

ROMANIA: THE POLITICAL BACKGROUND

by Thomas Carothers

1. The November 1996 elections in Romania marked the most significant political turning-point in the country since the fall of Nicolae Ceausescu. Romanians voted out of office President Ion Iliescu, the former communist official who had led the country since 1989, and elected in his place Emil Constantinescu, a professor and former Dean of the University of Bucharest, who represented the Romanian Democratic Convention (CDR), the largest coalition of opposition parties. At the same time, control of the government passed from Iliescu's Social Democracy Party of Romania (PDSR) to a new governing coalition made up of the Democratic Convention, the Democratic Party (PD) - a smaller coalition of former opposition parties led by Petre Roman, who had served as Prime Minister from May 1990 to September 1991 and the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR).

2. Before examining the challenges and opportunities for Romania's further democratization in this new juncture, it is worthwhile briefly to review the recent political past, focusing on the period between the December 1989 and the November 1996 elections. This seven-year period can be characterized as a gradualistic, often ambiguous transition away from communist rule towards democracy. The transition process entailed the achievement of many basic elements of democracy, including a democratic constitution and regular, genuine elections in which diverse political parties competed, and a general respect for basic political and civil rights. A varied and active media, both printed and electronic, grew up around the country. Labour unions operated locally and nationally. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) sprang up by the thousands, in a wide range of sectors including social services, human rights, and the environment.

3. In those years, Romania's process of economic reform - the attempted transition from a calamitous communist economy to a functioning market system - was similarly hesitant and partial. The Government enacted a number of laws establishing a basic framework for a market economy, primarily in the period from 1990 to 1992. Private enterprise did get under way, and hundreds of thousands of small and medium-size enterprises started up. The privatization of state companies proceeded slowly, but did advance in 1995 and 1996. Agricultural land was largely privatized. Some foreign investment did flow into the country.

4. President Iliescu's commitment to market reform policies, however, was half-hearted at best. He feared the social disruption that a tougher fiscal line could bring, and was disinclined to give up the levers of political power which went with the continued high level of state employment in the economy. Many reform initiatives were announced, but few were fully implemented. Key areas such as privatization, the creation of incentives for foreign investment, and financial sector reform were particularly problematic. Some economic growth did occur in the mid-1990s after a harsh bottoming-out of the economy at the beginning of the decade; but the economic situation deteriorated in 1996, revealing the absence of deep structural reform. For most Romanians, actual improvements in their day-to-day economic life were slow to arrive, and were usually overshadowed by heightening insecurity over rising prices and the spectre of unemployment.

5. Romania's difficult post-1989 trajectory must of course be understood in relation to the harshness of the Romanian experience with communism. Throughout the 1990 - 1996 period, the debilitating legacy of Romania's forty-odd years of communist rule continually made itself felt. The last ten years of Ceausescu's regime were particularly repressive and despotic, and much worse than the political life of the other Eastern European countries (with the exception of Albania). The cardinal elements of this legacy included a profound distrust by citizens of political life and all organized forms of power, a shattering atomization of the society, a deep fear of taking individual initiatives, and a paralysing and widespread sense of victimization. The gradualistic socio-political transition of the 1990s can be analysed in terms of the former political and economic institutions discussed above. It can also be understood as the progressive working-off of the legacy of the communist past. The process has been a complex mix of attempting to rediscover and revitalize positive, pro-democratic features of pre-1939 Romanian life while at the same time attempting to enter the fast-moving, challenging European world of the 1990s.

6. The experience of the major political parties which were in opposition from 1990 to 1996 exemplified this dualism. Several of the opposition parties, the National Peasant Christian-Democratic Party, the National Liberal Party and the Social Democratic Party, were historical parties, suppressed in the 1940s

and then brought to life again by aging leaders who had long before been young party activists. These parties faced the daunting challenge of updating their programmes and practices very quickly, and bridging their own generational gaps. At the same time, around them were forming new political parties or movements, such as the Civic Alliance Party and the Democratic Party, which were very much creations of the contemporary political moment. Inevitably, this mix of old and new was slow to move forward, and was often riven with complicated alliances and divisions.

7. Although the processes of political and economic transition in Romania in the seven years after 1989 were difficult and slow, there was little doubt about the overall direction. A large majority of Romanians believe strongly, even fervently, that their country has a Western and democratic destiny. They feel that with the ending of communist rule, Romania can finally take its proper place as part of a democratic Europe. President Iliescu made Romania's eventual membership of both the European Union and of NATO the two foundation-stones of his foreign policy, and this position was fully shared by the parties then in opposition. This clear sense of a pro-Western external orientation - questioned only by a small, declining part of the domestic political spectrum - has provided a larger, coherent framework for the country's internal processes, one that has helped sustain the overall project of Romania's democratization even as she has passed through trying periods and moments of doubt.

The Phases of Recent Political Life

The Start of a New Era

8. Romania's political life unfolded in three phases from December 1989 to the November 1996 elections. The first, and briefest, phase was the period of fluidity and great uncertainty after the fall of Ceausescu. In the early months of 1990, Romanian political society was in a state of psychological flux, caught between contradictory sensations; on the one hand, after years of the most asphyxiating socio-political rigidity everything suddenly seemed open to change, yet on the other hand there lurked the disquieting impression that significant parts of the old order were still in place.

9. In these months, a new configuration of political forces began to define itself. The National Salvation Front, the political entity led by Iliescu which emerged in Ceausescu's wake to rule the country, began to operate as a political party. In early 1990 the Front declared its intention to hold early elections and to compete in them. At the same time, a number of new, independent organizations began to appear - a rash of fledgling parties, labour unions, student groups, human rights organizations, newspapers, magazines, and environmental groups. These were in many cases small groups, consisting of one leader and a small band of followers, but they represented the beginning of an independent sector in Romania, something that had been almost completely absent during the Ceausescu years.

10. This initial period of political openness culminated in presidential and parliamentary elections in May 1990. Iliescu, as the candidate of the National Salvation Front, received an overwhelming 85% of the vote. In the parliamentary elections, the Front received 66% of the vote for the Chamber of Deputies and 67% for the Senate, with the various major opposition parties splitting most of the rest of the votes. The elections were substantially flawed in a number of ways. The Front exploited its position of near-complete political dominance to distort the campaign in its favour, using the state television as a propaganda tool on its own behalf, and using state resources for its campaign. In addition, the still-active secret police continued some of their old practices of political infiltration and harassment, creating an atmosphere of intimidation among people in the fledgling opposition sector. None the less the elections clearly established Iliescu as the person charged with leading Romania in its early transition away from communism.

From 1990 to 1992

11. The next political period lasted just over two years, from the aftermath of the May 1990 elections to the next set of national elections in September and October 1992. It was a very mixed period and began with what was unquestionably the low moment of post-1989 Romanian political life: the coming to Bucharest in June 1990 of several thousands of miners who violently broke up a large and peaceful University Square demonstration in central Bucharest. The miners, who many Romanians believe were called to the city by President Iliescu, not only inflicted terrible violence against the demonstrators but also selectively ransacked and looted the offices of some of the opposition parties and independent newspapers. The miners' rampage did severe damage to the new Government's already uncertain international reputation,

and was a traumatic internal blow to Romania's democratic aspirations.

12. Over the two subsequent years, Romania struggled through a slow process of political opening and limited democratization. Opposition parties continued to operate and some of them gradually began to build up national organizations. Newspapers and magazines of all different political stripes entered the field. A few human rights groups became active on a national plane. The limitations on this nascent democratic political debate were still considerable, but the direction was basically positive. Two consecutive Prime Ministers - Petre Roman who led the Government until forced out of power when the miners returned to Bucharest in September 1991, and Theodor Stolojan, who succeeded Roman and led the Government to the 1992 national elections - contributed considerably to what reform impetus existed at the central level. Both men helped push through a series of basic laws establishing a framework for a transition to a market economy. The programme was far short of the sort of thorough restructuring programmes implemented in some other countries of the region, but it was a start. In addition, under both Roman's and Stolojan's leadership, the Government introduced some partial but nonetheless potentially important reform initiatives in areas such as public administration and judicial training. A new constitution was drafted in this period to replace that of the communist era, and it was adopted by public referendum in 1991.

13. In 1992 Romania went through its second round of post-communist elections. Local elections were held in February 1992 and resulted in a number of opposition victories in the cities. The opposition's relative success reflected its growing strength in urban areas and the fact that political pluralism was starting to become an accepted feature of the system.

14. Parliamentary and presidential elections were held in September 1992, with a second round of the presidential elections taking place in early October. Four main political groupings competed in the elections: the ruling party, led by President Iliescu, which had renamed itself the Democratic National Salvation Front; the opposition parties, many of which had joined an opposition coalition called the Romanian Democratic Convention led by Emil Constantinescu (with the National Peasant Christian-Democratic Party as the anchor party of the coalition), although other opposition parties or groups, including the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania and some Liberal parties competed outside the Democratic Convention umbrella; a new political party led by Petre Roman called the National Salvation Front which was born when Roman split with the original National Salvation Front; and a set of small nationalist parties including the Party of National Romanian Unity, the Great Romania Party and the Socialist Labour Party. These four groupings defined an ideological spectrum with Iliescu's party left of centre, the opposition parties in the centre and centre right, Roman's party between Iliescu's party and the centre, and the nationalist parties on the far left (though they had some rightist tendencies as well).

15. The campaign was more open and the procedural conditions were better than in the 1990 elections. Nonetheless, Iliescu and his party held important advantages in terms of media access (especially television), campaign finances, and a persisting culture of conditioned political obedience in many parts of the countryside. In the parliamentary elections, Iliescu's party won a plurality (about 28%) with the Democratic Convention not far behind at about 20%. Roman's party was third with 10%. The four largest nationalist parties polled a total of 16% and the Hungarian Alliance received about 8%. Iliescu came out ahead in the first round of the presidential elections, but received less than 50%, a significant decrease from the 85% he had obtained in 1990. Constantinescu was second and Roman third. Iliescu won the runoff elections with a showing of 61.4%.

From 1992 to 1996

16. Having been generally accepted by the international community as free and fair, the 1992 national elections greatly helped improve Iliescu's external credibility and led to a gradual normalization in the next few years of Romania's relations with Europe and the United States. By forthrightly proclaiming membership of the European Union and NATO as Romania's main foreign policy objectives, Iliescu removed lingering doubts in the West that Romania might be seeking to pursue either an intermediate position between the West and Russia, or some sort of special Balkan identity. Romania entered the Council of Europe and joined the Partnership for Peace in 1993, and Iliescu began devoting considerable amounts of time and energy in diplomatic efforts to foster closer ties with the major Western powers, particularly the United States, France and Great Britain.

17. With regard to internal affairs, the 1992 elections brought much less change. After the elections Iliescu formed a government in informal coalition with the three largest nationalist parties, his offer to the opposition parties to join a coalition having been turned down. The new Government was led by the little-known Nicolae Vacaroiu, who proved an ineffective, uninspiring leader. From late 1992 up to the 1996 elections, the Vacaroiu Government led the country along what could at best be described as a very slow reform path, which in reality had many elements of stagnation and even backsliding. The Government carried out very few significant reform initiatives, and many of those which had been initiated by the Roman or Stolojan government, such as public administration reform and judicial reform, foundered. The state bureaucracy was heavily politicized in this period, in a reconsolidation of party control over the State. The Parliament was unproductive and often publicly rather inept, which aggravated the already strong tendency among many Romanians to view politicians with serious distrust. Corruption among government officials and politicians became a major problem in these years, and was a further cause of public dissatisfaction.

18. The economic situation improved somewhat, particularly in 1994 and 1995 when a stabilization programme implemented by the semi-independent central bank, the National Bank of Romania, brought inflation down significantly. The economy began to grow in 1994, and in 1995 hit a growth rate of over 6%. The underlying restructuring of the economy was still quite weak, however. Privatization did move forward in 1995 but most of the large, money-losing state industrial enterprises were not on the privatization list and continued to be heavily subsidized by the Government. The agricultural sector also continued to receive large, somewhat hidden subsidies. Energy prices were also kept artificially low, and there remained in place many trade barriers of both a formal and informal nature. The banking sector was still dominated by inefficient, often highly corrupt state banks, rendering credit difficult to obtain for many small and medium-sized enterprises.

19. In 1996 these structural problems began to make themselves felt. Exports fell further and further behind imports. Foreign reserves diminished and the pressure on the national currency increased. Inflation began to increase from its 1995 low of 30%, and the currency began to lose substantial value against the dollar. Faced with a deteriorating economy in an election year, the Government tried to spend its way out of what was becoming an increasingly bad situation. This effort could not be sustained, however, and by late 1996 it was obvious that the basic tenet of Iliescu's approach to market reform - the tempting notion that a transition to a market economy could be achieved without any real pain or dislocation if pursued very slowly - was illusory.

20. Although democratization was fairly stagnant at the level of formal political institutions in the period from late 1992 to 1996, there was positive movement in other sectors. The media continued to operate with a high degree of diversity and freedom. The governing party did maintain its tight political hold on the two state television stations, but it allowed the establishment of several private stations. Although their broadcasting reach was more limited than the state television, they did broadcast news that was not in conformity with the Government line, as well as some informative programmes on current events. Private local television and cable television also expanded considerably. Radio and newspapers remained very diverse, although the general level of professionalism of most journalists improved only slowly.

21. The development of civil society advanced during these years. The most tangible form of this process was the tremendous multiplication of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). By 1996, over 10,000 registered NGOs were in existence and many more were forming every month. The NGO world diversified far beyond the small world of elite-based urban advocacy organizations that sprang up fairly quickly after 1989. NGOs were becoming active in many areas of social, economic and political life, ranging from education to social welfare to environmental issues. The Government maintained its early scepticism towards much of the NGO world, being suspicious of any form of power obviously outside its control, but began at least to enter into dialogues with NGOs and to think about how the Government could relate more positively to this emerging sector. In a very general sense, the mushrooming of NGOs represented the beginning of the reversal of the deep atomization of society that had occurred during the communist years. Each NGO, no matter how small or fragile, represented at least a few people trying to work together co-operatively on matters of mutual interest, building voluntary bonds of thought and action outside the immediate circles of family and workplace. Reweaving this associational web of the Romanian society only just got under way in these years, but it was a start of a deepening of democracy beyond just the formal institutions of politics.

22. After local elections in the spring of 1996, Romania prepared for presidential and parliamentary elections in the autumn. In terms of candidates and parties, the elections seemed to be similar to those of 1992. The three leading presidential candidates were the same - Ion Iliescu, Emil Constantinescu, and Petre Roman. The same four-part configuration of political parties or coalitions was also still in place, with a few changes. The opposition parties had formed some different internal alliances, with the Democratic Convention having lost a few members and a new alliance of Liberal parties, the National Liberal Alliance, having been established. Petre Roman's party, renamed the Democratic Party, had moved from the left closer to the centre, and was clearly in the opposition camp. The Democratic Party competed in the elections in a coalition with the Romanian Social Democratic Party (which is not to be confused with Iliescu's Social Democracy Party in Romania), known as the Social Democratic Union.

23. In addition to the same basic range of candidates and parties, the underlying bases of support for the various parties were fairly similar to 1992. Iliescu and his party drew their core support from the rural population, pensioners, and employees of state enterprises. Constantinescu and the opposition parties generally had their base in the educated urban sector. Though the basic political cleavages were similar, Iliescu was politically weaker in 1996 than in 1992. The deteriorating economic situation hurt his campaign considerably. Public disgust over the high levels of governmental corruption also damaged him and his party significantly, and the inevitable public fatigue faced by any president trying to get elected for a third time also weighed against him. The opposition's basic platform of a sweeping agenda of political and economic reform promised an alternative to the economic, political and moral problems afflicting the country.

24. The result was a victory for the Romanian Democratic Convention and a strong showing by Petre Roman and his party as well. In the first round of the presidential election, Iliescu won 32.2%, Constantinescu 28.1% and Roman 20.5% of the vote. In the runoff, Constantinescu defeated Iliescu 54.5% to 45.4%. The top four vote-getters in the parliamentary elections were the Democratic Convention with about 30%, Iliescu's party with about 22%, the coalition led by Roman with about 13%, and the Hungarian Alliance with almost 7%. This permitted the Democratic Convention to join with Roman's coalition and the Hungarian Alliance to form a solid governing majority. The elections were fairly well run although administrative problems continued to be higher than necessary, reflecting in part the failure to establish a permanent electoral board and the reliance on a provisional electoral administration mechanism.

25. Emil Constantinescu took office soon after the elections and a new government was formed, led by the former mayor of Bucharest and former union leader Victor Ciorbea. The key economic ministries were given to representatives of the National Peasant Party. Petre Roman became head of the Senate and his Democratic Party gained the ministries of defence and foreign affairs. For the first time in well over fifty years, Romania experienced a peaceful, democratic alternation of power.