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Learning Democracy and Market Economy in Post-Communist Romania

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INSTITUTUL EUROPEAN
2012

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1. Introduction

The end of the 1980s marked the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The countries of this region started a complex transition: it was not only a political reform, as in the case of the Latin American transitions to democracy; it was rather a holistic reform, a radical social change. The CEE countries had to structurally change the political, economic, and social domains of the society:

> "First, there is the political transition, the change of the regime. This takes a relatively short time. However, it may be several years before this framework operates smoothly and appropriately, according to the norms and values of Western-type democratic states. The second process is the economic transition, the change from a command economy, controlled by the single ruling party, to a market economy operating with a money mechanism, with the absolute majority of private ownership. This is more difficult and complicated. Finally, the third process is the cultural change and the development of a civil society, which takes an even longer time" (Vitányi, 1999: 187-188).

Successfully completing the changes in all these areas is of tremendous importance because "democracy has endured only in countries with a predominantly market-economy; and it has never endured in a country with a predominantly non-market economy" (Dahl, 1998: 166). It is this "dilemma of simultaneity" that represented the main characteristic of the post-communist transitions. Excluding post-World War II Germany and Japan, where market economy and democracy have been introduced by an external power (Crawford, 1995: 3), the two systems have never been established simultaneously in any other cases (Schopflin 1994; Hall 1995; Offe 1997; Pickel and Wiesenthal 1997).

Given the record of previous attempts to simultaneously switch to democracy and market economy, scholars have been rather skeptical about the success of the post-communist transitions: "Many scholars have identified the economic decline that accompanies economic restructuring as the essential dilemma of the dual transition, arguing that if the well-being of the majority of a population is substantially harmed by reforms, popular support for democracy will erode" (Kullberg and Zimmerman, 1999: 326)[4]. Fortunately, most of these

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[4] See, for instance, Przeworski (1991), Diamond (1992), Haggard and Kaufman (1995), Nelson (1995), and Gati (1996).

grim predictions have been disproved: "amazingly little resistance from below has come to those reforms that have been instituted" (Hall, 1995: 89).

The post-communist transition literature developed around three main actors – institutions, political elites, and citizens. Studies of institutional change dominated the literature, with comparatively less attention being given to the second dimension of the transition and consolidation process – the beliefs, values, and attitudes of the post-communist citizens – or to elite interactions (Diamond 1997, 1999).[5] The institutional change literature largely ignored the idea that democratic and market institutions, while relatively easy to create, cannot function efficiently in a hostile environment: "If democracy and capitalism are to take root in the former communist states, it is necessary not only to create the institutions and processes intrinsic to those systems, but also to foster popular attitudes that are accepting and supporting of them" (Mason and Kluegel, 2000a: 11).[6]

Popular support is not only necessary for the institutions to play their role in society: "just as macro-economic theories have no relevance to everyday life if they cannot be related to micro-economic activities of individuals, so constitutional forms are lifeless or irrelevant if they do not have the support of the people" (Rose, Mishler and Haerpfer, 1998: 8); it is one of the key defining features of democratic regimes (Easton 1965; Miller 1974; Norris 1999).

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[5] Kubicek (2000: 297), in an analysis of post-communist political studies published in the leading political science journals (APSR, BJPS, JOP, WP, CPS, and CP) between 1991 and 1998 found that 41% of the studies focused on institutions and political economy, as opposed to 24% on political culture and 15% on elite interactions.

[6] This is an easy task by comparison to the necessity of creating a new political culture. The formation of the new institutions usually consisted of importing the complete set of democratic institutions (e.g. constitution, electoral rules, government structure, and separation of powers) from a developed democracy. Offe referred to this process as the "copying of institutions" and argued that "copied and translated institutions that lack the moral and cultural infrastructure on which the originals rely are likely to yield very different and often counter-intentional results [...] As a result, the newly founded institutions are in place but they fail to perform in the anticipated ways" (Offe, 1998:212, 217). Later in the transition, most of the post-communist countries were forced to address the problems generated by this import by modifying the institutions: new constitutions were adopted, the electoral system was changed, and the government structure was reformed. In Romania, for instance, in 2006 the society was still debating whether the Parliament should have one chamber or two, whether the President should be elected by the people or by the MPs, whether people should vote for party lists or for individual candidates in the national elections, and about the proper balance of power between the president and the prime minister.

Despite the fact that the post-communist citizens' attitudes represent an important component in the study of post-communist transitions,

> "one of the most striking aspects of the literature on transition is how little we know of what it involves on a daily basis. We have quite a large amount of data and analysis of the macro side of the transition, but relatively little on the micro. We speak of adjustment as if the societies were psychiatric patients requiring a bit of therapy to return to normal. But we know very little about what that normality means or about the strategies used by the population in coping with the change" (Centeno, 1994: 140).

At the center of this study stands the idea that democratic transition and consolidation are not possible in a society that does not accept the ideals of democracy: the stability of a democratic political system is dependent on its consistency with the political values of its people (Almond and Verba 1963; Dahl 1989; di Palma 1990; Diamond 1993; Sørensen 1993; White, Gill and Slider 1993; Hahn 1995).[7] How people react when faced with this dramatic change is perhaps one of the most important elements during the transition: "the people are the ultimate movers of reforms" (Sztompka, 1996a: 127) and, at the same time, they are "the main obstacle to reform" (Przeworski, 1993: 185).

The literature also suggests that, in addition to this attitudinal congruence, the behavior of the citizens has a significant effect: "mass mobilization can contribute to both the founding and the consolidation of democracy" (Bunce, 2003: 170). Democracy requires the active involvement of the citizens (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). This line of thought follows the argument that "a society in which a large proportion of the population is outside the political arena is potentially more explosive than one in which most citizens are regularly involved in activities which give them some sense of participation in decisions which affect their lives" (Lipset, 1960: 180). Active citizen participation in the political arena is "the lifeblood of representative democracy" (Norris, 2002: 215).

Starting from the assumption that a successful transition requires citizens to accept the institutions of the new political regime and the values

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[7] This argument is not without its critics. Barry (1970: 48-52) argued that democratic values are not required for a stable democracy; it is the stable democracy that generates the democratic values. Przeworski (1991), dismissing the role of the citizens' values during the democratization process, argued that all democracy needs in order to survive is a self-enforcing equilibrium. Weingast (1997a, 1997b), while working from a similar perspective, suggested that the citizens' consensus on values is necessary and that the existence of such a consensus forces the elites to reach different self-enforcing equilibriums than when a consensus does not exist.

associated with these, the main goal of this project is to identify and describe the evolution of political culture in Romania from the beginning of the transition to the present. At the most general level, the question I am asking is: How does political culture change?

Democracy needs democratic citizens. During the last days of 1989, twenty-two million *communist* comrades watched (some on the TV screens, others on the streets) how the communist regime under which they lived for more than forty years suddenly collapsed. Fifteen years later, during the last days of 2004, almost twenty-one million citizens voted in their fifth national and presidential elections, choosing their third post-communist president. They were certainly playing the democratic game. But does that make them *democratic* citizens? What are the processes that transform comrades into citizens?[8]

An answer to the previous question requires a definition of a democratic citizen. By democratic citizen I understand first of all a citizen who values democracy as a political system, who believes that despite its problems, democracy, as a form of government, is indeed better than "all those others that have been tried". This is, however, only a minimal definition. Other qualities are usually attributed to a democratic citizen (tolerance, trust, participation) and they help define types of democratic citizens. In the context of a post-communist country an additional component seems to be relevant in defining democratic citizens: planned economy versus market economy.[9]

There are two factors that have made this distinction an important one. First, during the communist regime people have come to equate communism with planned economy and democracy with market economy. Second, the Washington Consensus, although initially designed for the Latin American context, once applied to the Central and Eastern European countries has linked democracy and market economy as two inseparable goals for the post-communist countries, suggesting that one cannot have democracy without a market economy.[10] Democracy and market economy cannot be analyzed separately in the post-communist context: "one of the most delicate sets of conditions for the success and sustainability of democracy relates to socio-economic problems. Democracy cannot be treated in isolation from other social

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[8] To use Bahry's phrase (1999).

[9] This is particularly true in the case of Romania, where not even rudiments of a market economy were allowed to develop during the communist regime.

[10] See Williamson (1990, 2000). It should be noted that the most important international financial institutions (especially the International Monetary Fund) have consistently conditioned their assistance on the implementation of the economic and fiscal reforms proposed by the Washington Consensus.

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and economic processes" (Simai, 1999: 44). These countries were offered a "package" deal: either both democracy and market economy or none. As Centeno argued, "the question should not be whether a particular nation is ready for democracy or the market, but how a minimal social consensus develops about the rules involved in both. […] less attention has been paid to the process of creating the imagined community that could manage the transition" (Centeno, 1994: 139).

This is not to say that democracy and market economy are one and the same thing, but in this particular context the political and economic transformations are so dependent upon each other that one cannot hope to understand either of them without taking them both into account.[11] Throughout this study I will refer to this transformation process as "transition to democracy", when talking about the political transformations, as "transition to market economy", when talking about the economic transformations, or as "transition" or "transition to a liberal democratic market society", when talking about the transition as a whole process, without differentiating between the political and economic aspect.

The goals of this study are, then, to identify the patterns of political culture in Romania, and to identify and explain the trends displayed by the evolution of these patterns over time since the fall of the communist regime.[12] In doing so, the study will explain the process of political culture change in a country that evolved from being one of the most oppressive totalitarian regimes in the communist world to being a democracy.

Defining characteristics

The niche to which this study belongs can be found at the intersection of two theoretical dimensions and one methodological approach: it is a *case study* of *political culture* change during *the post-communist transition* in Romania.

Post-communist transition

This project fits within the framework of transition studies. The post-communist transition process can be interpreted as a particular case of dramatic social change, a case characterized by transition from a communist to a

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[11] The existence of non-democratic countries with market economies should be evidence enough.
[12] These patterns are defined by attitudes toward democracy and market economy.

democratic state with a market economy.[13] While the boundaries between the two main stages of the democratization process, democratic transition and democratic consolidation, are difficult to define, by focusing on the democratization process as a whole I eliminate this definitional problem.[14] For the purposes of this project I define democratic transition as the period of time between the fall of the communist regime and the 1996 elections (1990-1996).[15] Since the 1996 elections marked the first transfer of power, I consider them to indicate the existence of the minimal requirements for democracy (electoral democracy) and, thus, the end of the transition stage of the democratization process. I define democratic consolidation as the period of time between the 1996 elections and the acceptance of Romania as a member of the European Union (1997-2007).[16] Placed on Schedler's *democraticness* continuum, the transition stage in Romania ends with the establishment of electoral democracy, and the consolidation phase ends with the establishment of liberal democracy. I consider the acceptance of Romania within the EU (which requires approval from all current EU members) as an indicator that Romania reached the liberal democracy stage and managed to transform its economic system into a functioning market economy.

The literature identifies different conceptualizations of democratic consolidation, each corresponding to different areas of democratization, answering different research questions, and requiring different research strategies: consolidation as the process of eliminating formal and procedural constraints imposed on democracy; as the elimination, marginalization,

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[13] Thus, at a more general level, this is a study of political culture change during a period of societal upheaval. Other instances of abrupt social changes include the 1911 Chinese Revolution, the Russian October Revolution, Germany's defeat in the Second World War, and, more recently and depending on how the situation will evolve, Iraq's transition to democracy or the Arab Spring.

[14] Pridham suggested that analyses of post-communist transitions in the Balkans "should embrace the democratization process as a whole and not just the transition or the consolidation stage, if only because of the interlacing of different levels of change" (Pridham, 2000: 2).

[15] The first post-communist elections in Romania were held on May 20, 1990. The new Constitution of Romania was adopted on November 21, 1991, and it was approved on December 8, 1991 through a referendum. Following the approval of the new constitution, new presidential and legislative elections were held on September 27, 1992. Alternative transition end-points could be the 1990 elections (the founding elections), the 1992 elections (the first post-communist elections for a full term), or even the 2000 elections (the second transfer of power).

[16] For a more detailed discussion of democratic consolidation see O'Donnell (1996), Schedler (1998), and Munck (2004).

neutralization or democratic persuasion of politically relevant actors who could or might stall the democratic process through violence or by other means; as habituation to democratic procedures and the stabilization of such political behavior, practices and attitudes as are likely to facilitate the normal functioning of democracy; or as the comprehensive process of creating institutions and institutionalizing (Plasser, Ulram, and Waldrauch, 1998: 47-48). Following this typology, I use the third definition of consolidation (habituation to democratic procedures), understanding consolidation not just as the spread of democratic legitimacy (Linz 1990; Diamond 1994; Linz and Stepan 1996) but also as the development of a broad-based democratic political culture (Pridham 1994, 1995; Plasser and Ulram 1996).

From this perspective, democratic consolidation requires the legitimation of the new political institutions, so that the democratic rules of the game are considered as the only viable solution (Linz and Stepan 1996; Plasser, Ulram, and Waldrauch 1998; Diamond 1994, 1999).

Political culture

The political culture approach is the second defining dimension of this study. This is a political culture study in the sense described by Lane as "an approach or method analyzing, for a given group, its basic beliefs, in order to develop a model of those beliefs and their interrelations" (Lane, 1992: 364). This is not a study of Romanian political culture, but a study of the different political cultures in Romania. It is a study of the political cultures that characterize different groups within the Romanian society and of how these cultures transformed during the transition from communism to democracy.

Culture is a highly disputed concept: "the major concern of the skeptical discourse on culture is that the concept suggests boundedness, homogeneity, coherence, stability, and structure whereas social reality is characterized by variability, inconsistencies, conflict, change, and individual agency" (Brumann, 1999: S1). Despite the debates surrounding the concept, most anthropological definitions of culture focus on two main dimensions: values / beliefs / attitudes, and behavior (Harris, 1975: 144; Keesing, 1981: 68; Peoples and Bailey, 1994: 23). The concept was imported in political science without the behavioral dimension, culture being defined as "psychological orientation toward social objects" (Almond and Verba, 1963: 13), as "the system of empirical beliefs, expressive symbols, and values which defines the situation in which political action takes place" (Verba, 1965a: 513).

How well do these standard definitions of political culture fit situations characterized by significant social change? The transition from a communist to a democratic political system requires a change in citizens' political culture.

Cohen (1985: 17) argues that "found in political beliefs and expressed through political behavior, political culture is created and continually recreated through social interaction." Change in political culture is the result of the continuous interaction between subjective beliefs and behavior. From this perspective, political culture is defined as "historically formed patterns of political belief and behavior of the members of a political system, whether a state or a smaller group" (White, 1984: 351) or as "the attitudinal and behavioral matrix within which the political system is located" (White, 1979: 1).

Understanding political culture as resulting from the continuous interplay between beliefs and behavior leads to the issue of change: the political culture approach has been often criticized for not being able to explain political change. Eckstein and Swidler offer two complementary and particularly interesting answers to this problem.

Eckstein (1988) acknowledged that the postulates of culturalism do indeed lead to an expectation of continuity.[17] However, he dismissed post-hoc accounts of political change as the solution to this problem, arguing for the necessity of developing a general culturalist theory of change. The theory he presented deals with both gradual (normal) and drastic (social discontinuity) change, each type requiring a different explanatory mechanism. In the case of gradual changes, the solution consists primarily of people adopting strategies like pattern-maintaining change, perceptual distortion, or increased flexibility. The second type of change, social discontinuity, applies directly to this study. The solution, in this case, suggests that "cognitions that make experience intelligible and normative dispositions (affect, evaluative schemes) must be learned again, and learned cumulatively [...] changes in political cultures that occur in response to social discontinuity should initially exhibit considerable formlessness" (Eckstein, 1988: 796).[18]

Using Merton's types of individual adaptation (1957: 141-157), Eckstein presents the following as the set of strategies available for dealing with drastic changes: ritual conformity (ritualism in Merton's terminology, characterized by an individual's rejection of the cultural goals and acceptance of the norms), self-serving conformity (innovation, with accepted goals and rejected norms), retreatism (retreatism, with both goals and norms rejected), or intransigent resistance to authority (rebellion, with the goals and the norms not only rejected, but also replaced). In addition to these four strategies, Merton also indicates conformity (both the goals and the norms are accepted) as a

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[17] The four postulates, oriented action, orientational variability, cultural socialization, and cumulative socialization, and the ways they work together are discussed in Eckstein (1988: 790-793).

[18] Lipset (1960) and Huntington (1968) developed similar arguments.

possible type of adaptation. These strategies will lead, eventually, to the formation of new culture patterns and themes. Under the postulates of culturalism, this process of political culture change should be "prolonged and socially costly" (Eckstein, 1988: 796).

Swidler, in a similar manner, argued that culture, defined as a tool kit for constructing strategies of action, has different influences in *settled* versus *unsettled* lives: culture has the role of maintaining the existing strategies of action in settled lives, while aiding in the construction of new strategies in unsettled lives.[19] Strategies of action play a significant role in Swidler's theory. They are seen as patterns of organizing action, allowing the achievement of different life goals.

In a departure from the traditional view of culture, however, Swidler argued that strategies of action are more stable than goals, the result of this being that during unsettled lives people might prefer goals for which they already have a strategy of action: "if culture provides the tools with which persons construct lines of action, then styles or strategies of action will be more persistent than the ends people seek to attain. Indeed, people will come to value ends for which their cultural equipment is well suited" (Swidler, 1986: 277).[20] This view may be helpful in explaining, for instance, why some groups accept the ideals of a market economy, while others reject them or accept them only after significant delays (needed for updating their strategies of action).

Ideology and tradition play different roles during *settled* and *unsettled* periods.[21] During unsettled periods, new strategies of action need to be constructed and ideologies stand at the center of this process. Applied to the

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[19] The unsettled lives are periods characterized by drastic change or anomie. Following Geertz, Swidler conceptualized strategies of action as incorporating and depending on "habits, moods, sensibilities, and views of the world" (Swidler, 1986: 277).

[20] Swidler lists two sociological studies, Mancini (1980) and Gerson (1985), as offering empirical evidence for this proposition.

[21] Swidler assumes the existence of a continuum from ideology to tradition to common sense. "An 'ideology' is a highly articulated, self-conscious belief and ritual system, aspiring to offer a unified answer to problems of social action. Ideology may be thought of as a phase in the development of a system of cultural meaning. 'Traditions', on the other hand, are articulated cultural beliefs and practices, but ones taken for granted so that they seem inevitable parts of life. Diverse, rather than unified, partial rather than all embracing, they do not always inspire enthusiastic assent [...] The same belief system may be held by some people as an ideology and by others as tradition; and what has been tradition may under certain historical circumstances become ideology [...] 'Common sense', finally, is the set of assumptions so unselfconscious as to seem a natural, transparent, undeniable part of the structure of the world" (Swidler, 1986: 277).