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ROMANIAN PARLIAMENTARY DEVELOPMENT UNDER THE POWER CHANGE (1996-2000)

Timur Yerbolatovich Kanapyanov

kanapyanov@yahoo.com

PhD student in the Department of Political Science, L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National
University, Astana, Kazakhstan
Scientific advisor – Naubat Kaliyevich Kaliyev

By the end of term of the second post-communist parliament the political situation in Romania had altered substantially. The coalition formed by the Iliescu's Party of Social Democracy of Romania (PDSR) had been fragmented and slowly started to fall apart. By October 1995, the Greater Romania Party (PRM) had been removed from the government, later, in March 1996, the PDSR ended its coalition with the Socialist Labor Party (PSM), and by September the Romanian National Unity Party (PUNR) also quitted the coalition [1, p. 170]. By the time of elections to the Parliament in 1996 Iliescu and the PDSR was less popular in comparison to the 1992 elections. The opposition represented by the Democratic Convention of Romania (CDR) was more consistent and stronger, although it was also fragmented and between 1992 and 1996 some former associates left the coalition. Roman's renamed party now called the Democratic Party (PD, former PD FSN) formed a coalition with other social democratic parties called the Social Democratic Union (USD) [2, p. 139]. The forthcoming parliamentary and presidential elections had to meet furious competition between the crippled and weak ruling party, fragmented but more mature opposition represented by the CDR, and the Roman's PD with powerful allies represented by the USD.

Another thing to change was the actual number of political parties and movements. One of the main features of Romanian political life has been the high number of political parties. After the 1989 revolution in political landscape of Romania political parties and movements had mushroomed. In 1992 the figure was over 250 and this development was helped by the low legal requirement of a minimum party membership of only 251 [3, p. 5]. However, following the new law on political parties enacted in March 1996, political parties must now have a membership of 10,000 members domiciled in at least 15 counties but not less than 300 in each county, and must be registered with the Tribunal of the Municipality of Bucharest. Accordingly, the number of parties/alliances registering their electoral signs by the deadline of September was reduced to 57 [3, p. 6].

The elections to the House of Deputies and the Senate were held on 3 November 1996 [4]. For the parliamentary elections once again was employed the proportional representation system. Namely, Deputies and Senators are elected for 4 years in constituencies on the basis of a list system and independent candidatures, according to the principles of proportional representation based on multi-member constituencies formed by the 42 Counties (Judets) including Bucharest and Ilfov Agricultural Sector [3, p. 3]. Candidates can be put forward by parties or coalitions or they can stand as independents. Independents need an endorsement of at least 0.5% of the eligible votes in the constituencies they hope to represent [3, p. 3]. Candidates for the Chamber of Deputies must be

at least 23 years of age and for the Senate at least 35 years of age and otherwise qualified to be elected [3, p. 3]. The number of seats in the House of Deputies and the Senate remained unchanged, 328 and 143 respectively.

The results of election to the lower house were as following: the CDR (30.17%, 122 seats), the PDSR (21.52%, 91 seats), the USD (12.93%, 53 seats), the UDMR (6.64%, 25 seats), the PRM (4.46%, 19 seats), and the PUNR (4.36%, 18 seats) [5]. Besides, according to constitution 15 seats in the House of Deputies were distributed to minority organizations. The outcome of elections had surprised everybody. As we can see only 6 parties and coalitions managed to bypass the 3% threshold, whereas in 1992 this number was 7.

Accordingly, the results of election to the Senate were almost identical to the lower house and seats were distributed as following: the CDR (30.7%, 53 seats), the PDSR (23.08%, 41 seats), the USD (13.16%, 23 seats), the UDMR (6.82%, 11 seats), the PRM (4.54%, 8 seats), and the PUNR (4.22%, 7 seats) [5]. Regarding parliamentary groups, the number of groups in the lower house decreased to 8 and in the Senate was almost the same number of groups, due to the fact that now according to standing orders only 5 senators needed to form a parliamentary group [1, p. 171].

As Steven D. Roper pointed out 'the results of the parliamentary and presidential elections indicated a clear rejection of the politics of the past' [1, p. 170]. First of all, it was first time in the post-revolution history of Romania when the opposition had actually won a plurality of seats in the Parliament. Indeed, the CDR managed to win over 30% of seats in both chambers of Parliament. While for the ruling party PDSR and other parties these elections were clear defeat. Moreover, first time in the post-communist elections the uninterrupted rule by the communists and their successors was ended by the clear victory of the anticommunist opposition. 'In addition to its parliamentary victory, CDR presidential candidate Emil Constantinescu defeated Iliescu in the second round' [1, p. 170]. The defeat of Iliescu in the presidential race was crucial moment in Romanian politics in general and particularly for the development of parliamentarism in the country. This was the first time in 60 years of Romanian political history that a head of state was changed by the electorate (Michael Shafir and Dan Ionescu 1997, cited in Roper 2005). According to Roper previous heads of state had either died in office or abdicated [6, p.82].

As it was mentioned above the Iliescu's PDSR was a loser in the parliamentary elections and enjoyed second place with approximately 22% of seats in the parliament. Roper singles out some following factors which affected the outcome of the 1996 elections (negatively for the PDSR and Iliescu): "First, Iliescu and the PDSR could not control the electronic media as they had done in 1992. The independent and popular television station Pro-TV assured that the opposition would receive equal and fair news coverage. Second, the CDR offered voters a more positive and clear program called the "Contract with Romania." Third, there was a change in the Romanian electorate itself. The new entrepreneurial class distrusted the PDSR's economic policy, and the working class began to change its party allegiance because of the poor economic performance of the Văcăroiu government and the parliament" [1, p. 170].

In a matter of few weeks after the elections the CDR formed a coalition government with the UDMR and the USD and the mayor of Bucharest, Victor Ciorbea was selected as a new prime minister [6, p.82]. There were great hope and big expectations to the Ciorbea government about the economic and political development of Romania. However, as it happens usually, soon after the coalition was formed the members of coalition started to diverge on various issues. Contradictory stance of the USD and the UDMR to the CDR within the coalition made it difficult to pass legislation for the Ciorbea government. Finally on 30 March 1998, after permanent economic failures and long contradictions within the coalition, the entire government resigned [6, p.82]. Instead of Ciorbea the coalition selected Radu Vasile. However, in a matter of year disagreement between Vasile and Constantinescu had resulted in a presidential decree dismissing Vasile. Taken together, during the period of third post-communist parliament Romania saw 2 governments. It says about governmental instability and that the Parliament did not manage to transfer all conflicts into the parliamentary debate. It happened mainly because the legislature failed to institutionalize and strengthen its powers and still was weak institution in the country.

Nevertheless, the elections of 1996 and the victory of the CDR were a turning point in post-revolution political life of Romania. It was also a good impetus for the parliamentary development in the country, because for the first time the ruling party staffed with former communists did not dominate in the post-communist legislature. The third parliament of Romania was formed by the healthy and fair elections and a huge number of contenders participated in the electoral race. The outcome showed that the Parliament was represented by the various interests and it was first step towards genuine multi-party legislature. Although parties and the Parliament were more mature than before, the reality still was that much of the conflict stemmed from a clash of personalities [1, p. 172]. Indeed, as we have seen all disagreements and tensions either within the coalition or in the Parliament and the Government derived from high ranking individuals such as Iliescu, Roman, Constantinescu, Ciorbea, Vasile, and so on. It is to say that during the third post-communist parliament of Romania politics were still oriented and evolved around personalities rather than established institutions. But we have to admit that this parliament was much more active than its predecessors in terms of law-making process and the parliamentary oversight of the executive. For example, between 1997 and 1998, the parliament passed 481 laws and 381 interpellations were addressed to government officials [1, p. 172]. The number of laws was almost equivalent to the number of laws passed during the first five years of the parliament's post-communist existence. Yet the number of decrees enacted by the President during 1997 and 1998 much more exceeded of those passed by the parliament and this number was close to the more than 1000 decrees [1, p. 173]. The third post-communist parliament of Romania was less influenced by the president Constantinescu as it was clear case when Iliescu was the president. It happened due to the fact that Constantinescu had to rely on the coalition within the legislature rather than his own party, whereas Iliescu's party enjoyed an absolute majority in the first parliament and a plurality of seats in the second one. Therefore, Iliescu had more influence to the legislature, because he did not have to form a coalition in order to select the government, at least in the first post-communist legislature. All in all, the Parliament still lacked strong parties that do not rely on personalities. The CDR alliance and the PDSR became more disorganized, thus extremist and nationalist parties enjoyed more popular support from the disoriented population. As national elections approached in 2000, the political system had become more divided [6, p. 85]. In order to have more institutionalized and more professional parliament the stable and consolidated party system was needed very much.

To sum up, the parliamentary activity and the level of parliamentarism in the first decade after the revolution was very well assessed by Cornelia Ilie as following: "During the first tormented decade of post-communist transition the Romanian Parliament was rather weak and ineffective. Apart from the heavy Communist legacy, this may be accounted for by the fact that the country adopted a French-like semi-presidential regime in which president Ion Iliescu had a dominant role. As a result, parliamentary oversight of the executive was minimal. After 1996, under Constantinescu's rule, the parliamentary activity improved, as did parliamentary control over the legislative process. However, the parliamentary activity was still ineffective, allowing the president to exercise legislative power" [7, p. 197].

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