

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ROMANIAN POLITICAL PARTIES AFTER '89: APPEARANCE, EVOLUTION AND ELECTIONS

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Abstract: Following the events of December '89, all the existing structures up to that moment were dissolved and a sudden replacement of the totalitarian regime with a democratic one was made. As a result, a problematic situation was generated for the Romanian society at the same time that the idea of the need to organize free elections as a tool for the production of political institutions emerged. The difficulty came from the lack of political parties, the main prerogative of the multi-party system and the establishment of constituent democracy. Thus, the first step of the new established regime was the organization of political parties.

As parts of the social corpus, the political parties, bearers of power interests, are the instruments of the principle of representativeness and indispensable factors of the functioning of democracy. For Romanian society in the '90, political parties were (re)created in a specific context. The present study proposes an incursion into the context in which the Romanian political parties appeared and evolved immediately after the revolution.

Keywords: political parties, democracy, representativeness, multi-party system, Romanian society.

For the democratic functioning of a state, the political parties are indispensable. Based on the principle of representativeness and tools necessary for the smooth functioning of democracy, they are part of the social corpus, bear interests and establish the relationship between the government and the governed. We note that the simple existence of a political formation that calls itself a party is not enough for the operationalization of democratic principles and their transposition in the daily lives of individuals or social groups.

In general terms, a political party is defined as an organization of a voluntary type, which is based on a political project and on behalf of which it acts with the precise aim of obtaining power, as characterized by Max Weber – “a collective political enterprise of those interested in power”¹. For the author, a representative democracy,

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¹ Max Weber, *Politica, o vocație și o profesie*, Bucharest, Anima Publishing House 1992, p. 27.

with free and fair elections, is inconceivable without political parties². George Burdeau defines a political party as a “group of individuals who promote the same political orientation” for which they make the effort to “impose it on as many citizens as possible with the aim of conquering or at least influencing political power”³, and Daniel Seiler sees it as an organization that mobilizes individuals in collective action to reach government, in a coalition or alone – “collective action ... to conduct public affairs...”⁴. In the same sphere of the group with governing goals and interests is the definition offered by Raymond Aron – “voluntary groups, more or less organized, whose activity is more or less permanent, which claim, in the name of a certain conception of the common interest and of society, to assume, alone or in coalition, the functions of government”⁵. The picture of a political party can be complete if we also recall the economist approach, according to which it is a team that aims to occupy positions in the government act for the pleasure of gain and power. Anthony Downs believes that parties formulate policies as a tool to win votes on the way to government⁶. Thus, whichever definition or approach we prefer, it is obvious that political parties benefit from a social base that develops over time, so that a natural link is created between the party and the social environment from which it originates.

The fall of the communist regime and the dissolution of the existing structures until that moment generated a problematic situation for the Romanian society, namely the establishment of the democratic functioning mechanism and the replacement of the old, totalitarian structures with other new structures. Without a clear vision of how to proceed, the idea of the need to organize elections emerged as a tool for producing political institutions, but there were no political parties. The democratic models are based on multi-party system, and for Romania it was the moment of establishing democracy which, however, could not function without political parties. Thus, before the organization of the elections, the parties had to be organized, this being the only way of manifestation for any democratic regime.

The sudden replacement of the totalitarian regime with the democratic one made the objective of establishing political parties difficult. Following the numerous studies carried out on the transition, it was concluded that the democratization of a society takes time and takes place in two stages: (1) the first is represented by the transfer of power from the totalitarian government to the one elected by the citizens and (2) the second refers to consolidation, to the transformation of democratic governance into an effective regime in which

² *Ibidem*.

³ Georges Burdeau, *Traite de Science Politique*, tome 2, “La dynamique politique”, Paris, Librairie generale de droit et de jurisprudence, 1968, p. 26.

⁴ Daniel-Louis Seiler, *Les partis politiques*, Paris, Armand Colin Publishing House, 1993, pp. 22–23.

⁵ Raymond Aron, *Democrație și totalitarism*, Bucharest, All Educational Publishing House, 2001, pp. 85–86.

⁶ Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Political Action in a Democracy*, in “The Journal of Political Economy”, Vol. 65, no. 2/1957, p. 137.

democratic institutions gain legitimacy⁷. Due to the specificity of the Romanian society in the first years after the revolution, the consolidation of democracy will be questioned for a period of time. Despite all the obstacles that appeared, with a more difficult transition than initially thought, the democratization process continued, managing to generate long-term effects⁸.

After a long period of time in which multi-party system was suppressed in Romania, the classical parties (peasant, liberal and Christian-democrat) acquired the opportunity to participate in the construction of Romanian democracy. Thus, after an interruption of decades, the long road of modernization and democratization of Romanian society began. Compared to the former socialist countries, the path taken by our country was somewhat different. The dissolution of the Communist Party resulted in a vacuum in the political process, all the more so as the very notion of a *party* suffered a series of negative connotations associated with the past and the single party. Society's enthusiasm for the dissolution of the CP and the collective consensus against communism reflected the shift towards the Western model of democracy⁹.

The reconstruction of Romanian partyism manifested itself in two unique characteristics for the South-Eastern European space, namely the reinvention of parties against the background of the sudden disappearance of the single party and the lack of opposition, of an alternative movement or organization during the communist regime. Unlike countries like Hungary, Poland or Czechoslovakia, where there were structures opposing the communist regime, thus ensuring a negotiated transition, in our country "all these elements that supported the process of transition and configuration of the political system were missing"¹⁰. It is obvious that this shortcoming has created dysfunctions on the democratic political system as a whole. Under these conditions, the parties were created both without a specific social base and without responding to a specific social need. They were mostly created from ad-hoc groups, inconsistent from a political point of view, based on voluntarism, opportunism of some and client interests and characterized by a lack of political discernment¹¹.

⁷ Fr. Hagopian, S. Mainwaring, *Democracy in Brazil: Prospects and Problems*, in "World Policy Journal", 4/1987, pp. 485–514; G. O'Donnell, *Transitions, Continuities, and Paradoxes*, in S. Mainwaring, G. O'Donnell, A. Valenzuela (eds.), *Issues in Democratic Consolidation: The New South American Democracies in Comparative Perspective*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1992, pp. 17–56.

⁸ C. Zamfir, *O analiză critică a tranziției. Ce va fi "după"*, Iași, Polirom Publishing House 2004, p. 117.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ Alexandru Radu, Daniel Buti, *Partidul de anturaj. Un model explicativ pentru partidismul românesc postcomunist*, in "Sfera politicii", no. 3 (169)/2012, p. 5.

¹¹ George Voicu, *Pluripartidismul. O teorie a democrației*, Bucharest, All Publishing House 1998, p. 203.

So, after more than four decades of a single party, as a result of the events of '89, another system of government was established for our country – democratic and pluralistic. Obviously, in order to face the new challenge, a new legislative regulation was required. The first free elections were scheduled for May 1990, but there was a lack of political parties to present themselves to the voters. In a very short period of time, at least a few parties with a significant weight, credible and balanced in terms of electoral support had to be produced. A first step in the reorganization of the Romanian democratic and pluralist political system was the creation of the necessary framework for the establishment of political bodies. Thus, at the end of 1989, Decree Law no. 8 of 31 December, which confirmed that “In Romania, the establishment of political parties is free, with the exception of fascist parties or those that propagate concepts contrary to the state and legal order. No other restrictions based on race, nationality, religion, degree, culture, sex or political beliefs can prevent the establishment and functioning of political parties”¹². It is the moment when, in a specific Romanian society, the emergence of political parties “in an upside-down form in relation to the social base” was achieved¹³. The political and social pluralism, the democratic system and the separation of powers in the state were the concepts used in the new post-communist order in our country. In the prerogative of the constituent policies, pluralism represents a characteristic of society, at the same time being the functional attribute of a political regime. In this context, the political parties have the role of ensuring the link between the two plans.

Through the decree issued by the Council of the National Salvation Front (CFSN), as the first regulation in the matter, the functioning of political parties was legislated and the minimum conditions for their establishment were established. According to art. 3 of the decree, in order to establish a political party, it had to “present its organizational and operating statutes, its political program, declare its headquarters and the financial means at its disposal and prove that it has at least 251 members”¹⁴. The court was the body that ruled on the legality of the establishment of the political party, within 5 days. Within 3 days of the communication, the decision of the tribunal could be appealed to the Supreme Court of Justice (ÎCCJ – High Court of Cassation and Justice), and it was passed within a maximum of 5 days from the registration of the submitted appeal. Political parties acquired legal personality on the date the court decision became final¹⁵. Practically, at this moment the parties were declared associations of citizens, with goals that could not contravene the legal order. The effects of the decree law appeared very

¹² Decree-law no. 8 of 31 December 1989 regarding the registration and operation of political parties and public organizations in Romania.

¹³ Alexandru Radu, Daniel Buti, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, art. 3.

¹⁵ Angela Rus, *Constituirea privind adoptarea primelor reglementări cu caracter electoral din România postcomunistă. 1990–1996*, in the “Anuarul Institutului de Istorie «George Barițiu» din Cluj-Napoca”, volume LIII, 2014, p. 49; Dorin Cosmin Vasile, *Reintroduction of the multi-party system in Romania: the legal framework and the evolution of political parties from 1989 to 1996*, in “Anuarul Institutului de Cercetări Socio-Umane «C.S. Nicolăescu-Plopșor»”, no. XXI, 2020, p. 118.

quickly if we take into account that in January there were already 30¹⁶ registered parties¹⁷. The decree law, through its minimal conditions, contributed a lot to the creation of a boom and an excessive fragmentation of the political spectrum. Of course, most of them did not have an important contribution to the political life of the moment considering, mainly, the electoral and governmental performance criteria¹⁸. Obviously, we cannot speak of the advantage of quality from a doctrinal point of view, but of a lack of ideology dictated by the pressure of the upcoming elections. We note, however, that certain ideologies were claimed, such as the social democratic one through the FSN, the liberal one through the PNL, the Brătianu Liberal Union or the Liberal Democratic Party, the environmentalist or the peasant one. The multi-party system was thus proclaimed and the legal framework for political pluralism was established. However, an organic law regarding their establishment and operation was also needed. Later, by Law no. 14 of January 2003, several regulations regarding the creation and operation of parties in our country were provided¹⁹.

The organization of Romanian political parties according to the Western system and the return to a free system represented our country's commitment to democratization and institutional modernization²⁰. According to Mainwaring and Scully's opinion expressed in 1994, "in modern, mass societies, the construction of a party system is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the consolidation of democracy and effective governance"²¹, and "the consolidation of democracy" is the separation between survival and sustainability of a political system²² and involves the meeting of three cumulative conditions, according to other specialists in the field, Linz and Stepan²³. Romania fulfilled the conditions of the two authors issued in 1996, the

¹⁶ By May of '90 80 parties had appeared, so that in the following years their number would increase to almost 200. Most of these parties disappeared as quickly as they appeared or, in the lucky case, disappeared after a short political activity. Their decrease in number appears only a few years later, through the limitations imposed by the adoption of a more restrictive law in 1996, which required a minimum of 10,000 founders to be able to register a political party (Law no. 27/1996).

¹⁷ C. Preda, S. Soare, *Regimul, partidele și sistemul politic din România*, Bucharest, Nemira Publishing House, 2008, pp. 76–78.

¹⁸ Mihaela Bărbieru, *The Romanian multi-party during the first years following the revolution*, in Iulian Boldea, Cornel Sigmirean, Dumitru-Mircea Buda (eds.), *Paths of Communication in Postmodernity*, Section: History, Political Sciences, International Relations, vol. 6/2020, Târgu-Mureș, Arhipelag Publishing House XXI Press, p. 341.

¹⁹ See in detail the Political Parties Law no. 14 of January 2003.

²⁰ V. Naumescu, *Sisteme politice comparate. Elemente de bază*, Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință Publishing House, 2003, p. 144.

²¹ S. Mainwaring, T. Scully, *Introduction: Party Systems in Latin America*, in S. Mainwaring, T. Scully (eds.), *Building Democratic Institutions: Party Systems in Latin America*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1994, p. 27.

²² It may be the result of factors other than sufficient reinforcement. On the other hand, it can be observed "ex facto".

²³ J.J. Linz, A. Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1996, p. 8.

political actors obeying the laws and democratic principles, from which we deduce the establishment at that time of the first democratic manifestations. The politicians appropriated the democratic order, although there was economic recession and a low standard of living of the citizens in an overwhelming proportion, and we have no evidence that the acquisition of political power other than by democratic means was considered. Moreover, the public opinion, recently freed from communist oppression, had the firm conviction that the only form of governance of collective life was only through democratic institutions, beyond all social, political and economic problems generated by the context. In conclusion, it is obvious to us that there was a generalized desire to place our country at the table of European democracies.

In this context, the formation of Romanian political parties according to the Western model was the ideal and simplistic form for the transition period. The model was used by all former socialist states, although it faced various impediments. The question arose whether the newly formed Romanian political class could pass in a very short time, of only four months, from socialist solidarity to structuring in a diversity of parties, with unclear programmatic distinctions, specific to the beginning of the transition. On the other hand, the main source on which the new political class relied was technocracy, which made ideological differentiation difficult. At the same time, the marginal parties of the technocracy emerged, and as the elections took shape, politicians and groups aspiring to power aimed to mobilize voters²⁴. With a confused and inhomogeneous technocratic mass, with marginal groups eager for power, in the absence of a developed space between the private and public spheres, it was necessary to turn to the elites, who shaped the political opportunities and structured the voters' options.

The western model of the party system raised a number of problems, the most important of which are represented by the difficulties in creating political programmes and differentiated ideologies necessary in the individualization of parties on the new political scene, obtaining in a short time the local support necessary for the political actions, as well as belonging to the same ideology claimed by several political groups. Blockades in political differentiation also appeared when several political formations declared their membership to the same Western political family²⁵.

From the point of view of traditionalism, a small number of parties are categorized as historical in Central and Eastern Europe. For our country, we retain a number of three such formations – the National Peasant Party, the National Liberal Party and the Social Democratic Party. Established long before the establishment of communism, abolished during the totalitarian regime, their historical continuation was marked by some limitations of symbol, name, properties and ideology. The Romanians, encouraged by the small number of

²⁴ Mihaela Bărbieru, *Comportament electoral în România postdecembristă*, in Mihaela Bărbieru, Lucian Dindrică (coord.), *O viață în slujba cercetării. În onoare Cezar Avram*, Târgoviște, Cetatea de Scaun Publishing House, 2016, pp. 210–216.

²⁵ The case of ecological parties.

members needed to establish a party and with an effervescent desire to overcome the phase of the single party, generated the new phenomenon of the multitude²⁶ of established political parties²⁷, all considered legitimate²⁸ and capable of representation²⁹. A controversial and tense moment was the transformation of the

FSN into a political party in February 1990. The controversies arose due to the fact that it was the party that had taken power after the fall of communism and had managed to generate structures in all counties, giving it a considerable advantage over the other parties. Statistically, these tensions were justified, subsequently observing an above-average loyal electoral base towards this political formation, far above the electoral base of historical parties.

The elections of May '90, being the first free elections (legislative and presidential), were met by voters with great emotion, enthusiasm and many expectations. 5 months after the collapse of communism, it could not be otherwise for a society where communism had left no room for any of the democratic game. For the country's president, Romanians had a choice between three candidates who came from different cultures. Ion Iliescu, the youngest of them, former party secretary and minister, but also a dissident within the party, had accumulated a very large capital of sympathy during the few months of democracy, while Ion Rațiu (the gentleman with the bow tie, prosperous businessman in London) and Radu Câmpeanu (former leader of the liberal youth, arrested by the communists and emigrated to Paris in the '60), returned to the country after many years, could not be understood by a society at the beginning of the transition to democracy, and the symbolic capital was also disrupted³⁰. The parliamentary elections were held on the same date and had candidates from no less than 75 political parties and formations on the lists. Independent candidates were added to this impressive number. The permissive electoral system meant that the parliamentary mandates were won by 27 political formations, which meant very much. An independent candidate is added to these.

²⁶ Romanian Democratic Socialist Party, Romanian Peasant Party, Romanian Ecological Movement, Christian Democratic Union, Democratic Party, Democratic Unity Party, Romanian Environmentalist Party, Romanian Liberal (Freedom) Party, Romanian Christian Union Party, Progressive Party, National-Democrat Party, Ecologist-Humanist Party from Romania, Democratic Unity Party from Moldova, Socialist-Liberal Party, Free-Democratic Party, Social-Democratic-Christian Romanian Party, Agrarian Democratic Party from Romania, Republican Party and the list goes on.

²⁷ I. Scurtu (coord.), *Structuri politice în Europa Centrală și de Sud-Est (1918–2001)*, vol. I, Bucharest, Romanian Cultural Foundation Publishing House, 2003, p. 283.

²⁸ Al. Ionescu, *Consolidarea partidelor politice și reforma instituțională a autorității publice în Europa Centrală și Orientală. Pluripartism și pluralism politic în postcomunismul românesc*, in "Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review", 13 (1)/2013, p. 114.

²⁹ D. Barbu, *Republica absentă. Politică și societate în România postcomunistă*, 2nd edition, Bucharest, Nemira Publishing House, 2004, p. 170.

³⁰ Gabriel Pricină, *Causes of Economic and Social Decline. Analogy with the Stockholm syndrome*, in "Anuarul Institutului de Cercetări Socio-Umane «C.S. Nicolăescu-Plopșor»", no. XVII, 2016, p. 275.

**Representation of the results of the parliamentary and presidential elections
in Romania, from 20 May 1990**

| Political formation | Senate | | The Chamber of Deputies | | Presidency | |
|---|---------|----------|-------------------------|----------|---------------|---------|
| | votes % | mandates | votes % | mandates | candidate | votes % |
| FSN | 67,02 | 91 | 66,31 | 263 | Ion Iliescu | 85,07 |
| UDMR | 7,20 | 12 | 7,23 | 29 | Radu Câmpeanu | 10,64 |
| PNL | 7,06 | 10 | 6,41 | 29 | Ion Rațiu | 4,29 |
| PNTCD | 2,50 | 1 | 2,56 | 12 | | |
| MER | 2,45 | 1 | 2,62 | 12 | | |
| AUR | 2,15 | 2 | 2,12 | 9 | | |
| PDAR | 1,59 | - | 1,83 | 9 | | |
| PER | 1,38 | 1 | 1,69 | 8 | | |
| PSDR | 1,10 | - | 1,05 | 5 | | |
| other formations and independent candidates | 7,55 | 1 | 8,21 | 20 | | |

Source: Alexandru I. Bejan, *Presentation and comparative analysis of the results of the elections of 20 May 1990*, in Petre Dăculescu, Klaus Liepelt (coord.), *Rebirth of a democracy: The Romanian elections of 20 May 1990*, Romanian Institute for Public Opinion Polling (IRSOP), Bucharest, 1991, pp. 111-133.

These elections actually represent the legitimacy of the Romanian institutional system, without being an ideal historical moment of democracy. However, historians, political scientists, constitutionalists and the general public consider it the first step towards the democratization of the Romanian society, with the multi-party system specific to democracy and the alternation of parties in power, beyond the specific manipulations of any electoral campaign or subsequent electoral events.

Today there is no doubt that in the '90 the need to reform the state was more than obvious and was created in an unrepeatable context. The 20 May elections were not necessarily won by a political formation, but rather they were generated by fear and the dread of profound change at the societal level. In the more than 30 years of constitutional democracy, we also note a fluctuation in the electoral legislation, with many changes and amendments, in a context of multiple and rapid social and political changes that have disrupted the lives of citizens even more.

In a Romania freed from a long-standing totalitarianism, the path to democratization could not be done otherwise than through the multi-party system and through continuous dialogue between citizens and power. The political class had a rather difficult task due to the multiple reforms that were necessary to create a democratic

climate and to make a transition as efficient as possible, and the change of regime also meant the change of mentalities, organization and implementation of reforms.

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