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# Independents in the Local Politics of Post-Communist Romania

ION ENACHE

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

It is an extensively accepted truth that parties are the main actors in modern liberal democracies[1]. However, the last twenty years have seen a number of significant independent actors emerge in more than a few political systems worldwide. In an attempt to investigate the rise of non-party actors we analyse the case of independent competitors in Central and Eastern Europe elections. More precisely, this paper aims to scrutinize the issue of independent candidatures addressed in the specific setting of post-communist Romanian local politics. We intend to explore a topic which has been greatly ignored by scholars, despite its obvious contribution to the modernization of the electoral pace of Eastern European countries. Independents represent more than occasional appearances at various electoral cycles, they offer a measure of the state of the party system at large. This is specifically why an attempt at addressing the presence of independent politicians in the particular situation of the third wave of democratization might give us a better impression of the maturity of the electoral system and also of the success of the democratic changes.

Two decades after the breakdown of communist regimes, parties and party systems throughout Eastern European polities still undergo extreme internal transformations. During the period of post-communist transition, many of these traditionally dominant parties have seen their vote shares drop under the weight of accusation of unrepresentativeness and endemic corruption[2]. Public rejection of party politics created an opening in the electoral market for independent political entrepreneurs, whose points of access in local politics are not dependent on party affiliation, but rather on their ability to present themselves as viable alternatives to the traditional parties by emphasizing local issues and their distinction from party elites.

Independent politicians represent a particular manifestation of post-communist politics which deserves further investigation, especially due to their recurrence in the local elections. Commonly, the local office is the first and decisive stepping-stone to higher elected positions of public trust, with local elections profoundly altering the course of national politics; such was the case of the office of the general mayor of Bucharest which served as departing point for various positions in the central

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[1] Arend LIJPHART, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*, Yale University Press, New Heaven, 2000, p. 25.

[2] Tom GALLAGHER, *The Balkans in the New Millennium – in the Shadow of War and Peace*, Routledge, London, pp. 186-187.

administration[1]. We believe this to be an additional argument for the importance of local level politics and for treating independent candidatures in this specific setting with extensive attention, together with the observations that voters tend to form their political preference at the local level and to maintain it for mainstream elections and also that local elections might be instrumented as barometers of national political trends, because it helps politicians at large determine what matters most to voters[2].

Despite the vivid importance of local elections in Romanian politics, the local voting literature appears limited, while mostly integrating the national outlook. Similarly, the discipline seems excessively preoccupied with presidential elections and leaves local politics largely untouched in the realm of party studies and electoral politics[3]. Compiling an orderly review of the literature led us to the identification of only a handful of studies that have attempted to question the elements of local elections and of even fewer that scrutinize the particular place occupied by independents. Still, these studies are rather distant from the Eastern European region and we can hardly say much about what motivates certain politicians to run as independents, or about the value of incumbency over first-time independents, or about the importance of financial support in winning votes, or whether personal qualifications of individual candidates can compensate for the lack of party backing. Another issue we observed during our attempt was represented by the insufficiency of studies which go beyond casual partisan and socioeconomic features of the voting process, or of analyses that follow independent leaders which manage to capture office not only during their electoral effort, but all throughout their mandate. Thirdly, limited considerations exist regarding the voting behaviour for local elections, keeping in mind the basic fact that this problematic has been recursively addressed especially in those studies in which national politics are scrutinized[4]. Most probably this has happened because of the inadequate amount of existing data and equally because of the preference of numerous authors for solo cross-sectional analysis. Therefore, one purpose of this study would be to address these matters preponderantly from an Eastern European perspective. Namely, this would mean to analyse what motivates certain political actors to run as independents, in what way these types of independent candidatures are different from partisan campaigning and to question how they manage to mobilize the needed support in this particular context. Our main question refers to what fuels independent candidatures in party-controlled political systems? We intend to accomplish this rather daunting task by analysing the recurrence of independent candidacies at local elections which have been organized in post-communist Romania between 1992 and 2008. For that matter, we believe that post-communist Romania represents an illustrative application of independent politics particularly because its particular electoral setting is not directly conducive to independent candidacies. Nonetheless, despite this fact, independent entries have occurred with more or less success during

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[1] IDEM, *Theft of a Nation. Romania since Communism*, Hurst, London, 2005, p. 170.

[2] James D. KING, "Comparing Local and Presidential Elections", *American Politics Research*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1981, pp. 277-290.

[3] Arthur H. MILLER, Martin P. WATTENBERG, Oksana MALANCHUK, "Schematic Assessments of Presidential Candidates", *American Political Science Review*, vol. 80, no. 2, 1986, pp. 521-540.

[4] Craig GOODMAN, Gregg R. MURRAY, "Do You See What I See? Perceptions of Party Differences and Voting Behavior", *American Politics Research,* vol. 35, no. 6, 2007, pp. 905-931.

the past two decades. Mayoral, local council and county council elections will be our main targets, with special attention reserved for those areas where most independent candidatures were articulated. Similarly, we will not ignore the political trajectories of independents following their election, especially as we believe it to be decisive for depicting the political performance of independent actors.

Segments of the population and demands usually excluded from consideration by highly centralized and self-absorbed national parties identified an alternative means to voice their grievances thanks to independent politicians. With questions about roads, schools and trash pickup dominating local elections, local notabilities found it possible to have a say in an area usually monopolized by political parties. This particular setting was intensely exploited by independents during the last two decades. And, despite constrains imposed against them by the party-dominated electoral system, these independent political actors managed to advance their candidatures against party competitors. Here, we need to identify what made this particular situation possible. Was it the personal appeal of independents, the electorate's desire for viable alternatives to party politics or it was more of an exceptional setting which favoured independent standings? Essentially, the phenomenon of independent candidatures challenges the commonly accepted concepts in party research and particularly, raises questions about the organizational advantages of parties and doubts the dominant role of party structures as representation mediums. The widely spread belief that parties as organizational vehicles represent the best means for individual actors to obtain electoral gains has increasingly become the subject of critique since both the decline of the party identification model and the rise of anti-party sentiment left established parties increasingly unpopular among electorates[1]. This is not to say that partisan politics is becoming redundant in the proximity of independence; instead, we plan to investigate what might encourage independents to challenge a political setting otherwise uniformly subject to partisan supremacy.

## *Research Approach and Strategy*

This paper sets out to explore and understand the peculiarities of independent candidatures at local level, in an Eastern European post-communist setting. It focuses on the development of this particular type of politicians in societies that are moving away from the communist derail, and soughs to analyse independents' specific place in the post-communist establishment. Through the research, the project aims to highlight the dynamics of local independence by approaching its main actors, the politicians who ran as independents and, using this particular label, managed to get into office. The main objective, as well as providing an insight into the rationale behind the individuals which enter politics on their own, is to deliver an analysis of the local context where independents advance their candidatures and of the general legal framework so as to better discriminate between the advantages and drawbacks of this particular political habitat for independent politicians.

For better understanding why politicians chose the independent path to office we interviewed thirty independent politicians who participated in the last local electoral

[1] Diana OWEN, Jack DENNIS, "Anti-partyism in the USA and Support for Ross Perot", *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 29, no. 3, 1996, pp. 383-401.

moment organized in Romania, namely in the June 2008 elections. We believe such an investigation might offer fundamental insight regarding independents' motivation to get involved in local politics without any sort of party support and can provide us with a more general impression on the dimension of political independence in post-communist Romania. Using political autobiography as main research method, a total of thirty interviews were conducted with independent politicians elected for the office of mayor, selected randomly from within the public database provided by the Electoral Authority. These interviews form the primary empirical data of the study. They took place from April 2010 to May 2010. Particularly, the interviews were open-ended, as this allowed for the interviewers to express their ideas, thoughts, and memories freely, using their own words. The interviews were supplemented by many other informal discussions with those involved in local politics as independents, together with consistent monitoring of existing official sources on independent candidatures. The interview material was thematically approached, the results being analysed in the empirical part of our paper. Our analysis employed as dependent variable the total number of votes received by each candidate and generally his or hers political reach, whereas the independent ones consisted of candidate's personal characteristics, political resources and endorsements as well as the political following. Ultimately, the control variables were represented by the number of candidates who run in each election together with numbers that stand for the voter turnout. Electoral campaign served as unit of analysis, data being collected for each election year on the total votes received by independents and translated to the size of their political followership which we measured by the comparing independents' scores to the total numbers. Also we employed a variety of personal indicators obtained from the interviews conducted with the candidates, their official profiling on their promotional materials and in the local media. The data are drawn from observing five successive mayor, local council and county council elections between 1992 and 2008. During this period numerous independent candidates participated in local campaigning, with a total of 1229 mayor nominations won, and almost 6000 councillors' mandates accorded to independents. A breakdown of these campaigns shows that, despite the decrease of the general scores obtained by independents, independent politicians managed to get re-elected on various occasions. We also met some exceptional situations where independents established a monopoly in those respective localities. In the next parts of our research we will attempt to advance various explanatory interpretations for this precise situation.

Our analysis will focus on three different electoral levels with independence occurrences – elections for the mayor's office and for the local and county councils. Drawing from the existing literature a number of key questions were identified which guided the structure of the interviews and the analysis that followed. Together with the qualitative data we plan to obtain from the interviews, in order to demonstrate the empirical relevance of independents in Romanian local politics we refer to the details on vote, seat and candidate share obtained by independents in local elections held between 1992 and 2008. Observing the often significant presence of independents, with several cases when they won over fifty percent of the vote, we can rightfully asses the validity of our selection.

For the purpose of the present examination we start from the basic observation that party supremacy is under serious revision especially at the local level, where ordinary citizens make up their electoral decision based on daily issues, rather than on political platforms. Consequently, independents see their chance of success being

helped by both this relative decline of electoral parties, as well by the increased electoral volatility in modern party democracies[1]. It remains to verify to which extent these presumptions apply as well to the polity under scrutiny here.

As architects of electoral system, the dominant political parties made their best to assure their prevalence in the party system. Due to the specific exigencies of the electoral competition the monopoly of political parties is preserved, to the disadvantage of independent interventions[2]. Nonetheless, despite the all-encompassing partisan framework in nowadays politics, independents manage to voice their interests and some succeed to win sympathies of the electorate. In order to take our investigation further, several questions are needed: How do independents manage to convince the voters of their trustworthiness? And what motivates these candidates to choose the independent path to getting in office in the first place? What makes independent candidates prone to survive electoral quarrels, even as they might seem disadvantaged by their initial lacking of a coherent party structure? Is there a direct relationship between non-partisanship and the negative views concerning the parties' role in democratic politics? Is winning elections in the particular case of independents more about contextual factors, than actually about attributes inherent to the political system? Similarly, should we expect younger generations to feel more close to independents? One puzzling question which first needs answering would be why do independents basically regard the parties as irrelevant in the search for public office? Can it be because they fail to procure a party nomination or because their political career discriminates fundamentally against partisan affiliation? Certainly independent identifications are motivated by distinct features, but we believe that a focal point exists. Starting from these convergent traits of independent candidatures we intend to identify also how do independents relate to party counter candidates and what sort of rhetoric they employ against them. Another question should also be answered, namely why does the electorate show appetite for a virtually unknown candidate who can hardly compete with the organizational advantages of candidates supported by political parties? Subsequently, some authors argue that independent candidacies seem to be mainly fuelled by party detachment, with voters expressing their grievances mainly against specific parties and not necessarily against the concept of parties *per se*[3]. Might this mean that independents have limited electoral resonance in today's politics of post-communist polities? Likewise, what could best explain the variation in the electoral reach of independent candidates? Are independent candidates habitually more circumstance-dependent than party actors? We will attempt to provide these questions with an answer starting from the observation that, unquestionably, the ability of independents to win votes is not carved in stone, facing significant variations not only from one scrutiny to another in different electoral districts, but also within the same constituency. This is especially true as individual politicians don't enjoy a party brand, and manage to obtain at best low scores of the so-called "captive electorate"[4]. But despite this obvious drawback of political

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[1] Michael MARSH, "Candidates or Parties? Objects of Electoral Choice", *Party Politics*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2007, pp. 500-527.

[2] Liam WEEKS, "Independents: a case-study", in Kris DESCHOUWER (ed.), *New Parties in Government: in Power for the First Time,* Routledge, London, 2008, pp. 143-144.

[3] Dawn BRANCATI, "Winning Alone: The Electoral Fate of Independent Candidates Worldwide", *Journal of Politics*, vol. 70, no. 3, 2008, pp. 648–662.

[4] *Ibidem*.

independence, there are vivid examples of constituencies lost by political parties in favour of independent contenders. Equally, the unpredictability encompassed in political independence makes our scrutiny as necessary as it can serve as a test of the maturity of our political system.

Without the label and without any financial backing of political parties independents face numerous obstacles winning political office. The ability of independent candidates to gather votes varies from constituency to constituency and even within the ranks of the same constituency[1]. Therefore, one problem would be identifying what might explain this disparity in the electoral potency of independent candidates. A first step in an attempt to address this problematic would be to identify the relevant texts which try to scrutinize the issue of independent candidatures.

Studying independent candidatures turns us to reviewing a literature dominated by two-dimensional constructions afar from our region of interest. Most identified approaches draw their conclusions from a biased understanding of independent elites, whose specific characteristics are identified by opposing them to political parties. Or, it is quite difficult to comprehend the true nature of political independence by simply comparing it to its partisan counterpart and disregarding its intrinsic incentives. For that reason, our present attempt will depart from this party-centred understanding of independency so that to reach some appreciations on political independence from a more autonomous outlook.

Our attempt at approaching the issue of independent candidatures from a comparative perspective led us to identifying the existing case studies on Australian independents by Elim Papadakis and Clive Bean[2], analyses of the British acceptance of independent candidatures, those focused on Canadian politics such as that compiled by Éric Bélanger[3], the Japanese account of Robin Le Blanc[4], a Norwegian case[5], or some limited examples investigating the Russian situation – here we chiefly refer to the leading paper written by Robert Moser[6]. Many of our available literature targeted peculiarities of independent candidatures within the American presidential competition[7] and in the context of minor and third parties[8]. There are important structural transformations going on in Eastern European politics particularly

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[1] Susan HERBST, *Politics at the Margin: Historical Studies of Public Expression Outside the Mainstream*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1994, pp. 70-71.

[2] Elim PAPADAKIS, Clive BEAN, "Independents and Minor Parties: The Electoral System", *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 30, no.1, 1995, pp. 97-110.

[3] Éric BÉLANGER, "Antipartyism and Third-party Vote Choice: A Comparison of Canada, Britain, and Australia", *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 37, no. 9, 2004, pp. 1054-1078.

[4] Robin LE BLANC, "Rebuilding the Electoral Connection: An Examination of the Origin and Potential of Anti-Party Electoral Movements in Japanese Local Politics". Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, 2004. http://allacademic.com/meta/p60767_index.html (accessed on 22.02.2010).

[5] Jacob AARS, Hans-Erik RINGKJØB, "Party Politicisation Reversed? Non-partisan Alternatives in Norwegian Local Politics", *Scandinavian Political Studies*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2005, pp. 161-181.

[6] Robert MOSER, "Independents and Party Formation: Elite Partisanship as an Intervening Variable in Russian Politics", *Comparative Politics*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1999, pp. 147-165.

[7] Steven J. ROSENSTONE, Roy L. BEHR, Edward H. LAZARUS, *Third Parties in America. Citizen Response to Major Party Failure*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1996.

[8] William SCHNEIDER, "Antipartisanship in America", in Vernon BOGDANOR (ed.), *Parties and Democracy in Britain and America*, Praeger, New York, 1984, pp. 103-144.

affecting local political leadership, but we can hardly assess these manifestations by referring solely to the remote examples mentioned before. More than in other fields of political science, we believe that our investigation on the dynamics of independent candidatures in local politics should foremost take into consideration the immediate environment, while make usage of the existing literature as a departing theoretical framework. Reviewing the existing literature on political independence we stumbled upon several approaches. Some scholars view independence from the behavioural point of view, and address voters which ditch their partisan affiliation in order to either split their ticket, or to switch from one party to another partisan formation or independent candidate[1]. These attempts view independent candidatures highly dependent on the structuring of the electorate, and put great emphasis on the personal traits of independent leaders. Others focus on dispositional provisions influencing political independence, and develop a typology of self-defined independents and independent candidates[2]. Our present academic endeavour attempts to navigate the elements of independence starting from the advantages presented by the latter approach. We should also keep in mind that, subscribing to the common belief that political parties are indispensable to modern democracy, most scholars consider independents as redundant or even opposing democratic practice[3]. Some academics such as Robert Moser believe independent candidates are responsible for lowering voter turnout because they fail to present voters with viable alternative policies; at the same time, other authors consider that independents are prone to affect representation particularly for poor and less educated strata[4]. In one of their common works, Brain Schaffner, Matthew Streb, and Gerald C. Wright agree that non-partisanship might indeed depress turnout and take their argument forward in saying that independent candidates are to be blamed for holding back challengers from defeating incumbents[5]. Conversely, other scholars think that independents contribute to the electoral success of less preferred candidates and even that they increase the saliency of the electoral race. On a more categorical tone, independent politicians are also accused by the same academics to interfere with the administration's stability to the point that they can induce deadlocks[6]. But, along with these less fortunate approaches, there is also the so-called "half-full view". Scholars which perceive in more bright colours the issue of independent candidates imply that they strengthen democracy by nurturing citizen's interest in politics and by voicing critiques, acutely needed for the restructuring of the establishment[7]. Nevertheless, despite these unilateral approaches on the issue of

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[1] Walter DeVRIES, V. Lance TARRANCE, *The Ticket-Splitter: A New Force in American Politics*, Eerdmans, Michigan, 1972, pp. 67-72.

[2] Paul R. ABRAMSON, John H. ALDRICH, Phil PAOLINO, David W. RHODE, "Third-Party and Independent Candidates in American Politics: Wallace, Anderson and Perot", *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 110, no. 3, 1995, pp. 349-367.

[3] *Ibidem*.

[4] Robert MOSER, "Independents and Party Formation...cit.", pp. 147-165.

[5] Brain F. SCHAFFNER, Matthew J. STREB, Gerald C. WRIGHT, "Teams without Uniforms: The Nonpartisan Ballot in State and Local Elections", *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2001, pp. 17-30.

[6] Arthur LUPIA, "Busy Voters, Agenda Control and the Power of Information", *American Political Science Review*, vol. 86, no. 2, 1992, pp. 390-403.

[7] Shanto IYENGAR, Adam F. SIMON, "New Perspectives and Evidence on Political Communication and Campaign Effects", *Annual Review of Psychology*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2000, pp. 149-169.

political independency, we consider that in order to approach this particular subject we need to assume a less biased viewpoint.

On what concerns our particular area of interest, the rise of independent candidates in recent politics of Eastern and Central European states has seldom been accompanied by the development of specific literature. Most contributions on the subject are consumed by depictions of failing candidacies, while more optimistic pieces are hardly to be taken into consideration as they provide an exaggerated account advocating independent politics. In most liberal democracies, almost all voters choose one party or another, with independent candidates receiving minuscule levels of support, if any[1]. This domination by parties is equally reflected in the literature on voting behaviour, where there has been very little research on why some voters choose to cast their ballot for independents[2]. Respectively, as independent politics have become fairly frequent after 1989 a new question emerges – why do voters show their support for independent candidates? This interrogation is to be addressed both for national politics and at sub-presidential level, precisely where independent candidates have their most significant impact. A possible answer could be the fact that citizens are increasingly searching for alternatives to traditional politics in an otherwise less visible part of politics: independents. Still, what about the motivations and behaviour of independent candidates – what makes them seek a highly risky alternative route to office? Scholars such as Timothy Colton argue that, for the overwhelming part of independents, their *raison d'être* is competing for the spoils of office[3]. We will further attempt to apply these methodologies to the Romanian case in our analysis of the peculiarities of independent candidatures in local post-communist politics. Nevertheless, we expect that our particular case at hand not to entirely correspond to any of these endeavours, keeping in mind the specific structure and the relative novelty of Eastern European democratic arrangements.

## *Voting for Independents*

The term "independent" is usually attributed to someone who is not affiliated with a political party[4]. Primarily, political independence encompasses the lack of the brand, the support and of the resources usually offered by a political party and, at the same time, it means pursuing a political path using own material resources, network of connections, know-how and political abilities[5]. Despite its underground position, independence responds entirely to the founding values of liberal democracies as it promotes political entrepreneurship and individual achievement to the best interest of the community. And contrarily to its accused centrifugal tendencies, political

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[1] Robert MOSER, "Independents and Party Formation...cit.", pp. 147-165.

[2] Donald GREEN, Bradley PALMQUIST, Eric SCHICKLER, *Partisan Hearts and Minds Political Parties and the Social Identities of Voters*, Yale University Press, New Heaven, 2002, p. 26.

[3] Timothy J. COLTON, "Transitional Citizens: Voters and Elections", in IDEM (ed.), *Post-Soviet Russia*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 43-59.

[4] Éric BÉLANGER, "Antipartyism...cit.", pp. 1054-1078.

[5] Allan G. JOHNSON, Frank BEALEY, *The Blackwell Dictionary of Political Science*, Blackwell Publishing, London, 1999, p. 163.

independence helps the renovation of the establishment and equally serves the reformation of partisan attitudes by highlighting the often unseen flaws within the establishment. Likewise, independency might vary across circumscriptions, being motivated by numerous different political gains and stimuli, and producing dissimilar political consequences. This is why identifying circumstantial traits of political independence is crucial for better understanding the phenomenon at large within the specific region selected for analysis.

From an ideological understanding, independents are not required to assume centrist positions, but simply to develop their own system of political references, liberated from the strains of a political party. In the most basic understanding, independence removes the party label from the ballot, the candidate using his or her name alone for identification, together with the appellative "independent candidate"[1]. For what concerns its qualitative attributes, the term independence might be understood as the lack of correspondence with partisan directives and as alternative to party candidacy – here, we have to mention that our thesis does exclude these so-called "party mavericks" that act largely independently from their party machinery[2]. We consider these party-dependent actors to display a faux type of independence, as it does involve neither the true attributes nor the strains of non-partisanship. Comparatively, genuine independence might surface as result of internal motivations of the political actor, without much relying on influences coming from the political framework or from the partisan setting. Usually, politicians annoyed by the current state of affairs get involved on their own in politics, attempting to bring their individual contribution to ameliorating the establishment[3]. Secondly, political independence can be triggered by severe dissatisfaction with the management done by representatives of political parties and in response to the corrupt ways proffered by partisan politicians. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the basic fact that independents candidates can be also recruited from partisan politics. Correspondingly, the literature sees former party members turned independent as representing quite scarce cases and being usually motivated by misunderstandings with former party colleagues[4]. Typically, these independency-motivating conflicts occur in the immediate period preceding elections being driven by the allocation of party nominations and by personal divergent interests[5]. It can equally be argued that the magnitude of the conflict helps the independency gather electoral momentum[6]. Conversely, we cannot overlook these particular recurrences by simply separating from the bulk of *per se* independent candidatures. Thus, a separate analysis of these so-called "recycled independents" seems intensively necessary.

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[1] Art. 34 Align 5, Law No. 35/2008 on the Election of the Members of the Romanian Parliament.

[2] Liam WEEKS, "When Parties Are Not the Only Party in Town: Independent Actors in Ireland", paper presented at the joint sessions of the European Consortium for Political Research, Nicosia, Cyprus, April 2006.

[3] Liam WEEKS, "Independents...cit." , p. 149.

[4] Elim PAPADAKIS, Clive BEAN, "Independents and Minor Parties...cit", pp. 97-110.

[5] James D. KING, "Comparing Local and Presidential Elections", cit., pp. 277-290.

[6] Brain F. SCHAFFNER, Matthew J. STREB, Gerald C. WRIGHT, "Teams without Uniforms...cit.", pp. 17-30.

On the electorate side, a trend toward not claiming allegiance to a political party is visible[1]. But we should also notice that measuring political independence by research institutes is only one way of tapping partisanship and we also must not ignore the basic fact that partisanship can go hand in hand with non-partisanship in the case of the same voter[2]. Or, in other words, partisanship is multidimensional and, according to some scholars such as Richard Katz or Arthur Miller and Martin Wattenberg, for a correct understanding of political independence we should employ several partisanship measures and regard national surveys only as one of the needed instruments for that particular affair[3].

Issue voting is expected to bring independents to the top preferences of the electorate. Together with partisan candidates' positions on the broad issues such as economic development and environmental protection, independents often address more topical issues such as controversial reforms or support towards various actions[4]. It's not simply enough to insulate the native effects of partisan politics such as bribery, inefficacies and rampant corruption in order to turn voter choice to independents. Nonetheless, managing to turn these particular issues into the centrepiece of the local race is vital to independents. Another occurrence, highly visible in the more recent post-communist elections in Romania, is that of the emergence of a significant block of potential voters which are mostly disconnected from politics, and which treat party organizations and party electioneering efforts with great indifference. These voters may thus be less susceptible respond to traditional political mobilization endeavours and, if they decide to get involved in any sort, end up being highly volatile in their electoral choice[5]. Structurally, this particular stratum of the electorate represents the main target for independents. Correspondingly, it can be argued that stirring the imagination of a substantial number of voters represents a demanding job for independents as compared to the easier path for party candidates who have the entire support of their organization, but, be that as it may, one could ask what makes independent candidates stick even after voters got a close look at them? One explanation might be the fact that they challenge the classical and often grimy understanding of politics[6].

Taking further the position presented by V.O. Key on the abandoning of established partisanships by unsatisfied voters, we introduce the stance that electoral mobility favours the independent vote[7]. Especially younger voters seem prone to quit their inherited partisan affiliation and to adopt independent electoral views. And,

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[1] Éric BÉLANGER, "Antipartyism...cit.", pp. 1054-1078.

[2] Richard KATZ, "The Dimensionality of Party Identification: Cross-national Perspectives", *Comparative Politics,* vol. 11, no. 2, 1979, pp. 147-163.

[3] Arthur H. MILLER, Martin P. WATTENBERG, "Measuring Party Identification: Independent or No Partisan Preference?", *American Journal of Political Science,* vol. 27, no. 1, 1983, pp. 106-121.

[4] Liam WEEKS, "Independents...cit." , p. 141.

[5] Elim PAPADAKIS, Clive BEAN, "Independents and Minor Parties...cit", pp. 97-110.

[6] David GILLESPIE, *Politics at the Periphery*, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, 1993, pp. 47-48.

[7] V.O. KEY, "The Responsible Electorate: Rationality in Presidential Voting 1936-1960", Harvard University Press, 1966, in Pierre BRECHON, *Partidele politice*, Romanian transl. by Marta Nora Țărnea and Adina Barvinschi, Eikon, Cluj-Napoca, 2004, pp. 142-143.

undeniably, conjecture plays a definitive role to all this[1]. Mainly because of the mobile character of the preferences of the voters, independents are forced to convince the electorate each time they present themselves at the polls. Therefore, winning the elections it's more about occasional voters in the case of independents. Still, judging after another component of voting behaviour, such as social category and education, a clear-cut delimitation cannot be easily made. Voting for independent candidates represents a highly volatile experience, which can be equally approached by low-income middle parts of the electorate as it can by higher-educated conservatives or even by older generations[2]. This is why voting independents might be rightfully catalogued as a highly circumstantial experience, being not that much about political habits as it can be about incidental decisions. But what motivates less faithful partisan voters to give their vote to independents? Is the political appeal of a particular candidate? Is it some radical transformation of the identity of the voter himself which occurred between elections? Is it the Internet? Or might the answer rely in the influence exerted by the mass-media? Or maybe it's more of a combination of all the above?

And what can be said the local independent voter? Firstly, we should notice that, because of their critical attitude towards party politics, voters which usually reject independent candidates at the national level might become motivated by more contextual reasoning at the local level – and turn to giving their vote to independent runners. This would mean that the local level of politics offers the best chance for independents to win, further potentiated by the legal provisions which make hardly open the national sphere of politics to independent competitors, by the insufficient development of the party system, the widespread distrust in political parties, and also by the negative connotations of party membership maintained from the era of communist dictatorship[3]. Similarly to other countries which use proportional representation, in Romania independent candidates can run successfully for office, at least theoretically. However, thus far independents have failed miserably to win nationwide elections and independent representatives surface only during the actual term of the Parliament. This was possible for those leaving their original parliamentary group which got them elected in the first place and chose independent path because of different arguments they had with their former party's leadership. Nevertheless, these recycled independents are highly susceptible to return to partisan politics, as their profile is highly prone to become incorporated in one of the competing parties' ranks[4]. Comparatively, it remains a commonly accepted fact that voters are more inclined towards political parties especially as party identification is one of those shortcuts heavily employed in elections. And in the particular case when independence interferes with accessibility, we must expect people to be more resilient to change their habits. Current theory on the matter, however, considers that, in lack of partisan closeness, the electorate will seek out other, more encompassing information on which

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[1] Phillips W. SHIVELY, "The Relationship between Age and Party Identification: A Cohort Analysis", *Political Methodology*, no. 6, 1979, pp. 437-446.

[2] Franco MATTEI, Richard G. NIEMI, "Unrealized Partisans, Realized Independents, and the Intergenerational Transmission of Partisan Identification", *Journal of Politics*, vol. 53, no. 1, 1991, pp. 161-174.

[3] Tom GALLAGHER, *Theft of a Nation*…cit., pp. 74-79.

[4] Daniel BARBU, *Republica absentă – politică și societate în România postcomunistă*, Nemira, București, 1999, p. 89.

to base their decision[1]. Voter decision making is visibly more difficult to manage for independents and in the case of less informed citizens this might even mean they lose their greatest information shortcut for making a cultivated vote. Some electors are expected to skip the election altogether, when they realise they are unable to determine clearly the differences between candidates or if they are little concerned to invest in time-consuming searches for pertinent information[2]. Those that eventually decide to express their political option might do that having in mind several other hints such as the politicians' familiarity, background and his or hers programme[3]. For that matter, electoral geography studies underline the strong importance of the social context for the voting decision adopted locally[4]. Voters actually find out about their options by word of mouth, from their peers at the workplace or during other forms of social interaction. Interpersonal information transfers are complemented by the electoral contamination by which voters match their voting preference to the characteristics of an area, irrespective of their personal characteristics[5]. Working at a micro-scale such as that of local elections obliges us to better comprehend the basic fact that an important effect is the closeness of voters to candidates. Namely, the nearer one lives to a candidate's home or has met him or her personally before, the more likely is one to vote for that candidate. This effect, which has been empirically proven by Liam Weeks and Aodh Quinlivan, might be extended in as much to affect those people that know somebody that have met the candidate[6]. This behaviour is explainable by admitting the fact that voters prefer someone they trust and from whom they hope to receive support in their dealings with the authorities. Equally, the position of a candidate's name on the ballot paper can have a significant effect in terms of the number of vote he or she receives. This is particularly true for low-profile elections where voters are less informed about the background of the contenders and for lower-placed positioned candidates such as independents. According to the provisions of the Romanian electoral law, independent candidates are placed at the bottom of the ballot following the order their candidatures were registered[7].

The structuring of the electoral system, the personalization of voting and the particular character of independent candidates contribute to the consolidation of independents as viable alternative to party politics. All the same, independents are considered to be context-driven, as it would be most unlikely for voters to stick to independents the same way party supporters do. Nonetheless, it is hard to assess what does happen to independent preferences, if they fade away during the lifetime of a generation or if they can be transmitted generically as family legacy. Whatever

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[1] Stuart ROTHENBERG, "The Politics of Independents", *The American Enterprise*, vol. 1, 1990, pp. 13-15.

[2] John ZALLER, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, p. 34.

[3] David GILLESPIE, *Politics at the Periphery*, cit., pp. 47-48.

[4] John Robert Victor PRESCOTT, *Political Geography*, Methuen and Co., London, 1972, pp. 85-88.

[5] Kevin R. COX, "The Neighbourhood Effect in Urban Voting Response Studies", in David SWEET (ed.), *Models of Urban Structure*, D.C. Heath, Boston, 1972, pp. 159-176.

[6] Liam WEEKS, Aodh QUINLIVAN, *All Politics is Local. A Guide to Local Elections in Ireland*, Collins Press, Cork, 2009, pp. 90-92.

[7] Art. 34 Align 5, Law No. 35/2008 on the Election of the Members of the Romanian Parliament.

might be the case, independent voting can be best understood as a deviant political attitude, an assumption recurrent in the literature[1].

## *Partisanship versus Independence*

Essentially all governments that have called themselves democracies have incorporated however limited the idea of partisan organization. Equally, when democracy is established, as was the case for Eastern European countries not long ago, what seems a normal initiative of the new regime was to reinstate party activity[2]. The existence of democracy is directly connected to free and fair elections, with political parties being inherent for a functional democracy. Limited to observance about the changing place of political parties in the political systems of contemporary world, any debate on an eventual restructuring of party systems, even one to incorporate the independent labelling, maintains nevertheless some sort of institutional embodiments of the manifesting party logic. Continuing our argumentation on the idea of systematic interpretation of partisanships, we must take in consideration the most visible feature of partisan change, namely the erosion of partisan attachments among large numbers of citizens. Explanations found in the literature either consider the shifts of voting patterns, or adopt the attitudinal stance, insisting upon the decay of partisan feelings[3]. Both explanations stand, and both identify the growth of political independence as a reaction. The repercussions of such mounting independence are still under debate. Some authors consider that actually the escalading independence is rather superficial, meaning that many of those that would embrace the independent tag might even end up leaning towards one party or another[4].

Given their centrality to modern democratic governance, the structuralism-dominated literature on transitions has tended to focus on the importance of party system consolidation, emphasizing the importance of the electoral system, that of elections and party building[5]. In the particular setting of Eastern European countries, their communist rule produced a strong antiparty sentiment among the elites and voters alike. The young Romanian party system makes no difference, as initial partisanships lacked a coherent social base, a firm organizational form and thorough ideological programme[6]. Especially at local level, the parties penetrated more difficult, and this is highly visible in the enhanced electoral scores obtained by independent candidates in the early years of the transition. On the one hand, parties are accused that they simply aim to increase their electoral score in order to get access to more resources and to satisfy the interests of their supporters. These catch-all parties exhibit

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[1] Arthur H. MILLER, Martin P. WATTENBERG, "Measuring Party Identification...cit.", pp. 106-121.

[2] Tom GALLAGHER, *Theft of a Nation*…cit., p. 23.

[3] Timothy J. COLTON, "Transitional Citizens...cit.", pp. 43-59.

[4] Jack DENNIS, "Changing Public Support for the American Party System", in William J. CROTTY (ed.), *Paths to Political Reform*, Heath, Lexington, 1980, pp. 35-66.

[5] Juan LINZ, Alfred STEPAN, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation. Southern Europe, South Africa, South America and Post-Communist Europe*, John Hopkins University Press, London, 1996, pp. 156-160.

[6] Tom GALLAGHER, *Theft of a Nation*…cit., p. 104.

an obvious degree of professionalization and find it easy to participate in a highly competitive political market. And especially because political parties which manage to attain electoral relevancy gain access to a series of advantages assured by the state such as public financing, political parties try to incorporate any available electoral entrance[1]. However, following Georges Lavau's rhetoric we are entitled to argue that political parties, however functional and inclusive, cannot represent and integrate every particularity and social tensions existing within a society[2]. Here is where independents enter the scene, as they fulfil the need for political variety by speaking on behalf of those excluded by mainstream politics.

Despite the prevalence of several main national political parties, the party system does not replicate wholly at all levels of the political competition. Regional specificities are commonly encountered, with numerous regional players having a say in local politics. The level of local politics represents a niche prone to be exploited by independent candidates, especially as the electoral system offers them several concessions to engage in the electoral competition[3]. Comparatively, at a time when voter turnout continues to decline together with the widespread lack of civic involvement, independent candidates offer the greatest personification of the resentment that many citizens feel toward major parties[4]. If political parties are universally understood as indispensable institutions for the functioning of democratic systems, one might argue that candidatures of independent politicians diversify the political options and contribute decisively to the maturation of the polity. Going further with our argumentation, dysfunctional parties might favour corruption and stagnation. This is why in any competitive democracy political independency is seen even more as relevant the moment political parties stop acting as regulatory responsible institutions and start affecting the very sanity of the political establishment. This negative approach towards political parties has been challenged by Martin P. Wattenberg, who considers that citizens do not immediately reject partisan structures, but rather they consider them less relevant in solving their uttermost important issues[5]. Therefore, rising levels of independence are not directly linked to sentiments of mistrust or scepticism expressed by the electorate towards political parties, but rather they are motivated by highly contextual reoccurrences[6].

Distancing themselves from partisanships, independents are believed to face several obstacles in their efforts of running for office as compared to the widely-accepted advantages enjoyed by party-supported candidates[7]. In the first place, independents lack any partisan support when they decide to forward their candidacy. Secondly, they rely mainly on a scarce amount of resources originating mainly from own sources and from a handful of supporters. To a similar extent, the voting mechanisms, the electoral context and financial resources play an equally important role in determining how

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[1] Pierre BRECHON, *Partidele politice*, cit., p. 102.

[2] Georges LAVAU, "Partis et systèmes politiques: interactions et fonctions", *Revue canadienne de science politique*, 1969, in *Ibidem*, pp. 125-127.

[3] Liam WEEKS, Aodh QUINLIVAN, *All Politics is Local...* cit., p. 112.

[4] David SEARS, Nicholas VALENTINO, "Event-Driven Political Socialization and the Preadult Socialization of Partisanship", *Political Behaviour*, no. 20, 1998, pp. 127-154.

[5] Martin P. WATTENBERG, *The Decline of American Political Parties: 1952-1980*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1984, p. 89.

[6] *Ibidem*.

[7] David GILLESPIE, *Politics at the Periphery*, cit., p .19.

well an independent can do at the polls[1]. Authors such as Arnold Fleischmann and Lana Stein which drew their conclusions from the national-level politics believe incumbency to be equally critical in local elections as well. Namely, those who have run previously in local races have the first chance in as much as their mandate has satisfied the expectations of their electorate[2]. But the system can be also forced by new candidates, and one of the main facilitator for new politicians to successfully advance their candidature is money. Spending cannot be ignored for local elections according to a growing number of studies from various countries, which attest the importance of local campaign funding as a determining factor of electoral outcomes, together with local canvassing and volunteer activities[3]. Though, since independents cannot rely on party funding for their political endeavours, their main sources for financial support are donations, which add to existing personal resources to finance their campaigns and, if legalized, to state subsidies. For example, according to the existing legislation on funding, Romanian independents do not enjoy public financing as they are not allowed to receive public budget subventions unlike political parties, their only source being donations[4]. At the local level the costs of running an electoral campaign are expected to be lower than the sums spent on national campaigns, with the similar predominance of political parties to be manifested. Within this particular setting, independents are expected to have the advantage of a smaller electoral population involving smaller costs. Nevertheless, who contributes financially to an independent's campaign, and more importantly, why? Local businesses are identified as the main contributors by most scholars, while small donations are rather limited[5]. Together with the direct costs of modern politics, so-called administrative resources such as special treatment by the local government, funding provided illicitly from the state budget, free usage of state facilities, help political parties strengthen their position alongside indirect state subsidies such as free broadcasting and subsidies for parliamentary groups. Hence, the lack of a clear set of rules and strict control over political funding favours the incorporation of local political actors to centralized partisan structures and leaves little space for political independence to manifest[6].

Party affiliation is a highly complex deal, and this was especially true in the first days of post-communism characterized by high scores in party volatility. Especially then the issue of truly admitting partisan status emerged, because not all candidates who belonged to party structures were also formally members of those respective parties, especially in 1992. This situation appeared as some candidates were afraid that openly assuming their party affiliation would alienate potential voters which remembered the rotten nature of the socialist party-state. These candidates enjoyed the support of various political formations, even they ran as independents, and, as soon

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[1] Robert MOSER, "Independents and Party Formation...cit.", pp. 147-165.

[2] A. Clarke HAGENSICK , "Influences of Partisanship and Incumbency on A Nonpartisan Election", *Western Political Quarterly*, vol. 24, 1964, pp. 719-730.

[3] Caty R. KENNETH, Munroe EAGLES, "Do Local Campaigns Matter? Campaign Spending, the Local Canvass and Party Support in Canada", *Electoral Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1999, pp. 69-87.

[4] Law No. 334 from 17 July 2006 on financing the activity of political parties and of electoral campaigns.

[5] Caty R. KENNETH, Munroe EAGLES, "Do Local Campaigns Matter?...cit.", pp. 69-87.

[6] Steven D. ROPER, "Campaign Finance in South East Europe: The Case of Romania". Paper presented at the Workshop on Party Funding and Campaign Finance in Central and Eastern Europe, Open Society Institute, Budapest, 2-3 November 2001.

as they got elected, they admitted their partisanship by joining the political party who supported them[1]. Therefore, we should be cautious when approaching independents' performance in the early days of post-communism, particularly because this would mean to overestimate the number of independents. The evidence to support this view is quite impressive in present-day Eastern European post-communist politics. Strong partisans are fewer, spilt-ticket voting amplified, and parties lost much of their appeal, while scarce numbers of independents made their presence felt in local and national politics.

## *The Matter of the Electoral System*

Independents face a hard time competing in a dysfunctional political framework, especially if the rules of the electoral technique were set to favour big political runners. Equally, political tradition plays a crucial role, influencing the performance of otherwise marginal contenders such as small parties and nonpartisan players. Because most partisan systems give an extra credit to large parties, the risk of under-representation of minor voices and that of affecting independents' performances is highly present and forces independent candidatures to adapt[2]. Every now and then a minor candidate can win the elections. But for most independent adventurers, experience shows that the electoral system in most democratic countries nowadays favours a party-centric competition for national elections combined with candidate-dominated elections occurring mostly at regional and local levels[3]. Of course, exceptions exist and confirm the fact that independent candidates are prone to make the best of all those small opportunities the electoral system has to offer.

Though, opening the rigid partisan establishment to small players at the expense of big political interests is not an easy thing to do. This is highly visible for post-communist politics – here, political institutions were designed by plagiarizing Western political practice, but the transformations were accompanied by the incomplete adopting of political pluralism outside the party realm[4]. Nevertheless, because independents act in the same institutional environment as big parties do we should not ignore the basic fact that institutional mechanisms that regulate political competition and influence the nature of the partisan system were designed with the parties in mind[5]. Then again, independents depend greatly on various characteristics of the electoral system, such as seats allocation rules or ballot access requirements (e.g. deposits or lists of signatures). Within a highly competitive electoral system, lax ballot access requirements permits independents and small parties to enter the race, while in rigid polities, independents might even be banned altogether for entering certain types of elections[6]. Together with ballot access requirements, other intrinsic features

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[1] Frode BERGLUND, "Party Identification...cit.,", pp. 84-105.

[2] Hermann SCHMITT, Soren HOLMBERG, "Political Parties in Decline?", in Hans-Dieter KLINGEMANN, Dieter FUCHS (eds.) *Citizens and the State*, cit., pp. 95-133.

[3] Stefano BIANCHINI, "Political Culture and Democratization in the Balkans", in Geoffrey PRIDHAM, Tom GALLAGHER, *Experimenting with Democracy: Regime Change in the Balkans*, Routledge, London, 2000, pp. 67-71.

[4] Tom GALLAGHER, *Theft of a Nation*… cit., p.52.

[5] David C. VALENTINE, John R. VAN WINGEN, "Partisanship, Independence, and the Partisan Identification Question" *American Politics Quarterly*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1980, pp. 165-186.

[6] Robert MOSER, "Independents and Party Formation...cit.", pp. 147-165.

of the electoral system which dominates certain electoral competitions influence the electoral performance of independent candidates. Among these, the extent to which a competition is candidate-centred or party driven is crucial for independents[1]. We should also notice that the dimension of the electoral district is vital for independents, as large circumscriptions are difficult to cover[2].

Furthermore, the type of voting system constitutes a major factor in shaping the configuration of any political system and represents one of the most vital institutional features to discriminate against small political actors. According to its design, mechanisms, effects at different levels, one can distinguish numerous variations of electoral systems, each of them developing specific relationships with the larger institutional framework. The same variables which influence the competition between political parties have significant repercussion for independents – namely, the electoral formula employed, the ballot structure (whether single or multiple choices can be expressed for candidates or parties) and the district magnitude[3]. Electoral system design is of critical importance because it influences the way in which constituencies are drawn, the design of ballot papers, how votes are counted, and numerous other aspects of the electoral process. With similar effects can be credited other administrative aspects of elections such as the nomination of candidates or the registration of voters, but their influence is believed to be rather limited for independents. And particularly because the design of the voting system is often chosen at the discretion of established political parties, electoral laws tend to be specially made so that they protect partisan interests. This manipulation of the electoral system by an unscrupulous majority usually encourages the performance of political parties and disadvantage individual candidates. Likewise, despite the fact voting systems are *de jure* democratic, being guided by key principles such as fair representation, transparency and inclusiveness, the practice shows they actually limit the chances of small political parties and of independents[4].

Widely encountered throughout Europe, proportional representation systems tend to be more permissive and to encourage a greater diversity of parties and of individual political contenders[5]. Allowing multiple ballot choices, proportional systems are more likely to facilitate the success of small political formations, and hence open electoral opportunities for independent candidates. This argument is highly criticized by Russian-originating studies which argue that proportional representation systems help party system further consolidate[6]. Comparatively, majority and plurality systems are expected to decrease the electoral strength of independent candidates and small political formations, due to the way seats are being distributed favouring large competitors and making voters turn away from marginal candidates. Some authors maintain the idea that, because it dampers the connection between parties and voters, and makes voters more candidate-aware than label-dependent, majority and plurality systems encourage independent candidates[7]. Nevertheless, it's hard

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[1] *Ibidem*, pp. 147-165.
[2] Dawn BRANCATI, "Winning Alone...cit.", pp. 648-662.
[3] *Ibidem*.
[4] *Ibidem*.
[5] Josep M. COLOMER, *Political Institutions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003, p. 44.
[6] Robert MOSER, "Independents and Party Formation...cit.", pp. 147-165.
[7] Arend LIJPHART, *Patterns of Democracy*… cit, pp. 141-146.

to assess the recurrence of these theses, when only relying on single-case studies of independent candidatures. Certain commentaries regarding the confrontation between the dynamics of independent candidatures and that of certain subtypes of electoral systems are well-needed here. We presume that any electoral circumstance which puts a great emphasis on the candidate itself and its personal attributes and neglects the party labelling is creating opportunities for independents. Similarly, threshold is equally important for the electoral performance of independent candidates, with lower electoral threshold helping parties recuperate the disadvantage they face as compared to members of political parties. In the case of local elections, the two-round voting system employs winner-takes-all voting method for the first round of voting, and, if no candidate is able to receive an absolute majority of votes, the two candidates which obtained the highest scores take part in the second round run-off ballot[1]. As the practice shows it, ballotage has been affected by various practices of tactical voting: voters go for the most popular candidates or, *au contraire*; they rather support a weak candidate in the first round of voting, so that their real preferred candidate has a better chance in the runoff[2]. This latter practice might help independents credited by opinion polls with little chance to gain momentum and enter second round. The presence of a distinctive electoral system might provide an explanation for the success of independent candidates in a particular setting according to some scholars[3]. But this is not entirely true for our case, if we take into consideration the fact that the provisions of the electoral system remained arguably the same since the first local elections, while the vote for independents diminished considerably over time[4]. One explanation for this brutal decreasing might be the maturation of the partisan system, which managed to capture most of the voting preferences, while limiting the electoral performance of small competitors.

We attempted to assess the electoral strength of independent candidates by comparing the percentage of candidates that present themselves using the independent label in elections, the percentage of votes that independents receive and the number of mandates captured by independents. Therefore, facing the numbers in the Romanian case, we end up with these numbers as an average for the past five electoral cycles: out of the bulk successful candidatures, independents won 10.45% of the vote and about 9.58% of the available mandates. Comparing these figures with those Dawn Brancati obtains in his comparative study on political independence we can place Romania on the weaker spectrum of independent politics[5]. For Romanian local politics a proportional representation voting system was in place since the 1992 elections in the case of local and county councils, while a two-tier majority voting system is used for electing mayors. This inconsistency between the types of elections used at local level was further extended in 2008, when a new electoral law opened to public will the function of president of county council, via a single tier majority vote. And precisely because of the nature of this varied arrangement highly dependent

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[1] Dawn BRANCATI, "Winning Alone...cit.", pp. 648-662.

[2] William POUNDSTONE, *Why Elections Aren't Fair (and What We Can Do About It)*, Macmillan, London, 2009, pp. 34-38.

[3] Dawn BRANCATI, "Winning Alone...cit.", pp. 648-662.

[4] Paul G. LEWIS, *Political Parties*...cit., pp. 81-83.

[5] Dawn BRANCATI, "Winning Alone...cit.", pp. 648-662.

on the political colour of the centre majority, numerous vicious situations surfaced among central and local authorities in the past two decades.

## *Independents by Law*

According to the Romanian electoral laws, independents are seen as electoral competitors in legislative, presidential and local elections. Compared to the legal instability which characterizes the concept of political party in post-communist Romania, the legal definition given to independent candidates was rather constant all throughout the period of transition. Nevertheless, political independence is interpreted in legal terms as the monopoly of individuals which advance on their own political candidacies and receive the support of a particular number of voters[1]. Following this logic independence defines itself using the personal criteria combined with the popular dimension of political support.

In line with the Romanian standards, parliamentary mandates are accorded using uninominal majoritarian vote distributed proportionally. At this particular level of politics, independent candidates are allowed to enter legislative elections having them provide a minimal number of signatures from their supporters, number which is decided for each uninominal college, but has to equal at least 4% of the number of the voters registered in their respective college, with no less than 2000 names for the lower chamber and double for the Senate[2]. Also, the law stipulates that independents running for a legislative mandate, similarly to party-supported candidates, need to make proof of a deposit consisting of the amount of five minimum national wages. If these independent candidates manage to get at least 20% of the total amount of valid votes for the college where they competed, the deposit is returned to them. According to the same piece of law, independents have access to the public services of radio and television, proportionally with their electoral significance, the same being true about their possibility to use the special boards for electoral posters[3]. In order to obtain a mandate in the legislative, independents need to win the majority of votes in their electoral college and do not benefit from any special treatment as their partisan counter candidates do, such as redistribution bonuses. Despite the fact legislative elections do not represent the focus of our research, we cannot ignore some basic facts regarding the political performance of independent candidates at that particular level. Our first observation would be that independent candidatures were advanced for both the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies. All these independent attempts at winning a legislative seat failed especially as result of the exigent nature of the rules in place at this particular level of politics. With the requirements for both registering a candidature and for covering the circumscription rocketing as compared to the state of thins at the local level, it is no wonder no actual independent candidate

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[1] Art. 26 Align 1 and Art. 30 Align 1 of Law No. 35/2008 on electing the representatives to the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate of Romania, together with Law No. 67/2004 on electing the Authorities of the Public Local Administration, the Law of Local Public Administration No. 215/2001 and Law No. 393/2004 on the Statute of Local Representatives with subsequent modifications.

[2] Art. 29 Align 7, Law No. 35/2008.

[3] Art 38 Align 1, Law No. 35/2008.

managed to surpass the threshold and to get a mandate. At best, the scores obtained by independents managed to pass the average of three percent. One particular detail not to be ignored is the presence of recycled independents in the Parliament, originating from failed partisanships. Their ranks vary accordingly to the stability of the legislative session, with more castoff independents surfacing in very combative political setting.

For presidential competitions, independents need at least 200 000 signatures in order to advance their candidatures, and enjoy similar provisions as members of political parties and of alliances do[1]. What became highly visible in the past two decades of post-communist politics is the very fact that independent candidatures for the supreme function in state were rare, and most of them can be categorized as fair exceptions. In 1992 and 2004 there was a single independent candidature, while in 2009 we can easily spot no less than three independents running for president, the back-then mayor of Bucharest, a Roma ethnic and a businessman. Among these candidatures we encounter only one woman which presented herself to the polls as independent, a lawyer which ran in the 2000 elections. Similarly, just one independent attempted to run for president more than once, in the 2000 and 2009 elections. In the case of presidential elections the situation for independents is somewhat ameliorated to what we noticed at the parliamentary level. Still, for most occurrences of independence in nationwide politics, these numbers are highly exceptional. For example, during the past two decades and over the past five electoral cycles only one presidential candidate forwarded his independent candidature twice. At the last presidential elections independents failed to raise the interest of the people, with all three independents getting under four percent of the votes[2].

On the other hand, in the case of the elections organized for the representatives to the European Parliament, independents are permitted to run under the proportional representation formula, providing the fact they raise 100 000 signatures. This number appears to be too exigent, as compared to the requirements parties need to meet in order to forward their electoral lists[3]. Also, similarly to the other types of elections, independents are placed in the last part on the ballot, after candidatures from parties represented in the European Parliament and other parties and alliances are satisfied. Likewise, independents' presence in public media is also subject to party premiership. Nonetheless, independents might get one of the available European legislative mandates if they manage to surpass the national electoral coefficient, established by law as being the rapport between the total number of votes expressed nationwide and the number of mandates attributed to Romania[4]. For the past European parliamentary elections held in Romania, it was highly visible that independents can hardly penetrate the partisan monopoly. But, similar to other Eastern European polities, Romania was confronted with scarce recurrences of independent players managing to reach needed score, most of which usually emanate from high-profile typecasts within the establishment. One of the most visible electoral settings remains

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[1] Law No. 370 on Electing the President of Romania from 20 September 2004.

[2] Stan STOICA, *Dicționarul partidelor politice din România 1989-2004*, Meronia, București, 2004, p. 83.

[3] Art. 12, Law No. 33 from 16 January 2007 on Organizing the Elections for the European Parliament.

[4] Art. 20 Align 2, Law No. 33/2007 on Organizing the Elections for the European Parliament.

Bucharest, retaining a symbolic importance for the state of the entire nation and with capacity to irradiate the remainder of the electoral body. After the first four mayors appointed by governmental decision, since march 1992 Bucharest experienced five mayors belonging to one of the political parties, and an independent[1]. In 2004 the only independent candidate for the office of general mayor managed to obtain a meagre score of 0.15% of the total vote. Four years later, a former social democrat turned independent as result of internal quarrelling with his party colleagues decide to run as independent for this seat. He obtains 56, 55% of the votes, managing to defeat the representative of the most important political party in Bucharest over the previous years[2].

At local level, independent candidatures can be proposed for local and country councils, and for the mayor's office. Independents which wish to run for any of the available councillor position need to enjoy the support of at least 1% of the total number of voters registered in their circumscription, but at least 50 for communes, 100 for small towns and 1000 for counties, the capital city, Bucharest districts and large towns[3]. Those who wish to run for mayor's office, need to make proof of the support of at least of 2% of the total number of voters registered in their circumscription, but no least than 200 for communes, 300 for cities, 1000 for large cities and districts of Bucharest, while 5000 signatures are needed for the Bucharest[4]. This particular aspect of the electoral legislation led to discriminatory practices against independents, such was the case of the only successful independent candidate to the office of mayor-general, which was confronted with the ultra-correctness of the Municipal Electoral Bureau[5]. Nonetheless, these numbers do not seem to represent a direct problem for independents; they even appear to be provoking independency at the local level. On the other hand, on what concerns women's participation as independents at local elections is highly dependent on each candidate's strength to participate as no gender quotas are in place. The proportion of women competing independently for office is rising gradually, but remains very small up to the present as compared to the experience of Western Europe on the matter. And, this seems especially visible at the regional level, where a more patriarchal understanding of politics seems to remain in place[6]. The law discriminates against independent candidates in the case when no political formation or independent candidate has managed to pass the electoral threshold, when the mandates are redistributed among these partisan groups, with independents being excluded from the formula from the very beginning, according to the d'Hondt rules for redistributing unused votes[7]. Furthermore, according to the

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[1] Cristian PREDA, "Al nouălea primar postcomunist al Bucureștiului", *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. 2, no. 5, 2005, pp. 503-506.

[2] Central Electoral Bureau, *June 2008 elections for the authorities of the local public administration*, http://beclocale2008.ro/ (accessed on 12.04.2010).

[3] Art. 48 Align 1, Law No. 67/2004 on electing the authorities of the local public administration, republished.

[4] Art. 48 Align 2, Law No. 67/2004 with subsequent modifications.

[5] Public Policy Institute, *Alegerile locale 2008 – organizare inerțială, candidați apatici, alegători indiferenți*, IPP, București, 2008.

[6] Ionela BĂLUȚĂ, "Le Parlement roumain à l'épreuve du genre. Les femmes politiques dans la législature 2004-2008", *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2010, pp. 123-151.

[7] Art. 96 Align 8, Law No. 67/2004 on electing the authorities of the local public administration, republished.

electoral laws for local elections, electoral publicity is permitted, with independents enjoying free access to the public radio and TV stations as well as to private media station[1]. Unlike candidates of political parties which benefit of greater airing time for their electoral announcements, independents can dispose of only five minutes for their public broadcasts. Independents can also present their political offer on public places specifically selected for electoral posters.

As noticed, independents face several obstacles in winning political office. Though, as we can easily observe, ballot access requirements are pretty permissive at local level, with signature requirements being rather easy to meet, and even without the large infrastructure of a political party independents are able to reach eligible voters. Monetary deposits are omitted for independents that participate in local elections and therefore do not pose any obstacle to independents at this particular level of Romanian politics. Still, compared to other Eastern European countries, ballot access requirements seem rather volatile in the area, ranging from quite burdensome deposit requirements and large signature requirements to exemptions targeting various ethnic or social groups. For example, Hungary, Moldova, Poland and Russia lack any sort of deposit requirements for independent candidatures, while Estonia removed signature requirements as well[2]. Nonetheless, there are systematic differences in the contexts in which local contests are fought, differences that account for the relative success of an independent candidate in one election and the failure of another candidate four years later. Among contextual factors contributing to the electoral success of independent candidates we identified low levels of partisanships, dissatisfaction with major party candidates, economic discontent, issue preoccupation, distrust towards mainstream politics[3]. Then again, we consider that electoral performance is not all about the characteristics carved within the electoral system and consequently, that an eccentric candidate can obtain maximal electoral advantage by employing unorthodox campaign tactics. For that reason, in the next parts of the present scrutiny, we intend to evaluate the systematic explanations for independent success in local politics by examining contextual changes that occurred from 1992 until the latest elections of June 2008. We also intend to analyse the bases of independent candidates' support, an average profile of the Romanian local independent candidate and the political outcome of independent candidatures.

## ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

### *Local Politics in Romania*

At a first glance the last two decades in the history of the Romanian party system can be characterized by great variance in the number of composing political parties, by the numerous alliances and splits which marked the transition from the single

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[1] Art 65, Law No. 67/2004 on electing the authorities of the local public administration, republished.

[2] Dawn BRANCATI, "Winning Alone...cit.", pp. 648-662.

[3] John CAREY, Matthey Soberg SHUGART, "Incentives to Cultivate the Personal Vote: A Rank Ordering of Electoral Formulas", *Electoral Studies*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1995, pp. 417-439.

party to multipartidism[1]. An obvious place of political volatility, the Romanian party system has been greatly scrutinized by numerous authors, whom mainly approached its dynamics from an institutional perspective, either analysing the parties as organizations, or by approaching their relations to the electorate and to the act of governing[2]. Few studies have turned their attention to independents within the Romanian establishment, and those which did approach the subject were mostly tributary to the national level of politics[3].

Manifested mainly through a growing sense of alienation from political parties, the erosion of partisan loyalties within the Romanian electorate represents one of the most obvious political developments characterizing the past two decades[4]. Fewer citizens identify with either of the major parties, more voters are splitting their tickets on the day of the elections, and generally there is a growing sense of alienation from the political parties[5]. The capacity of political parties to serve as representative institutions in democratic politics is hardly contested in its entirety; nevertheless the weakening of party attachments is a reality of nowadays post-communist politics. For example, Richard Rose and William Mishler claimed that citizens of post-communist countries approach with scepticism party politics, scepticism caused by the dissatisfaction with the economic situation and by their approval of the perceived benefits of the previous non-democratic era[6]. Although economy is picking up as compared to the situation at the beginning of the 1990s, trust in political parties remains low as the last Eurobarometer survey shows[7]. Hence, we find it necessary to overcome Rose and Mishler thesis, and for this matter we suggest two elements which might affect the performance of political parties in most post-communist countries: the limited transparency of the establishment and its reduced pace of incorporating contradictory sentiments. Additionally, we plan to integrate the warning forwarded by Daniel Barbu about the fact that elections provide an incoherent mirroring between popular wishes and political representation, and, instead, each electoral scrutiny is in fact reproducing partisan privileges[8]. Especially by assimilating this interpretation, we can better understand that independents are severely affected by this inherent component of the Romanian political system and that their political performance is highly dependent on the electoral unattractiveness of the representatives of the main political parties. More precisely, this particular situation is best portrayed by the basic fact that, despite the stigmatisation of political parties in Central and Eastern Europe as corrupt and

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[1] Cristian PREDA, Sorina SOARE, *Regimul, partidele și sistemul politic din România*, Nemira, București, 2008, p. 58.

[2] Tom GALLAGHER, *Theft of a Nation*… cit., p. 10.

[3] Alexandra IONAȘCU, "The Evolution of Parties Supporting Government Forms of Patronage in Post-Communist Romania", *Sfera Politicii*, no. 123-124, 2006, pp. 62-76.

[4] Dawn BRANCATI, "Winning Alone...cit.", pp. 648-662.

[5] Richard KATZ, "The Dimensionality of Party Identification...cit.", pp. 147-163.

[6] William MISHLER, Richard ROSE, "Learning and Re-Learning Regime Support: The Dynamics of Post-Communist Regimes", *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2002, pp. 5-35.

[7] According to the most recent *Eurobarometer* survey, political parties ranked next to last in terms of public trust in institutions across most Eastern European countries. http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/ (accessed on 15.03.2010).

[8] Daniel BARBU, "Can Democracy Be its Own Enemy? The Intended Consequences of the 2004 Romanian Elections", *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2005, pp. 9-17.

unrepresentative bodies, independents scarcely managed to recuperate the lost ground in the last two decades of democratic transitioning. Correspondingly, the same author defines the Romanian political system as "partidocracy", cultivated by the list vote used until recently which rewarded political parties at the expense of small political actors[1]. At the level of the local administration this is highly visible, with little space left to nonpartisan and opposition actors to exist, despite the variance of electoral tools used here. As already noticed, partisan pre-eminence is highly cherished within the establishment. Resulting from the preferential allocation of resources, this system of patronage produced the migration of local elected representatives accordingly to the best party in power – a system which at least formally was stopped by the emendation of the Law 393/2004 on the Statute of the Local Representatives[2].

Nevertheless, the real power of local administration is given by decentralization; an imperfect one for the Romanian case, as it continues the administrative tradition set by communism which it tries to patch with local autonomy and public services decentralization while neglecting the national setting[3]. This particular situation made local facilities such as education, public transport, roads, water, and sewerage, land-use planning, cultural and recreational facilities to be highly targeted by partisan interests. Equally, local elections have become especially important in countries that are experiencing, or have recently undergone, transition from authoritarian rule to more open political systems, as the viability of local elections gives an impression on the success of the general process of transitioning. However, how can we rightfully test the efficacy local governance? Some authors propose we should check whether the issues of immediate relevance to citizens are debated and tackled. Equally, others believe minorities' inclusion can rightfully serve as an indicator[4]. For that matter, we consider one indicator that should not be ignored for establishing the viability of local politics is the success of independent candidatures. But instead of formulating any hasty appreciation regarding the independents' particular place within the Romanian local politics, we should keep in mind the basic fact that every four years the number of local administrative units increased[5]. This particular feature promoted to the interests of political parties, helps as well independents competitors in providing them with another chance to advance their candidatures. Yet, before systematically approaching the peculiarities of the Romanian political establishment, we consider utterly necessary to go through the general features of the system, all of which we believe to interfere with the political acceptance and performance of independent politicians. In Romania there are 41 administrative denominations, plus the capital city. Bucharest has a distinct administrative arrangement, being divided into six districts each with its own mayor and local council. The capital city is run by a general mayor and a general council. Each of the 41 counties has a governing body, the county council, with an average of 34 members which are being elected through a proportional representation system since 1996. Starting with the 2008 elections, the

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[1] *Ibidem*, pp. 148-150.

[2] Cristian PREDA, Sorina SOARE, *Regimul*…cit., p. 57.

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 54.

[4] Samuel HUMES, Eileen MARTIN, *The Structure of Local Government: a Comparative Survey of Eighty-one Countries*, Internationa Unit of Local Authorities, The Hague, 1969, p. 34.

[5] Social-Democratic Institute, *Raport supra alegerilor locale din România*, SDI, București, 2004, p. 4.

president of the county council is elected as well throughout a uninominal scrutiny[1]. At the locality level, the local council is elected through a proportional representation system. Therefore, getting many votes is useless if not accompanied by belonging to the most significant coalition. Within this particular setting we might argue that political independence is highly damaged, because of the rare occurrence of situations where independents win a majority of seats in the local councils. Consequently, winning a seat in the local council as independent requires significant bargaining skills in order to turn an individual position into that of an indispensible partner in coalitions. Another fair observation would be the basic fact that candidates for councillor positions are visibly more obscure and face a low-profile position in the electoral campaign, despite the importance of this office in forwarding local reforms.

Accordingly to the electoral law, the local public authorities which accomplish the principles of local autonomy are the local councils as deliberative authorities and the mayoralties as forms of the executive power[2]. In each county a council is established with the purpose of cordoning the activities of the local authorities. The vote expressed for local and county councils are considered to be highly political and the results of these particular levels of politics to be highly important for the result of the parliamentary elections, as it provides the main political parties with testing grounds for their electoral reach[3]. Within this particular setting, independent candidatures are given little chance to occur, especially at the county level where parties make tremendous efforts at pushing their candidates. For example, with the modifications brought to the electoral laws after 2004, the county level was hardly penetrated by independents, with barely one mandate obtained at the last two elections. The examples of the latest elections for county councils show us that only a high-profile independent can successfully met the requirements for competing at this level. Furthermore, the single independent county councillor elected for the 2008-2012 mandate decided to quit his independent coating and joined the ranks of the main political parties as a natural political move which best responds to his political beliefs[4]. So, we might rightfully ask why did he run as independent in the first place? According to his own statements independence was the only possible path for him at the time of the elections because his union affiliation interfered with his political calling. In what concerns the recently introduced elected office of the president of county council, it seemed to be virtually impossible for independents to accommodate on a short notice to such a demanding office. Therefore, independents which ran for this seat in 2008 managed to get only 0.61% of the total number of votes and failed to procure any mandate whatsoever. Comparatively, independence has occurred more successfully within a particular local context: the mayoralties. As stated by the law, the head of the local administration is the mayor, which is elected through a popular vote. The local executive is being elected through a majority two-round system, similarly to that applied to presidential elections, with a vivid importance given to

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[1] Ioan MURARU, Elena Simina TĂNĂSESCU, *Drept constituțional și instituții politice*, C.H. Beck, București, 2008, p. 86.

[2] Art. 21 Align 1, Law No. 215/ 2001 regarding the local public administration.

[3] Arnold FLEISCHMANN, Lana STEIN, "Campaign Contributions...cit.", pp. 673-689.

[4] "Singurul independent din Consiliul Județean Covasna s-a înscris în PSD", *Cotidianul*, http://old.cotidianul.ro/singurul_independent_din_cj_covasna_s_a_inscris_in_psd-90608.html (accessed on 15.03.2010).

individual characteristics such as the candidate's background, social position and personal accomplishments to the disadvantage of political affiliation. These particular features of mayoral competitions make room for smaller runners as compared to those permitted to successfully run in county and local councils.

Independency occurred throughout the past five electoral cycles in both urban and rural communities, more developed or poorer localities, within ethnically divided and as well within more homogenous areas. Also, throughout the past two decades, independence candidates running in local elections approached their electorates mentioning primarily some of the following issues on their electoral materials and in their public appearances: the necessity of administrative reforms, social issues, local economic development, and modernization of the infrastructure. Although designed with the immediate interests of the community in mind, the local elections were confronted during the past twenty year with a visible lowering of the electoral presence. With the exception of the first post-communist local elections when almost 65% of the total number of valid voters expressed their political will, for the following four electoral cycles the presence stabilizes around 50%[1]. At a first sight, the low interest showed by the electorate as compared to the scores obtained for general elections would led us believe that the voters consider local polls to be less important than general elections and ignore that community-level politics might develop unpredictable countless repercussions. But despite the marginalization of local elections, it became obvious after the June 2000 polls that the main political parties rely heavily on local level of politics to test their political strength. In the same way, the enlarging of partisanships at the local level became even more poignant with the stabilization of a few political parties which manage to get the majority of local mandates, at the expense of small political organizations and independents. For example, for the last elections, 90% of the total number of mandates was granted to the main parties, with barely 2 percent of the total number of candidates managing to win office independently. At this point, we consider that several characteristics inherent within the establishment need to be highlighted in order to continue our scrutiny on local independence. One of the most significant influencer was the introduction of the electoral threshold of 5 percent right before the 2004 elections, which led to the reduction of the number of the represented parties at the local level and also to an even more concentrated permeability for independent runner. An equally important modification was the surfacing of the law on financing electoral endeavours and the reduction of the period reserved for campaigning from 45 to 30 days[2]. We believe that these modifications posed further problems to smaller political actors and especially to non-parliamentary formations, because their reduced size and scarce resources makes it difficult to efficiently reach a vital segment of the electorate. Another highly common practice affecting independence is represented by the luring, blackmailing or even forcing elected officials to abandon their independent stance and to join a political party[3]. Independents might become subject to political constraining

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[1] Cf. data available on the webpage of Romanian Electoral Authority: http://roaep.ro/ (accessed on 15.03.2010).

[2] Ioan MURARU, Elena Simina TĂNĂSESCU, *Drept constituțional*…cit., pp. 63-65.

[3] Sorina SOARE, "Quels modèles partisans pour l'Europe Centrale et Orientale? Étude des structures organisationnelles des partis politiques roumains", *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2005, pp. 21-48.

especially in regions traditionally identified with partisan politics, where political formations are expected to pressure non-partisan mandate holders to join their ranks and to condition their access to public resources on their partisan adoption. Similarly, weak independent holders of mayoral office can be further affected by the opposition of representatives of political parties, if the latter chose to back the partisan deputy mayor to the disadvantage of non-partisan political actors. During their mandate, independents are highly expected to find themselves confronted with numerous other similar situations that will test the strength of their independence.

Several other aspects affecting the recurrence of independency within post-communist setting are to be discussed further. One of them would be the Hungarian-dominated regions in Romania. One might rightfully expect that in every locality where a majority of ethnic Hungarians is present, the representatives of Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania to hold the monopoly. Without a clear-cut ideology, this political formation representing the interests of ethnic Hungarians in Romania contains numerous civic and cultural associations and organizations as well as several Christian-democratic political parties. The Union passed all five post-communist electoral tests and was co-opted in all governmental coalitions established after 1996, as result of its successful ethnic mobilization practices. Drawing its substance from the nationalist tensions of the beginning of the 1990s and with a faithful electorate, the Union managed to get about 150 mayor's office, 2500 local councillor positions and about 130 county councillors throughout the last five post-communist electoral polls. At its first European scrutiny, the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania got 2 mandates and one of its most prominent members running as independent managed to get a nomination for the European Parliament[1]. With the county councils visibly dominated by the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania in Harghita and Covasna, it would seem equally true this control to be maintained for mayor's office[2]. Nevertheless, accordingly to the available figures one can rightfully say that precisely in the regions inhabited predominantly by Magyar ethnic a higher number of independent politicians managed to get into office as compared to the other parts of the country. This observation can equally be applied to other counties where Hungarians are present, such as Mureș, Satu Mare, Bihor, Sălaj, Cluj and Arad[3]. Therefore, it is highly necessary to investigate these recurrences further and to find out precisely what motivates independency in this particular area. Another characteristic of the Romanian political system which is present to a higher degree at the local level is clearly the intersection of politics and Orthodoxy. With the clerical structures intertwining with the modern state since the latter's inception, the Eastern interpretation of Christianism is a significant public manifestation to be confused with the democratic exigencies[4]. With structural traces originating in the Byzantine epoch, the Orthodox Church strengthened its administrative connections to the Romanian state up to modern times and developed its institutional strength based on a collective national character[5]. During the communist era and afterwards, the Church treated

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[1] Cristian PREDA, Sorina SOARE, *Regimul*…cit., pp. 223-224.

[2] *Ibidem,* pp. 165-166.

[3] Stan STOICA, *Dicționarul partidelor politice*...cit., pp. 105-108.

[4] Daniel BARBU, "Can Democracy Be its Own Enemy?...cit.", pp. 282-283.

[5] IDEM, "Etica ortodoxă și spiritul românesc", in IDEM (coord.), *Firea românilor*, Nemira, București, 2000, p. 80.

its followers' religious intimacies as if they were of public and even of state interest[1]. Denying the secular character of the Romanian state, the Romanian Orthodoxy advances its practices in each and every corner of the society and this is highly visible at the local level where the clergy represent one of the main focal points[2]. And exactly political independence was targeted by the representatives of the Church, especially as they cannot find themselves in any partisan or confrontational circumstances which would lead to the secularization of the religious time and would risk the particular place reserved to the Church within the social order. Precisely because in traditional local confines the priest represents not only a moral authority but also an important local figure, political involvement of the church's clergy seemed more than a natural outcome. Still, what motivates these priests' political independent endeavours in the first place? Is simply a likely extension of the church entanglement with the state? Or is it more about personal motivations of the clergy itself? We will attempt to satisfy these academic enquiries departing from the explanations provided by the protagonists themselves. It is now time to evaluate the performances of independent politicians in the particular setting proposed by the recent local elections in Romania and to assess their evolution throughout the post-communist decades. In the following analysis, we will be guided by the considerations introduced previously, having in mind the theoretical framework proposed in the first part of our scrutiny. Therefore, we shall voice equally the importance of the votes won by independent contenders throughout the past two decades, as well as individual analyses of the independents which engaged in the most recent local electoral competition that took place in post-communist Romania. A separate focus will be built around independent politicians who ran and managed to win these elections, approached comparatively from the perspective of the previously announced themes.

## *Current Status of Political Independence in a Post-Communist Setting*

Before starting with our analysis on the situation of independents at the local level of post-communist Romanian politics, we should take into consideration several aspects relating to the particular dynamics of our study. Firstly, we cannot simply aggregate the available data as we would mistakenly be led to an improper understanding of independent politics. We also consider that a full evaluation of the recurrences of independency should go beyond the strictly electoral phase and tackle the need for separate approach in the competition for county councils, local councils and mayoralties. Moreover, we should not overrate the predominance of political parties as well as we should escape the attraction towards a heroic interpretation of independent candidacy. And not last, an analysis focused on the local politics is highly dependent on the particular arrangements that are in place at that level, which should be best understood by comparing them with similar institutions active all over Eastern Europe. Having the above-mentioned observations in mind, we should start

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[1] IDEM, *Republica absentă – politică și societate în România postcomunistă*, 2nd ed., Nemira, București, 2004, p. 287.

[2] Olivier GILLET, "Religion et politique dans les Balkans. Les enjeux contemporains", *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2004, pp. 269-277.

our investigation from the crude picture implied by the popularity of independents in local politics all throughout the country. The appended tables present the electoral performance of independent candidates that won at least one mandate in any of the five post-communism polls organized locally in Romania. What we first observe is the fact that, with every new electoral cycle, fewer independents managed to fruitfully advance their candidature. In 2008 we reached a situation where only 56 mayor mandates were obtained nationwide by independents, 358 independent candidates got a nomination as local councillor, and barely one independent became county councillor whereas no successful independent candidature was possible for the position of president of the county council[1]. This situation seems somewhat problematic if it were to compare it to the numbers of the first post-communist elections, when 22.4% of mayoralties and 6.54% of the local councils belonged to independents. Some explanations for this situation were advanced previously, when we mainly referred to the certain setting specific to the beginnings of the Romanian democracy and to scarce consolidation of the political parties. In the next segment of our examination we intend to offer further clarifications on the abrupt declining of the magnitude of independence in the local post-communist politics, especially by integrating the views independents themselves have on the matter. Then again, by comparing the latest scores with the ones from the period of democratic stabilization, we can fully assess that independence is degrading with each electoral cycle in Romania. We should now question what truly motivates those scarce numbers of independent to forward their candidacy, even within this restrictive electoral setting.

When studying independence at the local level, one has to bear in mind that local elections are chiefly about small electoral competitions. But nevertheless, within this micro electoral setting, a visibly greater importance is given to bigger cities and particularly to residence cities. Unlike smaller political units, independents competing for the open positions in bigger localities need to mobilize a larger number of voters and are more exposed to media and partisan attacks. From our available data it would seem that big local political units represent the most vulnerable spots for local independency, with eight towns, four county residences and one of Bucharest sectors captured in 2004 and barely five cities, one county residence and the office of the general-mayor in 2008[2]. Even as we should expect a worsening of these scores with the coming elections, we consider them being more about circumstantial occurring. By far, the most noticeable incidence of independence at the top tier of local politics is represented by partisan derails. The most striking example of counterfeited independence is that of a former social democrat which ran as independent candidate for the office of mayor of one of the six Bucharest district after his exclusion from his party due to allegations of corruption. After winning the office from the first round, at a comfortable 27% margin he returned to his party[3]. This example does not entail that in bigger communities independence is less articulate or truthful or that more visible political units might turn into favourable grounds for *façade* independence. Instead, what we can observe is the smaller penetration of independents in larger localities,

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[1] See Appendix: Table 1 – *Mandates Won by Independents at the Local Elections (1992-2008).*

[2] See Appendix: Map 1 – *Political Independence across Romania after June 2008 Local Elections.*

[3] Mihaela AVRAM, "Marian Vanghelie se întoarce în PSD", *BBC Romanian*, http://bbc.co.uk/romanian/news/story/2004/06/040629_vanghelie_psd.shtml (accessed on 12.04.2010).

which might be explainable by the difficulty of covering such a large circumscription. We now consider opportune to propose and test the validity of a differentiation between partisan, intermediate and non-partisan circumscriptions, defining the latter as political places where independents gain from the first electoral turn. Highly partisan circumscriptions can be defined as where either no independent candidature was ever advanced or no independent candidate manages to reach the second round. From observing the available data, we can easily argue that localities in the centre and Northern part of the country are more open to independent candidatures, whereas the Western and North-Eastern parts are generally sporadic hosts for independency, with communities situated in the South-West allowing little penetration. We consider these situations as a measure of the local context and socio-economic attributes, with more developed places showing an increased rate of approval for independents. Also the ethnic component plays an important role, with ethnically divided regions allowing to a greater extent independency to happen. One major observation that is mandatory to be made now would be that, despite its low scores, independence can be characterized by continuity at the local stage of post-communist politics. Palpable manifestations of steady independence can be identified in those regions where the electorate prefers non-partisan actors with each election, no matter their persona. This is the case of several localities in the county of Covasna (Ilieni, Ojdula, and Sânzieni) and Harghita (Brădești, Păuleni-Ciuc). Offices repeatedly won by the same independent candidate as is the case of two localities in the county of Satu Mare, Certeze and Livada represent another particular manifestation of interdependency-prone places.

There are a number of ways in which independents can be conceptualised and categorized, some of clearly drawing upon and relating to classification of political players at national level such as ideology or electoral magnitude. We purposely ignored such a classification because it little served the interest of our scrutiny of independence understood as purposed avoidance of party labels by politicians. Instead, we proposed a distinct categorization, namely one that would allow us to distinguish *true* independents, which propose their candidatures autonomous of any external inferences and have no history of partisan activity. Secondly, we can identify *recycled* independents, a variety more commonly met in post-communist politics as they usually emerge from failed partisanships being former members of political parties which decided to ditch partisan affiliation and pursue their political career solitarily. Another subtype of independence is represented by *faux* independents, which can be easily distinguished from the other two kinds due to its dependency on outside support. This third variety largely represents a perverted type of independence, and refers to any politician that publicly denies any connection to any political party, but in fact, he or she represents the interests of that party locally. Another variant, that belongs more to the partisan spectre, is represented by party members who distance themselves severely from party line. This last category was essentially ignored by our study, as its members essentially belong to a political party and have fallen out with the party whether over a matter of principle or on other conjectural grounds for short periods of time. These breeds of independence are essentially visible in the Romanian local politics, with certain kinds being more represented than others depending upon the characteristics of the corresponding electoral moment. For example, we might consider that the highest degree of genuine independence occurred after the first post-communist electoral cycle, with more and more recycled independents making their appearance with each new electoral moment. This general overview should

permit us to advance our analysis to the next step. Our primary findings indicate that independent-driven politics is possible at local level for a variety of reasons. One of them would be the growing discontent with the major parties, manifested particularly through a sentiment that political parties prolong corruption and wastefulness. More than anywhere else in the establishment, voters are in search of more alternatives, as consequence of their discontent in the mainstream parties coupled with a fundamental erosion of faith in political parties themselves. The need to solve pressing issues brings the electorate closer to the person which is best fitted for that job, no matter his or hers political affiliation. Voting mechanisms, electoral conditions and a candidate's financial resources play a large role in determining how well an independent candidate can do at the polls. Equally, frustration towards political parties can be observable on the side of the politicians, which might turn to independency as their last resort. On the other hand, independent attitudes can be also favoured by the intrinsic determination of certain political actors to help their community.

For distinguishing the impact of political followership we compared the total number of votes expressed in local election with number of votes obtained by independent candidates. We then compared this data with the nationwide performance of independents during the past five electoral cycles. Several implications can be drawn from the figures we analysed. Firstly, it becomes clear that the success of independent contenders diminishes with each election. Hence, there appears the question why this happened – and the most plausible explanations seem to be the fact that independence faces financial hardships coming from highly centralized governance. Also determinant for the weakening of independents' scores is the further maturing and strengthening of the partisan system. Second, the data at hand suggests that the independent tag has substantial effects on the structure of local vote, which nevertheless remains dependent on the broader aspects populating the establishment. In particular, there seems to be a significant voting bias in favour of medium educated candidates coming generally from technical backgrounds. This situation can be best explained by looking into the broader composition of the local administration, where we could easily observe the recurrence of similar profiles[1]. Before going further with our analysis, it is necessary to say that exceptions are possible, and might be furthermore promoted by the importance accorded by the voters to the personal criteria.

In our attempt to profile independents in local elections we selected several variables to represent personal characteristics (educational level, professional background etc.), political resources (the type of rhetoric employed, incumbency) and political success of this type of political contenders. We further addressed the interview material and additionally available data through the lenses of certain main themes we considered helpful for answering our research questions. Among these themes, we reserved considerable space for clarifying what motivates independence at the local level, what might be the advantages and the disadvantages of independent politics, how independents approach their electorate and manage to sponsor their campaign, their particular situation in office, their relation with partisan politics and their propensity towards re-election. Analysing the data gathered we come to the following candidate profiling of independents in local elections for the period at hand. In terms of personal characteristics, independents tend to be male (95%), mainly Orthodox (70%),

[1] Șerban OLAH, *Elitele locale*, Editura Economică, București, 2004, p. 317.

middle aged (mean of 54 years), both Romanian and Hungarian ethnics (one third), originating from rural areas of the country (9 out of 10), more likely not to be college educated, nor to hold an advanced degree. By profession independents originate generally from technical specialities, and usually have had their own business prior to advancing their candidacy. He or she is more likely to count the advantages of incumbency, and to have a limited access to financial resources, most of which come from personal sources, and from business partners or close friends.

But let us take a closer look at a general profile of independence by going through some of the profiles of independents interviewed. We consider that the best means for approaching individual situations of independence which occurred at the last electoral cycle would be to integrate them within the general framework of this examination. In order to provide this study with the greatest possible perspective on the background of independence in post-communist times and at the same time to better understand how does independence truly manifests itself nowadays, we interviewed independent politicians in office, randomly selected from all over the country. In designing the selections needed for research, we made sure that our choice to represent best how independence is currently distributed across Romania, with more attention given to those spaces where independence is more visible. Firstly, as stated before, what could best motivate politicians to run as independents might be their failure to procure a party nomination. Comparatively, as our findings show, most independent candidates previously did seek for party nomination, this being especially true for politicians in counties controlled by the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania. Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that independence can also be motivated by the expulsion from partisan ranks. Secondly, as is the case for an equally significant part of independents, independence is expressly preferred in turn to party candidacy. This is largely possible thanks to the electoral system which is in place at local level, which permits independent candidatures. Nonetheless, in order to further approach what motivates independence at the local level, we must turn our attention to what independents themselves say about their particular situation. To begin with, independence can be triggered by the detachment from partisan politics. B.T. from a locality in Covasna said he chose to run as independent because he never felt close to any political party. L.O., running for the first time as independent in 2008 in a locality in the Iasi County, said he sought for change within his community and also wanted that corrupted politics which was proffered by a "partisan clan" in the last twenty years to stop. The same mistrust in and dissatisfaction with partisan politics was accused by the mayor of an important town in Maramureș, P.V., which advanced his independent candidature for the first time in June 2008. Another independent voice originating from the Brașov County told us he ran because "[political parties] are all the same" (I.B.). Originating from a rural community in Satu Mare, C.P. says he seized the opportunity as he saw that the electorate in his locality is disappointed by partisan politics and decided to run independently. Asked what he thinks about his counter-candidate which also assumed independency, he told us that his competitor did it as the last resort, being unable to mobilize the support of any political party. On the other hand, the mayor of a locality in the Covasna County, B.E., said he ran as independent as a measure of his trust in politics: "If politics is truly fair, it should not matter if I belong to a party or not". Other type of rhetoric we encountered among independents was one that explains independence in terms of popular demand. For example, L.G. from the Vaslui County considers his independent candidacy to be the result of the wishes expressed by the people in his community. A former member of

a political party, F.C. agrees with this: "It was not me; the community pushed me to run as independent". M.M., after three mandates as mayor of an important city in Harghita, described himself as different from "those independents which have passed through seven or eight parties". M.M. also says he feels proud about the fact he never was member of a political party and it was the people that helped him decide to stand as independent. C.B., an independent from Cluj at his first mandate said that his independent candidature was motivated by the annoyance he felt towards the backwardness of his locality. Another independent from Covasna County said he felt he was capable to do something to help his locality, but did not want "to work in the interest of the parties". Previously identified as top motivators for political independence, failed partisanships are also recurrent in practice. Several examples are required. F.I. from Covasna ran as independent in June 2008 after previously being vice-mayor of the locality on behalf of a political party. On the other hand, originating from a locality in the Cluj County, another independent considers that unfair politics he experienced during his previous four mandates as representative of a political party made him engage independently (S.I.). He wished to measure his political performance as compared to that of his former party, especially as he lost his support right before the elections. Another example of failed partisanship turned independence is that of S.E., who after previously representing a political party, was not summoned to run again in 2008. Therefore he had to stand as independent. A similar situation was met by M.A., which had two mandates on behalf of a political party before advancing his candidature in 2008 as independent because of a misunderstanding with his former partisan supporters. With a quitted partisan adherence, A.B. thinks that what motivated his independence was the fact he did not wanted to be under the control of a political party. During his partisan experience, A.B. admitted to have witnessed some unfair happenings which provoked his independence. Oppositely, L.Z. from Harghita held the office of mayor as representative of a political party, but decided in 2008 to quit his partisan allegiance: "I never dropped my ideological legacy" he added. After a failed candidature on behalf of a partisan structure, P.I. admitted his candidature as independent in June 2008 was motivated by the fact he could not get the nomination from one of the political parties. L.S. ran as independent incidentally, as he decided to late in order to procure a party's nomination. Running his campaign he found out that was the best choice, especially as the voters seemed to manifest their disapproval with all political parties. Another frequent situation we met was that represented by politicians who continued to remain in office after the fall of communism as independent mayors, especially because they already accumulated certain renown in their locality and also developed all their needed local connections before 1990s. Ironically, one of them who won in June 2008 his fifth mandate as independent said he was not interested to subsume himself to party politics as he knew what that means and it was the people who asked him to return.

> "I have a bad opinion about partisan life, they [politicians] follow by all means the interests of the party and their own interests. The moment they get elected they forget what they've promised because the parties lack the strategies needed to develop local communities"

continued this independent (A.C., Călărași County). Another case of communist-supported independence is that of P.R., who considers that, because he was a high-profile figure before 1989 in the locality, he won the mandate as vice-mayor in 2004 and the mayor's office in 2008.

Other politicians chose independence as their only available alternative – this being the case of B.D., a civil servant in Covasna, as the law does not allow civil servants to be part of political parties[1]. Similarly, following his participation in a non-governmental organization that mediated between centre politics and local administration, B.B. decided to run as independent, especially as he was unable to identify a political party that could best answer his political plans. Then again, political independence seems to serve as an important political tool in ethnically heterogeneous areas, permitting otherwise marginal voices to successfully forward their candidature. Independent mayor of a city in Satu Mare for the fourth time, S.I. said he chose the independent path as he did not want to hurt the feelings of any of the inhabitants of the locality, no matter their ethnic origin. In the same way, M.R. decided to run as independent in June 2008 because he saw it as the only possibility to get into office in a community controlled by ethnic Magyars:

> "The people told me that my only chance is to run independent because they were fed up with the promises they received from political parties".

Orthodoxy and independence seems to be highly compatible, with numerous priests and small local clergy getting involved in politics using the independent label. Asking G.B., a priest which got re-elected four times as independent in the Argeș County what motivates him to run, we received this blunt answer:

> "After forty years of service as a priest, I decided in 1996 to continue to work for the people even as a retiree. Everybody asked me to do it and, without thinking, I got elected. Clearly the fact that I was the priest helped my candidature".

He then added that, if he were to run again, he will follow his independency, because he thinks "as mayor I'm not allowed to get involved in any political party, I play game of the people not that of the politicians". Another priest that ran independently in 2008, N.G., said his clerical belonging does not permit him to participate in any political party. Instead, he also acted as independent local councillor before advancing his candidature for the mayor's office. Reaching this point in our analysis, we can rightfully say that, for what concerns the local level of post-communist Romanian politics, independence has multiple motivations. For numerous independents, their particular profile came either because they never identified with a political party, either as reaction to the will of the people, either provoked by quitted partisan allegiance, by mistrust in the political system, either by the ethnical context, either because other options were not possible or as particular manifestation for revamped communist origins.

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[1] Art. 40 Align 3, *The Constitution of Romania*, http://cdep.ro/pls/dic/site.page?id=339, (accessed on 15.03.2010).

For what concerns their attitude towards partisan arrangements, independent politicians seem to share the opinion that the party politics are profoundly rotten. One candidate which now is at his fourth mandate considered that "it's hard, it's extremely hard for us [independents], as the others [partisan politicians] know how to lie and steal" (G.B., Argeș County). Another one added "let them fight in their own way" (L.O., Iași). L.Z. said that the political system is a chaos at the present moment and the local administration is the worst affected by the lack of vision and improper organization. Also, he believes that repeated conflicts among political parties have deceived and estranged the electorate. On the other hand, P.V. thinks politicians are best examples of dilettantism. Comparatively, N.G. believes that first and foremost the laws need to be respected, and, despite what should ideally happen, political parties attempt to evade the control of lawful institutions by all possible means. P.I. thinks that, in partisan politics, everybody cares about his own interest. M.R. believes "[partisan politicians] are all the same, they don't wish to budge a thing". Equally, independents see a minimal role for political parties. Some said political parties should mind their own business, other considered parties to lack clear-cut ideologies leading to political derails. Another voice thinks political parties are cliques brought together by personal interests, where everybody expects something in return. A.C. from Călărași says he feels he doesn't belong to partisan politics, as he despises being controlled by and serving the interests of political parties. The same independent told us that political parties are determined by vanity and he provided us with the example of the local council in his locality where an independent was chosen as vice-mayor only because political parties could not agree whom to name from their own ranks. B.E., an independent from Covasna at his first mandate, considers political parties should rethink their role within the society because "they're getting more and more irrelevant by the day". Likewise, after a previous experience with a political party and from his position as independent, F.I. considers that parties should reform their current place within the society and start to promote in the first place correctness, Christian values, and morality. B.D., another independent from Covasna, said he sees the main political parties as being extremely powerless and inefficient in their efforts to serve the citizens. Coming also from a Hungarian-dominated locality, A.B. said it more bluntly:

> "Present-day politics is a disaster, and this is why I believe the role of the independents to grow with the passing of time, especially because of the weak political performance generally displayed by the Romanian political class".

A rare independent voice in the Sibiu County, B.B. considers that our political system is still in its infancy, as "they [political parties] yet have to define their long-term intentions and values". Similarly, S.E. thinks political parties should quit developing their clientele and instead support the growth of local communities. P.R. said that political parties grow interested only before electoral moments, and thereafter they ignore local politics until next elections. N.G. admits he is quite upset on the political parties because politicians are not taking their job seriously and they only criticize and blame one another without providing any solutions. Henceforth, because partisan politics is seen as corrupt, lacking long-term vision, being characterized by frail organization, internal conflicts, clientelism, inefficiency, independents associate it with a marginal role within the society. In the same way, sympathizing with political

parties seems to remain generally a taboo for local independents. Among those who agreed to convey their political preferences, one priest elected as independent said humorously that he does sympathize with other politicians, because "I baptized them all" (G.B., Argeș). Another independent from Cluj admitted his sympathy for the ecologist movement (C.B.). Similarly, one independent from a traditionally Magyar majoritarian county, admitted straightforwardly his sympathies (F.I., Covasna). Another ethnic Magyar, S.E., admitted his partisan sympathy, but accuses that party to have ignored him. Most independents consider that electoral campaigns are highly problematic events for their independency, especially as they lack the professional and material contributions a party usually provides its candidates with. Nevertheless, some also accuse political parties of interfering with the electorate in an illegal manner, by attempting to change their political will via bribes, and various other small gifts. In general, electoral campaigning at the local level poses smaller problems, especially as the financial effort is expected to decrease accordingly to the size of the circumscription. Mayor of a small city in Harghita, M.M. said he ran all his three electoral campaigns without much effort, with just few banners and posters, despite the heavy mobilization of the political parties against him. Similarly, F.C. said his posters kept disappearing, and he believes political parties are to be blamed for that. Also at his first mandate, N.C. admits to have faced a difficult campaign due to the unfair fight waged by the former mayor. L.S. faced in the second tour of the elections the opposition of all local political parties. Similarly, P.I. said advancing his candidature was highly difficult because of the attacks coming from political parties. Then again, P.V. believes the attacks he was confronted with originating from political parties are natural, as everybody wishes to win.

Oppositely, C.B. admits he escaped any interference from the political parties basically because nobody expected him to represent a threat. He adds "to be honest, my campaign was quite obscure, just a few posters. Nevertheless, I had a close relation with most of the people here". B.D. admits he underwent a similar path, as he invested little in his campaign and relied greatly on his familiarity with the people. Others used their quitted "political colouring" hoping to impress the electorate. For example, owing his fame to his former three mandates as representative of a political party, one candidate did not even displayed electoral posters in June 2008 (S.I., Satu Mare). M.R. admits he was known by many people in the community because he had the advantage to have previously worked in the mayoralty since 1995 as a civil servant. Formerly a member of a political party, S.E. believes that the most difficult of the campaign was to raise the signatures. On the other hand, he enjoyed the support of some small businesses which paid for his campaign materials. As a matter of fact, most rurally-based independents did not procure professional services for promoting their image during the electoral campaign and simply limited to printing their own posters and leaflets. N.G., a priest from Maramureș, said he ran his campaign without telling any bad words about his counter candidates. N.G. further added that he financed his campaign himself with the help of some close friends as he did not wish to become tributary to others. Nevertheless, during the 2008 electoral campaign he spotted material bribes coming from political parties, especially targeting poorer people easily to persuade: "The voters are selling their vote because they are hopeless about their situation".

A.B. acknowledges as well to have enjoyed the support of some local sponsors, specifically because "the independent candidate has to do everything, nobody helps him". Enjoying the support of his friends, B.B. raised the needed signatures and

distributed his electoral materials. Comparatively, B.B. considers that the greatest cost of his campaign was the time spent meeting the electorate. P.I. said the highlights of his electoral campaign were represented by two gatherings, together with the classical means of campaigning (banners, posters, leafleting etc.). Mainly, local electoral campaigning in the case of independents is characterized by the little importance accorded to political label as compared to the personal traits of candidates, by the reliance on private contributions, limited inference of professional techniques, together with bonuses accorded by incumbency and by a previously established high-profile presence. For independents, the problems involved with financing their electoral campaigns differ accordingly to the independents' personal material power and to the level and magnitude of the circumscription; with larger ones being more difficult to cover and requiring added investments. One candidate previously supported by a political party said he feels the lack of party money, as "nobody is willing to contribute to an independent's campaign" (S.E., Satu Mare). On the other hand, F.I. adds that he financed his campaign from half of his monthly salary. B.T. thinks that in small localities independents are helped by the fact "everybody knows everybody else" and do not require large investments in the electoral campaign. F.C. said something similar, considering that money was not that important for his campaign, instead what he believes to have been crucial are the personal contacts he established with the voters. Most of the independents interviewed which originate from the business environment face an easier challenge, as they can finance their campaign themselves. For example, L.O. said he financed his campaign from his own pocket. P.V. did the same, being an administrator of a private business. B.E from the Covasna County identified close friends with businesses as his main financial supporters, whom contributions added to the money he invested personally. Especially those with numerous mandates won as independents say they do not need an expensive campaign, as they proposal is simple, being centred on their familiarity: "This is me; this is what I can do" said proudly A.C. from Călărași. Being largely known in the locality, M.A. admits he only copied few of his old posters and distributed them. L.Z., a former mayor on behalf of a political party now turned independent admits he continues to somewhat enjoy the support of that party, but the money needed for the electoral campaign were provided from his own personal savings. Hence, financing independents' campaigns is largely characterized by the lack of public subsidies, which are compensated by donations originating from private supporters such as friends, small businesses and business partners. Equally, we should notice that incumbency lowers the costs involved with running local campaigns, and also in the case of local independents money can be less important than personal contacts.

Few independents seem to really understand the advantages of their position. Some consider themselves exceptions: I.B., an independent at his first mandate having scarce partisan background, thinks that, because of the instability of the general establishment, independency offers added stability and autonomy during party reshuffling. "Being in normal relations with everybody else" seems to be highly needed for the performance of independency as the same politician thinks, because "otherwise [belonging to a political party] might imperil the access to information and funds at times". Similarly, B.B., L.G., and C.P. consider that independents bear the advantage of being able to address any institution and political party, as long as he presents himself as somebody who wishes to do something for his community. "Not being under the control or at the command of anybody" is seen as the main advantage by one independent originating from partisan politics. Originating from Covasna, B.D. provided us with an extremely positive outlook on independence after two years

of his first mandate as independent mayor, saying that he found no disadvantage to independence and added he received all the needed funds, despite his lack of partisan allegiance: "I cannot say that being independent is helping me as I can't say it affects my mandate". Still, it might be argued that this particular case, the independent benefited from his ethnic common denominator with the representatives of the dominant party in the county. With a similar optimist stance, M.M. considers that independents are more credible in the eyes of the electorate. Additionally, L.Z. considers that in local politics, the party matters less, and the electorate is mostly interested in the personal traits of the candidate, and this particular situation helps independence. All in all, independence offers politicians constancy no matter the partisan coating of the governing body, it gives the ability to equally address institutions indifferent of their political fidelities, and might proliferate electoral trustworthiness.

The political allocation of money is seen as one of the top disadvantages by our interviewed independents. This situation was radically described by one independent previously elected four times on behalf of a political party, as he compared his current situation with the period when he was aided by his party: "If you don't belong to a political party, nobody takes you serious" (M.A., Timiș). But for other independents, this is hardly the case as they might find themselves under the spotlight; either as this would mean accusations coming from partisan competitors. A conflicting county council endangers even more independency, as it can interfere with the allocation of resources. P.V. believes that the main problem faced by independents is that they hardly can make themselves heard, because administration is highly politicized. S.E. agrees to this position, as he believes independents are highly dependent on the will of the governing party and that of the president of the county council. The lack of the support of a political party is accused by B.T. as one of the most important shortcomings independents have to face, especially as he needs to accommodate the interests of various representatives of political parties. M.M., a Romanian mayor in Harghita believes the disadvantages of independence are even worst in his case, as the particular arrangements of the area act against him: "It's not easy to work with a council entirely subsumed politically, and it requires compromising, diplomacy and patience". On the other hand, another independent from Covasna considers that the local council poses little problem to independent as long as everybody acts to the best interest of the community (F.C.). An independent mayor from the Călărași County sees no major advantages in assuming independence, but he believes "independents continue to be treated as pariah" (A.C.). C.B. accuses interference from top politicians, as he received numerous calls to mind his own business. Comparatively, S.I. from the Cluj County remains confident about the disadvantages of independence as he considers good politicians can turn them to their own advantage. He tells us that the only problems he met when forwarding his projects were caused by incomplete papers, which he later remediate. Discriminated against when they need to receive public funds, more prone to partisan attacks and encountering difficulties in accessing highly politicized structures are seen as the main disadvantages of independency – nevertheless, independents managed to survive them while, even more, being able to complete their projects. The success of their projects depends on whether they are at their first mandate or they enjoyed re-election. In rural areas, most independents take pride in their ability to complete projects such as water supply, ecologic trash management and disposal, sewerage systems, infrastructure, tourist and leisure zones, modernization of roads, schools, gas supplies, control of pollution in agriculture and rehabilitation of green spaces, whereas independents which serve as mayors of both

small towns and municipalities believe restoration of historic buildings, parking spaces, expansion of touristic places, ameliorating of existing infrastructure to be among their top achievements. Most of the independents we interviewed said they rely greatly on attracting European funds for completing their projects, and equally feel the interference of parties which hope to control as much funds as possible for helping their own members. G.B., an independent at his fourth mandate, said that "I have too many projects to count, all totalizing about 30 million euros". Also at his fourth mandate as independent, S.I. said he never asked for the help of political parties, but he nevertheless got numerous sponsorships through various sources such as *Sapard* or *Phare*. In completing their assumed projects, independents usually are confronted with a partisan-dominated local council, with scarce cases when an independent mayor is able to cooperate with an independently-driven local council. For example, M.A. said he feels the lack of independents in the local council, and he blames this situation on the electoral law which favours the candidates of political parties: "Independents had 70-80 votes and those who won a mandate as local councillors on behalf of political parties had barely 30". Others admitted bluntly the fact that their independence is provoking the opposition of local councillors, which refuse to cooperate. P.V. says he believes that the difficulties he faced were provoked by the fact he lacks the party brand. M.R. highlights an aversive situation within the local council, with his opponent from the second round of the 2008 elections provoking numerous fights. He believes that with the next elections, people will elect more independent local councillors, in order to avoid such situations. In contrast, one mayor with a history of no less than five mandates told us he manages to limit the local council by explaining each project in detail and making them realise it has to be made for the interest of the people (A.C., Călărași). Similarly, F.I. considers that his relations with the county and the local council were aided by his previous participation in local partisan politics. Three of the interviewed mayors from Covasna told us that they equally enjoy the help of independents and that of partisan representatives in the local council, especially thanks to the heterogeneous composition of the council. A.B. thinks that thanks to his previous experience as member of a political party he collaborates quite well with the local and county institutions. N.G. said he did not feel to be put aside as independent, and he maintains a good relation with the president of the county council and with the central administration. Also, P. I. said that what matters most in developing good relations with the political parties is the way the problems are being addressed: "Talking nicely helps a lot".

Asked if they sought re-election, independents provided us with contrasting answers. Some said they barely wait to finish their mandate and escape the pressures of independency. For example, one independent said that he spends the greatest part of his mandate in courts and paying administrative penalties, as he is being sued by the local councillors belonging to the political parties (G.B., Argeș County). L.O., an independent which managed to obtain an office in a locality that belonged for the past twenty years to various representatives of political parties, said that the former mayors have filled trials against him. Therefore, he added he barely wishes to finish his mandate because he feels he cannot handle it anymore. Also disappointed with the way independents are seen in Romania, several other independents (M.A., P.R.) confessed they will not attempt re-election. Faced with the burdens of independence, one independent with deep partisan legacies admitted that he will most probably return to party politics, but this time as part of another formation (M.A., Timiș). I.B., an independent from Brașov County, said that depending upon the general situation

near the time of the elections, he will decide if he maintains his independent label or will go for a partisan ticket. Others said that, keeping in mind their success as independents, they will most probably maintain their label. Confidents in their political future as independents, B.D. M.R. and P.I. said they will most probably run again in 2012, particularly as they already have some finished projects to take pride in. We encountered this belief in the reconfirmation of their independence mostly from politicians originating from Covasna, Harghita, Mureș. L.Z, A.B, and F.C. from Harghita, and B.B. from Sibiu also believe they will ran again in the 2012 elections, as long as they manage to successfully finalize most of their political promises. All things considered, the label of political independence will most probably stick to those politicians that were most successful in advancing their political programmes, and to those which will run in those places predisposed to independence, whereas failed partisanships turned independent will most probably generate future partisanships. Partisan reconversion is therefore a matter of circumstantial occurring, with independence diminishing with each election its desirability.

Despite their dominance of the establishment, political parties seem to continuously make efforts to attract independents within their ranks. Several voices, especially those who failed to catch a party nomination in the first place and those who have encountered resilient partisan pressures during their mandate admit not to exclude the possibility to ultimately enter a political party. A.B., former member of a political party, elected as independent in June 2008 admits that political parties have made him some offers, and "now after half of mandate has been consumed and thinking in perspective, it's highly probable I will join their ranks again". L.O. on the other hand admitted directly he wishes to join a certain party, especially as he feels the need to "receive protection from unfair attacks". "I sell myself for the community – I don't believe this would mean deceiving their belief in me especially if this helps us reaching visible results" argued one independent from Cluj. B.E., an independent at his first mandate from Covasna, P.V., mayor of an urban locality in Maramureș, P.I. from the rural parts of Maramureș, S.E. from Satu Mare and C.B. from Cluj say they were approached by several political parties, but they thought that none was tempting enough for them to make the move. F.I. admits that indirectly, through conditioning local funds, he was influenced by political parties to join them. An interesting observation came from one independent originating from Brașov county, which assumed independency for the June 2008 elections after reaching the conclusion that within the party he formerly belonged to "he has no future": I.B. feared that independents are forced to jump into the boat of political parties due to the lack of resources, and added that "political parties take advantage of this situation, and even they don't need to invest much resources in that politician". Then again, M.M. said that he was never approached by political parties because they knew he would never agree to join their ranks. Similarly, independents such as B.B. and F.C. admitted they were never approached by political parties. On the other hand, S.I. declared he refused to join political parties as he did not want to offend nobody: "The people don't care about political parties, as long as you do something for them". Thus, maintaining political independence becomes a matter of resisting the conditions imposed by political parties, a matter of personal belief, and also directly linked to what serves best the immediate electoral interests of the political runner. For that reason, comparing the available data with the observations made by independents themselves, independence seems to remain highly volatile at the local level.

Faced with the decreasing of the scores obtained by independents nationwide, an overwhelming part of our interviewed politicians consider that one cause for this is represented by the efforts made by political parties to dominate the establishment and to integrate more and more political actors. N.G. believes than every political party, whether in office or not, wishes to incorporate as many independents as possible, and this particular situation leads to the declining of the scores obtained by independents. Equally, he considers that, despite the formally assumed independence, this category of politicians is highly dependent on those in power to receive their funds. Correspondingly, I.B. considers that the most striking aspect of the Romanian establishment which affects independence is the allocation of public funds discretionary, following a strict partisan command: "The Governmental measure No. 322 distributes the money coming from the European mainly on political terms". C.B. agrees to this, saying that, despite his efforts to obtain highly needed European money, he faced numerous obstacles during the first two years of his mandate, particularly because of the opposition of political parties. B.E. from a locality in Covasna and L.O. from Iași County had also problems with the Measure No. 322, as their communities were denied the funds. Others see the dropping of independency as consequence of the high cost it involves – "if one wishes to candidate he is highly dependent on his own financial power, and nobody wishes to support him in any way" (S.I.), "it's costly" adds another one (B.E.). A.B. considers that "the political parties have certain advantages hard to compensate – the financial part, their power to organize" adding that "belonging to a political party which is in power you get the best chances to finance your projects". L.Z. thinks that the political parties developed a greater capacity in attracting the electorate and that the individual is usually ignored because the system is controlled by partisan entities. In the same way, N.C. said that one explanation for the decreasing of independents' scores might the fact that some independents which fail to advance their own interests through the mayor's office join political parties or exit politics altogether. Other interpretations were provided as well: F.I accuses for the dropping of independents' scores the fact that mayors are badly prepared and depend greatly on the party's support while lacking any sort of political vision. On a similar tone, F.C. believes that politicians hide in the ranks of political parties as they lack motivation: "They [partisan mayors] simply wait for governmental programmes and remain under the protective wing of their party". M.R. considers that with a political party a candidate doesn't need to raise the signatures and receives with little effort whatever electoral material he or she needs. M.M. and B.B. take the idea even further, saying that our society is highly politicized and also that the mayor's office is not that attractive as it was before because of the struggles, vulnerabilities and responsibilities it encompasses. On the other hand, L.S. believes that independents in Romania are affected by the mentalities that are active within the political system: "Whenever someone gets into power, everybody else thinks how to get rid of him and nobody makes any effort to show support". Furthermore, he considers that the scores obtained by independents are hampered especially of the economic situation and of the limited available public funds. Oppositely, B.D. offers us a more positive outlook on the matter, considering that, since starting 2008 the funds are distributed differently according to a particular fiscal algorithm, independence is susceptible to strengthen itself once more, as it should not be necessary anymore to depend on the discretionary distribution of funds operated by the parties. Hence, in order to better understand why independency occurs with each election more and more scarcely we came across several explanations: mostly giving credit to the

growing consolidation of the establishment around political parties, to the financial practices discriminating against independents, the poor administrative performance of independents themselves, the political culture which favours high dependence of politicians on organized partisan structures.

Running our interviews we stumbled upon several cases where politicians which initially got elected as independents in June 2008, through their secretary or other staff, refused to answer our questions. As we considered this occurring rather strange, we insisted with our efforts and ended up learning that these politicians were recruited by political parties in the meantime. Cross-referencing the data with their declarations, we reached several observations on what motivates some independents to quit their label in favour of a partisan coating, especially visible for those areas where the dominance of one of the main political parties is substantial. For some cases it's about the material benefits and support of a party. Numerous examples arise throughout the post-communist decades, with the most recent ones confirming the tendency of independents that assume a partisan coating to be mostly captured either by the party in power or by that one which controls regional politics. Also, we came across cases where independence was assumed only for participating in elections by a former party member in order to return to his originating party soon after getting in office. This situation is highly recurrent in some parts of Moldavia and Transylvania. A particular situation is that of the counties controlled by representatives of the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania, where independence occurs either as the only viable alternative to the dominant party of the Hungarian minority, either as the best chance for Romanians to advance their candidature in those areas intensively inhabited by Hungarians. For example, F.I., an independent which managed to win a mandate in a Magyar dominated region thinks the high scores of independents in that particular region is a consequence of the particular internal atmosphere within the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania. Similarly, M.R. says that, despite the fact that Magyars are united, their electorate is faced with the same faces again and again: "The same actors distributed with different parts". Moreover, A.B. thinks that twenty years after the fall of communism ethnic Hungarians feel a certain tension towards the main party representing their interests: "Little of what was expected was achieved and the people became more sceptics towards them". B.E., an independent in Covasna says this path was more about personal choice, adding that he will most probably run again, but he remains unsure if he will prolong his independence or choose to join a political party. L.Z., an ethnic Magyar elected for the office of mayor in the Harghita County, considered that more than ever the issues of the minority are less important than administrative ones and the electorate already started acting accordingly. S.E. believes that independence is greatly cherished in these areas because it has the highest electoral efficiency – both Romanians and ethnic Hungarians can vote for independents. On the other hand, M.M., a Romanian mayor in Harghita believes the high numbers of independence in that region are produced by a faked form of independence, as many running independently represent in fact the interests of the Civic Magyar Party, but refuse to assume their partisanship due to the problematic situation of this political organisation in the region.

Often an overlooked phenomenon and treated in the footnotes of political science papers, independent candidatures can provide an impressive account at how modern politics are directly affected by individual political entities and how the latter choose to manifest themselves. And especially because it offers estranged voters an open platform to voice their heterogeneous thoughts and expectations, political

independence cannot easily be ignored. Even more, the political developments visible in Central and Eastern Europe during the last two decades make the scrutiny of this phenomenon seem even more imperative. Besides, as current practice shows, independence has reached a critical point: fewer candidacies are being advanced, even fewer manage to get into office and, generally, the establishment seems to be forcing a monopolistic integration of outcasts. Therefore, treating independence at the local level in the particular context of post-communist politics is not only a matter of academic outlook, but it represents a democratic urgency above all. Our attempt to better understand the specific characteristics of non-party actors in Eastern European local politics represents only a first step. Nonetheless, in order to achieve a broader approach on independent candidatures, future research needs to expand the presented framework to a cross-national level in order to assess the motivation and the activity of independent politicians throughout the area, and also to further investigate the response of the electorate towards the manifestations of local independence.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The present study began as an effort to understand the dynamics developed by independent candidatures within the particular setting of post-communist local elections. Observing the lack of any similar approach and, moreover, the scarcity of examinations on the Eastern European space, our study was intended not only at filling a gap in the domain, but also at opening new paths for the study of independence within a previously-neglected space. We started our observations from acknowledging that, in the case of Romania, the scores obtained by independents decrease with each electoral cycle and also that, despite this problematic situation of independence in the past two decades, independents continue to advance their candidatures. Therefore, our inquiry of the incentives which allow local political independence to surface within an unfavourable political situation clearly subject to partisanships aimed to better understand what makes independents ignore political parties in their search for office and to explore the dynamics related to independence. Additionally, we attempted to provide some insight into the often contrasting profiles of independents, into the actual obstacles they face, the type of rhetoric they promote, their actual path to office and also regarding their political performance thereafter. Most importantly, despite the particularities of the subject analysed, this paper tried to provide a multidimensional outlook on the matter, severely limiting the heroic interpretation of political independence. To address the above mentioned issues related to independence we analysed the figures regarding independent candidatures advanced at local level in Romania between 1992 and 2008 and we interviewed thirty independent politicians which managed to get into office after the latest local polls. In applying existing theories on party systems, political independence, local politics and voting behaviour to the available data we explicitly assumed that independent candidatures and political performance are largely determined by several factors: independents' social standing within the community, their incorporation of issues stringent to the circumscription and the political mechanisms and processes that legitimate or limit this particular type of candidacies. Namely, independents are favoured by the salience of interparty competition, by the liabilities encountered in the organizational strength of parties, the characteristics of the electoral provisions, by electoral turnout and precedence.

What about the immediate political profiles of independents? Many enter politics as outsiders, with no previous experience in the administration. Others engage independently in the electoral race being motivated by issues they feel passionately about and that they find corresponding to their professional background. Still, others decide to run independently after previously having been members of political parties; following the failure to acquire an office as party representatives, controversies with other party members, or dissatisfaction with the direction of the party politicians might decide to pursue their political career independently. Approaching closely the various backgrounds of local political independence, we also acknowledged that independence requires solid political determination in order to compensate for the absence of partisan support. As noticed, independents have the flexibility to adapt their political persona to the different situations which might arise and to adopt a variety of issues usually ignored by the representatives of the political parties. Also observed during our study was the distinctive recurrence of independence among several political backgrounds: the church, the minorities and the local inheritors of communist benefits. By far, a particularly interesting occurrence of independence was that noticed among Magyar-dominated areas, where it seemed to be driven by the wish of political actors for maximum gains, irrespective of their ethnic roots. For the most independents' cases we have dealt with, overcoming their outcast situation was realised thanks to previously accumulated professional and social resources, which were further employed for gaining political support and raising necessary political funds. On the other hand, from our compilation of a general typology of independence we observed that local independents hardly differ from mainstream candidates representing political parties. If in general elections higher status candidates are most favoured, middle-educated candidates do fairly well in local elections. Also, similarly to nationwide politics, a bias against younger and female candidates is in place for the local level. Hence, rather than being a likely emanation of the establishment, the politicians who assume the independent label are decisively influenced by circumstantial impetuses, with a similar situation being observable on the voters' side, whose propensity to go for independents seem to be less about longstanding enthusiasm. In our analysis we equally saw that it is clearly easier for independents to contest local polls than general elections, especially thanks to the lack of any substantial barrier to their candidatures. Among the benefits of local candidacies we notice there is no need to forfeit a deposit, or to raise vast political resources. But, despite these positive outlooks on independence, the scores obtained by independents at the past five electoral movements made us question what might affect their performance. We ended up identifying several characteristics that confirm the manifesting marginalization of independence, among which we consider the most important to be the discriminatory allocation of political resources within the establishment, low access to highly politicized structures, the maturing of the political system, the centrality of partisan structures, and the costs of independence itself.

We began our analysis with some basic numbers in order to assess the performance of independents for the selected period. In terms of shares of votes, independents enjoy decent scores in the first electoral cycle, with visibly lower numbers of mandates being captured with each new electoral cycle, with the most mandates won by independents in the case of mayoralties and the local council. Respectively, due to the problems that arise in covering large political units, independence has the lower representation in the county councils and no participation for the office of president of the county council. We have also identified that a geographic preference for independents is in place, with

independence being more visible in the central and northern parts of the country. In the rural versus urban debate, we can easily observe that local independence mostly occurs in small communities. Equally, we saw independence to be little dependent on electoral campaigning, with word of mouth representing by far the most import electoral activity at the local level. Classical campaigning techniques were also present, but their influence decreased the more the candidate was familiar to the electorate. Also, we further noted that money seems to be retaining a similarly low importance over local independence, with spending being proportionally influenced by the magnitude of the circumscription. On the other hand, independents that manage to get into office face a similarly difficult task in convincing partisan-controlled councils and higher structures of the necessity and usefulness of their projects. Particularly, the implementation of their political programmes remains at the discretion of partisan bodies, and obtaining an approval or access to public funds require additional efforts to be made. Nevertheless, despite this uneasy situation, political independence managed to survive all five post-communist electoral cycles. The failure of national political parties to respond to the demands of local constituents made room for the emergence of various independent outsiders. Independent politicians can be seen as providing new channels of engagement and participation. Arguably, independents fill the openings left by the major parties in their failure to completely reflect the views of the public, and enable individuals which do not have a direct affiliation to a political party to engage politically. Nevertheless, political parties are recuperating the lost grounds with each election, either as consequence of the more rigid electoral provisions favouring partisanships or as result of their numerous attempts at integrating independent players into party politics.

Many states are experiencing a considerable growth of electoral activity outside the multi-party system that would make one believe that politics independent of party structures will become a more common denominator in future politics. Independents, unlike party candidates, are not directly tied to the fate of other candidates and cannot draw on party resources to run their electoral campaigns – but this does not mean that they will soon represent an equivalent alternative to political parties nor that they will wholly emulate partisanships as key organizational forms of modern democracies[1]. This trend is equally valid for Eastern European politics, and especially for the local politics of Romania, where we observed that independent politicians depend greatly on circumstantial predispositions of the electorate and on the particular arrangements of the establishment. In relation to such arguments, independent candidatures are an interesting phenomenon. Although it has not resulted in any signi□cant improvement in the number of offices won, the recurrence of independent candidacies during the post-communist transition suggests that the party system in Romania is expected to continue its internal restructuring and that it has a potential for such independent voices in the future. For the time being, Romanian politics leaves little space for independent political voices to manifest. Political parties make their best to assure their monopole over existing political offices and public finance sources, and their structures remain extremely competitive[2]. However, political independence represents a complex occurrence highly susceptible to further contest partisan politics, especially at the local level.

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[1] Éric BÉLANGER, "Antipartyism...cit.", pp. 1054-1078.
[2] Daniel BARBU, *Republica absentă*…cit., p. 172.

Keeping in mind its particular pioneering character, we believe that this study serves only as a starting point in the investigation of political independence at the local level, within the particular confines of the post-communist space. Further debate should be ignited regarding the characteristics of that part of the electorate which might become prone to support independence, concerning a broader view on political independence throughout the rest of the Eastern Europe, and a further emphasis on the actual contribution of local independence to the maturing of the post-communist system at large. In the same way, it remains to be seen to what extent the suppositions advanced within this paper will be matched in practice and, correspondingly, to further examine the strength of local independence with the next electoral cycles.

# APPENDIX

**Table 1**

*Mandates Won by Independents at the Local Elections (1992-2008)**

| | Mayoralties | | | Local Council | | County Council | | President of the County Council | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mandates | % of T Mandates | % of T Votes | Mandates | % of T Mandates | Mandates | % of T Mandates | Mandates | % of T Mandates |
| **1992** | 659 | 22.4 | N/A | 2684 | 6.54 | N/A | 1.36 | N/A | N/A |
| **1996** | 251 | 15.79 | 16.48 | 1727 | 4.33 | 61 | 3.55 | N/A | N/A |
| **2000** | 159 | 5.38 | 7.27 | 422 | 1.06 | 0 | 0 | N/A | N/A |
| **2004** | 82 | 2.61 | 2.924 | 503 | 1.26 | 1 | 0.07 | N/A | N/A |
| **2008** | 56 | 1.75 | 1.598 | 358 | 0.88 | 1 | 0.07 | 0 | 0 |

*Source: *The Official Gazette of Romania*

**Figure 1**

*Evolution of Local Independence between 1992 and 2008*

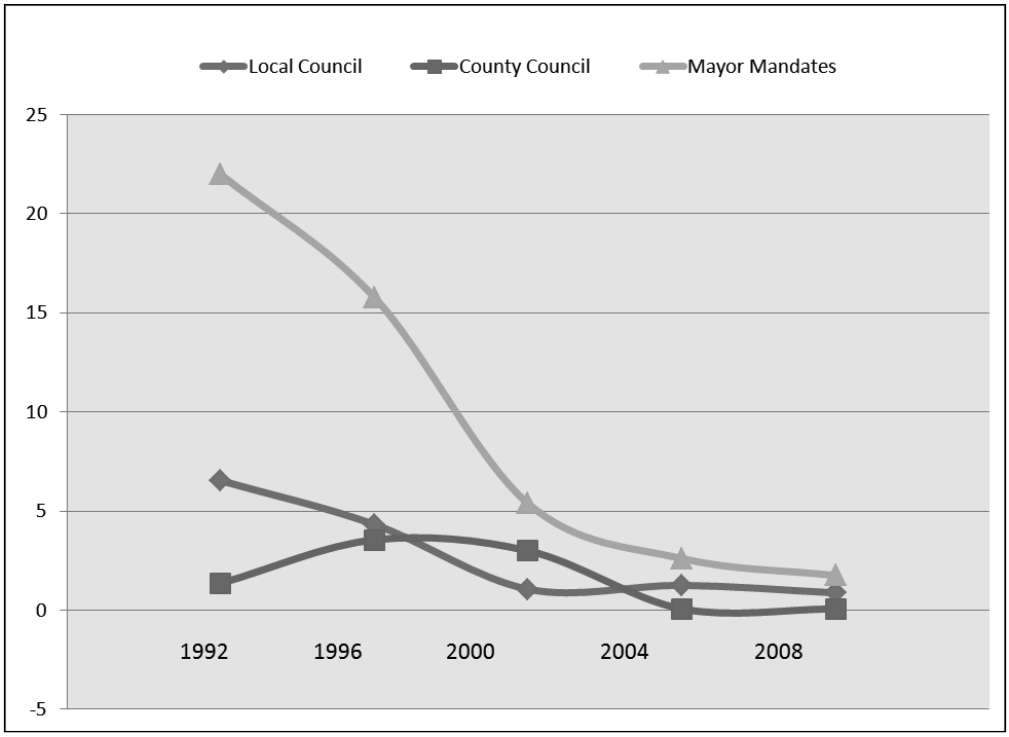



**Table 2**

*Voter Turnout in the Romanian Legislative and Local Elections: 1992-2008*

| | **1992** | **1996** | **2000** | **2004** | **2008** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Local | 65 | 56.47 | 50.85 | 54.23 | 48.99 |
| Legislative | 76.29 | 76.01 | 65.31 | 58.93 | 39.26 |

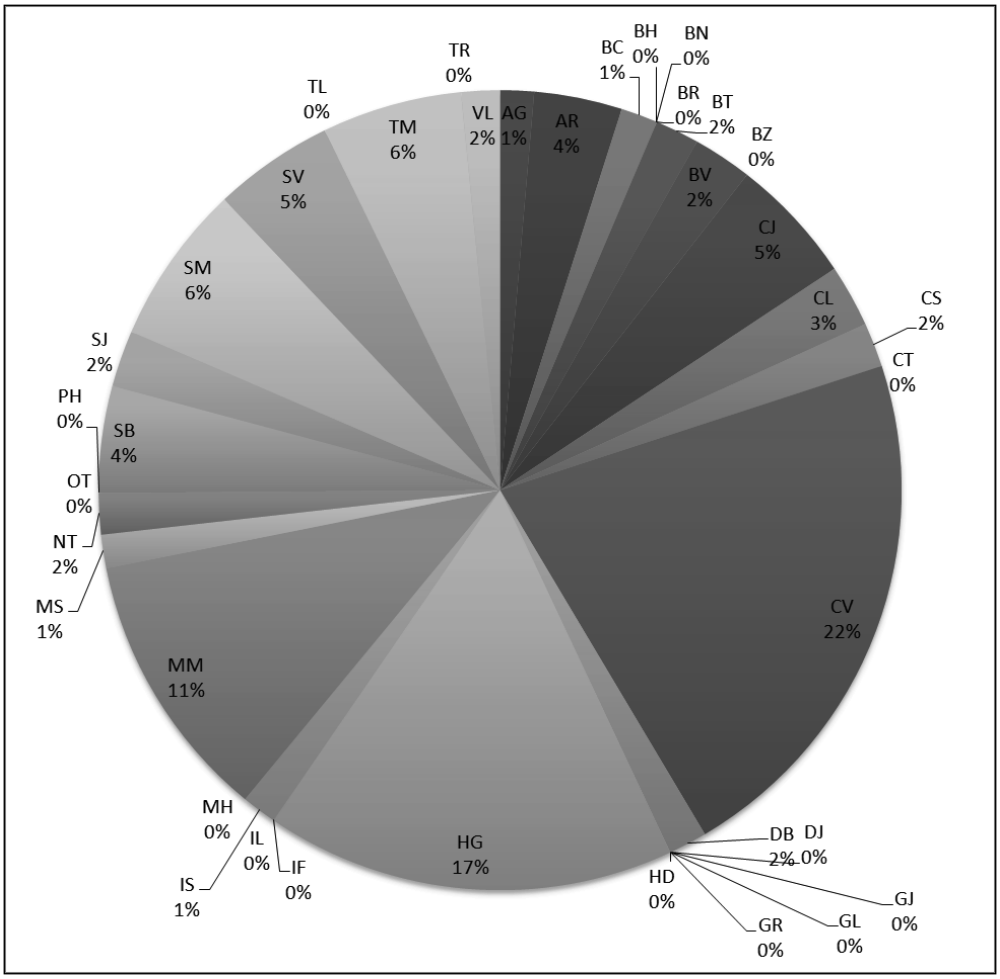
**Table 3**
*Distribution of Independent Candidatures after the June 2008 Elections*

| County | Urban | Rural | Candidatures (U+R) | Mandates won | Available mandates | % of Mandate | Coefficient* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **AB** | 1 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 78 | 0 | **0** |
| **AR** | 0 | 6 | 6 | 2 | 78 | 0.025641 | **0.333333** |
| **AG** | 0 | 15 | 15 | 1 | 102 | 0.0098039 | **0.066667** |
| **BC** | 3 | 6 | 9 | 1 | 93 | 0.0107527 | **0.111111** |
| **BH** | 2 | 9 | 11 | 0 | 101 | 0 | **0** |
| **BN** | 1 | 4 | 5 | 0 | 62 | 0 | **0** |
| **BT** | 0 | 4 | 4 | 1 | 78 | 0.0128205 | **0.25** |
| **BV** | 1 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 58 | 0.0172414 | **0.2** |
| **BR** | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 44 | 0 | **0** |
| **BZ** | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 87 | 0 | **0** |
| **CS** | 3 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 77 | 0.012987 | **0.25** |
| **CL** | 0 | 4 | 4 | 1 | 55 | 0.0181818 | **0.25** |
| **CJ** | 1 | 12 | 13 | 3 | 81 | 0.037037 | **0.230769** |
| **CT** | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 70 | 0 | **0** |
| **CV** | 3 | 16 | 19 | 7 | 45 | 0.1555556 | **0.368421** |
| **DB** | 1 | 10 | 11 | 1 | 89 | 0.011236 | **0.090909** |
| **DJ** | 1 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 111 | 0 | **0** |
| **GL** | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 64 | 0 | **0** |
| **GR** | 0 | 4 | 4 | 0 | 54 | 0 | **0** |
| **GJ** | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 70 | 0 | **0** |
| **HG** | 5 | 21 | 26 | 8 | 67 | 0.119403 | **0.307692** |
| **HD** | 2 | 5 | 7 | 0 | 69 | 0 | **0** |
| **IL** | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 66 | 0 | **0** |
| **IS** | 0 | 6 | 6 | 1 | 98 | 0.0102041 | **0.166667** |
| **IF** | 0 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 40 | 0 | **0** |
| **MM** | 4 | 7 | 11 | 6 | 76 | 0.0789474 | **0.545455** |
| **MH** | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 66 | 0 | **0** |
| **MS** | 2 | 19 | 21 | 3 | 102 | 0.0098039 | **0.125** |
| **NT** | 1 | 7 | 8 | 1 | 83 | 0.0120482 | **0.125** |
| **OT** | 0 | 5 | 5 | 0 | 112 | 0 | **0** |
| **PH** | 0 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 104 | 0 | **0** |
| **SM** | 1 | 6 | 7 | 3 | 64 | 0.046875 | **0.428571** |
| **SJ** | 0 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 61 | 0.0163934 | **0.333333** |
| **SB** | 1 | 5 | 6 | 2 | 64 | 0.03125 | **0.333333** |
| **SV** | 1 | 12 | 13 | 4 | 114 | 0.0350877 | **0.307692** |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **TR** | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 97 | 0 | **0** |
| **TM** | 2 | 12 | 14 | 4 | 98 | 0.0408163 | **0.285714** |
| **TL** | 0 | 4 | 4 | 0 | 51 | 0 | **0** |
| **VS** | 0 | 7 | 7 | 2 | 86 | 0.0232558 | **0.285714** |
| **VL** | 0 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 89 | 0.011236 | **0.333333** |
| **VR** | 0 | 8 | 8 | 1 | 73 | 0.0136986 | **0.125** |
| **RO** | 39 | 240 | 279 | 56 | 3177 | 0.0176267 | **0.200717** |
| **B** | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 6 | 0.1666667 | **1** |

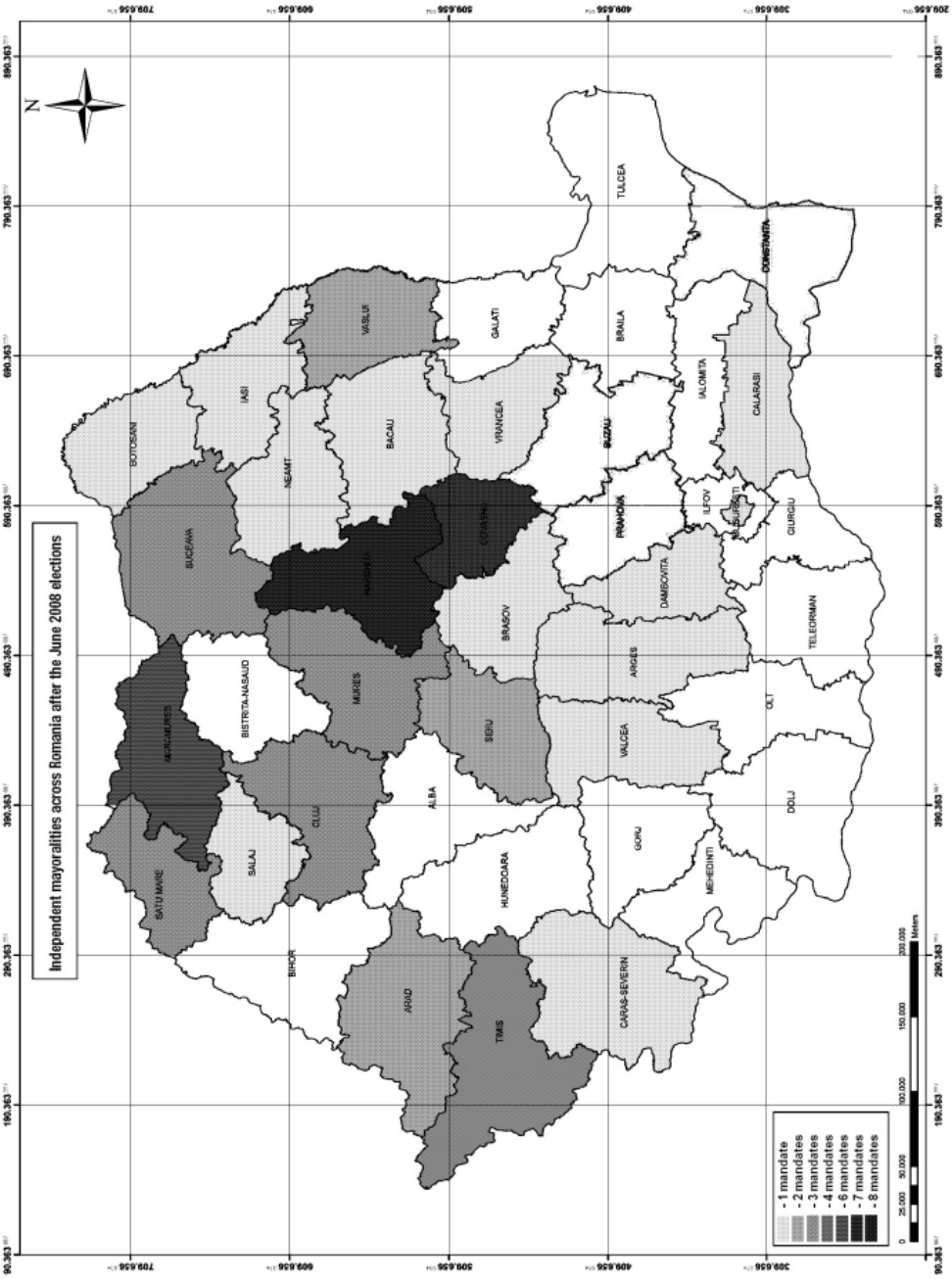
*Coefficient obtained by dividing the number of mandates won by independents to the number of mandates available per county.

**Figure 2**
*Independents after the June 2008 Elections*



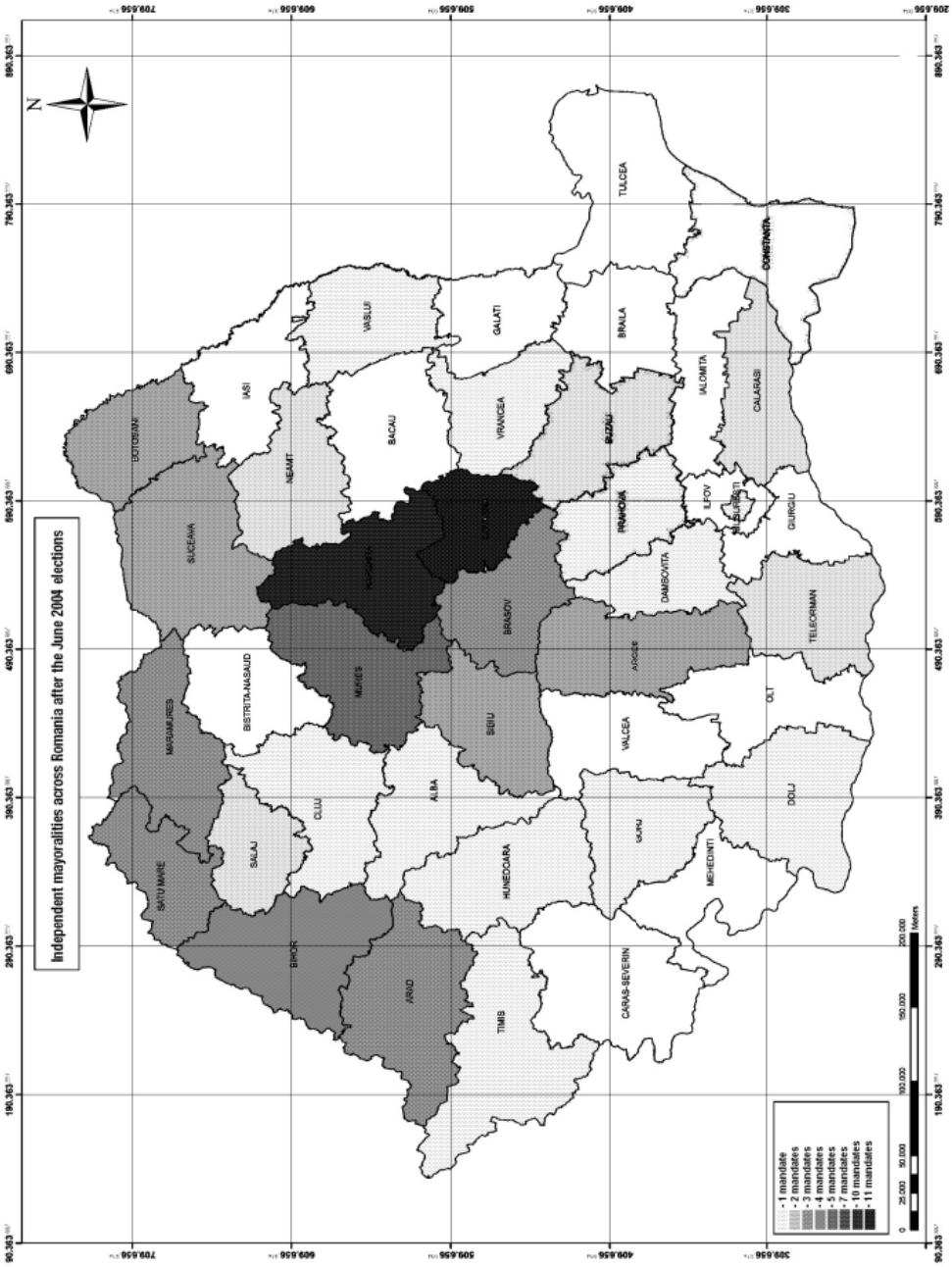
**Map 1**

*Political Independence across Romania after June 2008 Local Elections*



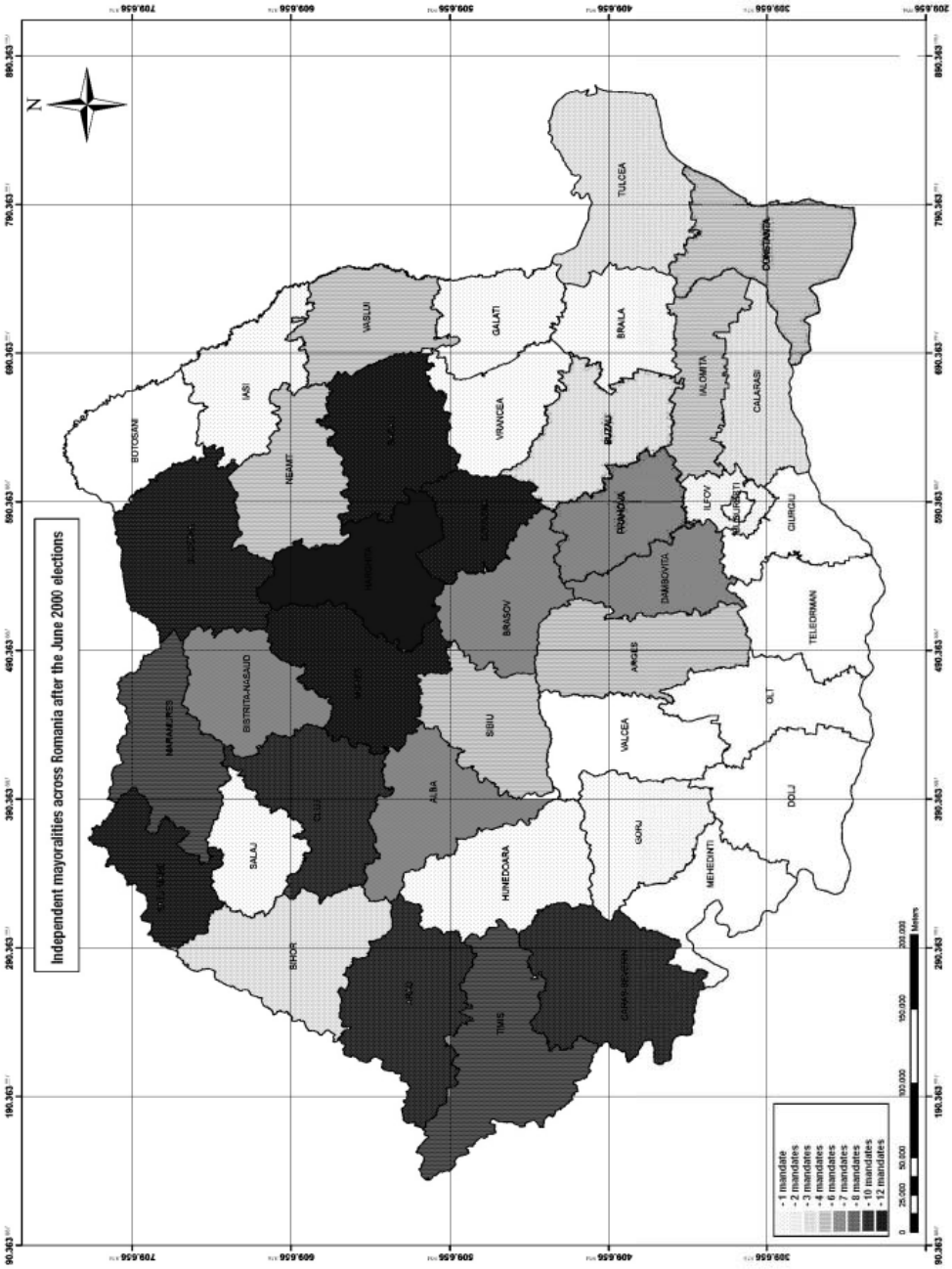
**Map 2**

*Political Independence across Romania after June 2004 Local Elections*



**Map 3**

*Political Independence across Romania after June 2000 Local Elections*



**Map 4**

*Political Independence across Romania after June 1996 Local Elections*

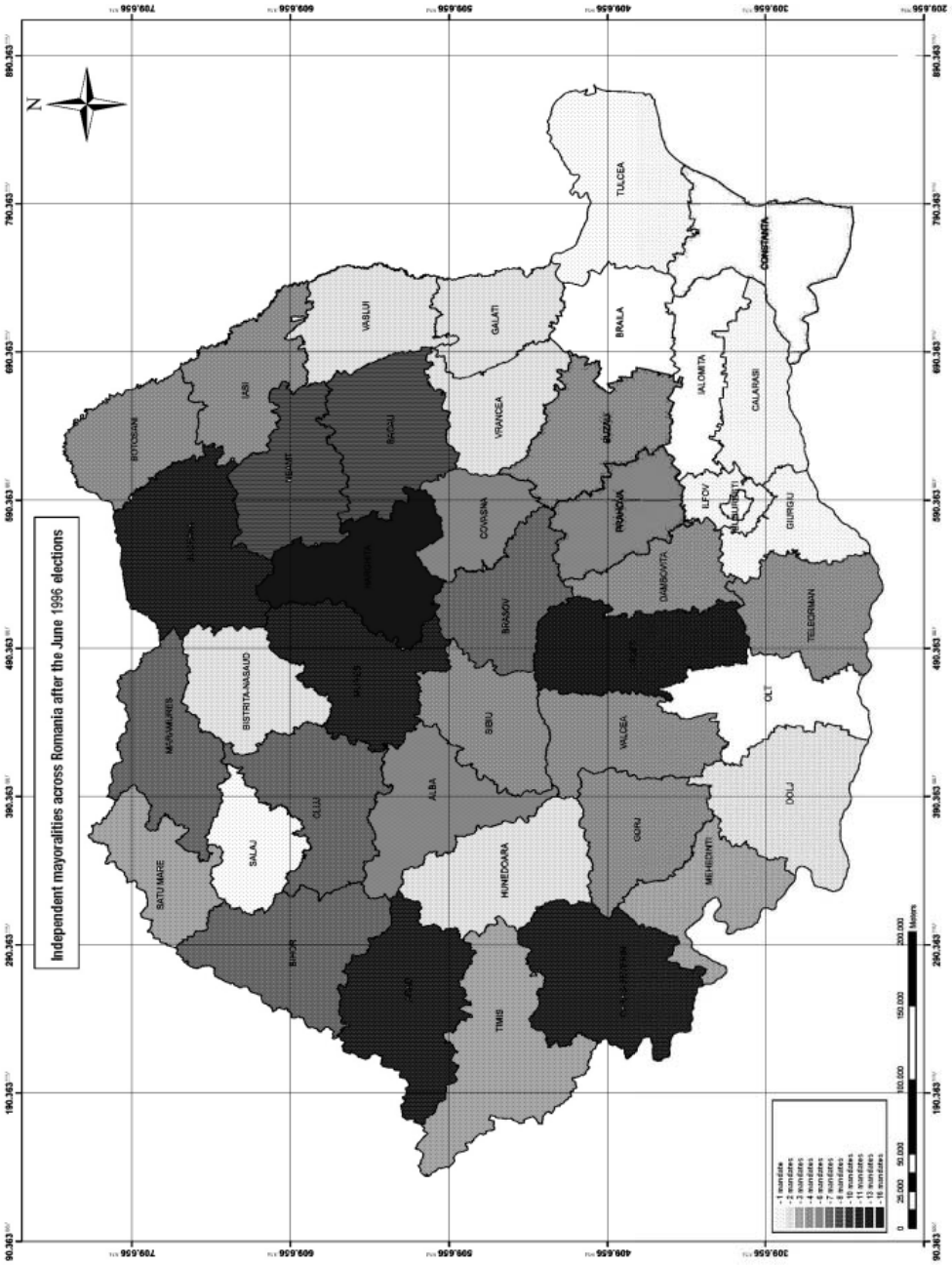


**Table 4**
*Profiles of the Respondents*

| No. | Name | County | Type of Locality | Number of mandates | Former partisan allegiance | Occupation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | G.B. | Argeş | rural | 4 | no | Priest |
| **2** | I.B. | Braşov | rural | 1 | yes | Businessman |
| **5** | A.C. | Călăraşi | rural | 5 | no | Veterinary technician |
| **3** | C.B. | Cluj | rural | 1 | no | Engineer |
| **4** | S.I. | Cluj | rural | 4 | no | Salesperson |
| **6** | B.E. | Covasna | rural | 1 | no | Computer specialist |
| **7** | F.I. | Covasna | rural | 1 | yes | Professor |
| **8** | B.D | Covasna | rural | 1 | no | Civil servant |
| **9** | B.T. | Covasna | rural | 1 | no | Mechanic |
| **10** | N.I. | Covasna | urban | 1 | yes | Businessman |
| **11** | M.M. | Harghita | urban | 3 | no | Jurist |
| **12** | L.Z. | Harghita | rural | 2 | yes | Engineer |
| **13** | F.C. | Harghita | rural | 1 | yes | Economist |
| **14** | A.B. | Harghita | rural | 1 | yes | Engineer |
| **15** | B.B. | Harghita | rural | 2 | yes | Engineer |
| **16** | L.O. | Iaşi | rural | 1 | no | Electrician |
| **17** | P.V. | Maramureş | urban | 1 | yes | Businessman |
| **18** | G.N. | Maramureş | rural | 1 | no | Priest |
| **19** | P.I. | Maramureş | rural | 1 | yes | Engineer |
| **20** | L.V. | Mureş | rural | 1 | no | Social worker |
| **21** | M.R. | Sălaj | rural | 1 | no | Civil servant |
| **22** | S.E. | Satu Mare | rural | 2 | no | Civil servant |
| **23** | C.P. | Satu Mare | rural | 1 | no | Economist |
| **24** | S.I. | Satu Mare | urban | 4 | no | Topography technician |
| **25** | B.B. | Sibiu | rural | 1 | no | Non-governmental |
| **26** | L.S. | Timiş | rural | 1 | no | Mathematician |
| **27** | M.A. | Timiş | rural | 3 | yes | Accountant |
| **28** | L.G. | Vaslui | rural | 1 | yes | Teacher |
| **29** | P.R. | Vaslui | rural | 1 | no | Engineer |