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# The Short Communism's Journey into Democracy

## An Appraisal of Romanian Democratization

ALEXANDRA IONESCU

This assessment has a fairly ambitious goal: it aims at drawing a brief and unavoidably condensed state of the art of the political regime which came into being and grew up in Romania during the last two decades. This political regime imagined, institutionalized and mainly endured in the years of Romanian postcommunism can be conceived either as an oligarchic form of government, relatively open and electorally confirmed, in the terms of the classical science of politics, or as a restrictive multiparty monopoly of the state, in the language of contemporary political sociology. The two perspectives are complementary. However, if the first expression emphasizes positively the socio-political triviality of society having coped with nothing more than a regime change against a background that experienced a process of failed modernization, the latter is explicitly intended to be a hybrid one, accounting for a crossbreed political form engendered by postcommunism. It feeds on the distinction made by Raymond Aron more than half a century ago<sup>1</sup> between democracy and totalitarianism as ideal-types. The French philosopher and sociologist captured then democracy as a constitutional-pluralist regime, while he conceived totalitarianism as a monopolistic party regime. Neither a single party monopoly any more, nor a genuinely, at least not yet, constitutional-pluralist one, the Romanian political regime stabilized itself in an in-between aria: the multiparty monopoly of the state. Such a statement does not intend to simply label an actual state of facts in Romanian politics, but rather to grasp the scope and the complexity of the political and social processes enmeshed in the very core of this voyage Romania got to travel from communism to a political arrangement commonly named democracy.

A voyage from communism to democracy: that is to say that, during the last twenty years, Romania, as well as the other former postcommunist countries, would have actually had experienced not only a regime change, but also a polity change, a change in the very rationale of its political community<sup>2</sup>. Consequently, Romanian postcommunism could be understood as a fourfold political endeavor which had – and still has – to recreate the fundamental principles of the body politic; to redesign the very subjects of politics; to handle and refurbish existing institutional instruments in order to govern a completely new and dazzling social dynamics.

The political principles and the subjects of the body politic, as well as the instruments of government and the social logic of government are the four major subject matters of the political change Romania undergone recently. This fourfold

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond ARON, *Démocratie et totalitarisme*, Gallimard, Paris, 1965.

<sup>2</sup> An appraisal of the failure of the postcommunist transformation to touch the fabric of the Romanian polity in Daniel BARBU, *Republica absentă. Politică și societate în România postcomunistă*, Nemira, București, 2004.

political overhaul had several striking characteristics: it was simultaneous; it was highly unorganized and unplanned; and it was largely self-contradicting. This intricate dynamics can be analyzed as a double process of disjunction affecting the whole political universe crafted during Marxism-Leninism: on the one hand, a sudden and apparently conflictive divorce between the political regime and the state; on the other hand, a slow and collusive separation between state and society. Eventually, the restrictive multiparty monopoly of the state is a result of the crossing over of these two processes.

Separating the regime and the state: considered ex-post, the main difficulty of the task was the following. While Romanian communism relied on a clear, thorough and exclusive vision of politics, of its goals, its tools and its promises, which was Leninism<sup>1</sup>, and it was inspired and modeled upon a ready-made and constrictive blueprint, provided by the Soviet Union, Romanian democracy in the making had no ready-made vision, nor any handy blueprint. Thus, Romanian postcommunism was firstly a process of invention: inventing a definition of democracy, and, moreover, inventing an operative definition of democracy, a definition which could become politically and institutionally productive.

That basically meant answering several decisive questions: what are the guiding principles of democratic politics in the Romanian setting, who are its subjects and actors, what are they made of and what exactly are they supposed to do. If this process can now be rendered intelligible, it does not mean that it was intelligible or explicit while it was in the making. Defining democracy in an operative way was in Romania an embedded, gradual, highly fluctuant and, eventually, a very empirical and unreasoned process. However, surprisingly enough, not that conflictive that it appeared to be in its own time, but rather more collusive than its contemporaries were prepared to acknowledge.

The fall of communism in Romania has been dubbed a "Revolution". We shall not discuss here the pertinence of this label<sup>2</sup>. Suffice it to say that it quickly became the subject matter of the public argument between the emergent political actors during the 1990s and, consequently, a high stake of political legitimacy. This so called "Revolution" was defined by several key elements. It was, first of all, the expression of massive civil disobedience. But the "Revolution" was also a sudden decapitation of the Party-State. The last Secretary General of the Romanian Communist Party and President of the Socialist Republic was executed in the last days of 1989, while the Communist Party itself was declared vanished, officially inexistent, in the first days of 1990. Instrumentally speaking, the actor responsible for those two events was the Romanian military. In political terms, the two gestures were commanded and alleged by an *ad hoc* and very ambiguous actor, the so called Nation Salvation Front, materialized spontaneously in the public life, addressing the nation through the voice of a handful of persons and claiming to be the political byproduct of the "Revolution" itself.

This beheading of the Party-State was full of consequences as it dramatically and brutally damaged the very meaning and the internal coherence of the whole political universe of the Socialist Republic. In the strategy of the National Salvation

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<sup>1</sup> See Dominique COLAS, *Le léninisme*, PUF, Paris, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> See Alexandra IONESCU, "La dernière révolution léniniste. Pensée et pratique de l'autorité révolutionnaire en Roumanie", *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. VI, no. 1, 2006, pp. 25-114.

Front, the "Revolution" was eventually intended to be a rapid takeover of the direction of the state, a ban of the high communist leadership and its replacement with a new one, more sensitive to the appeal of the Gorbachevian shake-up of the post-Stalinist orthodoxy. Therefore, the first and very explicit goal of this authority was the safeguard of the integrity and functionality of state institutions be them administrative, economic or repressive. However, this strategy engendered rapidly a number of unintended and unexpected effects. The Party-State system forged in a Leninist vein, and especially its Romanian version, was a strongly unified sphere of meaning whose internal political coherence relied precisely on the refusal of any legitimate structural distinction between state and regime or state and society. Striving to cope with the ideological requirements of the Soviet blueprint as well as with the endogenous social constraints, Romanian communists rested the validity<sup>1</sup> of the system on the mutual heteronomy of the Party and the State, an organizational heteronomy which was not only functional, but also structural and ideologically sanctioned. Therefore, banning the Party while safeguarding the State quickly became an untenable task. The sudden disappearance<sup>2</sup> of the Party as a reference of the polity rendered the takeover solution unmanageable and called for a political reformulation of the rationale of the polity.

In the frantic climate of the beginning of Romanian postcommunism, one principle seemed to be at hand: the one-party regime was to be replaced by a multi-party regime. However, "multipartism" did not really equate political pluralism, *i.e.* the liberal ethic principle of the legitimacy and fertility of political dissent<sup>3</sup>. It was rather a way to picture the change numerically. From one to many: if communism was one, democracy can then be nothing but many parties. Make room in the political space for many parties; let the parties become the new and prominent subjects of the body politic: this solution seemed to have satisfied at that time all the groups and factions speedily crafted in the emergent public sphere. Nevertheless, the solution, and the definition of democracy it implied, was not destined to endure. They both required answering several simple, but otherwise tricky questions: what a party is supposed to be, what is it meant to do and what is it supposed to be made of?

During the first decade of postcommunism, several answers have been given to those questions. The first set of responses was implicitly phrased in the early years of the period and explicitly carved in the stone of the 1991 Constitution. From then on, parties were to be the only legitimate depositaries of the political will of the Romanian citizens; they were supposed to run into national elections and constitute together the Parliament; and, consequently, they were primarily made of votes and of seats. Thus, following a very permissive and intuitive definition, a party was then any group able to get into Parliament through proportional representation ballots without or with minimal threshold. Hence, "multiparty" democracy was first understood as electoral democracy.

However, the electoral democracy of the 1990s was caught in a trap, both conceptual and functional. On the one hand, while they were supposed to represent

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<sup>1</sup>Max WEBER, *Economy and Society*, vol. I, texte traduit et établi par Guenther Roth et Claus Wittich, University of California Press, Berkeley & Los Angeles & London, 1978, pp. 31-33.

<sup>2</sup>Alexandra IONESCU, "Le Parti, où est-il parti?", *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. IV, no. 4, 2004, pp. 803-806.

<sup>3</sup>Giovanni SARTORI, *Parties and Party Systems. A Framework for Analysis*, Cambridge University Press, London & New York & Melbourne, 1976, pp. 13-18.

citizens, to produce the political community as such in a visible and actual manner, parties were in fact producing themselves as long as their electoral identity was their only identity and as there was not yet a political society to be represented. On the other hand, while producing themselves electorally<sup>1</sup>, parties were not really able to differentiate themselves from one another and thus became effective agents of pluralism. Any educated observer could easily agree upon the elusiveness of political messages in postcommunism in general, upon the lack of political prospects and the diluted identity of the parties. Romanian postcommunism was no exception in this respect. But there was also a decisive structural reason for this condition. Besides a certain lack of political imagination, parties were somehow condemned to be indistinct: firstly, they were addressing an indistinct society, as society as such was not readable, at least not yet; on the other hand, the scope of the political messages uttered by parties had to be exhaustive, had to have the extent of the former socialist state, as state and society were still entangled. Thus, electoral democracy was confined into a conceptual vicious circle: it was supposed to read the political society through parties, while parties were meant to give society a political image of itself. Meanwhile, both of them remained illegible to each other.

Curiously enough, the Romanian solution to this political aporia was the institutionalization of electoral democracy through legal instruments and its transformation into a parties' democracy. As parties and society were apparently not able to meet each other on a socio-political ground in a legible and stable manner, the rendezvous was institutionalized. And it was of course institutionalized by those parties which were already acting in Parliament. By the mid 1990s, a new and radically different set of authoritative answers was given to the initial basic questions of the regime. In the terms of the Romanian legislation in the matter, parties ceased to be voluntary associations of citizens sharing distinct political ideas and creeds in order to become national agencies replicating the administrative framework and functional hierarchy of the state, compelled to ensure the elective character of the regime<sup>2</sup>.

Intended initially to be subjects and actors of representation, parties thus turned into public institutions of the regime whose official mission was not to constitute the political community anymore, but simply to govern. They became governing agencies validated at the polls, called to bring citizens to the ballots in order to get out of the electoral process stable governments. But what was to be governed then? The question opens another narrative of Romanian democracy, one interrogating the social rationale and the societal core of parties by addressing the other major postcommunist disjunction, the one of state and society.

The core task of the so called "Revolution" was the safeguarding of the institutional and functional integrity of the socialist State. Politically coherent and surprisingly undisputed among the emergent parties as it was, this task quickly became untenable in policy terms. By virtue of its ideological grounds and politi-

<sup>1</sup> For an account of the electoral history of Romanian party politics, see Cristian PREDA, *Partide și alegeri în România postcomunistă: 1989-2004*, Nemira, București, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> The Romanian legislation of 1996 and 2003 transformed parties into legal entities of a public character, alongside the state institutions and the territorial communities. Against the promise of public funding, both laws held the parties under the obligation of having a minimal membership of 10 000, respectively 25 000, to endorse a predetermined organizational structure and to regularly participate into national elections. Failure to comply may lead to the legal dissolution of the party.

cal claims, the Romanian socialist state was exhaustive, penetrating the whole social body, and animated by a somehow mechanical vision on government inspired by Leninism. Or, in this respect, the fall of communism allowed primarily for as a sudden outburst of civil disobedience: not merely social unrest – meetings, rallies, all those forms of collective protest typical for the 1990s –, but diffuse, tacit, yet substantial social disobedience. In other words, the fall of communism led first of all to the surge of ungovernability<sup>1</sup>. Virtually on the spot, Romanian society became highly mobile, capable to tacitly or explicitly escape the constraints of the former socialist government while simultaneously calling for government. In other words, postcommunist political leaders were striving to save the institutional integrity of the state, whilst the means and devices of government shaped during socialism were rapidly turning inadequate in face of a society illegible, if not even unreachable<sup>2</sup>. The rationale of government routinized during socialism was abruptly broken.

Postcommunism used to be usually understood as a process of reform and privatization: reshaping the allocation system of resources in order to move from a planned economy to a market economy. Politically speaking, that meant separating state and society by dismantling the infrastructural dimension<sup>3</sup> of the former socialist system, its vast integrative social networks, while striving to govern an ungovernable society on the whole in order to engender a renewed space of satisfaction of needs.

Romanian parties in government during postcommunism were not only the political subjects of this process of disjunction of state and society. They were also and chiefly its organizational byproduct. Their electoral and political appeal, very uneven, rested on their capacity to practically fill the gap unfold by this dynamics of structural separation by way of addressing society through strategies of selective distribution of divisible benefits. In this respect, internally mobilized parties<sup>4</sup>, *i.e.* parties capable to mobilize bureaucratic knowledge and skills, and thus engage in patronage networks, had a certain strategic advantage.

Ungovernability added a new implicit set of responses to the basic questions of the regime: parties became distributive agencies of the public resources rendered available by this unraveling of state and society; they were basically made of state bureaucratic expertise; they were meant to ensure selective social integration through patronage networks. And they were meant to be productive: productive of a renewed society to be politically represented thereafter.

Were those answers destined to endure and to finally forge an operational definition of the new Romanian democracy? By mid-2000s, the process of this double disjunction was mainly over. The operative solutions made up during postcommunism turned out to have had eventually a double consequence: they produced a heteronymous political regime, resting on a patrimonial and clientelistic

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<sup>1</sup> Richard ROSE, *Governing the Ungovernability. A Skeptical Inquiry*, "Studies in Public Policy" series, Center for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, no. 1, 1977.

<sup>2</sup> An useful insight into the issue of the legibility of society in the eyes of the state is provided by James C. SCOTT, *Seeing Like a State. How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Michael MANN, *The Sources of Social Power*, vol. II, *The Rise of Classes and Nation-states. 1760-1914*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge & New York, 1993, p. 59.

<sup>4</sup> Martin SHEFTER, *Political Parties and the State. The American Historical Experience*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ., 1994.

administration, inhabited by parties entrenched in the state bureaucracy as well as in the corporate networks engendered by postcommunism, less and less careful with respect to political representation and having less and less public resources to distribute; they brought also about a society more and more autonomous in its invisibility and less and less willing to let itself be represented by parties and politics at large. The initial postcommunist process of the double disjunction finally produced an unintended alternative rift: between the political regime and society. From mid-2000s, populism seems to be the next pragmatic answer given by Romanian parties in order to fill it circumstantially.