.<sup>5</sup> In that sense, Brett positions the Romanian case in line with other European countries, especially in the second post-communist decade.

While the effects of change to the electoral system were very visible in the structure of the party system – a point well made by Brett – the modification of the competition rules had an impact on the political system as a whole. Emanuel Emil Coman investigates electoral reform throughout the entire post-communist period in Romania and emphasizes the different factors driving change. He distinguishes between two different periods in the electoral history of the country and sees a shift in the logic behind electoral change from the first to the second post-communist decade. While in the 1990s the goal had been reduction of the number of competitors by means of increases in the electoral threshold, in the 2000s the system was altered to try to increase the responsibility of individual representatives. It was thought such a change could be achieved by holding elections for single-member districts as opposed to the candidate-centred perspective of the closed-list. According to Coman, the two motivations show Romania's good intentions in its struggle to implement democratic order, but more precisely they correspond to the different requirements that characterized stages in the process of democratization. In the first phase, stability of competition was seen as being of paramount importance, with the emphasis shifting to the quality of political representation in the second.

One usual reason for electoral reform is the desire to improve the quality of representation, and Radu Cinpoș places that at the core of his analysis. He explains the reasons behind party switching in Parliament with a focus on the sources and consequences of political elites' party switching over the most recent decade. The study also links such behaviour to electoral politics, shedding yet an additional light on the complex matters revealed in Coman's contribution. The results indicate that party switching leads to political instability and fragmentation and has therefore limited the institutionalization of the Romanian party system. At the same time, party switching is motivated neither by primarily political ambitions nor by attempts to by-pass voter accountability. Instead, the patronage and clientelism characterizing Romanian politics appear to be the main drivers as politicians seek to become part of the governing party in order to gain access to the distribution of public funds. Both conclusions place Romania in the category of East European countries with fluid political representation and a considerable degree of political instability. For example, floor-crossing can artificially change parliamentary majorities without involving the voters, and it feeds back into the quality of democracy as scrutinized by Mișcoiu and Soare.

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Richard S. KATZ / Peter MAIR, *Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party*, *Party Politics* 1 (1995), no. 1, 5-28.

Eastern Europe is well-known for its ethnically diverse populations, and ethnic relations in Romania were tense until the mid-1990s. In March 1990 at the beginning of the post-communist period, the mid-sized Transylvanian town of Târgu Mureş had seen violent clashes between Romanian nationalists and Hungarian groups. The drafting of a constitution with what could be seen as nationalist provisions and which denied certain collective rights to ethnic minorities only prolonged the tension. In 1996, the victory of democratic forces in the legislative elections and the inclusion in the coalition government of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (*Uniunea Democrată Maghiară Română*, UDMR) – although the government had a majority in Parliament even without the Hungarian party – marked a turning point in the evolution of ethnic relations in Romania.<sup>6</sup> The progress registered in terms of reforms and the positive attitude of the Romanian state towards ethnic minorities was partly driven by the relatively constant presence of the UDMR in government after 1996. The last two articles in this special issue address the topic of interethnic relations from different points of view.

George Jiglău provides a detailed account of the evolution of interethnic relations from the perspective of the Romanian state and of the Hungarian minority. He focuses on the legislative dimension and accounts for external influences such as membership of the EU, with the conclusions of his study pointing to the progress made in Romanian-Hungarian relations during the post-communist period. If Romanian politics and mainstream parties had a nationalist tendency and the UDMR was considered a radical ethnic party at the beginning of the 1990s, 25 years later the situation is completely different. The Hungarian language is an integral part of the education system at a number of levels, there seem to be only isolated instances of tensions between Romanians and Hungarians and the Hungarian party is a frequent coalition partner for various parties from across the political spectrum – with the exception of radical right parties. Dragoş Dragoman expands this discussion by focusing on the dimensions of cultural and linguistic elements in the relationship between Romanians and Hungarians. He has included in his analysis more of Romania's ethnic minorities, such as the Germans, and shifted the focus of his analysis from national to local politics. His discussion gains particular relevance in the context of the presidential elections of November 2014, which were won by Klaus Iohannis, an ethnic German.

How have Romanian politics and society been transformed in the last two and a half decades? What lessons can be drawn for future research on the new East European democracies? This special issue of *Südosteuropa* seeks to offer some answers by combining theoretical approaches and rich empirical evidence.

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<sup>6</sup> For details see Sergiu GHERGHINA / George JIGLĂU, The Role of Ethnic Parties in the Europeanization Process: The Romanian Experience, *Romanian Journal of European Affairs* 8 (2008), no. 2, 82-99.