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The Presidentialization of the Romanian Political System
An Interplay between Structures and Contingencies

ALINA STURZU

The phenomenon of presidentialization has been mainly presented as a paradoxical movement of parliamentary systems towards a political *modus operandi* specific to their competing model, presidentialism[1]. Within this field of discussion, the cases that would qualify for an in-depth analysis would be the Western states, most often exponents of parliamentarism with minor variations. A restriction to the area of research would prove detrimental to the aspirations to enrich the nature of the argument. The impetus that Marina Costa Lobo brings through her statement describing presidentialization "as a trend in several advanced industrial democracies, regardless of their constitutional framework"[2] serves as a point of departure for the questions that set in motion this analysis: *Is presidentialization conquering also the "new democracies" in Central and Eastern Europe? All the more, can an Eastern-type of presidentialization be demarcated? If so, does it follow in the footsteps of its Western counterpart?*

Before delving into the actual analysis, the conceptual clarifications should be addressed in the light of the latest theoretical considerations. The leadership-oriented style of politics, denounced as a shift towards presidentialism without proper implementation, has been portrayed as a consequence of both structural factors (e.g. the internationalization of politics, the growth of the state, the progress of mass communication and the alteration of traditional social cleavage politics) and contingent factors (e.g. the political context and the leader's personality)[3]. One of the central sets of studies regarding the shift towards leaders concentrated on the *personalization of poli-*

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[1] See, for instance, Thomas POGUNTKE, "The Presidentialization of Parliamentary Democracies: A Contradiction in Terms?", Paper prepared for presentation at the ECPR Workshop "The Presidentialization of Parliamentary Democracies?", Copenhagen, April 2000; Richard HEFFERNAN, "Presidentialization in the United Kingdom. Prime Ministerial Power and Parliamentary Democracy", Paper prepared for delivery at the 28th Joint Sessions of workshops of the European Consortium of Political Research, University of Copenhagen, 14-19 April 2000; Dan KORN, "The Presidentialization of Politics: The Power and Constraints of the Israeli Prime Minister", Article 2, The Joseph and Alma Gildenhorn Institute for Israel Studies, University of Maryland, available at http://www.israelstudies.umd.edu/research-papers.html. Last accessed on 15.05.2011.

[2] Marina Costa LOBO, "The Presidentialization of Portuguese Democracy?", in Thomas POGUNTKE, Paul WEBB (eds.), *The Presidentialization of Politics: A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005, pp. 269-288/p. 269.

[3] Thomas POGUNTKE, Paul WEBB (eds.), *The Presidentialization of Politics*…cit., pp. 13-17.

tics[1] viewed as triggered by a larger process of *individualization*[2] of the social life. Lauri Karvonen, for instance, enumerates several characteristics of this trend: (a) the institutional framework places individual politicians above groups or parties, (b) politics is presented in a manner which emphasizes the leaders, (c) the citizens comprehend politics more as a competition between individuals, (d) the electorate tends to form its preferences and allocate their votes on the basis of the evaluation of the candidates, thus deciding the outcome of elections, (e) the power relationships begin to be settled considering the individual traits of politicians[3]. The personalized way of conducting politics is incontestable, but it should be integrated into a larger phenomenon that depicts not only the increased visibility of political leaders, but also their capacity to aggregate resources and make claims of autonomy in areas such as policy-making.

In this context, the concept of "presidentialization" seems to best capture the contemporary transformations within most of the democratic societies. In a study entitled *Media and the Presidentialization of Parliamentary Elections* (2000), Anthony Mughan holds that the concept implies a

> "movement over time away from collective to personalized government, movement away from a pattern of governmental and electoral politics dominated by the political party towards one where the party leader becomes a more autonomous political force"[4].

It could thus be argued that, irrespective of the constitutional arrangements, the leader assumes a quasi-monarchical standing, making the political world go round according to his personal perspectives, values and beliefs. Whether it eventually entails constitutional modifications or derives from a "transient political circumstance"[5], the presidentialization of politics is perceived as a phenomenon with impacts upon the quality of democracy, thus its evaluation could draw inferences about the future of the democratic regimes.

Applying this theoretical framework to Central and Eastern Europe is no unproblematic task, considering the specificity of the paths followed by the countries belonging to the ex-communist block. To catch a glimpse of this puzzle, the debate would be directed towards much limited and much familiar grounds. Therefore, the analysis integrates into the "presidentialization" debate, a new comer, Romania, as a country that underwent a painstaking democratization process after the fall of communism in 1989, on its road to European integration and democratic consolidation. The theoretical approach adopted follows the structure proposed by Thomas Poguntke and Paul Webb, in their edited volume entitled *The Presidentialization of Politics: A comparative Study of Modern Democracies.* As such, the test of presidentialization would be com-

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[1] Lauri KARVONEN, "The Personalization of Politics. What does research tell us so far, and what further research is in order?", Paper prepared for the 4th ECPR Conference, Pisa 6-8 September 2007, available at http://www.essex.ac.uk/ecpr/events/generalconference/pisa/papers/PP226.pdf. Last accessed on 6.05.2011.

[2] Zygmunt BAUMAN, *The Individualized Society*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2001, pp. 1-17.

[3] Lauri KARVONEN, "The Personalization of Politics…cit.", pp. 3-4.

[4] Anthony MUGHAN, *Media and the Presidentialization of Parliamentary Elections*, Palgrave, New York, 2000, p. 7.

[5] *Ibidem*, p. 8.

pleted after a thorough examination of three dimensions vital to the complexity of the argument: (a) leadership power resources; (b) leadership autonomy and (c) personalization of the electoral process[1]. To this purpose, it is imperative to delve into three corresponding spheres of power: executive, party and electoral process. Not only are these investigations instrumental in detecting an incipient or a matured presidentialized system, but they also shed light upon its evolution across the post-1990 period.

Going from the structural aspects towards interconnected contingent factors, the present assessment holds that despite anticipated differences, there are points of convergence between the Western and Eastern types of politics. The genuine prominence of leaders is to be derived from the evaluation of the nature of leadership powers in three most important political postures: as head of the executive, as party leader and, last but not least, as candidate in elections. All things considered, the present research does not only seek for confirmation of the existence of a presidentialising trend in Romania, for an isolation of a particular presidentialization in an European context, if at all possible, but also for a better understanding of the Romanian political system.

The Executive Face

One significant mark of presidentialization resides in an enhanced executive branch. The traditional separation of powers instituted an interdependent relationship between the executive and the legislative, adding various mechanisms that maintain the equilibrium between the components of the system. Whether it is a single executive (presidential systems) or a dual executive, with a mostly ceremonial head of state and a more powerful head of government (parliamentary or hybrid regimes), this branch is the locus where "effective power over policy"[2] is exerted. As a consequence, a larger amount of resources and influence at the discretion of the head of government, be it a president or a prime minister, provides him or her with the possibility to take personal decisions regarding appointments or policy choices. At this stage of the analysis, the primary objective is to examine how the lifespan of the executives progressed in Romania starting with the 1990s and to what extent the informal structures of power have been developed in conformity with the logic of intra-executive presidentialization.

The 1991 Constitution in Romania has not explicitly guaranteed the separation of powers. The option was justified, during the debates on the final form of the fundamental law, by the uniqueness specific to the sovereignty of the people, a strict divide between the three powers being analogous to a "scientific error"[3]. From this initial flaw, a series of ambiguities and institutional tensions intensified throughout the post-communist period.

First of all, considering the president-premier relations, the nature of the Romanian political system is still an enigma. Influenced by the institutional design of the

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[1] Thomas POGUNTKE, Paul WEBB (eds.), *The Presidentialization of Politics*…cit., p. 5.

[2] Gabriel ALMOND, G.B. POWELL JR., Kaare STRØM, Russell DALTON (eds.), *Comparative Politics Today*, Eight Ed., Pearson, Longman, New York, San Francisco, Boston, 2004, p. 116.

[3] Victor DUCULESCU, Georgeta DUCULESCU, *Revizuirea Constitutiei – Istoric. Drept Comparat. Documente. Opinii*, Editura Lumina Lex, București, 2002, p. 99.

French Fifth Republic and constrained by the memory of communist dictatorship, the balance of power between the two offices is not clearly tipped in favour of one side or another. Romania has usually been viewed as a semi-parliamentary republic due to a mixture between two core features of presidentialism and parliamentarism, as emphasized by Duverger: the direct election of the president, as the head of the state, and the accountability of the government in front of the Parliament[1]. Some authors have deemed this system as premier-presidential[2], drawing attention to the perils of cohabitation, which needed two "rules" to be respected: primarily, a set of clear provisions for an effective separation between the presidential and prime ministerial responsibilities, and secondly, a compliance with the division of powers on both sides, for the prevention of competitive diarchy. Nonetheless, different studies placed Romania in a number of typologies[3], though Thomas Baylis openly admitted the difficulties experienced by country experts when deciding upon the exact type of executive predominant in this case:

Table 1
Typologies of the Form of Government in Romania

	Stepan and Skach (1993)	***Derbyshire and Derbyshire (1996)***	***Baylis (1997)***	***Easter (1997)***	***Elgie (1998)***	***Berlund (2001)***
Romania	Presidential	Limited presidentialism	Presidential	Presidential	Semi-presidential	Parliamentary

Actually, Giovanni Sartori goes so far as to place the Romanian system within the parliamentary category, tough certain presidential tendencies are to be detected due to the fact that the prerogatives of the president, most of the time dependent on the approval of the legislative, place him on the same position as head of the Parliament[4]. Moreover, in an empirical study put forward by Andre Krouwel, the level of presidentialism is -2.0 (presidential score 2.5, parliamentary score 4.5), indicating strong parliamentary features[5].

Secondly, the vagueness in terms of who exerts what sort of powers has affected the interactions between the Parliament and the executive, between the president and the prime minister, and ultimately between the president and the Parliament. To start

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[1] Maurice DUVERGER, "A New Political System Model: Semi-Presidential Government", *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 8, no. 2, June 1980, pp. 165-187/p. 166.

[2] Mathew S. SHUGART, John CAREY, *Presidents and Assemblies: Constitutional Design and Electoral Dynamics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 55-56.

[3] Table adapted after the data in Andre KROUWEL, "The Presidentialization of East-Central European countries", Paper prepared for presentation at the ECPR Joint Sessions Workshop on the Presidentialization of Parliamentary democracies, Copenhagen, Denmark, April 14-19, 2000, p. 3; Sten BERGLUND, Frank AAREBROT, H. VOGT, G. KARASIMEONOV, (eds.), *Challenges to Democracy: Eastern Europe Ten Years after the Collapse of Communism*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, 2001, p. 17.

[4] Giovanni SARTORI, "Alcuni chiarimenti sul semipresidenzialismo", *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. III, no. 3, 2003, pp. 617-620/p. 618.

[5] Andre KROUWEL, "Measuring Presidentialism and Parliamentarism: An Application to Central and East European Countries", *Acta politica*, vol. 38, 2003, pp. 333-364/p. 350.

with the legislative branch and the positioning of the executive in relation to it, it is essential to draw attention to the weakness of the Romanian Parliament. In its bicameral structure, with the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies having similar prerogatives, the Parliament was often perceived as exaggeratedly large, highly corrupt, inefficient and somehow "the source of all evils". In practice, as Cristian Preda was underscoring,

> "there is a gap between the *de iure* enforcement of the Parliament as central element of the Romanian regime and its atrophy in the attempt to manage the political conflicts of the society"[1].

In fact, the post-communist settlements have informally established the executive as the main legislative initiator. The Parliament's right to issue legislation has been, throughout these decades, surpassed by a provision granting the government the possibility to adopt emergency ordinances through a mechanism known as *legislative delegation* (Article 114.4). These ordinances are either approved automatically, if the Parliament does not sit in a session, or after twenty days, if the first notified chamber does not approve it. The "exceptional" nature of these acts has gradually transformed into a routine justified either through the urgency to reform the state or comply with the European legislation.

Table 2
Emergency Ordinances (1991-2008)

Government	Emergency Ordinances
Theodor Stolojan ***(Oct. 1991-Nov. 1992)***	1
Nicolae Văcăroiu ***(Dec. 1992-Nov. 1996)***	16
Victor Ciorbea ***(Dec. 1996-Apr. 1998)***	104
Radu Vasile ***(Apr. 1998-Dec. 1999)***	260
Mugur Isărescu ***(Dec.1999-Dec. 2000)***	296
Adrian Năstase ***(Dec. 2000-Dec. 2004)***	692
Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu ***(Dec. 2004-Dec. 2008)***	730
TOTAL	**2099**

Source: Table adapted after Cristian PREDA, Sorina SOARE, *Regimul, partidele și sistemul politic*…cit., p. 40 and the website of the Chamber of Deputies, www.cdep.ro.

[1] Cristian PREDA, Sorina SOARE, *Regimul, partidele și sistemul politic din România*, Editura Nemira, București, 2008, p. 36.

A closer scan of the constitutional text[1] reveals a president who, in the light of the communist experience, is deprived of real powers of action and whose popular legitimacy seems to be restricted to a mere representation of the state under accurately defined circumstances. Described as a politically neutral, the presidency excludes any type of membership in a political party or activities attached to such a status. It is only by this manner that an objective president would successfully mediate between different institutions should conflicts occur. The relations president-legislative present another limitation, since the head of the state can dissolve the Parliament only in the exceptional case in which two proposals for the prime minister have been rejected, and only after previously consulting the presidents of the two chambers and the leaders of the parliamentary groups (Article 89). In what regards the government, he is entitled to choose his closest political partner, the prime minister, but once again, consultations should be held beforehand with the party that obtained the absolute majority or, otherwise, with all the parties represented in the legislature (Article 102.1.). Once again the presidential proposal can be rejected when a vote of no confidence is granted. Furthermore, the president can issue decrees, certain areas, such as foreign policy, impose the countersignature of the prime minister. In terms of legislation, he has to promulgate the laws passed in the Parliament, with the possibility to return them, once only, for revision (Article 77). In case of misconduct, there are two ways to sanction the president: (a) suspension from office for "grave acts" initiated by one third of the total number of MPs, approved by absolute majority (Article 95) and confirmed or dismissed through referendum; (b) impeachment for "high treason" is decided by two thirds of the number of deputies and senators.

The prime minister, as the other half of the executive branch, does not enjoy a type of legitimacy comparable to that of the president, his appointment being dependent on the leadership position within the party that had won the parliamentary elections and on the personal preference of the president. On most occasions, the elected presidents were the leaders of the party which had won the elections, whereas the prime-ministers were either high profile politicians within the governing party or the leaders of another party within the winning coalition. Subsequently, the appointment was either a matter of trust and political compatibility or the response to an obligation to grant recognition to the coalition partners and preserve the parliamentary majority. The powers of the prime minister, as regulated specifically by Article 106 of the Constitution, place him as the head of the government and consist of coordinating the activities of the cabinet. Additionally, he has to submit reports and declarations regarding the workings of the government to the Chamber of Deputies or to the Senate, for further debates.

Such stipulations have led to a particularly high conflict potential within the bicephalous executive. The governmental instability characteristic of the first democratic decade confirms the importance ascribed to a consensual collaboration between the president and the prime minister. The majority of the prime ministers who have prematurely ended their mandate have openly expressed their opposition to the president regarding the direction of policies and reforms. Though, in formal terms, the

[1] The Constitution of Romania, *The Official Journal of Romania*, Part I, no. 233 of 21 November 1991, (as revised by Law No. 429/2003 on the revision of the Constitution of Romania), available at http://www.cdep.ro/pls/dic/act_show?ida=1&idl=1&tit=1#t1c0s0a1. Last accessed on 10.05.2011.

president cannot dismiss the head of the government, his informal ties with the party in government, most often his former party, create the opportunity to remove the premier through parliamentary intervention (motion of censure). Comparing the two offices, the presidency has again much to gain from prerogatives such as that of appointing and revoking ministers of the cabinet, which despite requiring the proposal of the latter, it is known to be a matter of bargaining and compromise. In the end, a lower cabinet duration was the norm in the first years of democratization, a situation determined by the difficulties posed by the communist legacies and the hardships of transition.

A supplementary source of dispute is also related to the often invoked popular legitimacy that makes the president the representative of the people, and thus the spokesman of their discontent. A case in point would be that of the cabinet headed by Petre Roman, victim of the conflicts with President Ion Iliescu, who sympathized with the majority of the population and openly criticized the government he had approved of. However, an exception to this "rule" occurred during Traian Băsescu's first mandate (2004-2009), when despite his blatant disapproval of the Tăriceanu government, the strong opposition in the Parliament prevented the replacement of the prime minister. The political tension reached the peak in 2007, when the president's too active stance caused his suspension, followed by a reconfirmation in office through referendum. Though Margit Tavits nominates as primary causes the president's "use of delay tactics in appointing government officials and his foreign policy statements"[1], some other factors, such as the divergent political perspectives of the two members of the executive or the inter-party clashes (the party supporting the president vs. the party supporting the prime minister), should not be overlooked.

The degree of involvement of the president in policy-making has varied throughout the time intervals under scrutiny. A brief and concise summary of this observation is offered by Blondel *et. al.* in a comparative study entitled *Governing New European Democracies*:

> "During his first term, Iliescu was unquestionably directly involved in policy-making. His successor, the conservative Constantinescu, seemed to be more than occasionally overtaken by events and the presidency lost significant prestige in the process. The role of the president seemed to decline further when Iliescu returned to power in 2000, as he no longer desired to be markedly involved, perhaps because of his age. In 2004, however, with the election of Băsescu, the idea of a 'semi-presidential' Romanian president has come to be once more in the news"[2].

The degree of presidential leadership had definitely been constrained by particular political contexts. The immediate years following the collapse of communism were practically dominated by the socialists, whereas the demands of democratization required a coherent vision and direction, and President Iliescu was perceived as the right politician to provide it. Comparing this period with the following one, the

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[1] Margit TAVITS, *Presidents with Prime Ministers: Do Direct Elections Matter?*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, p. 5.

[2] Jean BLONDEL, Ferdinand MÜLLER-ROMMEL, Darina MALOVA (eds.), *Governing New European Democracies*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2006, p. 98.

benefits of single-party government are undeniable, since the fragmentation and the inter-party conflicts kept Constantinescu's voice at a minimum, considering also his non-political background.

A pertinent observation of the incumbents of the two offices outlines that the personality of the president plays a major role in his domination or subordination. Basically, the most active and powerful presidents are held to have been Ion Iliescu and Traian Băsescu. Their political success, as well as the lower performance of Emil Constantinescu, was contingent upon the degree of party personalization and support, and on the charismatic bond with the electorate. Ion Iliescu was the uncontested leader of the National Salvation Front, a personality whose participation in the 1989 events and the breakdown of the communist regime was crucial. Constructing himself an image of the "saviour" of the nation[1], the former PCR member has been considered the most influential politician of post-communist Romania, being elected president of the republic in 1990, in 1992 and in 2000. The chaotic landscape of the 1990s created the perfect political context for his rise. The informal structures inherited from the non-democratic epoch and the immediate FSN colonization of all core sectors of the society prevented the appearance of major contenders of power. In fact, it was only in 1996 that a large coalition, the Democratic Convention (CDR) comprising the major historical parties (the National Liberal Party – PNL, the National Peasant Christian Democrat Party – PNȚCD etc.), managed to defeat the socialist party and his leader. In 2000, after a period characterized by economic difficulties, government instability and the government's incapacity to effectively reform the state, Ion Iliescu was re-elected.

The period between 1996 and 2004 can be regarded as a parliamentarization of Romania, as outlined above, to a presidential retreat to a rather symbolic role. If Constantinescu was a technocrat placed as the candidate of a large coalition in which two parties, PNL and PNȚCD, constantly competed for higher control, in Iliescu's case, since a fourth mandate was fairly impossible, he strategically decided to coordinate the activity of the government in the prime minister's shadow. Undoubtedly, this assumption should be kept in mind since the prime minister at that time was Adrian Năstase, the leader of the Party of Social Democracy (PSD), and the future candidate for presidency in the 2004 elections. Basically, he was given the chance to gather enough political capital to continue the Socialist domination. Even so, Daniel Barbu makes several thought-provoking remarks regarding these changes in the light of the 2003 constitutional revision:

> "The 2003 revision was necessary in the light of Ion Iliescu's exit. As in the England of the XVIIIth century, the division between *Court* (presidency) and *Country* (the real country represented in the Parliament) was abolished in the favour of the latter: the government in Parliament is ready to completely take over the functions of the court, namely the control of the army, of the secret services, of the magistracy and bureaucracy"[2].

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[1] Magda M. GIURCANU, "Institutional Dynamics in Poland and Romania", Paper prepared for the Midwest Political Science Association Annual Meeting in Chicago, Illinois, April 3-6, 2008, p. 23.

[2] Daniel BARBU, *Republica absentă*, 2nd ed., Editura Nemira, București, 2004, p. 275.

The highest presidential claim for actual power has characterized the period starting with 2004 onwards. In his electoral campaign, Traian Băsescu, the current president, had recurrently referred to a refreshed type of presidential institution, promising to support a more accurate interpretation of Article 80[1] of the Constitution and be actively involved in policy-making. This approach collided with the constitutional provisions, with the prime minister's political projects and with the position of the parliamentary majority. Once again, the paradox, as Ioan Stanomir argues, lied precisely in the now notorious tension between the popular credentials acquired through direct elections and these constitutional limitations[2], which significantly reduce the real powers of the president. On this background, the president had to face his powerless position against a large coalition between the prime minister and an enhanced parliamentary majority. The fact that his suspension, as a result of pressures to hold early elections and force the PM to resign, was removed through the negative vote of the population in the referendum marks, as Cristian Preda argues, an annulment of the parliamentarization of the regime[3].

In such conditions, a proper presidentialization would position either the president or the prime minister on a clear position of superior power. Until the head of the government becomes the main political prize and succeeds in acquiring a status similar to parliamentary republic, the presidency continues to be perceived as the leading office.

The Party Face

Nowadays, the widespread belief is that parties do no longer fulfill their main functions to attract members and mobilize voters. The party machineries have somehow lost their individuality being fascinated with a "successful model" that gains elections without such intensive efforts: a charismatic candidate. Undoubtedly, though the ideological dimension of parties appears as an obsolete artifact in a political environment infused with catch-all and populist parties, it would be erroneous to overlook the importance of the party that recruits, trains, promotes and assigns in top positions politicians with remarkable careers. To provide a better assessment of the Romanian party system, the question to be answered is whether leadership positions have been enhanced to the point that the presidentialization of politics becomes inescapable.

To start with, this comparison centered on parties brings to the fore a number of evident differences regarding the past and present party systems, the party families and their historical development, the ideologies and programmes, the issues that divide and unite different parties. It is again the dichotomy East-West that would place the Romanian party system in a different cluster. Irrespective of the party poli-

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[1] The Constitution of Romania, Title III, Chapter II, Article 80 (2), 1991 (as revised in 2003), available at http://www.cdep.ro/pls/dic/site.page?den=act1_2&par1=3#t3c2. Last accessed on 10.05.2011. The article stipulates that the President of Romania "shall act as a mediator between the Powers of the State, as well as between the State and society."

[2] Ioan STANOMIR, *În jurul Constituției: practica politică și arhitectura legală*, Editura Universității din București, București, 2006, pp. 150-151.

[3] Cristian PREDA, Sorina SOARE, *Regimul, partidele și sistemul politic*…cit, p. 35.

tics, the main intention, at this point, is that of focusing on the intra-party life and on the distribution of power that might be to the leader's advantage. Consequently, the nature of personalized party would provide extremely helpful in the present analysis. The marks of presidentialization specific to the party area consist of a highly autonomous leader which would exert a growing influence on party appointments and policy orientations, consolidate his personalized leadership and aggregate the necessary resources to maintain this status.

Throughout Central and Eastern Europe, the lack of a pluralist tradition as prevented by the communist regime and a slow political learning of the democratic ways affected the new parties in terms of delayed institutionalization, low ideological coherence, populism, office-seeking and leadership-orientation. Romania was no exception, its party system being shaped by a more and more restraining legislation, a high unpredictability and instability. One of the first flaws specific to the democratic beginnings was the absence of limitations on party formation, the total lack of electoral thresholds (in 1990) or low percentages (3-5% for parties, 8-10% for alliances), and a PR system based on party lists, which facilitated the *ad hoc* emergence of parties. Consequently, the total number of political actors engaged in the electoral race, from 1990 to 2008, came around 196, alliances included. In discussing the peculiarities of the Romanian post-communism, Cristian Preda refers to a number of "non-political parties" (e.g. the Orphans and War Prisoners Party, the Free Democrat Party or the Romanian Christian Democrat Conservative Party), which are born out of immaturity, demagogy, the intention to obtain financial gains or out of pure self-delusion[1]. Later on, the legislation introduced in 1996 and 2003 eliminated these deficiencies.

From the onset, the parties preferred a large membership basis, such as the Communist Party had sought, including not only experts, businessmen, sponsors or ex-*nomenklatura* members, but also persons willing to go at lengths for the electoral success of the party. Most of the main parties that survived the electoral volatility have been in a continuous competition to attract influential members that could have strengthened their credibility, provide substantial "donations", or even become successful candidates in the parliamentary or presidential elections. The main attraction for the outsiders was not the ideological creed, but rather the opened doors and the career possibilities that the parties provided. In fact, until present days, ideologies were not the criterion to differentiate between the political players: though they defined themselves as either right-wing, left-wing or centrists, the parties included in their programmatic appeals mixtures of policies irrespective of their liberal or socialist colour. Though recently, they struggled to join international party families, especially visible at the level of the European Parliament, their ideological discourse is still difficult to classify[2]. Other characteristics of the Romanian parties are linked to their dependence on the state and the high levels of political patronage. To this point, the development of partitocracy comes as no surprise, since no one raised doubts about the well-entrenched clientelistic networks of the parties, the preferential appointment from key state positions to local institutions or the widespread nepotism. Within this environment, the primary task is to examine the status of the leader in the main parties that have governed in the given time frame.

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[1] Cristian PREDA, *Partide și alegeri în România postcomunistă: 1989-2004*, Editura Nemira, București, 2005, pp. 15-18.

[2] Laurențiu ȘTEFAN, *Patterns of Political Elite Recruitment in Post-Communist Romania*, Editura Ziua, București, 2004, p. 99.

In the Romanian case, one can detect a dominance of the party leaders strengthened by their mandates as presidents of the republic. It is the latter office that placed influential politicians such as Ion Iliescu or Traian Băsescu not only as strong leaders, but as *mobilizers* of the electorate, which tend to propagate "close to the ordinary citizen" strategies. Indeed, there were other contingent factors that encouraged leadership primacy. To take the example of the main socialist party, under its multiple formulas (FSN, FDSN, PDSR or PSD), we can nominate: (a) Iliescu's popularity during the "revolution" as the main voice of democratic change, reinforced by his charismatic leadership style, appealing particularly to the rural electorate; (b) the political chaos after December 1989 and the need of a transitory body to govern until elections; (c) the presidential mandates, an office that implied prestige and a privileged place in the front row of politics; (d) the rapid colonization of the state, including the control of the privatization process which enriched certain "businessmen" close to the party in power, ensuring future sponsorship; (e) the absence of a strong leader of the opposition, namely of the historical parties.

Later on, the rise of Democrat Party (*Partidul Democrat* – PD) was perceived again as a consequence of Băsescu's personal appeal and his strategic choices: (a) the decision to enter the alliance with the liberals in 2004; (b) the decision to merge with the PLD (*Partidul Liberal Democrat* – the Liberal Democrat Party), a faction detached from National Liberal Party (*Partidul Național Liberal* – PNL) after the conflicts between the president and prime minister Tăriceanu), and reposition as the main centre-right party, occupying the void left by the Democratic Convention, (c) the intense exploitation of the damaged image of the PDS, accused of corruption, of supporting "local barons" and committing electoral frauds[1]. Commenting on his leadership style, Renate Weber, Băsescu's former presidential adviser back in 2004, argued that he endeavored to run the party and the country based on his experience as ship captain, showing intolerance towards opposition and a tight control of everything[2].

The manner in which presidentialization works in the Western system is nurtured in the Eastern space as well, most often through aggregation of resources as a result of clientelism and patronage. The parties' struggle to attract prosperous sponsors, co-opt as many "party deserters" as possible in order to control the institutions at the local level and appoint sympathizers in top positions was instrumental in huge mobilization of resources during the electoral campaigns (e.g. the financial resources were allocated to organize local events, distribute "electoral gifts" and even bring voters in buses to ensure their participation after alleged bribery). In this way the party leaders usually surrounded themselves with prosperous and obedient followers. Rarely have local leaders, which did not join the leadership core in Bucharest and were not "approved" by Iliescu, gained a particular high visibility at the national level. Another mark of autonomy was blatant in the selection of the executive teams since the individuals occupying these positions were known to be close to the president and sharing his political views. But this was not a prerequisite for uncontested leadership. Nonetheless, those who attempted internal *coup d'états* were finally forced to leave the party or return to their humble status. The first option was chosen by

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[1] Edward MAXFIELD, "A New Right for a New Europe? Basescu, the Democrats & Romania's centre-right", SEI Working Paper No 106, Sussex European Institute, September 2008, available at www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/sei-working-paper-no-106.pdf. Last accessed on 15.05.2011.

[2] *Ibidem*, p. 27.

Petre Roman in the 90s, who decided to end the conflict with Iliescu by forming his own party, whereas Adrian Năstase, the former PSD prime minister, opted for a more diplomatic path in order to become the candidate for presidency in the 2004 elections. The personalization of the Romanian parties was not a model of "authoritarian rule", but open contestation with the purpose of sudden leadership change turned out to be generally impossible and not without repercussions.

Actually, the lack of a strong leader holding the presidency caused the fall of the Romanian Democratic Convention (*Convenția Democrată Română* – CDR[1]) in the aftermath of its 1996 electoral victory. Severely eroded by its multicolored nature (it comprised the historical parties, minority parties, various associations and civic organizations), its changing composition or the rivalry between PNL and the National Peasant Christian Democratic Party (*Partidul Național Țărănesc Creștin Democrat* – PNȚCD), the lack of a unifying leader that would keep under control party ambitions would have been crucial. Emil Constantinescu, as an outsider, an intellectual and a former university professor, did not possess the sufficient strength to bring together the parties in the Convention and make them function as a unitary bloc. Additionally, he failed to rise to the people's expectations, his term being marked by a high number of cabinets and ministerial reshuffle, low economic performance, failures in introducing state reforms, and criticisms regarding the decision to support the NATO intervention in Kosovo.

Furthermore, the strength of leadership went beyond constitutional arrangements, since most of the Romanian president, who where obliged to sever all partisan ties, still indirectly supported their former party. In the case of the PDL, the political commentators held that the president still directed the party's every move. In a guide designed for the 2008 elections, the liberals attacked the assertive role of Băsescu within PDL described as

> "a party without ideology. It is a party without doctrine, values, which listens to one single person. It is a party without a past and a party that will disappear along its leader"[2].

Without a doubt, Băsescu's autonomy and influence within his own party has outdone his few critics, the party recognizing him as the winning card for their survival at the Victoria Palace. In the same manner, Iliescu had guided his party and even today, as honorific president of PSD, his opinions are acknowledged.

In a nutshell, the intra-party presidentialization within the Romanian political arena is oriented both towards party management and policy making[3]. The increasingly leader-centered political arena has instantly facilitated the formation of "personal parties"[4] (e.g. George Becali's New Generation Party – *Partidul Noua Generație*) or personalized parties (e.g. PDSR/PSD, PD/PDL), as parties which totally or

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[1] For more insight into the CDR rise to power and governance, see Dan PAVEL, Iulia HUIU, *"Nu putem reuși decât împreună". O istorie analitică a Convenției Democratice, 1989-2000*, Polirom, Iași, 2003.

[2] Alina VĂTĂMAN, "Ghid de bune practici pentru campania electorală", *Evenimentul Zilei*, May 5th, 2008, available at http://www.evz.ro/detalii/stiri/ghid-de-bune-practici-pentru-campania-electorala-802385.html. Last accessed on 18.05.2011.

[3] Thomas POGUNTKE, Paul WEBB (eds.), *The Presidentialization of Politics*…cit., p. 337.

[4] Mauro CALISE, *Il Partito Personale. I due corpi del leader*, Editori Laterza, Bari, 2010.

partially rely on their leader in order to access state power. The use of expressions such as "Iliescu's party" or "Băsescu's party" was not uncommon in the Romanian political spectrum. In the spirit of a *partitocrazia senza partiti* (particracy without parties), which basically means exactly the fact that the collegial, organizational and ideological apparatus of the parties operating in the pre-1992 period has been substituted with a personal apparatus[1], the informal fusion between party leadership and presidential mandates creates the basis of a new presidentialization. This practice is strengthened by the exertion of high influence on internal party elections, the new leaders being usually "accepted" by the presidents and possibly appointed prime ministers, which endows the head of the state with a particularly significant share of authority within the parties as well.

The Electoral Face

The electoral process represents the most important test for a party and its party leader, confirming or refuting the ability to attract the electorate and to respond to their demands in an effective manner. Therefore, the link between presidentialization and the electoral process is confirmed by the fact that it is the electoral success that could considerably strengthen a leader's position or, on the contrary, cause his irremediable fall. In line with the theoretical framework reproduced from the study of Poguntke and Webb, the operationalization of presidentialization in electoral terms would entail three interconnected aspects characteristic of electoral campaigns: (1) increased importance shown to leadership appeals, (2) the mediatic exploitation of the leader and (3) the leader effects on voting behaviour[2].

The decline of political parties and erosion of partisanship, the loss in importance of the traditional cleavages, the rise of new issues generate a crisis that continues to severely affect voting turnouts. The theme of "electoral dealignment", as connected to partisan dealignment, has become popular within the field of electoral studies, being depicted through "electoral volatility, split-ticket voting, and late decision-making in electoral campaigns"[3]. But what really shapes the final decision of the voter? Is it his political attitudes, his party preferences or the candidate factor? If they decide rather late on whom to vote and if different types of elections reflect different choices, does this mean that the candidates, as individuals, could make a difference? This section is aimed at analyzing the three electoral components mentioned above in order to evaluate the strategies of the parties, on the one hand, and the responses of the electorate, on the other. Additionally, references to the electoral reform as a shift from proportional representation towards a majoritarian type of voting should arouse interest regarding the impacts of these changes on the voters' decision-making process and on the electoral results.

The specificity of the Romanian PR system involved closed lists and a two-tier system (district level and national level) for parliamentary elections, a majoritarian

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[1] *Ibidem*, p. 15.

[2] Thomas POGUNTKE, Paul WEBB (eds.), *The Presidentialization of Politics*…cit., p. 10.

[3] Romain LACHAT, *A Heterogeneous Electorate: Political Sophistication, Predisposition Strength, and the Voting Decision Process*, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, Zürich, 2007, p. 204.

two-round ballot for the president, as well as guaranteed seats for ethnic minorities[1]. As in the case of party legislation, the Romanian electoral laws have also evolved from extremely inclusive to more and more constraining. Consequently, the electoral law was amended before every parliamentary election, especially in terms of thresholds. In fact, Cristian Preda enumerates among features such as an initial decrease in the electoral body (1990-1992), followed by a steady increase, the declining electoral turnouts, the effective number of parties (the evolution from "one party and a half", to multiparty without a dominant party in 1992 and 1996, multiparty with a dominant party in 2000 and again multiparty without a dominant party in 2004), also this legislative instability[2]. However, the issue of a substantive electoral reform was debated starting with the 1999s, the majoritarian alternative becoming more tantalizing with the passing of years.

In reality, it was the long-debated electoral reform in March 2008 that placed the candidates at the core of the electoral process. The new law established the formation of 43 constituencies (41 counties, Bucharest and diaspora) and introduced a mixed system with single-member districts. The citizens grant a four-year mandate to their representative for each chamber and the votes are allocated in three stages: (a) the candidates with 50%+1 share of votes enter directly in the legislative; (b) the total number of votes for a party in a constituency are divided by the electoral coefficient (ratio between the total votes in the constituency and the number of seats for that constituency); after the subtraction of the seats won directly by a party, the rest of the mandates are distributed to the candidates with the largest share of votes; (c) the remaining mandates are redistributed among the candidates with the highest share.

In line with Sarah Birch's argument that "the option of voting for an individual candidate is clearly a device that will personalize the electoral process"[3], this so-called "uninominal vote" definitely favours primarily the large parties, and secondly puts more emphasis on candidates rather than ideologies, since the voting is no longer a matter of party lists. This is not to downgrade the importance of leader promotion under the PR system: a widespread strategy to attract voters was to place the leader as the first candidate on the list, followed by a number of other well-known politicians of the party. Even so, one important impact of the hasty introduction of these voting procedures that were insufficiently explained to the electorate, the late delimitation of the districts, as well as the restrained voting participation (e.g. the citizens could vote only in the place of residence, the ones living abroad could vote only if they were officially registered in the respective countries) was the an extremely low turnout (39.2%). Nonetheless, according to the BTI 2010-Romania Country Report, the future might bring an alteration to this tendency to personalize parties and elections:

> "The separation of presidential and parliamentary elections as of 2004 (by prolonging the president's term of office to five years) and, more importantly, the revision of the electoral laws have increased incentives to create broadly

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[1] Jean- Benoit PILET, Jean-Michel DE WAELE, "Electoral Reforms in Romania: Towards a Majoritarian Electoral System?", *European Electoral Studies*, Institute for Comparative Political Research, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 63-79/p. 66.

[2] Cristian PREDA, Sorina SOARE, *Regimul, partidele și sistemul politic*…cit, pp. 87-94.

[3] Sarah BIRCH, *Electoral Systems and Political Transformation in Post-Communist Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2003, p. 22.

based parties rather than political parties dependent on a single or only a few political leaders"[1].

The personalization of elections is fostered especially by the race for presidency, which we already depicted as a fierce competition between all party leaders eager to accede to the Cotroceni Palace. One primary reason for this privileged status of the presidential elections was the president's power to nominate the prime minister and the cabinet. Actually, behind closed doors, the head of the state mastered both the parliamentary majorities and the composition of the government[2]. With more details, Cristian Preda describes the rationale behind the dependence of governmental and parliamentary formulas on the candidates for the presidential elections and on inter-party dynamics:

> "Two are the reasons of this dependence and they are, in fact, of very different natures: first of all, it is the already-mentioned simultaneous organization of the legislative and presidential elections, which dominated the first five elections; secondly, it is the important role played by few political leaders in identifying the political strategies and tactics of the parties"[3].

The fact that the candidates' efforts were directed towards the success of their parties, at the first stage of legislative elections, and that, in turn, the parties aggregated all possible resources in order to have their candidate win the "big prize" is undeniable. Even so, the five year mandate ascribed to the president was not only desirable for a continuity of the political life without major disturbances, but also for a detachment of the parliamentary elections and party platforms from the "presidential contamination"[4].

Under these circumstances, the personalization of electoral campaigns became the key strategy of the Romanian parties. To keep in mind the considerations traced beforehand, it is expected of low institutionalized and poorly ideologically defined parties that presented quite similar programmes and discourses to seek a charismatic leader that would mobilize the apathetic electorate. More than that, the high importance of leaders is further demonstrate by the fact that, with the exception of Emil Constantinescu in 1996, the other two post-communist presidents obtained a larger share of votes that their supporting coalitions. Even before the parliamentary elections, the presidential race was the main subject of debate, manifested through a trade of accusations and personal attacks between the candidates. Negative campaigning was another common practice among parties with the purpose of convincing the electorate that their candidate was "the lesser evil". The most striking examples are the corruption evidences brought by the Justice and Truth Alliance (*Alianța Dreptate*

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[1] Bertelsmann Stiftung, "BTI 2010 – Romania Country Report", Bertelsmann Stiftung, Gütersloh, 2009, p. 10, available at http://www.bertelsmann-transformation-index.de/fileadmin/pdf/Gutachten_BTI2010/ECSE/Romania.pdf. Last accessed on 20.05.2011.

[2] Bogdan DIMA, "Președintele României: instituția cheie a sistemului constituțional românesc", *Sfera Politicii,* vol. XVIII, no. 1 (143), January 2010, pp. 30-41/p. 37.

[3] Cristian PREDA, Sorina SOARE, *Regimul, partidele și sistemul politic*…cit, p. 127.

[4] Bogdan DIMA, "Președintele României…cit.", p. 37.

și Adevăr – D.A.) against PSD and Adrian Năstase, or PSD's exploitation of a controversial video in which Băsescu allegedly hit a child during his 2004 campaign[1].

The symbiotic relationship between political parties and the state resulted in the intense exploitation of state resources and state-owned media. The FSN employed this practice since the first free elections. For the new party it was essential to stay in power, consolidate its position and organizational structures and mature while benefitting from the windows of opportunity provided by the transition. The general perception was that each party that governed immediately subordinated a large part of the state resources and most of the media, especially the state television. It was only in 2004, when Băsescu, through his aggressive anti-communist discourse, the appeal to go and vote in order to prevent another fraudulent victory for the PSD and his innovative electoral campaign, managed to win against Năstase in the second round, that the press was clearly split between those who supported the socialist and those who promoted change. For instance, it was obvious that newspapers such as *Cotidianul* or *Ziua* were pro-Băsescu. Both public and private media should have avoided paid political advertisements and provide equal coverage for all candidates, which was not always the case. Generally speaking, the public television is a major supporter of whoever holds the power.

Inevitably, the development and "americanization" of the media augmented the promotion of the leader through its various channels of communication. The use of posters, billboards and banners featuring the candidates and mobilizing messages has also been a method through which the party positioned their leader in the front row. Electoral programs including interviews with the candidates and monitoring the development of the campaigns throughout the country provided the electorate with substantial information on the leaders and their promises. More than that, televised face-to-face debates grew into the main attractions of the electoral periods, alongside the usual events organized at the local level. They were the ultimate test of a candidate's "worth" as displayed in the confrontation with his political adversaries. In 2004, the broadcasted debate between Băsescu and Năstase registered the highest audience in the urban areas with 1.4 million people watching the first debate before the second round. The honesty of the D.A. candidate in admitting that the Romanian electorate was damned to choose between two politicians stained by a communist past was considered a key moment that gained him additional voters. The online campaigning was also taken to another level through websites for the candidates, email campaigns, blogs and video-sharing websites[2].

The transformation of elections into clashes between candidates and personalities rather then parties has increased the chances of leadership influence on voting, since each candidate is compelled to enrich the party agenda by adding issues and solutions specific to the district he intends to represent. As the candidates are supposed to know best the local problems, their personalization of the campaign platform

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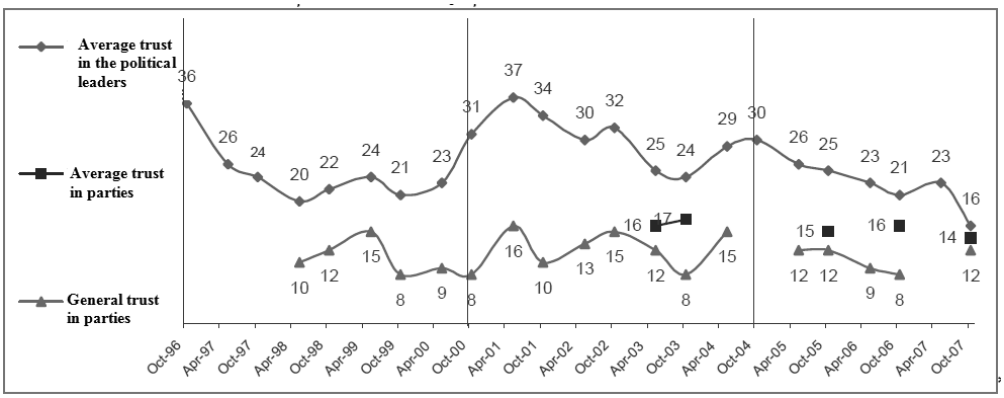
[1] OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, "Romania Presidential Election 22 November and 6 December 2009 – OSCE/ODIHR Limited Election Observation Mission Final Report", Warsaw, 17 February 2010, p. 12, available at www.osce.org/odihr/elections/romania/41532. Last accessed on 23.05.2011.

[2] For a detailed account of online campaign in the 2004 elections see Antonio MOMOC, "Online Negative Campaign in the 2004 Romanian Presidential Elections", *Styles of Communication,* no. 2, 2010, pp. 89-99, available at http://journals.univ-danubius.ro/index.php/communication/article/view/735. Last accessed on 27.05.2011.

and a higher stress on what they could do for the community, rather than what the party as such could do, is expected to increase the leadership effects on voting behaviour. The more and more direct contact with the ordinary citizen leads to vote based on trust in leaders rather than parties. As represented in Figure 2, the level of trust in political leaders, though not significantly high, managed to surpass the trust in parties as a whole in an interval of almost ten years[1]. At this point, a higher trust in leaders can be observed in the electoral period (1996, 2000 and 2004), while the general trust in parties, when such data is analyzed goes down, which would sustain the assumption that people do start to vote more based on a evaluation of leadership.

Figure 1
The Trust in Political Parties and Leaders



Source: Gabriel BĂDESCU, Mircea COMȘA, Dumitru SANDU, Manuela STĂNCULESCU, "Barometrul de Opinie Publică 1998-2007", cit., p. 92.

All things considered, the electoral presidentialization makes leaders dependent on their personal appeal and electoral success. However, this development indicates a higher individual responsibility, therefore the failure to abide by one's promises could equate with an exit from the political scene. It is interesting to see how the parties recuperate after losing their main electoral driving force. The socialists (PSD), for instance, are still in search of a new Iliescu.

Conclusion

The application of the presidentialization test, as manifested in the Western countries, on an Eastern European state has generated a wealth of observations. The assessment was organized along clear-cut analytical dimensions corresponding to the three arenas that indicate traits specific to the phenomenon under scrutiny. To this purpose, the attention was directed towards the executive face, the party face and the electoral face. Each of these areas of interest was tackled in terms of leadership autonomy

[1] Gabriel BĂDESCU, Mircea COMȘA, Dumitru SANDU, Manuela STĂNCULESCU, "Barometrul de Opinie Publică 1998-2007", October 2007, available at http://www.soros.ro/ro/publicatii.php?cat=2#. Last accessed on 27.05.2011.

and leadership-oriented resources, the role of the individual being regarded as extremely influential in spite of structural, functional or cultural outlooks. With the support of statistical data derived from official releases and secondary sources, as well as the observations drawing on previous research, the present analysis established the boundaries of a new case of presidentializing system, Romania.

First of all, the constitutional arrangements most often determine Romania's classification as a semi-presidential regime, which presents an inherent competition and conflict between the two parts of the executive, the president and the prime minister. Overall, a certain informal inclination towards escalating executive power is noticeable at two levels: the government outpaces the Parliament in what concerns the legislative process, whereas the president tends to outshine the prime minister in political assertiveness and influence. In the second case, a generalized propensity on the part of the presidents to accumulate prerogatives outside the constitutional framework is a work in progress. President Traian Băsescu has recurrently defined himself as an "active player" that would alter the presidency according to the population's aspirations. Various prime ministers, such as Adrian Năstase or Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu, have attempted to gain enhanced authority and escape the "marionette" image frequently attached to their position, leading to a unique situation in Romanian post-communist politics, the suspension of the president in 2007.

Secondly, the political parties have been reconfigured as a result of ideological decline, disappearance of traditional cleavages and a changing environment molded by new disputes. The foremost consequence was the rise of personalized, catch-all, populist parties which have been extremely successful following the efforts of their charismatic leaders (e.g. PDSR, PDL, PRM). The impact of individual standpoints on appointments and policies has been crucial in developing patronage, clientelism and corruption. At the same time, the party leaders, conscious of their popularity and the dependence of the parties on their electoral value, have gained a particular autonomy in this area as well. To take a relevant example, the fingerprints of Băsescu's ambitions have transformed the PD/PDL from a marginal promoter of social democracy into the main centre-right party in Romania, pushing it into a coalition (D.A.) that fabricated a parliamentary majority and a government, despite a different winner of the parliamentary elections (PSD), and safeguarding a new PDL-UDMR government, in the same manner, as a result of the 2009 elections.

Finally, the electoral arena has indubitably excelled in favouring leaders instead of parties. The central role of the media is undeniable, whereas the progress of political communication and marketing updated according to imported American techniques has practically developed an obsession with adjusting the candidates' images. This type of orientation is supported not only by the media and political consultants or experts, but also by the political parties which put their hopes into their leaders' capacity to stylize the electoral platform as much as possible, and by the voters who, in accordance with their lack of time and means to develop an informed choice, tend to rely on particular evaluations of the candidates. The level of corruption, patronage and illegal behaviour specific to our country is most visible in electoral years, when the contest for votes reveals parties willing to do whatever to gain access to state institutions and resources, candidates who prefer discourses targeting a negative image of the opponent and a mass media whose political affiliations are in a constant change.

To conclude, the Western presidentialization and the Romanian way of making politics seem to converge on several points. The interactions between structures and contingencies, between constitutional provisions, institutional designs and legacies

of the past, have not formally conducted to presidentialism, but to a gradual accumulation of analogous features. At the beginning of the 1990s, the lack of democratic knowledge, the less disciplined parties and the role of Ion Iliescu transformed the presidency into the "micro-universe" around which the whole political spectrum revolved. Later on, Traian Băsescu has adopted the attitude of a president in a presidential regime, but his achievements were still dependent on the support of his former party and the parliamentary majority. When a strong opposition against his will was constructed, the president had no choice but to resort to the ultimate sovereign: the people. Nevertheless, a three-folded political model would eventually encourage a clear presidentialization process in favour of the Romanian president: (a) the affiliation/membership of both the president and the prime minister in the same party, with the head of the government automatically assuming a subordinate position (e.g. the post-2008 configuration with Traian Băsescu as president and Emil Boc as prime minister); (b) the existence of a stable and coherent parliamentary majority controlled by the president; (c) an increasingly active president, that "imposes" his agenda on the executive and finds his suggestions implemented. Even so, the weight of political contexts and personalities should not be overlooked. Would the withdrawal of these influential politicians equate with a return to "normality"? Is this wave of presidentialization a temporary consequence of a mixture between deficiencies specific to our democracy? Time and further research would settle these inquiries by providing the missing pieces of this puzzle.