Civil Society, Party Politics and Government in Romania

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The Political Representation of Social Interests in Central and East Europe

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Using Romania as a test case, the paper will argue that the making of postcommunist politics is by and large a bottom-up process. Political parties fail or succeed according to their ability to aggregate a plurality of local interests. The Communist Party, in his later inclusion-stage, was already able to do that. Just like “semisovereign people” of Western democracies (to use Schattschneider’s language), the socialist people of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s got involved in public affairs by the logic of conflict. The difference resides in the fact that the socialist people did not have the opportunity to select and reject among several competing political agencies or agendas. Rather, the semisovereign people of state socialism had to introduce their own unorganised and incidental alternatives to the policies set up beyond their jurisdiction by the Party as the nominal sovereign of the political space. Hence, people did not contrive competition, but were compelled to react whenever faced with contending interests at their own level and within their individual or corporate reach. In the realm of state socialism, people got in the end a clear share of sovereignty, they were able to discriminate in any particular setting of society between what they could actually do to improve their status or condition and what they could not do, and did not even need to bother about, regardless of the official position of the Party. Indeed, what was authoritatively determined at the top always ran the risk to be received at the bottom with compunction and put into effect in a manner contingent on local circumstances and incidental interests. As a rule, the agents of these informal, grassroots transactions were the local Party bosses who strived to accommodate quietly the official policies to the particular environment they directly knew and had the task to manage. It seems that nowhere else in Central and Eastern Europe was this kind of informal political participation more influential at the expense of a loosened state. In this respect, the Communist Party should be construed not only in terms of an overwhelming monopoly over both state and society, but also, at its lower and base levels, as a mediator between state and society and, as such, as an organization not so different from any political party operating in a Western democracy. The successor party was successful to the extend it remained, as the Communist Party once was, a coalition of mayors, industrial managers, civil servants, union leaders, tradesmen, farmers, schoolteachers and the like, all concerned with accommodating national policies, be them European Union oriented, to their local interests. It is fair to say the Social Democratic Party of Romania, as a scion of the Communist Party and the dominant postcommunist party, is a coalescence of networks of a civil society that is still reluctant to turn into a legal society.
An anthropologist who had spent many years observing the people of socialist Romania has rest his research with a closing statement that all those partaking in the case could underwrite beyond any reasonable doubt: “Most people to whom I talked - young and old, men and women, workers, peasants, and clerks - said that one of the best things about the revolution was that it allowed them to be left alone to live their lives as they saw fit. Some workers, in fact, were elated to be relieved of the obligation to belong to any party. Membership in the Communist Party was, after all, a burden: it infringed on their time, energy, and personal autonomy. Now that party affiliation is voluntary, Olt Landers are gleefully exercising their right ‘to have no business with anyone,’ as they say”¹.

Indeed, from a somehow elementary economic perspective, totalitarianism could be, and actually has been described², as the political monopoly of a single party burdening a society where people would have rather preferred to go about their own businesses than embark on a common project. This is to assume that the entire process of production, circulation and distribution of social goods in the public sphere was strictly controlled and centralized by the Communist Party. According to the Marxist model of monopoly, this domination of a single party was meant to yield a maximum and exclusive political payoff for the communist hierarchy. In order to accomplish this task, the single party had to prevent the people it ruled from abandoning their participation in the communist project of social engineering, as well as from engaging in different forms of reluctance, resilience, or even worse, of silent or vocal protests.

There is no doubt that, under totalitarianism, the public sphere did not constitute and did not function as a space established by the citizens through a free act of political will, eventually translated in the explicit language of a covenant, but in a somehow Hobbesian manner, as a space created by the “sovereign”, namely the Communist Party, for its own advantage and usage.

It is equally obvious that any public square has to bear with the intent of its sovereign author. Which does not necessarily mean that such a space is the exclusive result of the choice or decision of a single political subject, be it a collective one. In fact, there may not be, at the centre of the public space, a forbidden city where all the threads of power inevitably and ultimately lead. We should rather figure out any public space as a stratified network of commands, compunctions, contradictions, causes, compulsions and complicities that manage a given society. The public realm could then be defined as an anonymous strategy that coordinates individual tactics, personal initiatives, unequally distributed instructions, duties, and rights that are unremittingly transferred between social actors, and converted at the level of personal responsibility. In such a setting, the power of the sovereign “is not an institution, is not a structure, is not a certain authority with which some are equipped” and others are not, but “the name we give to a complex strategic situation in a given society”³.

Indeed, when looked at from the post-communist common wisdom of the 1990s, Romanian Communism’s strategy to take over Romanian society seems to be an anonymous, impersonal cataclysm that fell unexpectedly upon a population forced to improvise its resistance: armed resistance in the mountains, political resistance in prisons, moral resistance in the households, resistance through culture, resistance through infiltration in the ranks of the party. Totalitarianism is very often depicted according to the rules of a siege, as a regime

³ Michel FOUCAULT, La volonté de savoir, Gallimard, Paris, 1976, p. 123
imposed through repression over a society that was in a permanent, though covert, state of denial.

Of course, the Romanian Communist Party is to be held responsible for hundreds of thousands of victims, but it is only fair to admit that communists should be themselves counted among the casualties of the basic contradiction of Marxism-Leninism as a political theory turned into a state ideology. Indeed, scientific socialism had no vision of the distribution of sovereignty among the branches of the government and between the government and the citizens. Instead, it went on about the inevitable disappearance of state power. Indeed, the state and its coercive institutions are in a Marxian perspective warranted only by economic inequality, and a triumphant working class will waste them away in order to open the door to communism. The historical framers of the communist theory and strategy left the Party leaders with no philosophical guidance on how they could move along in extending power beyond their own relatively closed circle\(^4\). From repression to mobilization and inclusion, the Party failed in its attempts to share sovereignty, because it had no concept of how its administration of the socialist mode of production could become the self-rule of a socialist people.

The people itself had no real interest, and no experience, in self-government. Socialist citizens were typically more concerned in exploiting for their private benefit the state-owned means of production and in informally influence the management of things, than in participating in the government of society\(^5\). The serpent in the paradise of state socialism was thus people’s inability of expressing any common political awareness or recognizing the value of general social goods\(^6\), regardless of the fact that such consideration for public stakes could have ratified or, on the contrary, undermined the communist project.

If the weight of evidence indicates that the Party was successful in its endeavors of nation building\(^7\) and political inclusion, the question remains why so many Romanians have chosen to take an active and institutional part in supporting a regime that, after its demise in 1989, could not find a single pro bono advocate.

To clarify this issue, we should look at the three main avenues of political participation in a soviet-type political regime that could be identified\(^8\). First, the formal, if not ritual, participation-pledge of the Party members, but also of the citizens at large, mainly on election days intended to celebrate – through a regular 99% turn out - the social triumph of state socialism. To cast the ballot in favour of the Communist Party and its mass organization was not a political choice, but a pledge of allegiance. Second, the participation-plea, of the citizens going before state and Party authorities to solicit the enactment of a particular right, to request for services they deemed themselves entitled to, or simply to ask for undue favors. Third, the participation-persuasion of citizens taking the opportunity to informally negotiate with local officials (mayors, Party activists, chief executive officers of state companies and factories, heads of public institutions and the like) the way policies designed at high political level could and actually should be implemented in any particular, real-life setting\(^9\). Thus, the general public of state socialism was confident in its own ability to exert a factual influence

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\(^8\) The typology is based upon the empirical research undertaken by Wayne DiFRANCEISCO and Zvi GITELMAN, *op.cit.*, pp. 603-621.

\(^9\) For this last type of participation as experienced in Romania, David KIDECKEL, *The Solitude of Collectivism*, pp. 104-105.
on the micro-social interpretation and execution of any given decision of the state and Party hierarchy.10

When compared to the classical forms of political participation, well documented throughout Western societies, this three-fold “communist” version of political participation – where inducement towers over official commitment and bureaucratic petition - is dramatically overturned. And, in order to be faithful to the Leninist reading of Hegelian dialectics, it is doubly reversed. Primary, and contrasting to the Western logic, the hegemonic Party does not sum up, ponder, and translate into public policies a plurality of interests expressed by its different constituencies; quite the opposite, the interests of all organized social and economic groups are defined by the Party itself, through its unchallenged control over the institutional leadership of all recognized labour, professional, local, ethnic, or religious associations, as an empirical analysis of the Polish society has pointed out11. Secondly, and contrary to the most basic understanding of the rule of law, when it comes to enforcement, both legal norms and Party decisions are subject to a complex and sneaking process of negotiation. Social ruling and economic planning were rather literary endeavours, which meaning was almost always bargained by the affected citizens (workers, individual farmers in Poland, collectivised peasants in Romania12, civil servants, writers etc.) according to circumstantial, incidental, sometimes accidental, and always local interests.13

This model of political participation seems to confirm the Foucauldian perspective14 on political power, which should not be conceived as an autonomous symbolic good that can be forcibly or legally obtained, that can be transmitted, shared, or distributed, as something that can be “reached”, or kept, something one can lay hands on, or risk to lose grip of. Of course, power relations are not exterior to other types of relations – economic processes, labor dynamics, social mobility, - but manifest themselves, most of the time, as means of production, for they do not forbid or permit according to an established set of norms, but create and let themselves be created beyond the legal logic of permission and repression.

Then - and this may be perhaps the essential remark - power comes into being from bottom to top. It is less the outcome of an overall contention between the dominated and the dominators, or of a class struggle, or of the competition between parties, or of the poise of multiple relations that command the constitution of ownership, family, knowledge, or institutions. Power is rather the setting where the tensions that arise among all these factors come to a particular arrangement or, better, the place of redistribution and disciplining of conflicts that naturally stir up the social body. Where there is power, there is necessarily resistance to power. The latter cannot function without contending with a multitude of indispensable, probable, impossible, dubious, spontaneous, enraged, perfidious, calculated, suppressed, solitary, inefficient, violent, irreconcilable, interested, self-destructive, opportunist or ready-to-compromise bodies of opposition. Like power relations, resistance knots are irregularly distributed all across the social networks, and seldom amount to one great refusal, to a massive and global denial, or to a coherent center of revolt with a specific

13 The challengers of the state and Party in this process of informal negotiations were rather local and unstable networks with unstructured and incidental interests, as Janine WEDEL has proven for the Polish case (The Private Poland: An Anthropologist’s Look at Everyday Life, Facts on File, New York, 1986), than proper official and/or unofficial corporate interests, as Valerie BUNCE believes (Subversive Institutions: The Design and the Destruction of Socialism and the State, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1999).
14 Michel FOUCALUT, La volonté de savoir, pp. 112-129.
address. Man as subject of liberty, and the state as agent of the law are present together in the
recipe of power.

To be sure, the inhabitants of state socialism indulged themselves in an “ethos of
dependency” with respect to the state. But it would be only fair to add that they were also
able to shape their relations to the state in conformity with an “ethic of socialist calculation.”
In the eyes of most citizens, the state was at the same time the ultimate provider figure and an
aggressive intruder into their private life. Thus, the state and its agencies were simultaneously
exploited and avoided by the ordinary citizen. It seems therefore appropriate to acknowledge
that the “democratic centralism” supposed by the Leninist tradition to rule the Party and the
socialist society might have been in fact replaced by a spontaneous authoritarian
decentralization. The theory of “democratic centralism” holds that when the supreme
leadership of the Party has to adopt a policy, it should do so after a free discussion, a
comprehensive debate, and an organized agreement of the rank and file; but, once duly
pronounced, this particular decision should remain unquestioned and should be carried on
without any reservation and with the greatest of disciplines by all membership. In fact and in
the realm of real socialism, the supreme leadership assumed the exclusive authority to decide
on all matters without prior consultation of the Party members; instead, what was
authoritatively determined at the top always ran the risk to be received at the bottom with
compunction and put into effect in a manner contingent on local circumstances and incidental
interests. As a rule, the agents of these informal, grass roots transactions were the local Party
bosses who tried to accommodate the official policies to the particular environment they
directly knew and had the task to manage. Nowhere else in Central and Eastern Europe was
this kind of informal influence more influential than in Romania, and at the expense of a
“loosened state”, an observer noticed. In this respect, the Communist Party should be
construed not only in terms of an overwhelming monopoly of its supreme leadership over
both state and society, but also, at its lower and larger levels, as a mediator between state and
society, and, as such, as an organization not so different from any political party operating in a
Western democracy.

Was this function of the Communist Party a late “corruption” of an initially strong
breakthrough regime, which developed an increased vulnerability to the influence of its
diverse constituencies, as Kenneth Jowitt argues? The obvious weakness of the post-
Leninist state, able perhaps to control, but not to determine either the social behaviour of
individual actors, or the performance of public institutions, could perhaps be the explained
by the fact that, despite its claim to be the driving force of a classless and nationless future,
the Communist Party was, after all, but a political party, that is an organization compelled to
promote social interests, conflicts, and values that predate and command its very existence.
An organization also designed to allow its individual members to exploit their political

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15 George SCHÖPFLIN, “Culture and Identity in Post-Communist Europe”, in Stephen WHITE, Judy BATT, Paul
16 David KIDECKEL, op.cit., p. 166.
201-204.
state is a “castrated” one, as Venelin GANEV, “The Separation of Party and State as a Logistical Problem: A
2, 1999, pp. 389-420 puts it, because its predecessor was already undergoing a diminution of its power.
position for private interests. State socialism lasted for five decades because the Communist Party could count on a genuine constituency able to outnumber any would-be opposition.

However incongruous it may seem today, communism ultimately became a legitimate political order in the eyes of a large majority. Legitimacy should be understood here in Max Weber’s terms, that is to say less as a personally and rationally pledged allegiance, morally motivated, but as a voluntary disposition to leave out of question and out of the reach of personal interests an order that manifests itself as legitimate, and whose validity is guaranteed by a human instance able to use violence in order to sanction any infringement of the established order. Such an avoidance to call into question the state and its functions was observed in Romania long after the demise of communism. Moreover, by uprooting the traditional hierarchies and by cultivating its own version of social opportunity and economic equality, state socialism levelled the social, economic, and cultural differences it inherited and essentially performed a democratic function. Indeed, totalitarianism, unlike authoritarian regimes, not only claimed to be democratic, but also theorized the democratic privilege of the “popular” majority to suppress the “decadent” and “bourgeois” freedoms of the liberal well-to-do minority. From a contemporary and involved standpoint, state socialism could have easily been construed as a political monopoly of a popular majority promoted to welfare by the party of the working class.

In fact and in economic and political systems that are not based on competition, a monopoly is often relaxed, debonair, and inefficient, as Albert Hirschman has argued. For the very purpose of preserving their inefficiency and negligence, lazy monopolies not only do not hinder peripheral expressions of abandon and protest, but tend to include them within certain limits in its space of sovereignty. The most active citizens were officially denied the right to speak up against the regime, or to leave it behind. Instead, they were offered some opportunity, in their own walk of life, to reapportion in their personal advantage the public space. If we admit that state socialism, at least in its terminal stage, could be considered a lazy political monopoly, we should infer that it had the astuteness to turn any latent sign of dissent into a specific, yet incidental form of political participation.

If Carl Schmitt was right, and the ultimate power of the sovereign is to establish exceptions to the common rule, it would ensue that, under state socialism, people got in the end a clear share of sovereignty, that they were able to discriminate, in any particular setting of society, between what they could actually do to improve their status and what they could not do, and did not even need to bother about. Just like the “semisovereign people” of Western democracies, the socialist people of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s got involved in public affairs by the logic of conflict. The difference resides in the fact that the socialist people did not have the opportunity to select and reject among several competing political agencies or agendas. Rather, the semisovereign people of state socialism had to introduce their own unorganised and incidental alternatives to the policies set up beyond their

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25 Carl SCHMITT, Verfassungslehre, Achte Auflage, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin, 1993
jurisdiction by the Party as the nominal sovereign of the political space. Hence, people did not contrive competition, but were compelled to react whenever faced with contending interests at their own level and within their individual or corporate reach. In the realm of state socialism, people got in the end a clear share of sovereignty, they were able to discriminate in any particular setting of society between what they could actually do to improve their status or condition and what they could not do, and did not even need to bother about, regardless of the official position of the Party.

Beyond their oligarchic temptations, the communist parties were, once in power, political organizations which complexity was designed to extend and level the opportunities to take part in the exercise of power\(^ {27}\). Thus, political participation was not, in Eastern-Central Europe, the historical result of a long sequence of movements of contestation of the established order. On the contrary, the political contestation that seems to be the landmark of postcommunist transitions is rooted in a tradition of participation experienced precisely under communism.

The successor parties were successful in disengaging from state socialism to the extent they managed to remain, as the Communist Parties used to be in their late stage, a coalition of mayors, industrial managers, civil servants, union leaders, tradesmen, farmers, schoolteachers and the like, all concerned with accommodating national policies, be them European Union oriented, to their local interests. It is fair to say the Social Democratic Party of Romania, as a scion of the Communist Party and the dominant postcommunist party, is a coalescence of networks of a civil society that is still reluctant to turn into a legal society.

In Romania, the downfall of state socialism was not a negotiated process political involving a plurality of social actors, but an abrupt event staged by a single performer, the Communist Party itself. An important, if not obligatory juncture on the democratisation path was thus skipped over, as no public debate on the legitimacy of regime change, and on rules that should regulate the competition between state sovereignty and civic autonomy was ever organized. Communism’s demise was taken to be as natural an occurrence as its governance. In consequence, post-communism was reluctant to immediately legitimate political partisanship, and was slow in considering the conflicts of opinions and interests, as well as the emergence of new social divides as normal fallouts of democracy. Long after December 22\(^ {nd} \) 1989, Romanian society continued to look for anti-political aggregation blueprints.

The established communist political and administrative élites experienced the change of regime as an operation of inner reshuffling, and as a legitimate opportunity to redistribute resources and rebalance power relations among its members in a bottom side up manner. Ruled as they were by a worn out scientific socialism, the communist rulers took advantage of the popular unrest of December 1989 and proceeded to a military dismissal of their own regime\(^ {28}\). Indeed, the thinking of this élite had become so transcendent of at least two main categories of scientific socialism - i.e. “democratic centralism” and Marxism-Leninism - that it has been necessary for its very survival to resign from communism. The rejection of democratic centralism should be best understood in terms of a Party leadership-Party networks division that had long thwarted the latter, increasingly estranged from the centre of power, to exploit in its own account the resources available both in the state-owned and in the “second” economy\(^ {29}\). In turn, the repudiation of Marxism-Leninism enfranchised the one-time

\(^{27}\) Juan LINZ, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder and London, 2000, p. 73.

\(^{28}\) Katherine VERDERY, Gail KLIGMAN, “Romania after Ceauşescu: Post-Communist Communism?”, in Ivo BANAC (editor), *Eastern Europe in Revolution*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1992, p. 121, duly recognize that the revolution would not have succeeded “without the support of not just the army but at least a portion of the Securitate”.

communist élite from a political theory that was silent about how to expand power beyond the two basic operations of taking control of the state and enforcing its control on society.

Where was then a theory of revolution and democratisation to come from? Intellectuals were the only alternative networks that could claim to be competent enough to provide an answer. As everywhere in Central and Eastern Europe, only the cultural élites, and in the first place the writers, could substantiate their post-communist political engagement on the grounds of a tradition - usually an apocryphal one - of passive or active dissidence, and even opposition to totalitarianism. So, intellectuals introduced themselves as the nonconformist Whigs of a conservative state socialism. But this élites did not have a real political science, but merely a literary awareness of what communism was and what should come after. They were, to give them a Leninist description, “rootless intellectuals” with no organization behind them, and whose politics reflected vacillation and doctrinal uncertainty. They held themselves to be “anti-communist” and thus genuine democrats, in contradistinction to the “neo-communist” and therefore opportunistic democrats recruited from the erstwhile Party apparatus. However, they deplored the landslide victory of “neo-communists” in the May 20th 1990 elections as an irrational and contemptible result of universal suffrage, which some of them were ready to consider inferior to an electoral system based on a kind of “political literacy census”.

Their concern was not so much “what democracy is“, but rather “whose democracy is it“. What should Romania do on the morrow of a Revolution they hastily – and somehow counterfactually - dubbed anti-communist, and who is to show the way? The intellectuals’ ambition to be the legitimate administrators of these questions had at least three major consequences.

First, the political incrimination of “neo-communism” eventually led to an exoneration of communism itself. The case, prosecuted initially by many intellectuals who, notwithstanding their significant presence in the provisional government, headed the anti-neo-communist opposition, forced the ruling network established under state socialism to freeze its process of self-selection after the unavoidable elimination of the group of high party officials who were in office in December 1989. Nevertheless, these enduring élites were neither challenged to present the reliable proofs of their conversion to democracy, nor to promote an authentic political transformation of the state, but only to explain away and denounce their own communist past, whereas the intellectual élite considered itself excused from such an examination, considering its critical commitment to censure this past.

Undoubtedly, the so-called neo-communists did represent in 1990 the most coherent public force in Romania, as well as in many countries from the former Soviet Bloc. And they still do. Surveys have pointed out that 68% of the Romanians holding a leading position in politics, economy or society all along the first post-communist decade already held similar top positions before 1989. They acted in the past as communists as long as scientific socialism was the official ideology that ruled the rulers. That is not to say that they are still under the

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30 Something of a complex of inferiority related to the meagre visibility and efficiency of Romanian dissidence when compared with other Central-European countries developed after 1989. It is often said that in Romania the regime was more brutal than elsewhere and thus those who had the courage to stand up against repression were less numerous and influential. It is nevertheless too often forgotten that overt dissidence and opposition did not have a significant ponder in any of the socialist bloc’s countries, except perhaps in Poland. For instance in Czechoslovakia, where civil society is taken to be solid and enduring, only 1,864 people dared sign the Charter 77, and even in June 1989, when the regime was in an advanced state of dissolution, only 39,000 Czechs and Slovaks signed Several sentences, Tony JUDT, “The Past is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe”, Daedalus, 121, 1992, p.102.

31 Katherine VERDERY, Gail KLIGMAN, op.cit., p. 126.

intellectual influence of Marxian political economy, or still attached to the policies of state socialism, or still tributary to a totalitarian understanding of the use of power. They form today, as they did in the past, a ruling class, a political and bureaucratic élite characterized, for a period of time, by the obligation to submit to an ideological rite. Their power, and their ability to exercise it, does not reside in this ideology, which constituted for a long time some sort of remote resource of legitimacy if not a trivial cover-up. This dominant class has no other ideal than power itself as a bureaucratic practice. It is an élite entrenched in the state and indistinguishable of its institutions.

Anyway, most politicians of the 1990s, regardless of their political orientation, have been members of the Communist Party, be it top leaders or rank-and-file militants. This is also true, and to a large extent, when it comes to the cultural and intellectual élite. In fact, not only that numerous prominent intellectuals (including the most fervent critics of neo-communism and champions of civil society) share the same past communist affiliation with the politicians they pass judgment on, but also many of them achieved their public reputation long before 1989. In other words, they mobilize against communism and its probable successors the social capital they have accumulated under state socialism and according to its rules.

But lo and behold, both categories eventually converged in their denial of communism. For the ex-communist politicians and administrators, state socialism is a stage like any other in the history of the country. Its legacy is mixed (but which legacy is not?): it has a good side (industrialization, for instance), as well as a bad one (especially personal dictatorship). Nor is that all. Under communism, everybody was a communist, as almost no one stood up in public and radical disagreement. The opposite is also true: under communism, no one – except perhaps the early militants of the 1940s – was a communist, as everybody was involved in a form of personal and secret resistance. Romanians should therefore move on, work for the present and think at the future. The past has no political meaning, as it belongs to everyone in general and to nobody in particular.

In turn, the intelligentsia has its own reasons to avoid an in-depth appraisal of communism. All intellectual careers started before 1989 are not only the result of a selection conditioned by an overt, covert, or contrived loyalty to the Party, to its ideology and leadership, but also relied on the institutions of state socialism (universities, research institutes, publishing houses, magazines, journals, theatres, motion pictures studios, scholarships in the West approved in high places, and the like). Alleging today that their status is only due to their personal merits and talents, the intellectuals are highly interested in recounting communism as a partial and incidental story pertaining essentially to three topics: the criminal activity of the political police (Securitate), the deprivation and frustrations of everyday life, and the personal dictatorship of Ceaușescu. Thus, the history of Romanian communism becomes a moral tale about oppressors and victims, the former irremediably malicious, the latter necessary blameless. Needless to say, the intellectuals see themselves as designated and unblemished victims of a regime that should be condemned but not discussed.

Thus, a public debate on “the question of guilt” becomes not only impossible, but also superfluous. All Romanians – but a few, either aliens or alienated from the national traditions and the popular commonsense – were victims that opposed communism in the clandestineness of their own selves. They are consequently blameless. But there is more to it. Contemplated ex post, all resisting victims turn necessarily into democrats, as liberal democracy was to prevail over communism. The ironic paradox is that a historical perspective would reveal that the only noteworthy anti-communist movements of resistance of the late 1940s and the 1950s

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33 A similar observation in Katherine VERDERY, Gail KLIGMAN, op.cit., p. 130.
were organized by extreme right radicals, as disdainful of democracy as their communist adversaries.

The second consequence of the intellectuals’ claim to provide a certified rationale of the Revolution was an unexpected and ineffective ideological bipolarisation of the political square. Paradoxically, this split did not seem to have a real function in the post-communist society, which was not cleaved by deep social rifts, in which political opinions were not mature enough to become adverse, and in which all the categories of public recognition, including the intellectual ones, were earned within the framework of the totalitarian regime. In addition, the erstwhile communist rulers have had ruled out Marxism-Leninism and apparently had no plan to lend themselves to the rule of another ideology. Hence they were beset against their will by the ideological dispute the intellectual élite stirred up.

This ideological confrontation does not uncover all the reasons, but is in no small part responsible for the success of the strange operation of reinvention of “historical parties”. These parties re-emerged after the downfall of the totalitarian regimes in other countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe, in the Czech Republic, in Slovakia, or in Hungary, but they had there a relatively marginal career. Undeniably, Romania was to become a safe haven for this category of political organizations: nowhere else they succeeded in winning national elections and form a government, as they did in Romania from 1996 to 2000.

The hostilities broke out on the 12th of January 1990, sparked by the issue of the legal prohibition of a Communist Party that had formally vanished anyway and that no one was willing to take over and reform. So, the ideological war was waged exclusively around the meaning of the past and needed soldiers who knew how to handle the arsenal of memory. In challenging the ex-communist political élites to assume a history of which they felt released, the intelligentsia spokesmen unwittingly revived the agitation technique of the Leninist science of ideological controversy. In order to draw up a clear-cut and irreconcilable opposition between a suspected neo-communism and an improvised anti-communism, the intellectuals had to pass judgement on the nomenklatura according to a political code an ex-communist could not share. The canon that did not befit the survivors of state socialism was pre-communist Romania as a role model of free enterprise, civil rights, political pluralism, and parliamentary democracy. This way, anti-communist intelligentsia could not only discredit its opponents as responsible for the dismissal of that glorious past, but also pose itself as the legatee of the political resistance to communism embodied in the period 1944-1947 by the National Peasant Party and the National Liberal Party.

Therefore, spurred on by the aspiration to have a history whose roots went deeper than the totalitarian age, the intellectual élite endorsed unreservedly the framing of the opposition parties according to pre-communist blueprints. Nevertheless, before the 1990 national elections, both the National Liberal Party and the National Peasant Party did not function as real partisan organizations, but merely as cultural parties, that is as unmistakable symbols of an ideological bipolarity. Temporarily “rented” by the intellectuals for their own purposes, the “historical parties” indulged in a culture of complaint, lament and incrimination, whilst the nomenklatura was raised in a culture of networks and mass mobilization. That explains to a large extent their blatant electoral failure, as Romanian voters had no motive, at least not in 1990, to understand what was at stake in the ideological debate.

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34 For a Rokkanian type analysis of the re-emergence of the former parties see Maurizio COTTA, “Building Party Systems after the Dictatorship: the East European Case in a Comparative Perspective”, in Geoffrey PRIDHAM, Tatu VANHANEN (editors), Democratization in Eastern Europe. Domestic and International Perspectives, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, pp. 112-114.

In the third place, the intellectuals’ ambition to be the accredited guides into democracy resulted in a deadlock on the constitutional issue, and hampered a radical transformation of the state. Because there was a serious ideological disagreement on what the revolution was all about, an institutional structure of the revolution was not put in place, as a proper revolutionary theory would have deemed necessary. From December 1989 to June 1990, the country was merely run by a provisional government that did not fill the gap between two totally different states, but aimed at the reform, be it radical, of the socialist state and of the socialist mode of production. Although Romania has travelled across a revolutionary stage, most of the pieces of the socialist state began to fall in their previous place, or in a nearby one. If, as Marx believed, the state is but the executive board of a ruling class, it follows that the communist apparatus had no reason to declare bankruptcy, but needed only to reform its institutional assets in order to be even more competitive on the new political market.

To sum up, the political class that controlled the state during and after December 1989 was able to turn in its own advantage the fact that the intellectual élite forced it express its identity in the language of ideology and not in political terms. For the lesson they learned from Leninism is that, in ideological debates, it never really matters on whose side truth is, who is truly devoted to the cause, or faithful to orthodoxy. It is important for each part involved in such a conflict to understand before the opponent does “what is to be done” in order to make a given majority believe that its toils and concerns are properly phrased and better voiced. Thus, the National Salvation Front was the best administrator of the downfall of communist deemed as “the end of the future”. The communist local leadership already acted, in the 1970s and 1980s as a mediator between a socialist state officially determined to plan the future and the current demands of a society lost in the present. Hence, the Social Democratic Party is compelled to be a party of participation and of civil society. One of the gravest misconceptions of postcommunism is perhaps the uncritical identification of civil society with the civic associations, the NGOs, and the intellectual élites. The new parties, notwithstanding if they had a past prior to 1948, nurtured this illusion and strived to legitimate themselves through policies aimed at promoting human rights and civil liberties. Hence, they were not aware that the ideology of *individual rights in society* is accompanied by a “recession of politics” that translates the inability of democratic politics to govern a *society of individuals*\(^{36}\). In this respect, civil society should rather be construed as a multiple and unstable network of disorganised solidarities in need of a mediation and unmove by partisan representation.

As a direct successor of the Communist Party, the Social Democratic Party was able to understand that postcommunist politics is not the mirror in which society reflects its cleavages in order to conciliate them without violence, but merely a loosened space where individual and corporate interests coexist in mutual indifference and in complete ethic invisibility\(^{37}\). Unlike the grand Rokkanian historical cleavages, such recent micro-social divisions are rather immune to partisan mobilisation and uninterested to be represented through ideological debates, legal norms and political competition. In an era when most parties have become “parties without partisans” and political behaviours prove to be more and more fragmented and individualized\(^{38}\), the Social Democratic Party knows to act as a mediator and, in this


capacity, relies on the participative practices of the groups of interests that dominate civil society (trade unions, entrepreneurs’ or professional associations, churches etc.).

However, the Social Democratic Party should neither be regarded as a representative or advocate of civil society before state authorities, nor as an independent negotiator between state and society, but rather as a state agency which task is to translate the legal language of governmental policies into a diversity of social dialects used by various and often antagonist interests. This function of interpreting the state and its policies in the idiom of society is only by incident related to the similar function fulfilled by western political parties39. Indeed, the renewed or transfigured communist parties are not a creation of civil society. They initiated their postcommunist career as part of the state. Even as the steadiest part of the socialist state. This would be the only way to explain the disciplined behaviour of the public administration and economic management after the formal demise of Romanian totalitarianism on December 22nd 1989. That particular day, the Communist Party officially vanished away for good as a public organization but did not give up his position of informal negotiator between a state unwilling to transform and a society unaware of itself.

The first name given to this position was the National Salvation Front. Long before it became the democratic and legal organisation of the former communist networks of mediation and participation, the Front was the only legitimate agency of the state and, through the fiction of its “revolutionary emanation”, the sole representative of society.

From January 1990 to September 1991, the National Salvation Front, embodied by Ion Iliescu, did not act as a regular political party winning elections alongside ideological divides, and supporting accountable governments, but rather as an institutional mechanism for occasional popular outbursts of political activity. The government’s exercise of the legal and legitimate power was thus replicated by an unconventional participation in decision-making and even in the process of law enforcement of samples of the people that acted somehow according to a “new social movements” pattern40. The National Salvation Front aimed to be a Sammelpartei, if not the party of the whole nation. And it was voted into his vocation, when winning 67% of the Parliament’s seats on May 20th, 1990. Indeed, one does not need to unveil conspiracies or seek occult manipulations in order to explain the miner riots. By choosing ideology as battleground with the power established in December 1989, and by distinguishing itself - through group activities, publications and mostly through the University Square’s long rally - as its sole redoubtable opponent, the intellectual élite automatically became the designated target of a unified people linked to the leader of the state by what could be considered a qualified populist relationship. The extreme public visibility of the critical intellectuals in 1990 was viewed as a threat by the popular élites, addicted to the privileges they enjoyed during the communist regime and who did not feel debarred by the precariousness of their level of education. These working class élites, of which the National Salvation Front seemed to be the spokesman, claimed not only to be democratic, as they cast a majority ballot on the May 1990 elections, but to be animated by the most authentic form of democracy, the direct one.

The emergence of the party system and the decline of the ideological bipolarity led during 1992 to a change of regime. The popular front that had naturally resorted to populist strategies was to be replaced by a “particracy” for which the tactics of coalitions and the technique of setting up parliamentary majorities become a fundamental principle of

government. The ideological confrontation between the people and the intelligentsia ended with the demise of the Front. The cultural and intellectual élites found themselves once more excluded as such from the political sphere. Paradoxically, the public authority of the intellectual élite seems to have in Romania the same life expectancy as the populist practices.

Between the elections of 1992 and those of 2000, the divide neo-communist power/anti-communist civil society consumed almost entirely the modest capital of participation to public life that most Romanians were willing to invest in contracting a new political bond. The “weak” political function, the one accomplished by electoral turn out and parliamentary debates, has been taken over by the parties. The “strong” political function, the one that poses the foundations of nation building, has been taken back by the state.

As a consequence, from 1992 on, the post-communist Romanian polity has an extremely ambiguous relationship with representative democracy and the modern practices of sovereignty. In the first place, that ambiguity is of a rhetorical nature. The term society is by and large missing from the Romanian political discourse, except for the technical expression civil society. In addition, for most Romanians, the very notion of civil society does not refer to the citizens’ participation in the public life through grass roots associations, but to the “professionals”, which chair non-governmental organizations.