The institutionalisation of inter-party relations. Patterns of behaviour in Romania

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Abstract:

This paper puts forward an analysis of the evolution of formal inter-party relations as materialized by the adoption of coalition agreements. The further aim is to initiate research on the possible effect of alliance and coalition experience on the institutionalisation of parties proper. Using the case of Romanian post-communist parties, we propose as an indicator for institutionalising parties the content of their signed coalition agreements and whether they induced some degree of compliance.

In a young democratic state, both parties per se, as well as coalition practices had to develop from nothing after decades of authoritarian rule. Reluctant at first to formalise inter-party understandings and highly dependent on their leaders for negotiations and decision-making, in time, parties have been coerced by the inherent demands of democratic institutions and practices to form coalitions and sign contracts which contain both functioning mechanisms and policies. A comparative analysis of approaches to inter-party negotiations and signed agreements between parties which have been a part of coalitions provides us with distinct patterns of behaviour. On the one side, parties that complimented informal collaboration with the implementation of formalised functioning mechanisms had a more successful track in government. On the other side, parties that only relied on informal understandings and considered agreements as ceremonial did not evolve to overcome a marginal/episodic role or disappeared. This observation separates coalition participants into a category of ‘main parties’ and another one of ‘satellite’ or ‘episodic’ parties. Equally, these are categories that overlap with a differentiation between a category of parties that have a noticeable upwards trend of institutionalisation and, respectively, with parties that did not institutionalise (according to the criteria of Basedau, Stroh 2008). Evaluating the nature of coalition agreements signed with the latter as ritualistic is doubled by the co-existence of agreements for added parliamentary support, instances of signed bilateral agreements between core coalition members or preserved pre-electoral functioning mechanisms between main parties.

Keywords: Coalition, Democratisation, Elites, Governance, Political Parties, Romania

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1. Introduction

This paper observes in parallel two phenomena related to new democracies: the institutionalisation of parties and the institutionalisation of inter-party relations through coalition participation. As in practice parliamentary democracy provides a simultaneous ground zero for both of these two occurrences, we attempted to see whether the approach of parties towards coalitions and coalition agreements can be a useful indicator for a differentiation between institutionalising parties and non-institutionalised ones. We noticed an overlap between the parties that developed a pattern of formalising their relations and would also score highest in the scholarly proposed dimensions for institutionalisation. Equally, we noticed that parties that signed coalition agreements mainly as a ceremonial practice and continued to engage other parties in informal manners are also parties which do not meet the basic criteria for institutionalisation. Deciding to include as an external indicator for party institutionalisation the existence of institutionalised inter-party relations would reinforce assumptions that there is interdependence between the requirements of a competitive party system and party institutionalisation. This perspective supports some of the more recent research on party institutionalisation which sees single parties and the party system as different phenomena, important to analyse separately (Dix 1992; Hicken 2006; Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Manaca and Tan 2005; Randall and Svåsand 2002; Ufen 2007, Basedau and Stroh 2008 etc). Thus, in what regards new democracies, new empirical support is found for the convergence and interdependence of the two.

Coalition building and maintenance is so strenuous that should parties not be coerced by the effects of parliamentary democracy, there would be no incentives for power sharing. Considering these have become so commonplace, the field of coalition studies has been a prolific one (e.g. Browne and Dreijmanis 1982; Bogdanor 1983; Pridham 1986; Laver and Schofield 1990; Laver and Budge 1992; Laver and Shepsle 1996; Warwick 1994, 2001, Strøm, Budge and Laver 1994 etc.), Equally, because of the costly process behind their writing, in the absence of the different types of benefits associated with writing detailed coalition agreements, we should not expect to see written coalition agreements at all (Müller and Strøm 2008). The research community only proved an increased interest in the empiric study of coalition documents in the last decades (Müller and Strøm 2000, Andeweg and Irving 2002, Timmermans 2003, Martin and Vanberg 2004, Strøm, Müller and Bergman 2008 etc). Nevertheless, the process of coalition building and the institutionalisation of inter-party relations through coalition agreements in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe have so far not undergone systematic research. (Müller and Bergman forthcoming)

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2 Selection of studies covering democratic development from Latin America to Asia to Central Africa.
Although literature largely accepts that coalition agreements have become intrinsic to coalition practice, empirical research as to the significant variations in their content is only just emerging. Analysing this varied content of coalition agreements for 20 coalitions cabinets (out of 26 for a period between 1990 and 2016) unfolds different patterns of behaviour between the institutionalising parties which also formalise their relations through more consistent agreements that induce compliance and non-institutionalised parties which enter agreements symbolically and persist in maintaining informal collaborations.

Firstly, we proceed by making a brief differentiation among the parties that have been a part of coalition agreements according to the Basedau- Stroh criteria (2008, p.9). We separate between general categories of ‘largely institutionalised parties’ (four cases) and ‘non-institutionalised parties’ (four cases - including a case of de-institutionalisation). We chose this scale as it is the most advanced operationalization of the concept of institutionalisation we identified in scholarly literature. However, there are limitations in pursuing it for the Romanian cases as not all indicators created by the authors for the African new democracies are relevant for our research. Secondly, we will undergo a comparative analysis of the content of the coalition agreements that parties in these two categories have signed among themselves and the level of compliance these induced. On major congruence observed is that the personalisation of party leadership is a strain on party institutionalisation as well as on the formalisation of inter-party relations. We use data gathered from field observations and interviews and combine qualitative and quantitative assessments for both criteria related to institutionalisation and coalition agreement compliance. The subjectivity of respondents on some issues is a given and is reinforced with open source analysis. The level of compliance with the functioning mechanisms that were eventually introduced to regulate inter-party relations is our focus for this stage of the research.

2. Institutionalising Parties

Observers of post-communist societies have come together in their general assessment of the weakness of party institutionalisation and their dependence on a leader or on a group of a small few. A de jure internal organization is generally attested, however, the de facto autonomy of party congresses, nationwide networks, local offices and the general status of grass roots organisations that parties ascribe themselves are contested (Katz, 1996: 122; Kopecky’, 1995; Lewis, 1996: 12, 2000: 103; Mair, 1997; Mair and van Biezen, 2001; Padgett, 1996; van Biezen, 2003, 2005). Through the use of the phrase ‘institutionalising parties’ for the main political parties instead of ‘institutionalised parties’, the paper also acknowledges an unfulfilled process. Similar weaknesses to those already identified by the existing literature on the institutionalisation of political parties in new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe exist in Romania. However, an analysis of the main Romanian parties 26
years after the Revolution proves that significant steps have been made in some cases towards more institutionalisation. In addition to inherited resources and electoral success, the policy of negotiating and entering coalitions has influenced the internal organisation and autonomy of political parties.

Post-communist Romania has had four major parties with a strong trend of institutionalisation. By the names they currently use, these are the Social-Democrat Party (PSD), the Democrat-Liberal Party (PDL), the National Liberal Party (PNL), and the Democrat Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR). The PSD and PDL share a common origin in the National Salvation Front (FSN), which they split in 1992. They both inherited the party structures and some of the human resources of the Communist Party leadership, with PSD more so than the PDL. The PNL is one of Romania’s historical parties, founded in 1875, which terminated its activity in 1947 with the order of dissolution of the new communist rule and had to be rebuilt from scratch starting 1990. The UDMR is technically a cultural platform with political goals that represents the interest of the large Hungarian minority on Romanian territory. It was founded as early as December 25th 1989 after the execution of Dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and ever since has acted in every way as a party. Unless otherwise mentioned, we will continue throughout the paper to use these acronyms for the four parties, although the PSD and PDL have experienced several name changes mainly in their first years of existence. To briefly provide evidence to their advance process of institutionalisation, we will use the operationalising synthesis put forward by Basedau and Stroh (2008) along four dimensions: (1) roots in society (i.e. party age, electoral support, links to civil society); (2) autonomy (i.e. independence from individual and groups outside the party); (3) level of organization (i.e. membership strength, regular party congresses, material and personal resources, nationwide organisation) and (4) coherence (i.e. coherence of parliamentary group, no dysfunctional factionalism, tolerance for dissidence).

2.1 Stability: Roots in society and level of organization

Regarding the dimension on **roots in society**, the four parties have the highest party age relative to the most recent reintroduction of multiparty system and have proven a largely stable electoral support. Although both ‘inheritor parties’, PSD and PDL position themselves in stark opposition to each other and built an electoral backing in different segments of the society. PDL (acting under the name FSN between 1992 and 1993 and the Democrat Party (PD) between 1993 and 2007) first tried to brand itself as the reformed socialist party fighting the neo-communists seen materialized in the PSD (activating under the name of Democrat National Salvation Front (FDSN)

3 As of July 26th 2014, the Democrat Liberal Party (PDL) and the National Liberal Party (PNL) have merged under the name the National Liberal Party (PNL). Since then, the new PNL has not been a part of government and still functions on a co-presidency basis. As such, the two parties PDL and PNL are considered separately for the time frame measured by this paper.
between 1992 and 1993 and Party of Social Democracy of Romania (PDSR) between 1993 and 2001). Electoral differentiation became even more noticeable as of 2005 when the then PD decided to no longer run for the same left leaning voters captured by the PSD and refashioned itself into a centre-right party, international affiliation and all. A 2007 merger with a splinter of the liberal party separated the PSD and the PDL electorate even further. To this polarisation and their voters, PDL chairman Traian Băsescu had an added divisive effect as he continued to provide preferential support to his original party during his two terms as President of Romania (2005 – 2015). The two parties have had a constant presence in the Parliament since their creation, with a growing support for the PDL that led to an almost equal number of parliamentary seats in the 2008 elections. The main balancers in the relation between the PDL and the PSD have been the PNL and the UDMR. The PNL was rebuilt starting 1990 on the legacy of the historic Liberal Party founded in 1875 and dismantled in 1947 as the Communist Party took over. It was built from scratch by a handful of people who ran in the first elections on the ticket of the liberals’ illustrious legacy. PNL benefited from the flexibility of a smaller party throughout its existence and cashed in on its high coalition potential, switching between PSD and PDL. Although the UDMR has party chapters all throughout Romania, its electorate is mostly concentrated in three counties with a significant ethnic Hungarian population. It thus caters for a very specific community of close to 7% of Romanian citizens that guarantees the UDMR the necessary votes to enter the Parliament at every election. This also means that it is a party stuck in this 5% to 7% vote share and can only be a hinge party. The UDMR has a centre-right doctrine that their electorate associates with. Nevertheless, as one high representative of the UDMR leadership declared to this author, the Hungarian voter is not so much interested with whom the UDMR governs as long as it knows that they do and represent their interests as a minority.

Although mildly improved in recent years, there is a general weakness in having few or poorly - organized and non-exclusive links with the civil society. The evaluations regarding the indicator related to the links of parties to civil society organizations is, for this dimension, the most contentious. There has been a general unease in setting up a regular, transparent collaboration beyond the time of campaigning - when politicians are usually more available. However, each party has at least one affiliated institute that organizes regular debates and invites representatives of the civil society. Also, parliamentarians or party officials are invited to debates or conferences held by NGOs. The frequency and the level of representation of parties to debates, especially in the case of the more uncomfortable ones, is regularly low. It is entirely up to the individual politician whether he or she wants to nurture such relationships. Nevertheless, we note that there is a moderate flow of ideas between the representatives of the civil society and politicians or politicians’ staffers. More recently, there has been a change towards more inclusion of NGOs in the administrative decision making progress as mainstream parties continue to lose social capital and attractiveness as institutions per se.
Internal stability in reference to **the level of organisation** differs relative to the inherited structures. All parties have been built through regular party congresses in accordance with party statutes and have material and personal resources such as employees, offices and funds relative to their size. Having had almost constant access to national resources as a result of parliamentary and government presence, headquarters outside the capital have been well kept. This is a most obvious effect of coalition participation on their organising force. The regional specificity of UDMR makes it the only party that does not have a strong nationwide presence. All other parties have nationwide offices and fairly regular meetings of members. However, field observations have shown a lower level of activity during times when there were no electoral campaigns. Related to the membership strength of parties, Romania confirms the conclusion of other researchers on Eastern Europe, namely observation made by Van Biezen (2003, 2005) that there is a minimal interest for parties in having members, shown by the absence of membership recruitment campaigns.

The PSD, PDL, PNL and UDMR have organized themselves through regular party congresses (alternatively called conventions) and have more or less the same three layered hierarchy and organigram. They have an elected president and a permanent national bureau (or presidium for UDMR) made up of elected vice presidents and few other high ranking members according to the party status. An intermediary more numerous decision making body (delegation or council) which includes representatives from the local level is also regularly convened between Party Congresses. Party Congresses are the most authoritative decision forum for all parties and are convened both regularly and for extraordinary situations. Other organisations instated by party statutes are the Youth’s, the Women’s, the Local Elected Leaders’ and others according to the party’s profile and can be changed over time (of businessmen, of pensioners, of the diaspora).

### 2.2 Value infusion: Autonomy and coherence

The **autonomy** of political parties from their founding leader or from interest groups is the first condition for party institutionalisation. The greatest difference between these four parties and the rest is that they fulfil the criteria of ‘independence from Big Men, who might create parties as electoral vehicles to get access to power rather than emerging from them’. (Basedau, Stroh, 2008, p.13) The considerably high number of alternations of party leaders (followed by no immediate remarkable losses or gains in electoral support) is a strong indicator to this extent. There is also no substantial evidence of groups outside the party that inflict upon decisional autonomy.

Numbering seven elected party chairmen, changes in leadership per se were not an influencing factor over electoral support for the PSD. The most important proof in this respect was that newly elected PSD presidents Adrian Năstase, Mircea Geoană and Victor Ponta entered the second round of presidential elections in 2004, 2009 and 2014 to lose by only a slight margin to the candidate of the opposition. The initial figure of authority that dominated Romanian political life as three times elected
president, Ion Iliescu, was overpowered in democratic internal party elections. This major change took place in 2005 when he made a new bid for party presidency and was defeated by Mircea Geoană by almost double the votes. It was PSD’s first sign of attempted modernization and display of decisional autonomy.

With five elected party chairmen overall, the first real alternation in PDL’s leadership was in 2001, when Traian Băsescu was elected, defeating the party’s ‘founding father’ Petre Roman. He became the ‘founding father’ of the soon to be centre-right PDL and overlapped his image and authority with the PDL since his first victory as Romanian president in 2004. His successor for the next eight years, Emil Boc, never contested his authority. PDL’s major struggle to prove its autonomy from Băsescu came during the final years of his less than popular presidency. His stronghold over the party led to an increase of this party’s personalisation which was finally overcome in 2013 as the reconfirmation of Boc’s successor, Vasile Blaga, for the chairmanship was made against the public support of president Băsescu for a counter-candidate.

In PNL, four out of eight chairmen decided to leave the party and form other liberal parties. On the negative side, lacking the party discipline that came with the structured organization inherited by the PSD and PDL led to considerable fragmentation and louder dissidence. This had a divisive effect on the electorate, more visible once PNL acquired more notoriety and membership strength. On the positive side, lacking centralized authority never led to a long lasting dependence on a party leader. PNL largely overcame two periods of factionalism in its existence, with splinters appearing from the opposition to the policies or attitudes of the then chairman: over the legitimacy of the ‘liberal legacy’ between 1990 and 1993 and over the policies of merging with the PD and supporting the president Băsescu between 2005 and 2007.

UDMR’s three presidents succeeded each other in an undramatic manner after the withdrawal of the incumbent. The alternations had no effect on the captive UDMR electorate and there have been no noteworthy conflicts between opposing factions. The UDMR requires cohesion and discipline as they benefit from the attention of a small, compact electorate that only by being kept united can muster the necessary 5% of the votes to enter the Parliament.

The criterion of “popular appreciation” of the party is most difficult to quantify as it requires extensive surveys. Also, the 2015 (and ongoing) merger of two of these most important parties makes an evaluation no longer possible and provides cause for a gap in our data.

With the exception of UDMR, party coherence is undermined by the prevalence of floor-crossing and/or defections from the parliamentary group. This phenomenon has prevented a great number of party splits, differences along this indicator also stemming from the structural strengths of ‘successor parties’ in comparison to PNL.
The same genesis influences leadership tolerance of partial deviations from the party line, with more freedom of expression in non-successor parties.

We nevertheless, have partial reason to rate the parties as having a high cohesion in parliamentary groups. Though party switching is an endemic practice, vote loyalty to the party line most often almost reaches unanimity. According to the statistics made public at the end of the 2012 electoral cycle by the Institute for Public Policy in Bucharest, the instances of party switches had doubled from the previous electoral cycle ending in 2008 with 94 deputies and senators changing political affiliation at least once. However, parliamentary parties have proven a high level of voting discipline with voter loyalty averaging 90% among the main parties discussed for the same period of time. This phenomenon is less present among the higher echelons of party authority. It proves that there is a lack of allegiance of lower ranking members in Parliament and at the local level that party leaders still have to confront.

All in all, according to most of the existing operationalizing criteria in literature, the briefly discussed parties can be considered in the least as having had an upwards trend in institutionalisation. We can notice that ‘successor’ parties PSD and, to a lesser extent, PDL, had more challenges in terms of autonomy from a single individual, but benefited from the advantage of organisational strength. On the other hand, PNL did not have the organisational strength and internal coherence, but a higher degree of autonomy. UDMR maintained their coherence and electorate at the expense of wider organisational strength. All of them present a core structure that resisted the test of time and outlived their founding leadership, acquired international affiliation, entered parliament after every election validating constant electoral support, developed internal hierarchies and higher membership strength, gained a core electorate (e.g. distinguishable in terms of education, age, country region, income etc.) and have proven to be autonomous from outside interest groups. This allows us to evaluate them as being on an upwards trend of institutionalisation. However, the fact that parties continue to have a tendency to centralize power in the higher echelons of leadership and internal coherence is still questioned by the phenomenon of party switching which takes place mostly at lower levels of authority would not allow us to evaluate them as fully institutionalised parties.

3. ‘Support’ and/ or ‘Episodic’ Parties

Other parties that have engaged in alliances and have been a part of coalition governments are the Christian Democrat National Peasants’ Party (PNTCD), the Romanian Humanist Party/ Conservative Party (PUR/PC), the Union for the Progress of Romania (UNPR) and the Romanian National Unity Party (PURN). Assessing their flaws of institutionalisation is more straightforward.

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4 The Institute for Public Policies issued a public report entitled *Sinteza activității parlamentarilor în mandatul 2008-2012*, Bucharest, September 2012

5 To be further referred to only as PC.
The PNTCD has been the principal party of the first political alliance that broke the governing and presidential supremacy of the PSD in 1996, the Romanian Democratic Convention (CDR). A historic party, founded in 1926 and dissolved by the communist regime in 1947, it only had an episodic role in post-communist Romania, albeit a very important one. Although the party still exists today, it failed to obtain parliamentary representation after it left the government in 2000. As such, its present levels of coherence cannot be measured. Also, two opposing factions fought in a court of law over the leadership of the PNTCD in 2001 and factionalism was the cause for further structural degradation in 2008. It counts eight presidents to this day, elected at Party Congresses, with no measurable effect on a very narrow electorate. It scores lowest in terms of organization as it has no membership strength, no material and personal resources and no nationwide organizational presence. According to the party statute, PNTCD has a three layer internal hierarchical structure. The case of PNTCD is an example of party de-institutionalisation. The PNTCD’s one mandate coalition experience and consequent loss of parliamentary representation interrupted the party’s learning and adaptation process.

The PC, UNPR and PUNR have not met the fundamental criteria of becoming autonomous from one ‘Big Man’ and, as such, never began a process of institutionalisation. PUNR had limited coalition and alliance experience between 1994 and 1996, including through the signing of a brief coalition agreement with the sole purpose of having dominant partner PSD agree to share four ministerial portfolios in exchange for legislative support. It gained visibility in the early 1990s with the rise of a xenophobic, nationalist president with which it became associated. It failed to enter the Parliament after the introduction of the 5% threshold starting with the 2000 elections. It did not enter further alliances and merged with PC in 2006.

On the other hand, the PC and UNPR had an extensive alliance and coalition experience. PC was founded in 1990 and changed its name to PC in 2005. Its strength derived from the financial and media potency of its founding president who used his private tools as influencers of the political life for personal gain. Although the party had two formal alternations of leadership, he continued to hold unquestioned authority. Once the leader was sentenced to ten years in prison for corruption, the PC lost its purpose and merged in 2015 with a splinter of the PNL. As mostly a running mate for PSD in electoral alliances, it never acquired a distinct electorate and only theoretically did it meet the internal organization criteria.

UNPR was formed from the group of ‘unaffiliated parliamentarians’ in 2009 as president Băsescu needed additional support to form a legislative majority in favour of his original party, the PDL. The leader of this group was the only counterpart for president Băsescu and Prime Minister Emil Boc throughout UNPR’s collaboration with the PDL. The group of the ‘unaffiliated’ did not technically constitute into a

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*a* One member entered Parliament in 2012 as the PNTCD was taken aboard in the main center right electoral alliance. He switched to UNPR in 2014.
party until 2010 but their informal leader and top negotiator was included in the Boc III cabinet from its beginning. UNPR continued its political ploys only on the parliament floor and so far made no real attempt at capturing their own electorate or build a nationwide presence. Following the withdrawal of its leader from government and the visible political life in March 2016, following allegations of abuse of power, the party was left stranded in terms of negotiating strength.

4. Patterns of alliance building in an uneven playing field

The difference between the four parties advanced in their institutionalising process and the four parties which could not avert disappearance or are still struggling continues in their patterns of alliance and coalition behaviour. The institutionalising parties are also the ones that guided the patterns of alliance behaviour in post-communist Romania. As made evident by other empiric studies, the variance in terms of strength and institutionalisation of party organizations is mostly due to the disproportionate strength of ‘successor’ parties to that of newly formed ones (Lewis, 1996, pp. 16–17, 2000, p. 100; Szczerbiak, 2001, p. 26; van Biezen, 2005). At first, this confirms the possible ‘unevenness’ of the playing field that is for Randall and Svåsand included among the ‘significant ways or contexts in which the imperatives of individual party institutionalisation and institutionalisation of the party system as a whole could be at odds’ (2002, p. 8) However, the policy to outweigh the disproportionate strength of one party through alliance building benefited from the rules of the multiparty parliamentary system and created an environment conducive to the institutionalisation of inter-party relations. From this perspective, the party system and the parties went through a simultaneous and interdependent institutionalising process. The opposing alliances that the existence of the dominant PSD coalesced led to the need to develop functioning rules which led to the standardization of party practices. The dominant party of the transition became itself aware of the need to reshape its organisational principles and struck its own alliances later on.

We observe an overlap between the first group of parties (PSD, PDL, PNL and UDMR) and the parties with the highest coalition experience (Table 1) that also displayed a more formalised approached to inter-party relations. The second group either did not pursue the same logic of alliance building and thus had too short of a coalition experience to initiate possible patterns (PNTCD, PUNR) or, even if they did amass coalition experience, did not pursue the institutionalisation of their relations (PC and UNPR). The last claim is supported by a comparative overview into the content of the binding agreements that laid the ground for inter-party cooperation and their level of compliance.
5. The coalition agreement and beyond

Coalition agreements are meant to limit the unpredictability of inter-party relations during governance. According to Müller and Strøm, because of the costly process behind their writing, in the absence of the different types of benefits associated with writing detailed coalition agreements, we should not expect to see written coalition agreements at all (2008). For this reason, when they do exist, we have reasons to consider them the most authoritative documents for the life of the cabinet, signed by all coalition members. (Müller and Strøm, 2000, p. 18). Referring to Western democracies, Moury also made a recent case for the authority of coalition agreements arguing that “the drafting of a coalition agreement is a constraint on, and a resource for, ministers. It is a constraint because ministers are inhibited to a large extent by the document. It can also be a resource, because if ministers have participated in the negotiations they may be able to insert some of their preferences into the coalition agreement and in that way ensure they will be able to adopt policies pursuing these preferences.” (2011, p.401) To achieve their purpose, coalition agreements ideally contain tools that lead to a routinization of these relations and provide partners with a common course of action as well as the policy agenda they agree on. Empirical studies have thus added to an earlier assessment made by Frognier that ‘of the external mechanisms aimed at reducing conflict, the one that appears to be the most effective in coalitions is informal collaboration; the other arrangements, namely party summits and formal collaboration, do not contribute to the reduction of conflicts in coalitions.’ (Frognier in Blondel, Müller - Rommel, 1993, p.67). We now have reasons to believe that informal and formal collaboration is complementary in order for a coalition cabinet to work and that coalition agreements serve both symbolic and practical purposes.

Through this paper, we contribute with empiric data to the general understanding of the institutionalisation of inter-party relations and observe an overlap between the parties that had such an interest and also exhibited upwards trends of
institutionalisation. The Romanian case thus provides reason to propose as an identifier for institutionalised parties the content of their signed agreements and the degree of implementation.

26 years into its democratic practices, Romanian parliamentary democracy serves as a good observation ground of how coalition agreements appear out of different and complementary needs. Most of the coalition cabinets have been based on written understandings between all or some of the parties represented in the cabinet. Thus far, parties have developed the practice of having these agreements out of the symbolic need to seal the deal on who is in and who is out, to advertise their agenda with the public and, most importantly, to regulate partner behaviour. The level of informal collaboration has decreased throughout the years although such practices still exist. The parties which did not overcome the symbolic signing of coalition agreements or for advertising benefits and persisted in having informal collaboration at leadership level are also the parties that did not overcome their marginal role in politics, do not fulfil basic criteria of institutionalisation and/or disappeared. The mutual expectation of compliance with the functioning mechanisms and set of policies, as broad or detailed as it may be, can range from having veto power to having oversight over the implementation of detailed provisions. This is dependent on the weight of the partners entering the agreement.

Our observations also instructed further analysis beyond coalition agreements as inquiries into the practices of coalition governments also gave reason to assess other documents as being more authoritative for the life of the cabinet as a whole. These were either pre-electoral or post-electoral bilateral agreements or legislative support agreements between members of the first group of parties discussed (PSD, PDL, PNL, UDMR). While this group has increasingly resorted to complex agreements between themselves, the others were complacent in signing ceremonial documents. The wide variation in size and content of coalition agreements or other documents provide us with an assessment of the importance that partners give each other and how ambitions they are in reference to their partners just as much as what are their interests.

6. The institutionalisation of inter-party relations

Out of 26 Romanian cabinets, 20 have been coalition cabinets between 1990 and 2016. The time frame analysed starts with the day the first democrat cabinet was sworn in (March 28th, 1990) to the day of the resignation of the last political cabinet (November 4th, 2015). This covers seven electoral cycles.

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7 As government policy is administered by a technocrat caretaker government from the time of the resignation of the last political government and until the time of legislative election in late 2016, our measurements regarding the activity of political parties in government are not influenced by ongoing events of 2016.
At any given time in the democratic history of the state, at least one of the four institutionalising political parties that emerged after 1990 has been in government. All of them have actively engaged in cross-party negotiations that have led to electoral alliances, political alliances and coalitions and materialized in contracts that have induced a certain level of compliance.

Table 2 presents the 26 cabinets of Romania from 1990 until 2016, coded according to the name of the prime minister. For the 20 coalition governments from 1990 until 2016, we count 11 individual coalition agreements. Coalition cabinets are counted according to the ‘maximalist approach’ by Müller and Strøm (2000) and a change is noted if there is a modification in party composition or of the prime minister or for every instance of cabinet termination due to elections. Their duration is measured from the date the cabinet was sworn in until the incidence of a terminal event (i.e. resignation of prime mister, exit of one party, successful motion against a cabinet etc). Interim periods of a cabinet are not included.

In addition to these 11 coalition governments whose composing members signed new agreements (Văcăroiu II, Ciorbea I, Ciorbea III, Vasile, Năstase I, Popescu Tăriceanu I, Boc I, Boc III, Ponta I, Ponta IV, Ponta V), six others have functioned with the same core party composition in accordance to a previously signed agreement (Ciorbea II, Vasile II, Isarescu, Popescu Tăriceanu II, Ungureanu, and Ponta II). The case for a renewal of agreements was either unnecessary as the coalition only lost a marginal member (PNLCD for Ciorbea II, UFD for Vasile II and PC for Popescu Tăriceanu II ) or only changed the prime-minister who did not require a change of deals between parties (Isarescu, Ungureanu). Ponta II is counted as a separate cabinet only because of the legislative elections held during the tenure of Ponta I that reconfirmed the cabinet composition. For the case of the Vasile I Cabinet and the following cabinets, Vasile II and Isarescu, the protocol was secret according to public sources mentioned at the time.

6.1 The odd ones out, coalition agreements remain the rule

The remaining three coalition cabinets that were not based on a written agreement were Stolojan, Popescu Tăriceanu III and Ponta III. Apart from the Stolojan cabinet, the others had outsider support later institutionalised through electoral alliances. The Popescu Tăriceanu II cabinet had the secret support of PSD, negotiated by the core party of the coalition, the PNL. PNL and PSD were brought together by the shared goal of removing president Băsescu from office. While no written agreement was signed at the time, they worked together towards a successful impeachment in Parliament. They signed a complex written agreement which was at the basis of the Social Liberal Union (USL) and of future governments in the following electoral cycle. In addition, the media speculations about a seated meeting between top negotiators of the PSD and PNL for support for the Popescu Tăriceanu III cabinet were confirmed to this author by then present party members. A written accord between two parties with such distinct electorates was considered too perilous in
terms of public image at the time. However, the mutual goal of removing the PDL president Băsescu proved to be a unifying agenda for the parties and their electorate for the next seven years. This alliance ended with the PNL leaving the governing coalition which led to the formation of the Ponta III cabinet. Ponta III did not have a new coalition agreement because the PSD strategy for the upcoming presidential election was to preserve the full electorate of the USL and as such did not want to separate itself from the brand and governing agenda of the USL alliance with PNL. However, an electoral alliance between the remaining members of the coalition, the PSD, PC and UNPR had been signed even before the exit of PNL which made reference to a general ‘collaboration, consultation and the setting up of common actions for activities related to the European Parliament, the Romanian Parliament, in government and at the local level.’

For the Stolojan care taker cabinet, the socialist led coalition members did not envisage some form of institutionalisation. For the beginning of the 1990 and in preparation of the parliamentary and presidential elections coming up in less than a year’s time, this matter did not seem of importance. As mentioned before, the PSD was the dominant party of the transition and was only to be blackmailed into making deals with smaller parties once it lost absolute majority in parliament after the 1992 elections.

Table 2: Romanian Cabinets after the 1989 Revolution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cabinet</th>
<th>Date in</th>
<th>Date out</th>
<th>Cabinet composition</th>
<th>Size of Agreement (Words)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roman</td>
<td>28/06/1990</td>
<td>26/09/1991</td>
<td>FSN</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Văcăroiu II</td>
<td>18/08/1994</td>
<td>03/09/1996</td>
<td>PSD, PUNR</td>
<td>1 679</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Văcăroiu III</td>
<td>03/09/1996</td>
<td>03/11/1996</td>
<td>PSD</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ciorbea I</td>
<td>12/12/1996</td>
<td>05/12/1997</td>
<td>PNTCD, PNL, PDL, UDMR, PSDR, PNLCD</td>
<td>992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ciorbea II</td>
<td>05/12/1997</td>
<td>02/02/1998</td>
<td>PNTCD, PNL, PDL, UDMR, PSDR</td>
<td>Same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ciorbea III</td>
<td>11/02/1998</td>
<td>30/03/1998</td>
<td>PNTCD, PNL, UDMR, PSDR, UFD</td>
<td>467</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vasile II</td>
<td>27/10/1998</td>
<td>13/12/1999</td>
<td>PNTCD, PNL, PDL, UDMR, PSDR</td>
<td>Same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isărescu</td>
<td>22/12/1999</td>
<td>26/11/2000</td>
<td>PNTCD, PNL, PDL, UDMR, PSDR</td>
<td>Same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Năstase I</td>
<td>28/12/2000</td>
<td>19/06/2003</td>
<td>PSD, PSDR, PC</td>
<td>1 724</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Năstase II</td>
<td>19/06/2003</td>
<td>28/11/2004</td>
<td>PSD</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popescu-</td>
<td>29/12/2004</td>
<td>04/12/2006</td>
<td>PNL, PDL, UDMR, PC</td>
<td>2 299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tăriceanu I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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6.2 The role of other authoritative binding agreements

In addition to coalition agreements, parties also signed support agreements with coalition outsiders. During Văcăroiu II, an additional agreement was signed between coalition partners PSD and PUR and outsiders Greater Romania Party (PRM) and the Socialist Workers Party (PSM). For the Năstase I cabinet, the PSD had had separate agreements signed with coalition members the Romanian Social Democrat Party (PSDR) and PC before the elections. After the elections, it merged with the PSDR and only signed another coalition agreement with PC. At the same time, only PSD had signed yearly support agreements with the UDMR and also had a pre-electoral support agreement with the PNL which was only briefly maintained in the first months of the Năstase I cabinet. After PUR left the Năstase I Cabinet, support was again formalized in writing for the Năstase II single party cabinet through yearly agreements with the UDMR. For the first time, the coalition agreement for Boc III also included the representative of the minorities’ caucus in Parliament and was signed almost two years in the life of the cabinet. One of the signatories, the UNPR, only then legally became a party although its leader had been included in the cabinet early on. However, a separate agreement between core parties PDL and rule seeking UDMR had been signed beforehand.

Other documents whose importance and authority remains high during the life of a cabinet are the pre-electoral agreements signed by core coalition parties. Three such documents summarize the evolution of the interests in negotiation and have been the basis for the major victorious alliances of the measured 26 years: the alliance between the Romanian Democrat Convention (CDR) and the Social Democrat Union (USD), the Truth and Justice Alliance (Alianta D.A.) and the Social Liberal Union (USL). These three alliances were made up of the core parties of the future cabinets. They marked the beginning of new electoral cycles and channelled the broad agenda of the
society of their time into victories: CDR+USD and Alianta DA against PSD and USL against PDL.

The cabinets brought about by these alliances inherited the practices of a set of parties that regulate behaviour according to their own rules before following those of the whole coalition. This was the case with Ciorbea I, II, III, Vasile I and II and Isaescu as the PNL, PNTCD and their smaller support parties would first convene as the CDR (which included PNTCD and PNL) and afterwards with the whole coalition members. The other alliance within the cabinet, USD, had the uncontested leadership of the PDL, yet still preserved its own meetings. The administratively strenuous experience of this ‘coalition of alliances’ between CDR, USD and UDMR instructed the future behaviour of the core parties. It was during this 1996 -2000 governing experience that the need for regulatory bodies appeared. While the first coalition agreement for Ciorbea I (and Ciorbea II) only mentioned the ‘need for periodical consultations between party leaders’, the coalition agreement for Ciorbea III instated the ‘Council for Political Coordination’ (Party president + one party member + Prime minister) to meet every other week and the ‘Council for Parliamentary Coordination’ (Speakers of the Parliament, leaders of parliamentary groups of the two chambers, Prime minister and Minister for relations with the Parliament) to meet weekly. The Vasile I and II Cabinets had a secret agreement but the practice of the meetings within these two Councils continued. All witnesses to these series of meetings testify to the difficult, bureaucratic and lengthy process of decision making.

The coalition experience of the 19996 -2000 cabinets was channelled by the PNL, PDL and UDMR into their future coalition behaviour and let to the insistence for the setup of rules. For the Năstase I cabinet, UDMR pursued regulating mechanisms even as part of a support alliance in Parliament. The Popescu Tăriceanu I and II cabinets had at the core the mechanisms and platform of the Truth and Justice Alliance (Alianta D.A.). This preserved a special status for the PNL-PDL relationship. The agreement signed between PDL and UDMR for Boc III was also the authoritative agreement for the coalition, as the UNPR was not considered a full-fledged party at the time but only a technical appendix needed by the PDL and supported in creation by president Băsescu. Ponta I and II had at the core the USL agreement, which, as the last document in recent Romanian party history, inherited the coalition experience of both PNL and PSD to put forward a complex set of rules.

6.3 Agreements as formality vs. agreements that induce compliance

Paternalism

PC’s first government experience came in 2000 as part of the Năstase I cabinet. The first agreement between PSD and PC made public was in 2002 and expressed a reinforcement of the previously secret arrangement of 2000. It had 1724 words and articulated a very broad policy agenda (decrease the level of poverty, reform the economy, provide better health care, fight corruption, further European and NATO
integration etc. The functioning mechanisms inscribed in the agreement regulated a trimestral meeting of the party presidents to assess the implementation of the common agenda and a weekly meeting of an Evaluation Commission between five members of each party. This proposed mechanism for coordination of the alliance was to be supported by the constant sharing of information between the two parties of their individual political works and collaboration in parliament. In practice, even though the PC president Dan Voiculescu was not a member of the cabinet headed by PSD president Adrian Năstase, any regulatory meetings only happened between the two. The PC was not externally perceived as an organised group by the PSD. The lack of formal meetings between the two parties was confirmed to this author by privileged witnesses. The PSD also lacked the intention to set up the institutional context for the PC to form its own parliamentary group as demanded by PC in the agreement. The institutionalisation of PC was thus impeded both by the paternalistic attitude of its president as well as by internal PSD calculations. This was mirrored by the largely ignored broad agreement signed with PC.

A comparison between the coalition agreement signed by PSD with PC and the yearly agreements signed by PSD with parliamentary support party UDMR starting 2001 stresses the same point. As an example, the 2003 3336 word agreement between PSD and UDMR made, in addition to provisions specifically targeting the Hungarian minority, minute references to the amendment or application of explicit laws. These measures were given monthly deadlines (e.g. certain amendments to the Law on the Minimum Wage to be made until June 30th 2003; the elaboration of a national program for thermic rehabilitation of housing until March 31st 2003 etc). The gravitas and attention that UDMR exhibited for bulwarking its interests in relation to PSD made the difference between their institutional development and that of the PC, in spite of similar regulating mechanisms. Agreements with UDMR also regulated trimestral meetings of the presidents, weekly meetings of the Evaluation Committee of the Agreement, collaboration in the Parliament. The collaboration mechanisms agreed upon with the UDMR were, in contrast, upheld. Several high ranking members of different parties have attested that the model of agreement put forward by the UDMR served as example for future alliances. Once the PC left the Năstase I cabinet accusing the PSD of not complying with PC requests, the UDMR continued to offer the necessary support in the parliament for the single party cabinet Năstase II on the basis of similar agreements.

The PC entered a more structured coalition with PDL, PNL and UDMR in 2005. The negotiations behind PC’s inclusion in the coalition were stealthy and took place directly between the newly elected president Traian Băsescu and PC president Dan Voiculescu. PC reconfirmed it had no autonomy from its leader’s decisions. At the national level, a National Council of the Coalition (Party President + one party member) was designed to meet every other week and a Parliamentary Council of the Coalition (Party Group President + party representatives in the Permanent Bureaus
of the two chambers) every week. Every party was to have a vice-prime-minister in government with the exception of the party that gave the prime-minister. Mechanisms for portfolio allocation and distribution of other offices (including at the local level) were instated based on the principal of consensus in the coalition. In practice, PC’s routine of following its president’s decisions did not build an external perception of the party as having the ability to last and, as such, did not benefit from the standardization of behaviour that this coalition agreement introduced. The agreement signed by the four parties was ushered in by the document that laid the basis of the PDL – PNL Truth and Justice Alliance (Alianta D.A.). By comparison, the 7079 word pre-electoral agreement (not including the governing program) that laid the basis of the PDL- PNL political alliance and regulated party behaviour was a more authoritative document for the Popescu Tăriceanu I and II cabinets. It also preserved a special status for the PNL – PDL relationship and provided the whole coalition with a governing program. The coalition agreement did not have policy provisions.

PC’s leader Voiculescu (although no longer party chairman starting 2005) continued to be a valuable asset for political parties due to his influence over media channels. PC was again sought for a political alliance with PNL and PSD in 2011, the USL. The USL agreement also became the coalition agreement for the Ponta I and II Cabinets. Before entering the USL, PC signed off on a separate agreement with PNL to form the Centre – Right Alliance (ACD). According to the USL agreement, the highest authority body of the alliance, the Co-presidency was made up of the PSD president and the PNL president who acted as the representative of the ACD. Thus, PC reconfirmed its support role and participated to the victory of the USL through the media resources of its leader and not through party specific means. Office and candidate distribution for local and parliamentary elections followed the principle of parity between PSD and ACD. Within ACD, inter-party relations continued to be informal, as PC did not amount to more than the will of its leader.

Assumed temporary existence
UNPR signed its first coalition agreement in 2011, two years after its leader had been included in the Boc III cabinet. The 622 word agreement only provided a broad policy agenda and only served as a formality to officially include the UNPR in the political camp of the president and the PDL. Private meetings between Gabriel Oprea and Traian Băsescu were the engine of this collaboration. For the first time, the minorities’ caucus in Parliament was invited to sign the coalition agreement. The other signatories, PDL and UDMR had signed an earlier 517 word agreement in 2009, which was, de facto, the coalition agreement for the Boc III cabinet. The PDL UDMR agreement provided 18 more precise points setting the government’s agenda. Although less technical than previous documents negotiated by the UDMR, it mentioned the establishment of a Central Coordination Council.
UNPR decreased its institutionalising potential even further as part of the Ponta cabinets. The UNPR leader Oprea became a minister in the Ponta II cabinet without the signing of a new coalition agreement. This was a personal reward to Oprea for support and not the party. New coalition agreements were signed for Ponta IV and V. PSD and its ‘satellite’ parties, PC and UNPR, now forming a political alliance named the Social Democrat Union (USD), signed a 687 word coalition agreement with UDMR which was at the basis of Ponta IV. It contained mostly UDMR specific policies that the USD agreed with (e.g. proportional representation of ethnic Hungarians in institutions at local level, a Hungarian language department at the University of Medicine in the majoritarian Hungarian county capital Targu Mures etc). It also stated that the UDMR supports the government program of the now defunct USL, the legacy of which the PSD wanted to preserve on its own. It made no mention of regulatory bodies or functioning mechanisms. A separate parliamentary support agreement was signed only between PSD and the minorities’ caucus on a broad policy agenda. Though marginal and largely ceremonial, it proved once more the dominance of the PSD over its supporting political groups.

The 611 word document signed by PSD, PC, UNPR and a splinter of the PNL, the The Reformer Liberal Party(PLR) in 2014 agreeing to govern together was beyond all else a Political Declaration in support of the candidature of the PSD Prime Minister Victor Ponta for presidency. It had a general policy content and was also an electoral tool aimed to preserve the legacy of the USL. The alliance was named USL 2.0 and had no regulating mechanisms. It was materialized in the Ponta V cabinet. After the loss of the presidential race, the coalition never signed a more complex agreement as the PSD continued to be the dominant party in the relationship with its satellites. PC and PLR merged to form the European Liberal Democrat Alliance (ALDE).

The difference between the text behind USL and the coalition agreements with PC and UNPR, and with PC, UDMR and PLR respectively is telling of the different approaches: agreements as formality vs. agreements that induce compliance. The complexity and detail, in terms of policy, office distribution and functioning mechanisms, of the PSD – PNL (representing also the PC) deal mirrors the importance placed by the two parties on having a functional relationship. It was also observed in practice through regular meetings and a working authoritative co-presidency. Complying with mutually agreed rules and an institutionalisation of practices led to the success of their common agenda of removing from power the PDL. Once the leaders decided to split and in the electoral backlash that followed, both parties proved autonomous enough from their leaders to oust them and pursue alternative strategies. PC and UNPR, while the latter still exists at the time of this writing, never pursued or were constrained to participate in institutionalised inter-party relations. The UDMR, on the other hand, although also a small party and enjoying the advantage of a captive electorate pursued the institutionalisation of its relations with its allies and developed a working internal structure.
6.4 Broken patterns of coalition, same patterns of party behaviour

In the only instance in which the PNL and UDMR did not fulfil their role as coalition partners for either the PSD or PDL, the two parties had a brief experience of governing together (Boc I, 2008-2009). Although it was a temporary cabinet made up in the expectation of the outcome of the presidential elections, the coalition agreement signed by the two parties proved that the practice of clearly defined operating rules was well entrenched. The part about the functioning mechanisms regulated necessary tools for collaboration while a second part contained general and necessary messages for the electorate. The highest decision making body of the coalition was the College of the Presidents. Thus, the Co-Presidency was to meet and decide through consensus on any significant issue. A Central Coordinating Political Bureau made up of seven representatives from each party had the task to meet weekly and decide on the political agenda. A Coordinating Council of the Parliamentary Groups was set up to meet weekly for legislative coordination. Witnesses asked to testify on the level of compliance with these mechanisms confirmed their regularity, but less so their utility as the incompatibility between the two parties was too great. This is a case of a dysfunctional coalition as the interests were individually different with the approach of the presidential elections. However, the agreement between two of the institutionalising parties was not ceremonial or small in size. It was a contract which had been put together following lengthy negotiations and its size and content are proofs that neither side took it lightly. Although it was a case of broken patterns of coalition, it reconfirmed the entrenched patterns of the institutionalisation of inter-party relations through a coalition agreement as two of the coalition experienced and institutionalising parties were involved.

7. Conclusions

The institutionalisation of political parties is generally acknowledged as important for democratic development. In the pursuit of finding the most relevant measurements for progress in this area we propose as an indicator the institutionalisation of inter-party relations, as inscribed in coalition agreements and documents beyond. Introducing such an indicator as a reference, reinforces recent attempts at separate research of party systems and parties as opposed to the general assessment that the relation between party institutionalisation and democracy is only established through the party system. We also note that the personalisation of party leadership is a strain on party institutionalisation as well as on the formalisation of inter-party relations.

Thus, our research question regarding the link between the institutionalisation of inter-party relations and the institutionalisation of parties draws us to a conclusion of interdependence rather than cause-effect. The overlap of the two phenomena adds to the understanding that the constraints of democracy act simultaneously on the party system and individual parties. However, as the laboratory of a new democracy
shows us, even if taken as different phenomena, their interdependence is also to be considered.

References


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