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Romanians – From Europhiles to Reluctant Europeans

Recently Romania turned into the most Europeanised country on the continent, a statement which will take many by surprise. Romania is not by any means the oldest, biggest, richest country in the EU nor is it particularly Europhile. Yet its recent political and constitutional crises were a test case for the viability of democratic institutions in central and eastern Europe and for the design of the European Union itself. A latecomer in the EU with a notably difficult political and economic transition, the country is still unsuccessfully struggling with widespread corruption and clientelism, a weak administrative capacity, a population disillusioned with the government and with political parties, increasing disparities, an ailing local democracy and its mass media captured by political and economic interests. Its structural weaknesses invite criticisms at European level to the point the very relation between EU level actors and Member States is questioned. The political dynamic only made things worse. In 2012, the president survived a landslide referendum, amidst widespread popular discontent, questionable actions by the then opposition, an electoral process with irregularities and an energetic involvement of EU level actors. In no other European country the EU has been more influential in determining who owns power, the very essence of politics. It is in this respect that Romania is 'Europeanised' much more than other countries. Apart from various indicators of 'Europeanisation', at least during the year 2012, the national-European continuum was never as narrow, as interconnected and as fluid.

But what is the significance for the European project especially now when the economic crisis puts pressure on the existing institutional arrangements? Is the EU ready to be dragged into the increasing turbulent national politics of its members? What are the terms of its involvement? And how does this influence the shaping of national politics and citizens' attitudes towards the EU and towards their national institutions? With a growing number of countries experiencing political and economic crises but also popular discontent, it is time to think thoroughly about the EU as an emergency and problem solving agent, and perhaps warn against the negative and unintended consequences of an unclear policy reflecting a lack of wider consensus on what the EU should do in relation with its Member States.

Never-ending transition: regime crisis and popular discontent

Due to rather exceptional events in 2012, Romania made it to the forefront of European debates. In the beginning of the year street protests (enjoying widespread public support according to polls) erupted in many of Romania's cities including the capital Bucharest. The protests came unexpectedly, even though in the two years before significant tensions had accumulated in society. One of the reasons was that the incumbent President Traian Basescu pushed a radical austerity programme, with the consent of the IMF and the European Commission and backed by a narrow parliamentary majority and a prime minister which failed to exert any control over policy. Societal unrest was also triggered by the perception of widespread corruption and clientelism under the patronage of the president and some key leaders in the main centre-right party PDL.

The street protests started after the sacking of a Palestinian born doctor who publicly opposed a new health law in which the privatisation of medical emergency services was planned. The protests soon turned into a wider platform for expressing discontent, mainly against the divisive figure of the president but also expanding to other key political and economic issues. At that moment, the opposition alliance created by the Liberal and Social Democratic Parties was holding a parliamentary strike. The parliamentary majority reacted by removing Prime Minister Emil Boc and replacing him with the Head of Romania's Foreign Intelligence Agency (SIE) Mihai Razvan Ungureanu. The move did not lessen the popular and political pressure and, due to the background of the newly appointed prime minister,

raised serious concerns in the media and in civil society over the role of intelligence and para intelligence institutions in Romanian politics.

The prime minister, perceived as another political agent of the president, failed to gather enough support in the parliament and didn't survive a censorship motion 70 days into his mandate. The president asked the head of the Social Democratic Party to form a new government. After its validation the main task of the new government was to organise the local elections. These elections brought an overwhelming victory for the former opposition parties.

The government parties soon pursued the impeachment of the president, a goal clearly stated in their political discourse. Following an unclear opinion from the constitutional court, concerning the breaching of a constitutional provision by the president, the parliament decided to suspend him. The citizens went to the polls and voted with an overwhelmingly majority (86%) in favour of the impeachment. The referendum, however, was not validated because the turnout was lower than 50+1, a rule that the constitutional court imposed amidst serious domestic concerns over its legitimacy. The European Commission backed the constitutional court ruling. The president returned to office, which means that now there is a co-habitation with the executive branch being divided between a president and a prime minister with distinct and opposing political support.

The year 2012 brought unprecedented tensions, citizens' involvement, political change and realignments. The structure of the constitutional system was challenged after a prolonged crisis. The key in understanding the crisis is in how the political system was shaped at the beginning of transition and how the main political actors used it to advance their political interests. Romania has a semi-presidential system, in which the president, elected by popular vote, has authority over some policy areas as foreign and defence policy while everything else resides with the prime minister. This constitutional system is put to the test in two situations: when the president and the prime minister come from different parties (co-habitation) and when the president seeks to extend his control over prime minister and parliament. Both situations occurred in Romania and triggered serious political tensions. More debate is expected in the following year, as both president and prime minister announced they have specific and distinct views on how the constitution should be reformulated.

Romania has a multi-party system with no dominant party. In the recent two years there were significant changes in the party landscape. The strongest party remains the Social Democratic Party, a successor organisation of the Communist Party. It is especially strong at local level and has a functioning party bureaucracy. The social democrats were joined in 2010 by the liberals forming the Social Liberal Union, after the landslide defeat of the former in the presidential election of 2009. The liberals represent the oldest political force and had an important role in building a pro-democracy alliance, which in 1996 succeeded in removing President Ion Iliescu, the first leader of the social democrats and a long-standing communist official.

The two parties were forced into an alliance by the growing power of the Liberal Democrats, a party which was reformed by the Mayor of Bucharest and current President Traian Basescu. The party is promoting a centre-right platform, where different ideological currents co-exist (conservative, Christian-democrat). It was a party which has been built by recruiting local officials from other parties. The party of the Hungarian minority (UDMR) has been a very relevant actor. Despite its small size, they have played a pivotal role in building majorities in the parliament. It is currently challenged from within the Hungarian community by more radical parties. If the party will fail to enter the parliament at some point, there would be serious prospects of deterioration of the minority-majority relations. Other minor parties in the parliament are the Conservative Party (PC), allied with the Liberals and the Progressive

Party (UNPR) allied with the Social Democrats. There are also newcomers in Romanian politics. Worryingly enough, they are almost all placed in the right political spectrum. The People's Party (PP-DD) formed last year by a popular TV journalist, practices a very blunt and corrosive discourse against the political class. Their support is high amongst the less educated and less affluent sections of the society. In the recent election, they gathered 12% of the votes and became a relevant political actor. Their parliamentary group significantly decreased in number in less than two years due to the aggressive recruitment from the governing parties and their weak ties with the organisation. The president created a new party, the Popular Movement Party (PMP) after his allies in the PDL party lost the internal leadership contest. Other two parties are the New Republic (NR), a centre-right organisation with strong neo-liberal and conservative attitude, formed mainly by young people. The second is the Civic Force (FC), formed by ex-prime minister and former head of the Foreign Intelligence Agency Mihai Răzvan Ungureanu. The FC is also openly neo-liberal but less conservative than NR.

The Europeanisation of a domestic political conflict

How can we explain the Europeanisation of the Romanian political crisis? It was not the first time EU level actors got deeply involved in the internal dynamics of Member States and accession countries. The cases of Austria, Greece and Hungary stand out but in a different way. In Romania's case we had witnessed an almost complete alignment of European actors with their Romanian counterparts. This could signal the emergence of a European cleavage structure and organisational actors willing to compete in an integrated and transnational political space. But it is no accident that this happened. Probably the most important variable is the development of functional European Party Federations (EPF) having both central structures of coordination and relevant party members at national level. After 1989 all the Central and Eastern European parties actively sought the membership in the European level party federations. The EPF were also going through a process of institutionalisation and centralisation.

The interest in building up ties was shared. The EPFs wanted to win the European elections and to better coordinate their representatives at the EU level, both in the community and intergovernmental institutions. The new Member States were a significant reservoir of political influence, given their population and presence in the decision-making structures at EU level. For the CEE parties joining an EPF and/or a political group in the EP was the ultimate international validation of their leadership, programme and organisation. This was especially important as the CEE countries exited their geopolitical isolation. Given their generally poor political performance and organisation as well as significance, the CEE parties have kept the European backing as a highly valuable resource. This was a result of the lack of internal legitimacy and more importantly a substitute for a political programme. The EU integration enjoyed the consent of the large majority of CEE citizens making the pro-integration platform a sure bet even though in terms of democratic competition this has led things into a dead end. Yet the leverage of the EPF structures remained very weak in terms of impact on how the CEE parties operate.

The relations of the Romanian parties with the EPFs follow this pattern closely. It is significant that none of the parties supported a Eurosceptic platform with one exception, the Greater Romania Party which was part of a short lived EP political group, Identity, Tradition, Sovereignty. As compared with other countries the impact on the party system was more significant. The successor of the communist party, now called Social Democratic Party (PSD) used the Party of European Socialists (PES) membership to gain external legitimacy and also to eliminate the possible competition from other parties. As the PES has a policy which pushes for the unification of parties at national level, the smaller Romanian Social Democratic Party (PSDR) had little chance to exist on its own. It is important to mention that the latter was the continuator of the interwar social democratic tradition, which was opposed to the communist regime. This policy also encouraged the Democratic Party (PD), formed as

an early splinter group of the National Salvation Front, the predecessor of PSD to change its international affiliation from the PES to the European People's Party (EPP). The rapidity of this switch reveals the weak programmatic nature of the Romanian parties. Two other Romanian parties were members of the EPP: the National Peasant Christian Democratic Party (PNTCD), an interwar party which re-established itself after the regime change. It was the main governing party between 1996 and 2000, but after a notably difficult legislature nearly collapsed and never regained its organisational strength and status. The second was the earlier mentioned Democratic Union of the Romanian Magyars (UDMR), an ideologically diffuse minority party. The Romanian liberals (PNL) had a very tumultuous post-communist history but they were a constant political presence in the parliament and in government. Their membership in the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) was continuous and uncontested. The three main EPF's were also the main supporters of their member parties during the political and constitutional crisis in 2012.

But it was not only the EPFs that played a crucial role. Key political leaders at EU and national level also intervened in the crisis, most notably the president of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Some of the reasons of this involvement were immediately obvious. Removing a head of state during his term is a rather exceptional procedure, which could create a precedent. The main reason for his removal was his push for the radical austerity measures that were part of the mainstream political response to the financial crisis. It would have sent a strong signal against these measures. Also, the president is the country's representative in the European Council.

During the crisis all the EPFs sent messages of support to their members. There were, however, differences in tone and approach. The European Commission framed its intervention referring to the existing Mechanism for Cooperation and Verification (MCV) a special instrument existing for Bulgaria and Romania. This instrument allowed the EC to maintain the pressure on the two countries to continue the reforms in the area of justice and anti-corruption. And even though it seemed to be a constitutional debate, the crisis was framed as a rule of law issue. The impeachment procedure was problematic in itself. In order to impeach the president, the alliance formed by the Liberals and Social Democrats first removed the ombudsman and then the presidents of the chamber of deputies and the senate, both members of the pro-presidential party PDL. During the crisis the EC strongly asked the political parties involved to observe the decisions of the constitutional court, most notably concerning the validation threshold for the referendum. The referendum was in the end not validated as only 46% of the voting population turned out to vote of which approximately 86% expressed themselves in favour of the impeachment. During the crisis some political leaders indicated that the positions of the president of the Commission and the of the commissioner for home affairs were affiliated with the EPP, the same party family having as member the PDL, the pro-presidential party. The European Parliament aligned itself with the position of the European Commission even though its president, Martin Schulz, is a social democrat. Angela Merkel, the German chancellor and one of the preeminent EPP leaders also voiced her support for the beleaguered president. Most of the Romanian political actors and opinion leaders recognised that the crisis would not have had the same resolution in the absence of the EU level intervention.

Towards a new Euroscepticism?

This opened a new set of issues. Apparently the intervention went against the popular will expressed in the overwhelming vote in favour of the impeachment. What would be the reaction of the Romanian public — on medium and long term — to the EU level intervention? First, the emergence of a new current of Eurosceptic attitudes was inhibited by the position of the Social Democrats and Liberals, the two main promoters of the impeachment. Even though some of the key members expressed their disappointment with the position taken by EU officials, this did not turn into a stable and programmatic criticism. The criticism was not directed towards EU institutions per se but more against the EPP and PDL representatives

pointing out that their coordination can be explained by the existence of transnational partisan links. In this respect, the Romanian party based Euroscepticism remained notably weak. The public opinion largely followed the direction of the main parties even though there is dynamic that shows some structural changes.

In an opinion poll launched in April 2013, 35% of the respondents considered that joining the EU was beneficial for the country¹. 21% considered that it wasn't beneficial and the rest (34%) remained undecided. In a separate question the respondents were asked with what they associate the EU. The 'positive/Europhile' associations were mixed in the predetermined answers with the 'negative/Eurosceptic' ones. The EU is associated with free circulation of people (76, 2%), democracy and human rights (57, 1%), peace with the neighbouring countries (55, 6%), economic development (47, 3%) and jobs (44, 5%). All these associations are positive in the sense that they acknowledge the role of EU in providing opportunities, development, democracy and peace, its essential promise and vision. But the structure of the 'Eurosceptic' associations is interesting. For only 31% and respectively 19, 9% the EU means losing the national and religious identity. This may come as a surprise for a peripheral country, a late moderniser and nation builder with a strong Christian Orthodox Church and deep-rooted social conservatism. So, if there is a future Euroscepticism in sight it is likely to be nationalistic and conservative. The other dominant associations were: 53, 9% with the intervention in the domestic politics of the country, 50, 6% with subordination to western countries, 49, 8% with the spread of the economic crisis, 43, 7% with losing control over the economy and 41, 6% with the exploitation of natural resources. All these associations show that this type of Euroscepticism is more nuanced and contextual. The EU level intervention in the political crisis definitely left a mark. Resistance to intervention/subordination can become part of sovereignty centered platform, not necessarily nationalistic but aimed at insulating the polity from external/ European interference. The rest of associations isarepr economic but their political effects can be significant. It is relevant that more people tend to associate the EU with the spread of the economic crisis than with economic development. Losing the reins over economy, somehow connected to the subordination fear, is questioning again the loss of sovereignty and also the retreat of the state from the economy, a key principle of EU economic conditionality. The exploitation of natural resources can be surprising as an EU correlate but it makes sense in a country which relied heavily on extractive industries and collapsed after 1989 only to be restarted with the help of foreign investments. Altogether, all the possible negative associations depict a kind of unusual but nonetheless structural Euroscepticism. It has both a political and economic dimension and surprisingly it resembles an anti-colonial dimension specific to other regions of the world. It is not unusual for Eurosceptic public attitudes to lack a political party representation. Apparently this is the case in Romania where the EU is both present and politicised but did not emerge as a key dimension in party politics. Soon after the crisis the EU retreated from being an obvious actor, and did not project any long term policy onto Romania, apart from the business as usual interactions.

Conclusion

The political and constitutional crisis last year showed that EU level actors can be easily dragged into domestic conflicts. This could be an indication of the fact that a single European political space is emerging and actors are forging ideological and political links across territories and levels of government. It also shows that Europeanisation can be an almost fortuitous/ accidental process triggered by the vulnerabilities of the member countries. But intervention in complicated and tense situations is not without risks. If there is no clear policy and coordinated action of the EU level actors, this might cause further political problems and damage credibility. Coordinated action is difficult to achieve given the increasing politicisation of the EU level institutions. However, apart from the tension between politicisation and

¹ INSCOP Research, The attitude of the Romanians towards the European Union, may 2013, <http://www.inscop.ro/mai-2013-atitudinea-romanilor-fata-de-uniunea-europeana/>

coordination, there is a bigger challenge. It is the spread of the perception that the EU works for a select few, leaving the others to wrestle with the economic crisis and against the structural problems of the government.. From enthusiastic Europhiles Romanians turned rather rapidly into reluctant Europeans. Associating the EU with the complicated and messy national politics comes with a price. And this price reflects the high expectations of the Romanians towards the EU which was for long considered a benign and neutral actor. The further integration, politicisation and democratisation of the EU could also bring more public disappointment. Whether EU and citizens are able to cope with this and move forward remains to be seen.



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