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Democratization and Political Alienation: The Legacies of Post-Communist Transition in Romania

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Abstract. A frequent finding in the political behavior literature is that citizens from Central and Eastern Europe participate less in politics than their western neighbors. While political institutions have democratized and consolidated in some of these countries (i.e. the new EU member states), overall civic and political activism of citizens from the former communist states knows an obvious setback. This article focuses on Romania and traces the sources of political disengagement to the problems of post-communist transition in this country. The findings reveal that public expectations during the transition processes (i.e. demand side) have largely diverged from the perceived democratic performance of political authorities (i.e. supply side). Thus, the paper identifies widespread disappointments with the perceived outcomes of the political process as a key source of political alienation in post-communist Romania. Pervasive symptoms of political alienation in this country include feelings of political exclusion, helplessness and political ineffectiveness, distrust of politicians and political institutions, lack of interest in politics and the perception of politics as irrelevant to people's lives. All these further hinder citizen participation in the democratic process.

Keywords: *democratization, political alienation, post-communism, transition, Romania*

An increasing number of studies assess the development and quality of democracies by how widespread and equal citizen involvement in the political process is. A common finding in the literature is that citizens differ in the extent to which they participate politically (Nový 2014, Hooghe and Quintelier 2014) and this differing degree of engagement can hinder the equal representation of citizens' interests and preferences in democratic politics (Dahl 1989, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Perceptions of unequal governmental responsiveness to citizens' needs seem to be acute in post-communist countries where people tend to distrust political authorities and feel politically alienated more than citizens of western democracies (Mierina 2014, Torcal and Montero 2006).

However, previous research has paid little attention to the broader societal

and political context in which political alienation occurred in countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). While political institutions have democratized and consolidated in some of these countries (i.e. the new EU member states), overall civic and political activism of citizens of former communist states knows an obvious setback (Inglehart and Catterberg 2002, Howard 2003, Mishler and Rose 2001). This finding is all the more puzzling as political participation is generally regarded as a benchmark for the quality of democracy in a country (Merkel, 2011). From this perspective, once democracy takes roots in a society, one would expect citizens to participate more and not less in the political process. Data on political participation in post-communist countries seem to contradict these expectations (Tătar 2015b). These ambiguous findings suggest that approaching post-communist democratization processes exclusively from an institutional and procedural point neglects a series of relevant questions on how people perceived and responded to the post-1989 transformations: What meanings do post-communist citizens attach to democracy and what expectations do they have regarding democratic governance? How do they asses the democratic performance of the new political institutions? How do citizens conceive their role in the post-communist politics in general? Answering these questions calls for a research approach that examines both the demand (i.e. public expectations about democracy) and the supply (i.e. public perceptions of the performances and outcomes of the new democratic regimes) sides of the political process.

This article aims to contribute to a better understanding of how the connection between citizens and the new democratic states has been reconfigured in CEE after decades of repressive control exerted by the communist regimes. More specifically, the article will focus on Romania chosen as a case that illustrates the *democratization without participation* pattern mentioned above: a relatively successful democratic consolidation of political institutions in this country (which has joined the EU in 2007) was accompanied with relatively low and declining rates of citizen political engagement during the post-communist transition. Since 1989 Romania has undergone profound social, economical and political changes. In the first phase, which largely overlaps the first post-communist decade, these changes were generated by a double transition: from communist totalitarianism to democracy and from state planned to market economy. The second phase of transformations occurred in the context of strengthening and adapting democratic institutions to the Euro-Atlantic (NATO and EU) integration processes unfolding in

Central and Eastern Europe. This paper will analyze how changes since 1989 have marked citizens' political attitudes and behaviors, affecting also the participatory nature and quality of democracy in Romania.

One fruitful way to understand the reconfiguration of state-society relations in new democracies is to examine the phenomenon of citizen participation in connection with the changing socio-political and economic context of post-communist transitions. Thus, the next sections of this paper will analyze the legacies of the communist regime in Romania, the dynamics of citizens' views regarding democracy and the socio-economic transformations that have taken place mainly in first decade of democratic reconstruction. I will particularly consider the evolution of several factors usually associated with political participation such as satisfaction with the functioning of democracy, institutional trust, the degree of political alienation, and the level of interest in politics.

Premises of post-communist transitions

The fall of communism in 1989 revealed significant differences between Central and East European countries. The reforms initiated by several communist regimes during the late 1980s smoothed the post-communist transition processes of these states. Central European countries such as Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary were generally more dependent on Moscow's influence than Romania. Therefore they have benefited to certain extends from the policies of openness (glasnost) and restructuring (perestroika) initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev. The strategy of distancing Romania from Moscow's control was initiated by Gheorghiu-Dej during the early 1960s and then it has been continued under Ceaușescu's national-communism rule until 1989. Particularly this strategy of getting Romania out of the soviet sphere of influence had its own perverse effects. Hence, during the late 1980s Romania was left untouched by the wave of reforms announced and allowed by Gorbachev in the countries of the communist bloc.

Consequently, at the end of the 1980s Romania was paddling against the increasingly strong reformist stream initiated in the region. At that time in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary initiatives for the development of autonomous civil society organizations gained momentum and such organizations were increasingly critical towards the communist regimes. By contrast, Romania remained a rough totalitarian state, increasingly isolated internationally, with a monolithic center of

power and an unprecedented degree of intrusion in the private sphere of its citizens in a perpetual attempt to completely control the society (Mungiu-Pippidi 2002).

The communist dictatorship exerted control over the Romanian society through several means. One of the main instruments was the Romanian Communist Party (PCR), which had the ambition to be the largest of the communist parties in Eastern Europe, relative to the population. With around 4 million members representing over 30% of the adult population of Romania PCR had a rate of membership which was double the regional average (14%) and triple to the ones existing in Poland and Hungary (Mungiu-Pippidi 2002). If we add to these figures those indicating the number of persons who were active in the communist trade unions and also the Romanian communists under 30 who were members of the Union of Communist Youth (UTC), we have an impressive overview of the degree of control and mobilization to which the Romanian society was subjected before 1989. Besides extensive mobilization, another control mechanism was terror instituted by the infamous *Securitate,* the secret police of the Romanian communist regime, which in turn had an impressive network of agents and informers infiltrated in almost all social groups. Any potential opposition to the political system was discouraged by the feeling that the *Securitate* is omnipotent and omnipresent in society. This feeling, in turn, has generated widespread fear and distrust, and a sentiment of helplessness and resignation.

Beyond the state and party structures, there was a poor society unhappy with abounding deprivations such as the "streamlining" of food distribution or the energy "savings" which literally meant periodical cuts of electricity and heat that left the residents of communist blocks of flats in the dark and cold in the dead of winter. These deprivations increased during the 1980s, as a consequence of payment arrangements of foreign debt accumulated in previous decades when the regime has tried to industrialize the communist economy. Poverty also started to affect the privileged classes comprising people in the key administrative and party positions often referred to as the communist "nomenclature", as well as people hired in the repressive apparatus. Consequently, discontent became generalized in the late 1980s (Mungiu-Pippidi 2002).

This brief overview of the situation in Romania before 1989 outlines the image of one of the most repressive regimes in Europe, in which the few voices criticizing the regime could be easily isolated and silenced before they could gain

support from other people. The collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe found Romania in the situation of having no organized opposition to the communist regime and no significant autonomous nuclei of civil society in which pro-democratic attitudes and behaviors could have been learned and alternatives to the communist regime could have been initiated and developed (Tătar 2006). Thus, the National Salvation Front (NSF) that emerged as the political and patrimonial successor of the Romanian Communist Party (Mungiu-Pippidi 2002), won the first post-communist elections of 20 May 1990 obtaining a special majority of 66.91% of the parliamentary seats. The weak and heterogeneous opposition parties were led on the one hand by dissident intellectuals from the communist-era and on the other hand by former interwar party leaders and members that survived imprisonment during the communist period (Mungiu-Pippidi 2002).

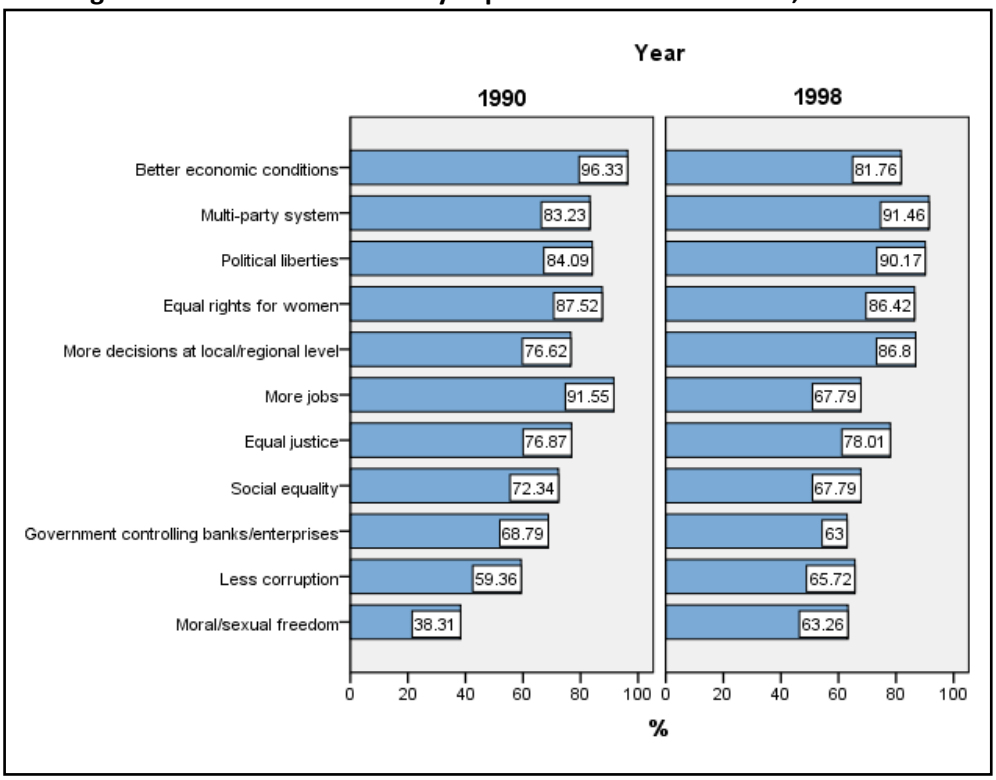
The dual transition: towards democracy and market economy

In countries of Central and Eastern Europe, political transitions from communism to democracy overlapped with transitions from state-planned to market economy. At least during the first part of the 1990s, the vast majority of Romanians tended to define democracy through elements related to economic prosperity (e.g. more jobs, better economic conditions, etc.) in addition to the standard political features of democracy (multi-party system, political liberties, equality, etc.). Figure 1 shows how Romanians have conceived democracy during the first post-communist decade.

Thus, in 1990 economical and social meanings associated with democracy seemed to prevail over purely political understandings of democracy. Thus, the items most often associated with democracy were better economic conditions (96.3%) and more jobs (91.6%). The classic elements of the political definition of democracy were ranked by Romanians only from the third place downwards: equal rights for women and men (87.5%), political freedom (84.1%), multi-party system (83.2%). Subsequently, difficulties associated with economic restructuring and especially the social costs of transition lead to a reassessment of the meanings ascribed to democracy. Thus, perceptions have changed by 1998, when political meanings of democracy took precedence among Romanians: more parties 91.5%, political liberties such as freedom of speech or association 90.2%, equal rights for women 86.4%. Conversely, the percentage of those who associated democracy

mainly with economic elements substantially decreased in 1998 compared to 1990: 81.8% associated democracy with better economic conditions and only 67.8% linked it with more jobs. The percentage of Romanians who connected democracy with an active role of the state in the economy and society has also decreases. For instance the proportion of those who believe democracy has to do with government control of banks or large enterprises dropped from 68.8% in 1990 to 63% in 1998, while the percentage of those who associate democracy with social equality declined from 72.3% to 67.8%.

Figure 1: The idea of democracy in post-communist Romania, 1990-1998



Source: Personal elaboration based on PCP 1 and 2 datasets (see Fuchs et al. 2005)

On the other hand, during the 1990s one can note a significant increase of the percentage of those who associate democracy with elements related to: state decentralization (i.e. the perception that in a democracy more political and administrative decisions can be taken at the local and regional levels increased from 76.6% to 86.8%); rule of law and public order (i.e. equality before the law from 76.9% in1990 to 78% in 1998, less corruption and selling of influence from

59.4% to 65.7%); tolerance (association of democracy with moral and sexual freedom increased from 38.3% in 1990 to 63.3% in 1998).

In addition, at the outset of post-communist transition Romanians tended to assess democratic governance especially in terms of economic performance and less in terms of political achievements. This is well illustrated by the way people perceived the changes that took place in 1990. From a political point of view, 1990 was a hectic year in Romania: the emergence of many new political parties[1], ethnic violence in the city of Târgu Mureş, the first post-communist elections in May 1990, anti-governmental protests and occupation of the University Square in Bucharest, violent clashes in Bucharest between anti-governmental protesters and pro-government miners coming from the Jiu Valley etc. On the other hand, economically Romanians fared well in 1990. People's incomes have increased compared to 1989, both in terms of net average wage and average pension[2] (Zamfir, Stanescu, and Ilie 2010). Economic reforms started relatively late and gradually in Romania and as of 1990 they have not yet shown their social costs contrary to what happened in other post-communist countries in the region which began a radical restructuring of the economy through the so-called "shock therapy" (Giannaro 2011).

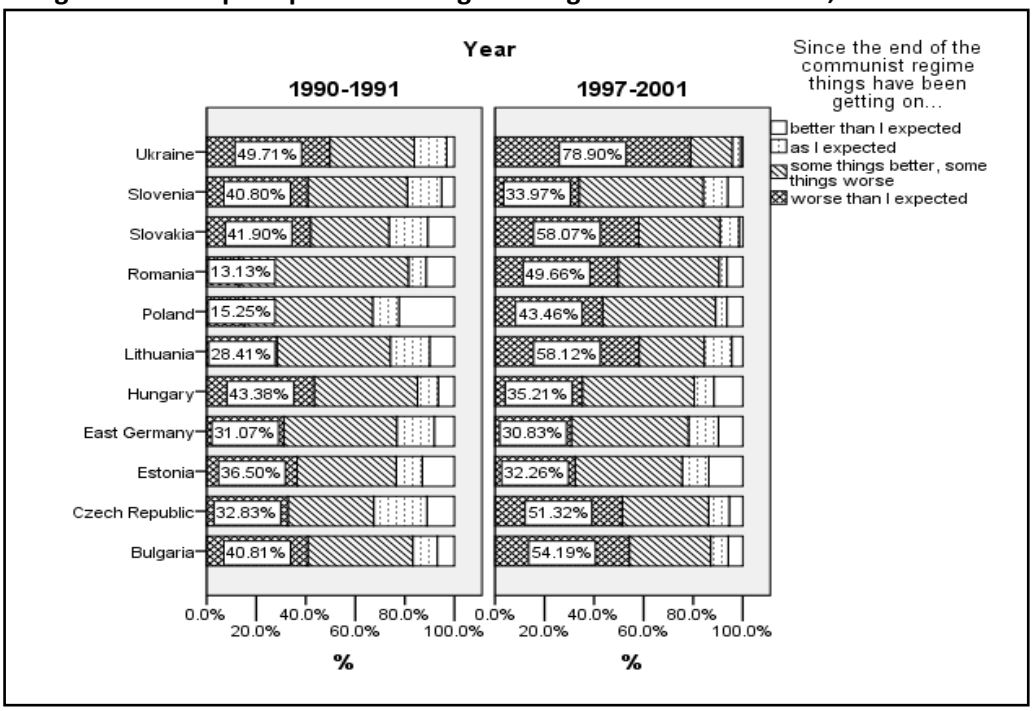
In this context, the Post-Communist Publics (PCP) surveys conducted in Central and Eastern Europe in two waves (1990-1991 and 1997-2001) show that at the end of 1990 Romanians had the lowest level of dissatisfaction with the way things have been getting on since the fall of the communist regimes in the region (see Figure 2). Thus, only 13.13% of Romanians believed that since the fall of the communist regime things have gone worse than expected, compared to 41.90% of Slovaks, 43.41% of Hungarians and 40.81% of Bulgarians. In other words, at the end of 1990 when the first wave of this survey was carried out in Romania, most respondents did not seem to have been disappointed by the way things evolved (especially in economic matters) during the first year of post-communist transition.

[1] Political parties mushroomed in Romania during the first months of 1990.The record in this regard was set in January, when on average one new political party was officially registered each day. Subsequently, most of these parties disappeared as quickly as they have appeared.

[2] According to the Romanian Quality of Life Research Institute (ICCV), the growth of the net average wage (expressed in 2009 prices for data comparability) was from 1061 (in 1989) to 1114 RON (in 1990), while the average pension increased from 498 to 528. It should be noted that both indicators presented here have droped dramatically between 1991 and 1993 and will not reach a comparable level to the one recorded in 1990 until 2007 when Romania joined the European Union.

On the contrary, this wave of the PCP survey (1990-1991) shows that Romanians expressed the highest levels of optimism regarding the evolution of the economy: 63.9% believed that the economic situation will improve in the next year. Optimism levels were much lower in other countries from CEE: only 23.9% of Hungarians, 23% of Bulgarians, 29% of Slovenians, 19.5% of Czechs, 17% of Slovaks and 18.8% of Estonians believed that the economic situation in their country will improve in the next year. Levels somewhat closer to Romanians' optimism were recorded in Lithuania (52.2%), Poland (42.1%), East Germany (38.9%) and Ukraine (33.6%).

Figure 2: Public perceptions of changes during the transition in CEE, 1990-2001



Note: Data emphasize percentages of those believing that, since the end of the communist regime, things have been getting on worse than they expected in their country.
Source: Personal elaboration based on PCP 1 and 2 datasets

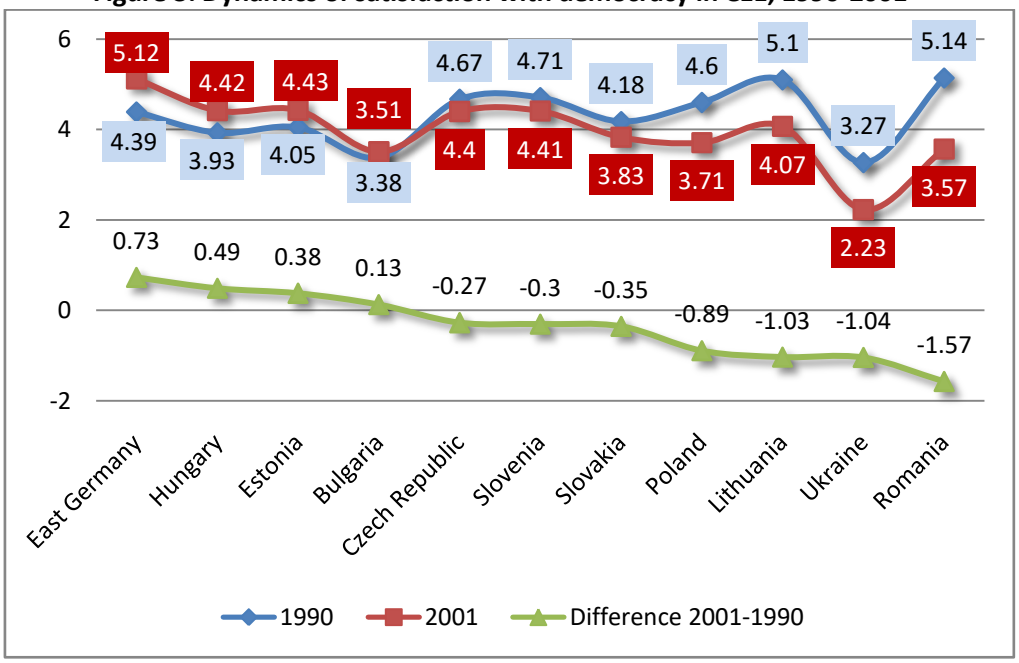
Starting with 1991 however, the population of Romania began to experience the social costs associated with the economic transition. According to a report issued in 2010 by the Institute for Quality of Life Research (ICCV), the post-communist Romanian economy has fared sinuously, having two main periods of economic collapse between 1991-1992 and then 1997-1999 and a period of sustained economic growth from 2000 to 2008, followed by the global economic crisis (Zamfir, Stanescu, and Ilie 2010). Cătălin

Zamfir summarizes the guidelines of the economic policies during the transition period (outlined in particular through agreements signed by Romania with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank): a) immediate withdrawal of the state from the economy; b) the rapid introduction of market economy mechanisms; c) rapid and full privatization; d) the strategy of "shock therapy" is preferable to gradual transformations and e) opening the national economy to international trade, with as few restrictions as possible (Zamfir 2004). Structural changes of the economy had extremely high social costs: loss of millions of jobs, hyper-inflation in the 1990s and a dramatic drop in living standards (Zamfir, Stanescu, and Ilie 2010). Thus, in Romania the post-communist transition was accompanied by widespread phenomena of poverty, social disintegration and decline of state authority amid rapid growth of inequalities, social distrust and corruption (Zamfir, Stanescu, and Ilie 2010).

These macroeconomic developments mirrored in individual attitudes regarding political developments. Compared to 1990, Romanians' perception of the transition process changed radically in 1998, as captured by the data in Figure 2. Among the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), Romania recorded the largest increase in the degree of dissatisfaction with the changes during the post-communist transition, about 36 percentage points (from 13.13% in 1990 to 49. 66% in 1998). Moreover, analyzing data in Figure 2.2, one can divide the CEE countries into subjective "winners" and "losers" of the post-communist transition processes based on the evolution of the aggregate perception of citizens regarding the changes after the fall of communism. We can include in the camp of subjective "winners" of the transition four countries where the level of dissatisfaction has decreased during the period analyzed here (1990-2001): Slovenia (from 40.8% to 33.97%), Hungary (from 43.38% to 35.21) East Germany (from 31.07% to 30.83%) and Estonia (36.5% to 32.26%). On the other hand, the group of subjective "losers" includes 7 countries in which the degree of dissatisfaction with the developments during the transition increased: Ukraine (from 49.71% to 78.9%), Slovakia (from 41.9% to 58.07 %), Romania (from 13.13% to 49.66%), Poland (from 15.25% to 43.26%), Lithuania (from 28.41% to 58.12%), Czech Republic (from 32.83% to 51.32%) and Bulgaria (from 40.81% to 54.19%). In sum, between 1990 and 2001 there is an overall increase of the level of discontent in the CEE countries regarding the way things have evolved since the fall of communism.[3]

[3] It should be noted that although the degree of dissatisfaction skyrocketed in the first post-communist decade, in 1998 Romanians continued to remain the most optimistic (with a

Figure 3: Dynamics of satisfaction with democracy in CEE, 1990-2001



Note: Data represent the average for each country on satisfaction with the functioning of democracy measured on a scale from 1 = "completely dissatisfied" to 10 = "completely satisfied". For each country, the line marked with triangles is the difference between the averages of the two waves of the PCP survey: 1990-1991 and 1997-2001.
Source: Personal elaboration based on PCP, waves 1 and 2.

In CEE the dynamics of satisfaction with democracy between 1990 and 2001 (see Figure 3) follows a similar pattern to the perceptions of how things have been getting on during the post-communist transitions. Typically, in countries where the degree of dissatisfaction with economic developments diminished, satisfaction with the functioning of democracy increased. Conversely, where people were increasingly unhappy about economic issues during transition, the level of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy has fallen. Comparing data in Figures 2 and 3, we observe only two exceptions to this pattern. First, in Bulgaria although the degree of discontent with how things have been getting on since the fall of communism grew, we note an increase in level of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy, and second Slovenia, where both the level of economic discontent and the average satisfaction with the functioning of democracy decreased. The other nine countries analyzed here conform to the patterns set out above.

percentage of 50.6%) of Eastern Europeans regarding an improvement of the economic situation of their country in the next year, according to PCP survey data, wave 2, 1997-2001.

Moreover, individual level data show that people less dissatisfied with the evolution of things since the fall of communism tend to be more satisfied with how democracy works in their country. This correlation holds for the entire dataset covering the period 1990-2001 (Spearman's Rho coefficient = - 0.301, N = 23503, p <0.001). The relationship between the two variables (i.e. degree of dissatisfaction with the evolution of things since the fall of communism and the level of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy) is stronger for Romanian respondents (Spearman's Rho coefficient = - 0.385, N = 2306, p <0.01). This suggests that Romanians tend to evaluate democracy especially in terms of economic performance, even in higher proportions than people from other countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Moreover, Figure 2.3 shows that in 1990 Romanians had the greatest degree of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy (an average of 5.14 on a scale ranging from 1 to 10). Also Romania stands out with the biggest decline in the level of satisfaction with democracy in 1998 compared to 1990 (- 1.57 points). This is consistent data showing that during the same timeframe (1990-1998) Romania registered the most pronounced increase of the degree of dissatisfaction with the way things have evolved since the fall of communism. Moreover, Romanians' confidence that democratic governance can provide solutions to people's problems decreases too. For instance, in 1990 about 63% of the Romanians believed that "in democracy problems will be solved", while just about 50% still believed this in 1998, according to PCP 1 and 2 datasets.

Declining trust in state institutions

Trust in state institutions and particularly in fundamental institutions of representative democracy such as the parliament and the government had a sinuous evolution during the transition period in Romania (see Figure 4). However, the overall trend is of declining trust rates[4]. Initial percentages of institutional trust

[4] Some authors argue that institutional trust has neither diminished nor increased in Romania as the "lack of confidence in key institutions of democracy characterized from the beginning the attitude of this country's citizens towards the new democratic regime" (Pavel 2010, 15). This assertion is however contradicted by data presented in Figure 2.4, which shows that trust in the main political institutions (Parliament, Government, President) has a sinuous dynamics in Romania with ups and dramatic downs, particularly overlapping on election cycles until 2004. Therefore, instead of claiming that lack of confidence in key institutions of democracy characterized Romanians from the outset of democratization (as Pavel does), it would more accurate to say that the lack of confidence in new democratic institutions

were relatively high. In 1990, 59.1% of Romanians had confidence in Parliament, and 63.1% in the new Government. After 8 years of transition, levels of institutional trust have dropped to 20.9% for the Parliament and 15.9% for the Government in 1998. Other key organizations of representative democracy, such as political parties, lost much of citizens' trust, from 28.6% in 1990 to 8.6% in 1998 (according to data from the PCP surveys, waves I and II). Moreover, since the mid 1990s Romanians' trust in political parties had never exceeded the 20% threshold (Tufiș 2011).

This sinuous evolution of institutional trust, with ups and downs which closely overlap election cycles (see Figure 4), suggests a potential "honeymoon" effect (Tufiș 2011, 487). This effect reflects people's tendency to grant more trust to political institutions and the new governmental team immediately after winning elections. During the first post-communist decade, substantial increases in levels of institutional trust are generally followed by dramatic erosions of people's confidence in the main institutions of representative democracy. This evolution appears to be stronger and therefore more visible in Figure 4 in the case of the 1996[5] and 2000 elections. Afterwards, in the second post-communist decade, the intensity of the honeymoon effect seems to decrease.

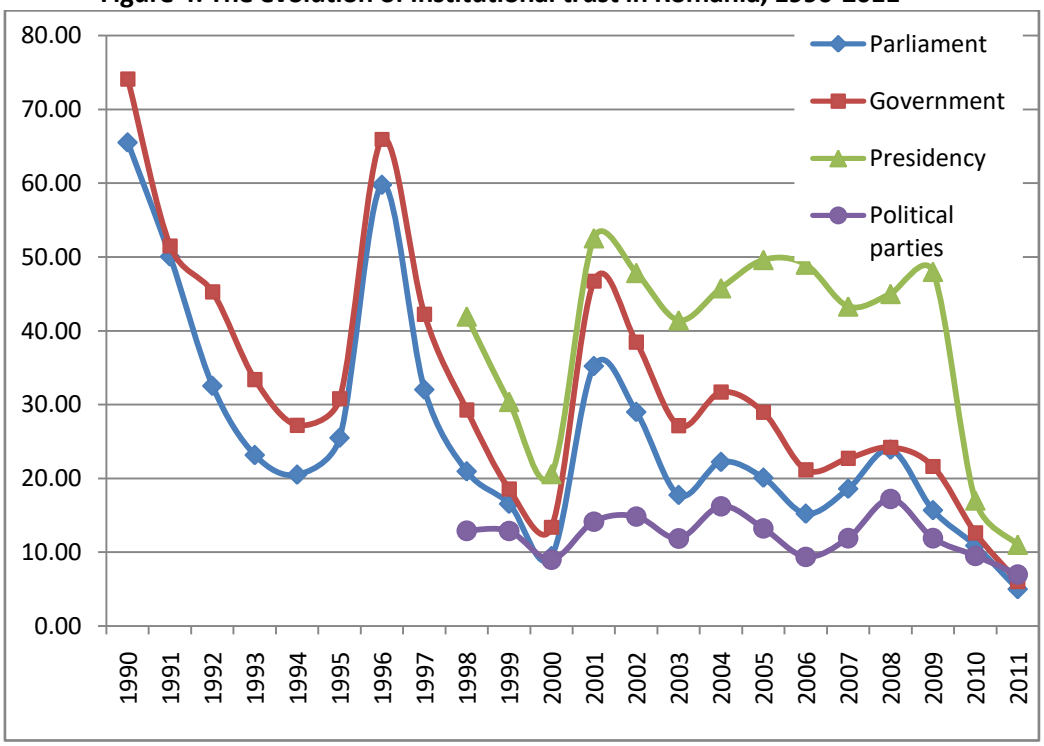
The ups and downs of trust in Figure 4 suggest that elections seem to provide a sort of "fuel" (or legitimacy) that democratic institutions need in order to work during an electoral cycle. But this statement could be amended and specified by two observations. First, not all elections may be similarly effective in recharging the reservoir of trust in the main political institutions. For example, the general

installed relatively quickly after the fall of communism, but not immediately, because for example, in 1990 (the turning point of Romanian democracy) both the Government and the Parliament recorded relatively high rates of trust and Romanians were significantly more satisfied with the functioning of democracy, to their neighbors in other post-communist countries. Trust in institutions begins to decline in Romania in 1991, when the social costs of economic reforms are first felt by the population (see the previous section for data and discussions on this topic).

[5] The general enthusiasm that followed the double victory of the opposition in the 1996 elections (presidential and parliamentary) is illustrated by Vladimir Pasti, Mihaela Miroiu și Cornel Codiță (Pasti, Miroiu, and Codiță 1997, 207): „ Exactly that part of intellectuals and professionals, which proved to be the most harsh on criticizing the previous government on the basis of contested realities of the economy and population, was now the source of spreading downright overwhelming optimism. Nothing seemed impossible; nothing seemed unsolvable once the government had been finally changed. Such optimism contradicted then, and it is contradicting now, the most important conclusions of the assessment of the state of affairs in Romania."

elections of 1992 neither seem to have brought any additional trust, nor have stopped the downward trend of institutional trust recorded since 1990. This might be so because the general elections of 1992 did not manage to produce a genuine alternation in power, although they somewhat balanced the ratio of parliamentary seats between government and opposition. Conversely, the general elections of 1996 brought about the first alternation in power after the fall of communism, while the 2000 elections generated the second alternation of power. In the aftermath of both the 1996 and 2000 elections one can note a dramatic increase of institutional trust, followed then by a similarly spectacular decrease of confidence in the main political institutions as governing processes started to unfold.

Figure 4: The evolution of institutional trust in Romania, 1990-2011



Source: Personal elaboration based on data provided by Claudiu Tufiş - data from 1990 to 2008 (also see Tufiş 2013), Eurobarometer 71.3 June 2009, Eurobarometer 73.4 May 2010, CSSB survey October 2010, CURS survey March 2011.

Data in Figure 4 suggest that levels of institutional trust are a function of people's post-electoral expectations compared to how people perceive the subsequent policy outcomes delivered by the governing elite. Higher expectations

and hopes are, more trust people grant to the new governmental team and representative institutions. On the other hand, it seem that larger disappointments are (that is the difference between high expectations and small achievements or outputs), more dramatic is the decrease of levels of institutional trust.

These remarks lead us to the second observation which in turn requires a discussion. After the 2000 elections institutions' "tank" of trust seems to fill less and less with each new row of elections. This phenomenon could be attributed to social learning: post-election disappointments were felt repeatedly by significant parts of the population which subsequently perceived the ineffectiveness of governing processes unfolding after 1989.[6] These repeated disappointments seem to have lowered people's expectations regarding politics and their demands towards the political class in general. In sum, recurrent post-electoral disillusions can also increased people's skepticism about the effectiveness of elections as a mechanism through which citizens can have a say in the democratic governance of the country.

However, declining public confidence has not affected all institutions equally. Romanians have kept relatively high levels of trust in traditional institutions, such as the military and the churches (details not shown here). In a transitional period characterized by profound transformations of social and economic relations, which have been often accompanied by feelings of uncertainty and insecurity, trust in traditional institutions could be interpreted mainly through their perceived symbolic role as "protectors of the self" through physical means, in the case of the army, and spiritual ones in the case of churches (Tufiș 2007).

On the other hand, trust in state institutions can be interpreted as a form of specific support for democracy. From this perspective, prolonged periods of low trust in state institutions may have negative consequences on diffuse support for democracy, that is perception of democracy as a legitimate form of government (Tufiș 2011). In an analysis of the evolution of institutional trust during the transition period in Romania, Tufiş (2007) emphasizes that trust in state institutions is strongly influenced by how the public and the media evaluates these institutions, suggesting that an improvement of institutional performance could lead to an increase in institutional trust. In addition, a significant part of the variance of trust

[6] Dan Pavel (2010) considers that Romanians had huge expectations and then similar disappointments regarding the regime change of 1989. The high level of disappointment "was bestowed upon elected politicians and democratic institutions" which have been found as "scapegoats" for everything that occurred during the transition (Pavel 2010, 15)

in state institutions depends on how people assess both their own economic circumstances and the economic situation of their country. Therefore, an improvement of the economic situation and a positive perception of the effectiveness of institutions could lead to an increased trust of state institutions (Tufiș 2007). Yet, during the global economic crisis the opposite scenario was unfolding Romania (as in many other European countries) leading to a dramatic decline of institutional trust.

Nevertheless, declining trust in political institutions is not a phenomenon specific only to Romania. A similar evolution of institutional trust can be seen in other former communist countries, but also in developed democracies. However, the sources of these trends could be interpreted differently: in advanced democracies declining trust might be a consequence of citizens' changing expectations towards state institutions, while in new democracies it may primarily result from malfunctioning of institutions[7] (Tufiş, 2007). Moreover, the reservoir of trust differs particularly in hardship times. In 'old' democracies, citizens who were once satisfied with the work of democratic institutions know that institutions can deliver more than they are currently achieving. On the other hand, the experience of citizens of former communist countries with democratic institutions was rather negative from the beginning[8], hence they have a generally skeptical attitude towards future performance improvements of democratic institutions (Tufiș 2007).

Political alienation and lack of interest in politics

The post-communist transition in Romania is characterized by a loss of confidence not only in political institutions but also in the political class in general (see Figure 5). Thus, the percentage of those who believe that one should not trust politicians increased from 56.1% in 1990 to almost 70% in 2002. The public has

[7] However, even in consolidated democracies the lack of confidence in political institutions due to people's changing expectations which are not met anymore by these institutions could be also interpreted as an institutional malfunction, at least from the public's perspective who perceives an inadequacy of political institutions to the problems and changing needs of citizens.

[8] This is especially true in post-communist countries which started economic reforms and people felt their social effects immediately after the change of regimes in 1989. In Romania, these economic measures were delayed by the first post-communist government and at least in 1990, Romanians had a relatively high level of confidence in the new democratic institutions.

perceived that politicians are increasingly distancing themselves from people's problems and views: in 1990, 36.4% of respondents believed that politicians do everything to get to know people's opinions, while only 18.9% still believed this in 2002.

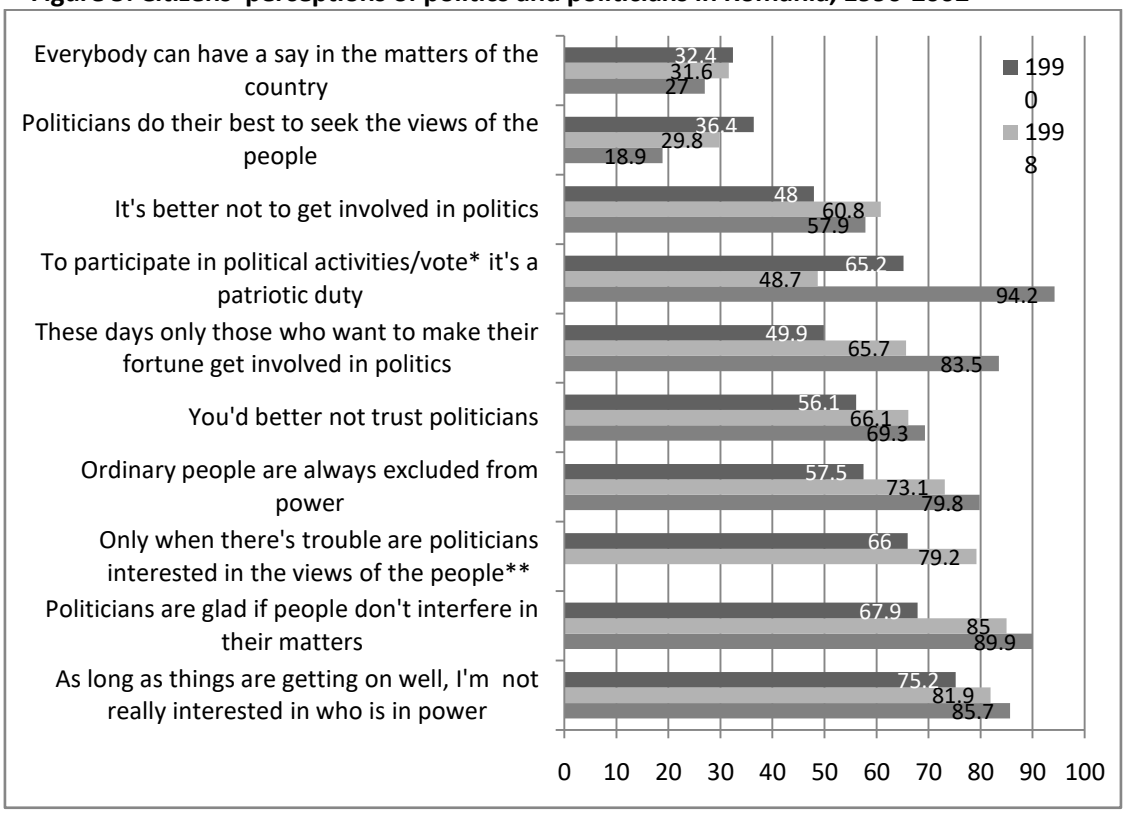
During the transition period, Romanians' cynicism regarding politicians and politics has increased substantially. This cynical attitude is expressed in public opinion surveys, among other things, by respondents' agreement with the following statement: "only those who want to make their fortune get involved in politics". The percentage of those who agree with this assertion rose from less than 50% in 1990 to 83.5% in 2002. Thus, political engagement is increasingly seen as a socially stigmatized and stigmatizing activity rather than a civic virtue. Moreover, the belief that public and political involvement is a civic or patriotic duty of every citizen decreases from 65% in 1990 to 49% 1998. The big difference between the percentage of those who agree that voting is a duty of every citizen (over 94% in 2002) and the significantly lower percentages of those who believe that participation in political activities in general is a civic duty (only about 49 % in 1998) might suggest that for most Romanians voting is one of the few (if not the only) form of political participation that is socially desirable.

But effective participation in political life is not just about voting, as shown by Vladimir Pasti, Mihaela Miroiu and Cornel Codiță (1997) in an analysis of the first seven years of the Romanian post-communist transition. These authors argue that participation is contingent on "a minimum interest in public life", and given the fact that most people are concerned more with struggling for survival, they have lost their interest to participate in public affairs (Pasti, Miroiu, and Codiţă 1997, 179). Furthermore, the authors cited above have estimated that during the mid 1990s about half of the Romanian population suffered from social and political exclusion, poverty being the main obstacle to participatory democracy.

In addition, the share of those who have perceived democratic governance in Romania as a participatory process substantially decreased during the first post-communist decade. Thus, while almost a third of Romanians believed in 1990 that "everyone has a say in the affairs of the country", only about a quarter still agreed with this statement in 2002. On the other hand, there is a notable increase in the percentage of those who feel excluded from politics, which is perceive as a rather closed process, reserved exclusively to politicians expressed through agreement with statements such as: "ordinary people are always excluded from power"(from

57% in 1990 to almost 80% in 2002), "politicians are glad if people don't interfere in their matters " (from 68% to almost 90%), "only when there is trouble politicians are interested in people's views" (from about 66% to about 80%). These data suggest a pronounced degree of political alienation of significant parts of the population.

Figure 5: Citizens' perceptions of politics and politicians in Romania, 1990-2002



Note: Data represent the percentage of those who agree with the respective statements. * The question of BOP survey in June 2002 relates to voting as a civic duty, while questions in the PCP surveys from 1990 and 1998 relate to involvement in political activities in general (hence probably the large gap between the results on this item). ** This item is missing from the BOP 2002 questionnaire. Otherwise, the questions were formulated in a similar way in all three surveys, so that data are comparable over time.
Source: Personal elaboration on the basis of three surveys: PCP I (1990) and II (1998), and BOP, May-June 2002.

The transition period in Romania was also characterized by a widespread sense of a minimal role of citizens in politics. According to Pasti and his colleagues, the perceptions of "minimal citizenship" are expressed through electoral absenteeism, lack of involvement in local communities, lack of interest in civic

association, and skepticism regarding the output of the political process (Pasti, Miroiu, and Codiţă 1997).[9]

To analyze the predictors of political alienation I used a multiple linear regression model (details not shown). The dependent variable, namely the level of political alienation is measured as a summative index of four items (Cronbach Alfa = 0.637) that measure the degree to which an individual agrees with the following statements: parties are more interested in winning elections than solving people's problems, no matter who wins the election eventually things unfold likewise in the next four year term, politicians' morality is very low, MPs' salaries are too high. Politically alienated people in post-communist Romania are in general persons who negatively evaluate politics and believe that democratic governance cannot provide any solutions to people's problems. Hence they are less interested in politics. People with a higher degree of political alienation are persons with low levels of support for democracy as a form of government, who have less confidence in state institutions and political leaders, those who are dissatisfied with the government's performance in various fields, those who are on the whole dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy and market economy in Romania, who have a lower degree of personal modernity (measured here by the number of foreign languages known and computer literacy). At the same time, people with fewer personal relationships[10] on which they can rely on to solve problems that can occur in various situations have a higher degree of political alienation.

Diminishing sense of citizen participation as a civic duty, distrust of politicians, and feelings of political exclusion are just some symptoms of political alienation of Romanians in transition. Other factors associated with political alienation are: lack of interest in politics, perception of politics as irrelevant to people's life, feelings of powerlessness and political ineffectiveness. For instance data from 1998 (PCP II) show most Romanians had little or no interest in politics.

[9] Moreover, Vladimir Pasti, Mihaela Miroiu and Cornel Codiță have ketched the profile of the "minimal citizen" who is: "*unsafe* physically, *uncertain* about state institutions, *doubts* that the principle 'no one is above the law' will ever make a practical sense as s/he faces daily counterexamples, has a sense of *humble beggar* in front of state institutions and a complex of hierarchical inferiority since institutions are perceived as the means by which the state controls and owns society; *disturbs* public officials from their work when s/he requests a public service; *bothers* the seller who actually guards the merchandise from the buyer" (Pasti, Miroiu, and Codiţă 1997, 181)

[10] If we interpret these personal relationships as an indicator of social integration, then we can say that people who are socially isolated or marginalized are also usually more politically alienated.

The lack of interest was higher for local than for national politics: over 78% of Romanian declaring little or no interest in local politics and 64% in national politics. Lack of interest in politics was accompanied in 1998 by perceptions of politics as irrelevant to people's life: 59.3% thought their personal situation is little or very little influenced by decisions of local authorities, and 43.9% believed that national level political decisions had only a limited influence on their life.

Thus, people tended to perceive politics as a characteristic of the central government (Comșa 2006). Thus, during the first post-communist decade, Romanians seemed to be more interested and deemed national politics to be more important than local politics[11]. Self-perceived political efficacy (i.e. the subjective ability to influence political decisions) recorded relatively low rates in Romania. We can rather speak of political inefficiency because more than three quarters of Romanians believed they can do little to influence political decisions. However, subjective political efficacy is somewhat higher when people aim to influence decisions of local authorities: about 22% of Romanians believe they can influence local decisions to a large or very large extent, compared to only 15% who believe they can influence national decisions.

Interest in politics is one of the most important predictor of political participation in all its forms: turnout in elections, conventional or protest participation, cognitive involvement in politics or direct participation in local decision making (Tătar 2015a, b, Tătar 2013, Tătar 2011c, Tătar 2011a, b). To understand why Romanians are (not) interested in politics, I have examined the predictors of this variable. Table 1 shows multiple linear regression coefficients and their level of significance[12]. The model explains over a third of the variance of interest in politics (% Adjusted R^2= 34.4%). Resources of a person are strongly associated with her/his interest in politics, people with more resources being generally more interested in political affairs. In terms of regional variance, one can observe a higher political interest in Bucharest and Moldova and less interest in Oltenia (residence in other regions had no significant effect).Gender socialization is one of the most important predictors of interest in politics, men being generally more interested in politics than women.

[11] This trend seems to have changed however by mid 2000s, when people tended to give more importance to local politics and turnout for local elections became higher than turnout in parliamentary national elections.

[12] Only the final model is presented here that resulted after the removal of statistically insignificant predictors.

Table 1: Predictors of interest in politics - Multiple Linear Regression

Predictors of interest in politics	B	SE	Beta	Sig.
Constant	*-1.547*	*1.211*		*.202*
Moldova	1.027	.348	.060	.003
Oltenia	-.446	.155	-.057	.004
Bucharest	.254	.057	.093	.000
Male	1.866	.272	.135	.000
Married	1.552	.292	.106	.000
Education	1.896	.272	.175	.000
Hungarian	-1.296	.526	-.049	.014
Age	.024	.009	.062	.004
Household material endowments	.274	.061	.114	.000
Trade unionist after 1990	.801	.422	.038	.058
Civil society membership after 1990	1.047	.383	.056	.006
Social relationships	.154	.082	.039	.061
Political party membership after 1990	1.617	.603	.053	.007
Trust in state institutions	.182	.034	.128	.000
Trust in political parties	.160	.030	.120	.000
Believes that elections make governments pay attention to people's opinions	2.046	.297	.142	.000
Subjective political efficacy (belief that people can influence policy decisions)	.573	.068	.173	.000
Believes that the country is moving in the wrong direction'	.876	.297	.063	.003
Believes that s/he will live worse next a year	.785	.350	.046	.025
Political alienation	-.293	.076	-.078	.000
% Adjusted R^2 = 34,4%				

Note: Multiple Linear Regression, *backward elimination,* regression coefficients significant at $p < 0.10$. The significance level of each coefficient is presented into column *Sig*. The closer are the Beta coefficients to 1 (or -1), the stronger that variable's influence on political interest is. The sign in front of the coefficients indicates a positive/negative relationship between the predictor and the dependent variable.
Source: Analysis of BOP, May 2005 survey data (see BOP 2005).

A number of other socio-demographic and economic variables influence the degree of political interest of a person too. Education is the most important variable of them. More educated a person is, higher her/his interest in politics is. People who have more resources in the form of household material goods are

generally more interested in politics than people with lower household endowments. In addition, married people tend to be more interested in politics than the unmarried ones. In terms of age, the regression model shows a modest increase in political interest with age. However, bivariate analyses reveal that political interest indeed increases with age, but interest in politics drops dramatically after the age of 70. In terms of ethnicity, one can note that persons belonging to the Hungarian minority in Romania tend to be less interested in politics than the rest of the population.

Social capital indicators have a weak influence on the level of political interest a person has. Membership in various civil society associations or unions is generally associated with higher interest in politics. Romanians who are or have been members of civil society associations after 1990 tend to be more interested in politics. Similarly, people with more personal relationships on which they can rely on in different situations or those who are or were union members are generally more interested in politics[13]. However, the effect of these variables on political interest seems to be relatively modest in post-communist Romania.

On the other hand, indicators of what might be called as the 'political capital' of a person are significantly associated with her/his interest in politics. Thus, individuals who are or have been members of political parties after 1990 are more interested in politics than those who were not affiliated with parties. Regardless of party membership, people with higher levels of trust in political parties are generally more interested in politics than those who do not trust parties. Similarly, trust of state institutions has a positive influence on political interest.

Data in Table 1 show that interest in politics is substantially influenced by several attitudinal variables. For example, interest in politics increases when people think elections are an effective means through which government is made more attentive to people's opinions. Moreover, interest in politics is generally higher when people believe they can influence important decisions affecting the community to which they belong (i.e. subjective or internal political efficacy). Prospective evaluations of national/personal situations have a significant effect on interest in politics. People expecting a worsening of the circumstances both in their personal lives and/or in the country tend to be more attentive to political

[13] But the regression coefficients of some of these variables are statistically significant only at $p < 0.10$.

phenomena and more interested in politics. In other words, our data show an increased political interest of people who believe the country is heading in a wrong direction, or who are pessimistic about the future and believe that next year they will live worse than currently.

Conclusion

This paper linked post-communist citizens' political attitudes and behaviors with the profound socio-economic and political changes affecting the Romanian society after 1989. The double post-communist transition towards democracy and market economy provided the context in which Romanians had the opportunity to participate freely into politics after decades of authoritarian rule. However, the development and consolidation of democratic institutions was accompanied by low levels of public involvement in democratic governance qualifying Romania as a case in which democratization occurred without substantial public participation.

On the contrary, public expectations during the transition processes largely diverged from the perceived democratic performance of public authorities. Since the political, economic and social transformations occurred simultaneously, they altogether have marked the context in which Romanians (as well as citizens of other post-communist countries) began to assess the functioning of democracy particularly through the lens of structural changes and economic outcomes during the transition period. As this paper has highlighted, at the beginning of the transition period Romanians' views of democracy incorporated a multitude of economic and social rights. Thus, most Romanians had relatively high expectations of what democratic governance should deliver during the post-communist transition. However, people perceived the economic and social outputs of the new democratic processes as generally disappointing. Thus, economic hardship, loss of jobs, deterioration of living standards, everyday life's uncertainties and risks were associated with a loss of confidence in the new democratic institutions and political actors.

In terms of attitudes towards politics, the post-communist transition period in Romania can be characterized by a *political alienation syndrome*. Symptoms of this syndrome include: a reduced sense of civic duty, distrust of politicians, feelings of political exclusion, lack of interest in politics, perceptions of politics as irrelevant to people's lives, feelings of helplessness and political ineffectiveness, citizens'

diminishing expectations with the solutions offered by the political sphere and lowering expectations regarding the quality of the political class in general. All these constitute unfavorable prerequisites of citizen participation in the democratic processes unfolding in Romania after 1989.

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