

Romania: In the Shadow of the Past

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Introduction

Given Ceaușescu's personalised rule, the local uncivic political culture and widespread corruption and intolerance, the country's limited historical experience with democracy, and the bloody Revolution of December 1989, it is not surprising that Romania faced serious challenges in its efforts to create a stable democracy and to gain acceptance into the larger European family. After Ceaușescu and his wife were executed on Christmas Day 1989, Romanians hoped to gain the political rights and economic prosperity they had been denied for 45 years. But the weakness of civil society and the absence of organised political opposition sealed the country's fate, as power reverted to second-echelon nomenklatura members, who rejected communism less than they rejected Ceaușescu.

The first years of postcommunist transition in Romania tell the story of the former communists establishing control over the state apparatus, intimidating political rivals, rigging elections, and appropriating state resources through shady privatisation deals. The country has yet to overcome this handicap, as its democratisation and marketisation unfolded at a slower pace than those of other countries in the region. Whereas in Central Europe the collapse of the communist regimes brought the pro-democratic opposition to government, in Romania this happened only in 1996. Whereas in those countries economic stabilisation, liberalisation and privatisation were largely completed by the mid-1990s, in Romania these processes extended almost to the end of the decade. Whereas Central European countries joined the European Union (EU) in 2004, Romania did so only in 2007. The country will need more time to catch up with the other EU member states.

The First Iliescu Regime: 1990-1996

Despite their strong ties to the Ceaușescu regime and open endorsement of a 'third way' retaining key political and economic communist traits, Iliescu and his National Salvation Front won the first postcommunist elections of May 1990, a position they used to shape the country's new democracy. The 1991 Constitution recognised Romania as a French-style semi-presidential republic, where the executive powers were shared by a president directly elected in a run-off system to a maximum of two four-year terms and a cabinet led by a prime minister; the legislative powers rested with a bicameral Parliament; the

judiciary included a new Constitutional Court and a Supreme Magistrates' Council. The country opted for a multiparty system from which only the Communist Party was excluded, proportional representation with party lists and a national threshold of 5 per cent for individual parties. Some legal provisions boded well for the new democracy. Small ethnic minorities unable to gain votes above the national threshold were guaranteed representation in the Chamber of Deputies. The country formally upheld the separation of powers and the separation of church and state, and guaranteed basic human rights denied by the previous communist regime (the right to travel inside and outside the country, to worship freely, to organise associations, and the inviolability of the domicile and correspondence). Censorship of the mass media and other publications was discontinued, and new privately-owned newspapers and radio and television stations were allowed to function alongside the publicly-owned media outlets (Gross, 2002).

New political parties could be set up by as few as 250 adherents, embrace a range of ideological and policy preferences, compete in local and national elections, and collect membership fees and donations from sympathisers. The new Constitutional Court could overturn legislation running counter to fundamental law, the powers of the prosecutor general were drastically curtailed, and citizens were allowed to approach the new ombudsman with complaints about governmental agencies. The secret state security services were placed under parliamentary oversight, and some agents involved in human rights abuses were retired (Williams and Deletant, 2001). Private property was guaranteed by the Constitution, previously-confiscated land was returned to initial owners, new Romanian and foreign-owned private firms were allowed to function, and some unprofitable industrial giants were privatised. Last but not least, the Greek Catholic Church, which the communists had suppressed in 1948, was relegalised, and the destruction of places of worship initiated by Ceauşescu in the mid-1980s was halted.

Other constitutional and policy choices were less fortunate. In line with the precommunist Romanian precedent, the new democracy was over-bureaucratized, centralised, wasteful and inefficient. At the county level, public administration included government-appointed prefects alongside elected councils with overlapping responsibilities, while the smallest village was represented by as many as 17 councillors. Strict centralisation was retained, as was Bucharest's domination over regions and provinces in terms of fund allocation and distribution (Stan, 2003). As they were too similar in terms of competencies and the way they were elected, the two legislative chambers unnecessarily prolonged the law adoption process without making it more democratic. Proportional representation fragmented Parliament, at a time when the country needed leadership and coherence to implement

painful but necessary socio-economic restructuring programmes. With its many politically-appointed and corrupt judges, the judiciary was not truly independent from the executive, which continued to influence court decisions in areas such as property restitution. The secret state security services were accountable to the president, as chair of the Supreme Council for the Country's Defence, and they controlled Parliament more than Parliament controlled them through its oversight committees.

The ease with which political parties were set up made for a fragmented party system, which numbered close to 180 formations in the early 1990s. The party system was dominated by the Salvation Front, which benefited from the Communist Party's huge membership, strict hierarchical structure, and unparalleled penetration at local level. Fragmented, polarised and inexperienced, lacking leadership and resources, the political opposition was unable to mount credible campaigns in the weeks leading up to the 1990 and the 1992 elections. It gained parliamentary representation without the right to form the government. This modest result was due to its many weaknesses and to the Front's undemocratic style of conducting politics. The 1990 poll was tainted by the Front's smear campaigns against the budding opposition, allegations that the opposition was ready to deprive ordinary Communist Party members of their political rights and to reinstate inter-war social inequalities, and insistence that Romanians unite around the Front if they wished to prevent the country's disintegration in the face of Hungarian demands for the return of Transylvania. An important intimidation factor was the descent on Bucharest of angry Valea Jiului miners encouraged by Iliescu and his Front. Shock troops of hundreds of miners came down on the capital in January, February and June 1990, and again in September 1991, ransacking the headquarters of opposition parties, and physically assaulting opposition leaders (though in January the miners were unable to reach the capital) (see Gledhill, 2005). Ironically, the *mineriada* of 1991 also led to the resignation of premier Petre Roman, and the split of the Salvation Front into the more reformist Salvation Front led by Roman and the more conservative Democratic National Salvation Front led by Iliescu. The *mineriade* greatly divided the electorate, damaged the country's international reputation, and isolated it within Europe.

The 1992 elections reaffirmed Iliescu as president (with only 61.4 per cent of the vote in the second round compared to nearly 80 per cent in the first round in 1990) and allowed his Democratic Salvation Front to form a government under the leadership of Nicolae Vacaroiu, an economist who had made a career in the communist planning system. Eight parties were represented in the new Parliament. To the left of the political spectrum were the two Front offshoots mentioned above together with the Socialist Party of Labour and the

Agrarian Democratic Party, heirs to the Communist Party. The centre-right Democratic Convention united two parties active in the inter-war period, the National Liberal Party and the National Christian-Democrat Peasant Party, supported by former political prisoners and anticommunist dissidents. To the extreme right stood the chauvinistic Greater Romania Party and the Party of Romanian National Unity, two new formations gathering former communist secret agents and apparatchiks. The Democratic Union of Magyars represented the interests of the Transylvanian Hungarian community.

From 1992 to 1996 the country gained some political stability, and as a result it received some international recognition, though western governments remained critical of Iliescu and Vacaroiu, their ties to the former communist regime, their strong endorsement of key communist principles, and their reluctance to effect resolute reforms. In 1993 Romania became an observer to the Council of Europe, and in 1994 it joined the NATO Partnership for Peace. Within months, however, the momentum behind the country's international opening was lost when nationalists were co-opted into the government.

Politically, the country's leaders gradually accepted the role of the constitutional opposition, renounced the most violent intimidation tactics (the *mineriade*), continued the institutional reform of the judiciary by agreeing to the irremovability of judges, strengthened the counties' autonomy relative to Bucharest, and pledged to observe fundamental human rights and to refrain from using the secret intelligence services against their political rivals. Political decisions were no longer adopted in the streets, at the pressure of the mob, but through negotiations between formations represented in Parliament.

In April 1993, the government created the Council for Ethnic Minorities to tackle the problems of the country's 14 minority groups, but the protection of minorities was grossly undermined from 1994 to 1996, after Vacaroiu refused to strike a partnership with the Democratic Convention, preferring instead to co-opt the Greater Romania Party and the Party of Romanian National Unity to government, a move giving the nationalists increased legitimacy, visibility and influence. Ethnic clashes flared between Romanians and Hungarians or Roma, with some reports claiming that by 1995 there had been 37 inter-ethnic clashes in which six Roma had been killed and dozens of Roma homes destroyed (Chronology, 2010). The nationalists incessantly promoted an irredentist agenda calling for the integration of the independent Republic of Moldova into a resurrected Greater Romania, and for ethnic minorities' rights to be limited to allow Romanians to be 'true masters of their own land' (Gallagher, 1995). Popular attitudes toward ethnic minorities remained generally negative, despite the availability of civic education programmes encouraging tolerance and inclusiveness.

Economically, the country made progress, without bridging the gap separating it from Central Europe. Hyperinflation was slowly brought under control; the agricultural collectives were dismantled and peasants received small land plots; the currency was stabilised at a significantly depreciated rate relative to the dollar; and new markets were identified to compensate for the massive loss of business with former communist countries. The most difficult problem revolved around the state's devolution in economy, as in communist times over 95 per cent of economic activity took place in state-owned units, one of the highest percentages in the region. As unemployment remained high, closing the state-owned unprofitable industrial giants (petrochemical refineries, aluminium processing plants, coal and rare metal mines) was not an option. Given the foreign investors' lack of interest and the domestic investors' lack of resources, the government opted for management-employee-buyout and mass voucher privatisation programs, which transferred property rights to managers and/or workers and granted shares in large industrial plants to all Romanian adult citizens. Privatisation largely benefited former Communist Party officials and enterprise managers, who had insider information about profitable ventures, connections to political decision-makers, raw material providers and retailers, and previous managerial experience. As the Roman and Vacaroiu governments did little to open the system to outsiders, the former communists became Romania's most important and successful businessmen (Stan, 1997).

The Constantinescu Regime: 1996-2000

The 1996 victory of the pro-democratic opposition, united under the banner of the Democratic Convention, was much anticipated both domestically and internationally (Kaplan, 1998). For the first time, religion featured prominently in the electoral race. The highlight of the presidential campaign was a televised confrontation during which Democratic Convention candidate Constantinescu took incumbent Iliescu, a self-avowed atheist, by surprise by asking him to state whether he believed in God. Constantinescu, a University of Bucharest geology professor, won the second round of presidential elections with 54 per cent of the vote. Only six coalitions and parties entered Parliament. The government was formed by the Democratic Convention, together with the Democratic Union of Magyars and the Social Democrat Union, which included the Democratic Party (Roman's former Salvation Front). The opposition consisted of the Party of Social Democracy (Iliescu's former Democratic Salvation Front), the Greater Romania Party, and the Party of Romanian National Unity.

Dissensions within the Democratic Convention and between it and the Social Democratic Union meant that three premiers, all representing the Christian Democrats, were appointed from 1996 to 2000. Former trade union leader and Bucharest mayor Victor Ciorbea was forced to resign in April 1998, being replaced by academic Radu Vasile, who in turn lost his party's support in late 1999 in favour of economist Mugur Isarescu, the National Bank governor.

The participation in government of the Democratic Union of Magyars greatly improved the minorities' input into the public decision-making process, and as a result some of the most restrictive laws on minority rights were amended and the number of ethnic clashes greatly diminished.

As the nationalists and the Social Democrats controlled a significant number of parliamentary seats, and some government partners were particularly sensitive to arguments advanced by the country's religious majority, the Romanian Orthodox Church, accommodation of sexual and religious minorities came at a slower pace. It was only in 2000, hours before the deadline imposed by the Council of Europe, that homosexual behaviour was legalised, amid the protests of Christian Democrat deputy Emil Popescu, who claimed that 'incest was preferable to homosexuality, since at least the former preserved the chance of procreation' (Evenimentul, 1998). At the same time, the position of the Orthodox Church relative to other religions was further strengthened. The Church was tacitly allowed to control the way religious instruction was delivered in state schools and received support from special governmental funds, and in 1999 the premier Radu Vasile agreed to recognise it as the national state church (a proposal abandoned before Parliament could debate it). Meanwhile, no new religious group that entered the country after 1989 received official recognition, making Romania one of the most restrictive countries in the region in this regard. Although the communist state had transferred Greek Catholic property to the Orthodox Church, postcommunist authorities refused to settle the property restitution issue. This position gave the Orthodox Church the upper hand, forcing some Greek Catholic congregations to organise demonstrations in parks or in the street (Stan and Turcescu, 2007).

The new government promised a lot, but delivered little. Penal Code stipulations that punished press offences, calumny, insult and defamation of the country were finally lifted, years after the Council of Europe voiced its concern about the lack of guarantees for genuine independence of the mass media. Over the years, several journalists were jailed for calumny or defamation, and only one was freed by President Constantinescu. Steps were taken toward decentralising public administration, fighting high-level corruption and organised crime, closing unprofitable mines at Valea Jiului

and professionally retraining miners who lost their jobs in the process, creating a viable private banking system, and selling off public utilities and state monopolies to strategic foreign and domestic investors. The new rulers made accession to NATO and the European Union their utmost priority, taking steps to reform the army, the police and the intelligence services, to protect the rights of minorities and to create a functional market economy.

However, governmental portfolios were divided according to a political algorithm whereby positions were proportional to the votes obtained in the 1996 general elections. To satisfy the demands of its constituent parties, the ruling 'coalition of coalitions' (Shafir, 2001) increased the number of ministerial and deputy ministerial posts and agreed to a pernicious rotation of cadres whereby the same seat was occupied by many individuals, some appointed only for weeks. From 1996 to 2000, four different politicians served as ministers of health care, while the minister of finance had 13 different deputies (Stan, 2002, p.85). President Constantinescu's claim that 15,000 specialists were ready to fill governmental positions at all levels was mocked when it became apparent that the 'specialists' lacked familiarity with the domains they supervised, had been appointed for their loyalty to party leaders more than for their training and expertise, and were encouraged to think of the interests of their party more than those of the country. With limited time at their disposal, cabinet members could not understand their departments, identify and prioritise objectives, or implement long-term programmes.

Inefficiency was not the only problem the new rulers faced. Inability to explain their goals to the population, unwillingness to take seriously the concerns of the impoverished population, a propensity to fight with other coalition partners rather than with the opposition, a tendency to eschew responsibility for mistakes and to blame the Social Democrats for socioeconomic problems and a lack of feasible reform targets with clear deadlines greatly eroded public confidence in the government.

Predictably, the main ruling partner, the Christian Democrats, gained no parliamentary representation in 2000. Constantinescu unexpectedly withdrew from the presidential poll, and has been unable to revive his political career ever since. The new rulers lost many hard-core supporters as a result of their refusal to launch transitional justice. During the presidential race Constantinescu supported lustration as a method to block the access of former communist officials and secret agents to political office, but after assuming the office he insisted that the results of the 1996 poll amounted to elite renewal, since younger, untainted specialists could replace Social Democrat public

officials (Constantinescu, 2002). In practice, this elite renewal was superficial, affecting the central government more than local government.

Looking for milder ways to come to terms with the past, the Democratic Convention turned its attention to the opening of the secret Securitate archives, but its commitment to that process was equally lukewarm. In December 1999 Parliament granted Romanian citizens access to files compiled on them by the Securitate, and entrusted a National Council for the Study of Securitate Archives with the task of investigating the past of elected and nominated public officials, including the president, members of Parliament and the Cabinet, prefects, county and municipal councillors, ambassadors, presidents of state universities, heads of public mass-media outlets, managers of state-owned enterprises and utilities, religious leaders and priests. Because the law was not a lustration law, individuals unmasked as former secret agents were not asked to renounce their public office, but their names were published in the official gazette. The intent was to clarify the criteria used for distinguishing between angels and villains, to force intelligence services to be more transparent and accountable, to prevent public scandals resulting from the uncontrolled release of sensitive information, and to end the manipulation of secret files by politicians seeking to discredit their rivals.

In 2000 for the first time the Council investigated electoral candidates. But the benefits of both secret file access and identification of former spies from among postcommunist politicians were meagre, given the Information Services' refusal to open the Securitate archive, the Council's lack of independence vis-à-vis political parties, and the legislative loopholes permitting spies to plead not guilty of engaging in 'political police' activities infringing human rights (Stan, 2004).

The Second Iliescu Regime: 2000-2004

As the main parties on both the left and the right side of the political spectrum were discredited by poor governmental performance - the Social Democrats before 1996 and the Democratic Convention after 1996 - many Romanians supported the nationalists in the 2000 general elections. In the second round of the presidential elections, the Greater Romania Party chauvinist leader Corneliu Vadim Tudor, a poet known as a Ceausescu sycophant, confronted Iliescu, and only a concerted effort on the part of more liberal elements in society succeeded in preventing Tudor's election as president of Romania. Consolidation of the party system, and the disappearance of most unviable small formations, meant that only five coalitions and parties entered Parliament. The new government was formed by the Party of Social Democracy (renamed the Social Democratic Party) and the Democratic Union

of Magyars. The opposition was represented by the Greater Romania Party, the Democratic Party, and the Liberal Party, formations that seldom saw eye to eye on policy matters. Social Democrat Adrian Nastase, a legal scholar with personal connections to the former communist nomenclatura, became the new prime minister.

Under Nastase's leadership, Romania took additional steps to fulfill the EU pre-accession requirements, although by 2000 it was clear that its admission had to be postponed because of its inability to close the important chapters on agriculture, justice and home security. An anticorruption bill asked public office holders and candidates to disclose their assets, income and interests when assuming and renouncing governmental posts. A new nationwide electronic system allowed state agencies and public utilities, enterprises, banks, schools and universities to accept bids from companies in order to conclude the most advantageous tender. A law on transparency compelled governmental agencies to disclose unclassified information to interested citizens, and to update and maintain websites detailing their composition and activity.

In 2002 Romania was welcomed into NATO, and soon thereafter started to send troops to Afghanistan and then Iraq and allowed the USA to set up a military base near the Black Sea port of Constanta. After a decade of economic contraction, in 2000 Romania registered economic growth, which reached unprecedented levels by 2004. Compared to the chronic cabinet instability of 1996-2000, most of Nastase's ministers fulfilled their four-year mandates and enjoyed the support of local governments dominated by the Social Democrats.

Despite these positive signs, the Social Democrats were unable to make the most of their rule. Premier Nastase's tolerance of corruption and patronage was high even by Romanian standards. Although Nastase's conspicuous consumption, lavish display of possessions, arrogance and cronyism were bitterly criticised by President Iliescu, many high-ranking Social Democrat ministers, deputy ministers, senators, deputies and prefects continued to enrich themselves under Nastase's patronage. Notwithstanding promises made to the EU and the Romanian electorate, the fight against corruption lost its momentum, no high-ranking politician was brought to trial, and no action was taken against public officers who refused to declare their assets. Journalists probing into the connections of Social Democrat leaders with organised crime groups were censored or intimidated, even after the opposition introduced a motion of no confidence and the country's freedom of press ranking was downgraded from 'partly free' to 'not free' (PFR, 2001). Fearful that investigation could taint the reputation of their Social Democrat colleagues, Cabinet members obstructed the work of the Council for the Study

of Securitate Archives, pressuring it into hiding the identity of former spies turned Social Democrat politicians. Dissensions between Iliescu and Nastase seriously fragmented the party, which faced the 2004 general elections at an unprecedented low.

The Basescu Regime: 2004 to Present

The 2004 presidential poll was the first in which Iliescu, the veteran of Romanian postcommunist politics, did not run. In the second round of presidential elections premier Nastase confronted Traian Basescu, a ship captain turned Democratic Party leader who served as minister of transport in 1991-1992 and 1996-2000, deputy in 1992-1996 and mayor of Bucharest from 2000 to 2004. The highlight of the campaign was a televised debate in which Basescu candidly admitted that Romanians had to choose between two candidates with a communist past, alluding to the fact that until 1989 both he and Nastase had occupied leadership positions or had benefited from the nomenklatura's protection. That remark apparently helped Basescu to win the first five-year presidential mandate, but his support of only 51.2 per cent of the national vote reflected the electorate's apathy and division. The parliamentary poll allowed four coalitions and parties to gain seats. Although the Social Democrats and the Humanistic Party together gained a plurality of seats in each chamber and Social Democrat leader Nastase voiced his readiness to assume the premiership, Basescu refused all cabinet formulae which would have excluded his Justice and Truth Alliance, which united the Democrats and the Liberals. Liberal Calin Popescu-Tariceanu, a wealthy businessman, became the premier of a Cabinet representing the Alliance, the Democratic Union of Magyars and the Humanistic Party (later renamed the Conservative Party). The Social Democrats and the Greater Romania Party formed the opposition.

The new government was responsible for Romania's final leg of EU accession, arguably the most important stage of the process. Politically independent lawyer Monica Macovei assumed the minister of justice portfolio, and set out to relaunch the fight against political corruption, reform the Supreme Magistrates' Council, restructure the prison system and bring the Penal Code into accord with EU legislation. The control of mass-media activity imposed by the Nastase government was lifted, and the government refrained from harassing journalists.

The Cabinet's concerted efforts resulted in sufficient progress to convince the EU leaders to accept Romania as a member in January 2007, with the expectation that further reforms would be carried out after accession. But the Romanian political landscape became increasingly unstable as a result of

divergence among government partners and between the president and the prime minister. In a development reminiscent of the Democratic Convention rule of 1996-2000, in 2004-2008 government allies fought each other more than they fought the opposition, and proved unable to transcend the logic of the electoral campaign to focus on the business of running the country. Within weeks of the 2004 poll, President Basescu voiced support for early elections, which he hoped would alter the balance of power within the Alliance, transforming it from a partnership of equals into a union where his Democrats towered over the Liberals. More importantly, the president hoped that early elections would bring the Alliance the clear parliamentary majority it needed to dispense with the support of the Conservatives, siding with the opposition Social Democrats in key policy options. Led by Dan Voiculescu, a self-declared 'media magnate' and one of Romania's richest businessmen, the party withdrew support from the government when its ministers were placed under investigation for corruption in 2006. Basescu disliked not only Voiculescu and his Humanists, but also Popescu-Tariceanu and his Liberals, whom he called 'oligarchs' in an effort to draw attention to their involvement in corruption, abuse of power, and considerable wealth not fully accounted for.

Politically, the country traversed a profound crisis, and the small accomplishments made by the governments of 1996-2004 were rendered meaningless. By 2007, the legal requirement for public officials to disclose assets has been ignored, and the fight against corruption was brought to a standstill. The number of young ministers increased, but their lack of managerial experience affected governmental performance. Even before losing the Conservatives' support, the government was a minority government, because of the lukewarm commitment of the Democrats, who wanted a share of governmental portfolios without assuming responsibility for governmental policy.

In 2007, Popescu-Tariceanu lost his Democrat ministers, but not the premiership. Despite Basescu's insistence on early elections, his Democrats refused to see their mandates cut short and give up their lucrative local administrative positions when the party joined the opposition. The war of all against all placed Romania in an unsolvable deadlock, prompting its political class to waste time in debates lacking direction and on initiatives lacking real chances of success.

On 19 April Parliament suspended President Basescu at the request of a parliamentary commission led by Voiculescu, without explaining the reasons for the suspension. A popular referendum reinstated Basescu as head of state in a bitter victory that deepened the estrangement between him and his Democrats on the one hand, and premier Popescu-Tariceanu and his Liberals

on the other. This open conflict led to the death of the Justice and Truth Alliance which had helped the two parties win the 2004 poll.

The political climate was also destabilised by the frequent public scandals surrounding revelations that prominent politicians had worked for the Securitate. In 2006, in an unprecedented step, Basescu ordered the Romanian Intelligence Service to surrender the bulk of the secret archive to the Council for the Study of Securitate Archives, including files on prominent politicians, set up the Presidential Commission for the Study of Communist Dictatorship in Romania to investigate communist crimes, and officially condemned the communist regime and its abuses. By doing so, Basescu promoted transitional justice as no other Romanian president before him. The Liberal government also furthered the process by creating a research institute, promoting lustration legislation, and initiating court trials against communist prison guards suspected of human rights abuses. The file opening showed the unsavoury past of several prominent politicians, intellectuals and church leaders. According to archival evidence, these individuals had provided the Securitate with information on their relatives, friends, neighbours, co-workers or students, but the Council failed to name them as former secret agents, claiming that they carried out no political police activities infringing human rights. Even President Basescu and new Orthodox Patriarch Daniel Ciobotea were suspected of having engaged in secret collaboration, though no files detailing their spying activity have been found. With the exception of Musca and Corneanu, none of those unmasked as former spies publicly apologised or gave up their public offices.

Economically, the country registered diminished growth rates, reduced inflation and unemployment, and increased productivity levels. A currency stabilisation drive helped the Leu gain strength relative to the Euro, and made the country more appealing to foreign investors. A flat income tax replaced the progressive tax to discourage small businesses and employees to hide revenues, and the tax collection process was streamlined to make it more customer-friendly. The government encouraged entrepreneurship and sold the old Olcit small car manufacturing plant to Ford, thus avoiding its closure and the ensuing lay-offs.

After 2005 the country faced unusually hot summers, mild winters and floods that spoiled harvest and destroyed dwellings, roads and bridges, prompting the government to grant limited aid to affected families. Despite commitment to classical liberal values, the Liberal government raised pensions and wages to government employees, refrained from reducing the number of public offices, and retained most social programmes (including two-year maternity leave, 'food tickets' to public employees, government allowances for every living child, heating subsidies for the poorest families, lower public transport

fees for pensioners and students). This government aid neither made the country more attractive to Romanians living abroad nor slowed down the migration of Romanian workers to Western Europe in the hope of more lucrative jobs. The sharp increase in the number of Romanians working abroad generated unprecedented social problems, as the 170,000 children left behind by their parents struggled with psychological problems, and were more likely to commit suicide, use drugs, and engage in criminal and gang activity (Toth *et al.*, 2007). With as much as 25 per cent of its population living below the poverty line, Romania remains the poorest member of the EU (CIA, 2007). It is also the EU's most corrupt country, where bribes, demanded by and offered to most public servants to do their job, account for some 20 per cent of the ordinary citizens' income (World Bank, 2001).

The 2008 general elections were the first to employ a mixed-member-majority system allowing Romanians to vote for individual candidates rather than political parties. Candidates ran in single-member colleges. In a college, a candidate could represent only one political party, and a party could support only one candidate. Candidates won the seat with a simple majority of the vote in the college. All other colleges were allocated to candidates in proportion to the votes their parties received at district and national levels. As Parliament remained the country's least trusted institution, the electoral reform sought to make the legislature more efficient and accountable to electors, correct for the legislators' absenteeism, prevent them from crossing the floor, and ultimately lead to the emergence of a new, reform-oriented political elite. But the poll revealed the shortcomings of the new system: political parties remained stronger than individual candidates, and the system worked for large, consolidated parties and against independent candidates and smaller and newer formations.

The 2008 elections further consolidated the party system. For the first time since 1990, the nationalists did not enter Parliament, but the Social Democrats (running together with the Conservatives) garnered the largest number of votes, as in all other previous polls. President Basescu's Democratic Liberals (the former Democrats) garnered the most seats, followed closely by the Social Democrats. The Liberals and the Democrat Union of Magyars also gained parliamentary representation. While the elections seemed likely to bring the Democratic Liberals to government, and their arch-enemy Social Democrats to opposition, the two parties unexpectedly formed the government together. The new government, which enjoyed the support of over 70 per cent of all members of Parliament, was led by Democratic Liberal leader Emil Boc and included 20 ministers equally divided between the two parties. An initial Social Democrat promise to extend the social safety network was scuttled and, instead, the government undertook to protect the country

against the international economic crisis by controlling inflation, monitoring budgetary spending and reducing the national deficit.

From 2008 to 2012, Boc presided over four cabinets. The first cabinet, unseated in 2009, included Democratic Liberals and Social Democrats, but the other three were backed by a slim majority of Democratic Liberal, Democratic Union of Magyars and Union for Romania's Progress legislators. Boc assumed responsibility for the largest number of laws, to prevent Parliament from debating them, and was the first to lose the premiership following a no confidence motion in 2009 and street protests in 2012. By February 2012, the Democratic Liberals had their popularity shattered after promoting austerity measures that disproportionately affected ordinary citizens, while protecting and even promoting the interests of the business and political elites. While in 2010 Boc slashed by 25 per cent the wages of all public employees, his cabinet squandered millions of Euros on public tenders benefiting private firms close to selected Democratic Liberal leaders.

Boc was succeeded by Mihai Razvan Ungureanu, head of the External Information Service, heir to the foreign branch of the Securitate. A disciple of Basescu, who encouraged his political career, Ungureanu was unseated by a no confidence motion only 74 days after his nomination. His ephemeral premiership was marked by stagnation and an ill-advised decision to approve the transfer of significant special reserve funds to Democratic Liberal mayors. In April 2012, after the no confidence motion against Ungureanu's cabinet passed, the despondent Democratic Liberals proposed no new candidate for the prime ministerial position. This made way for the Social Democrat leader Victor Ponta to form a cabinet with Social Democrat and Liberal support. This caretaker cabinet must organise the local and general elections of summer and autumn 2012. Its cohabitation with Democratic Liberal President Basescu might prove a serious challenge.

Romania as a European Union Member

Keenly supported by the political elite, civil society and the general public, accession to the EU in 2007 was regarded as a long-overdue recognition of Romania's rightful place among European states. To date, the small group of Eurosceptics, led by the nationalist Greater Romania Party and the traditionalist Romanian Orthodox Church, has remained marginalised, but it could attract new adherents if the promised advantages of accession fail to materialise soon (Stan and Zaharia, 2006, p. 1088). For now, ordinary Romanians are content to enjoy the benefits of being the youngest members of the European family, together with the Bulgarians. Many Romanians travel freely to Western Europe either for pleasure or for work, and are proud that a

growing number of the citizens of neighbouring countries visit Romania. The hope is that the income gap between them and the other EU citizens will close, and Romanian children will be able to study in European schools.

Despite the Romanians' positive attitude towards the EU project, the political leaders have proven reluctant to adapt their mores to European standards. In fact, the Romanian political elite does not seem to take the EU recommendations, deadlines and warnings seriously. After waiting longer than their neighbours to join the EU, Romanian politicians have lost interest in the issue, and seem convinced that, no matter how little they work towards fulfilling the accession and integration criteria, the EU will never punish them drastically by rescinding Romania's membership (Gallagher, 2009). This apathy stems from the fact that the EU still treats Romania as a second-class member. Romania has not accessed the bulk of the funds the EU set aside to improve infrastructure, upgrade education or revive agriculture and tourism: funds that the country badly needs. Basescu has talked about a Bucharest-London-Washington axis, and the country seems closer to the USA than to the EU in its foreign policy and military strategy.

Conclusion

A Balkan country with a tortuous communist past and a bloody regime change, Romania has faced many roadblocks on its way to effect successful postcommunist transition. The unreformed communist regime prevented the formation of opposition groups capable of wresting power from the Ceauşescu family. Its greedy and largely unrestrained communist elite retained considerable political clout, dictating the rules of the game, allowing liberalisation only when it benefited its interests, and even outwitting naïve and impatient EU leaders. The Romanian public remains despondent, uninterested, and ignorant of its political rights and of political mechanisms. However, during the last two decades Romania has made significant strides toward establishing liberal democracy and market economy and gaining acceptance into the larger European family. While corruption remains pervasive, the country has effected political change peacefully through elections and nationalist sentiment has been dampened considerably since accession to the EU. Citizens and politicians alike are likely to continue to work toward bridging the gap that separates the country from its neighbours.

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