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POLITICAL CLEAVAGES IN ROMANIA. A THEORETICAL OVERVIEW OF THE POST-COMMUNIST PARTIES AND PARTY SYSTEMS

Anca Parmena Olimid

Abstract

The following article examines the emergence of parties in post-communist Romania concluding that the theoretical basis of cleavages (the Lipset-Rokkanian model) is almost impossible to apply in this country. Accordingly, the historical evolution of the post-communist society and the strategic moves of political actors during democratization were often perceived as an „expected moments lacking any theoretical model”. Contrary to this assumption, I argue that even an incipient cleavage suggests at least two questions about the significance of an ideological framework and a stable party system. I also propose a linkage between Lipset-Rokkan’s model and Kitschelt’s, Deegan-Krause’s and Crowther’s theories. The article begins with an overview of general trends of development of political parties in Romania. a general development of Romanian party system tendencies. Its aim is to present the three main political cleavages using as a starting point for discussion Lewis’s reflection regarding post-communist parties.

Key words: *post-communist cleavages, post-communist party systems, transition, the Lipset-Rokkanian model, electoral behavior.*

Main trends of formation of party system. The democratic transition from „a hundred-party system” to „a partial consolidation of a partial system”

The central argument in the present article is to find the key issues of the post communist transition by focusing on cleavages. The scope and extension of the present paper makes it sensible to limit the selection of literature and political theories. To summarize my approach, there have been six important tendencies in the formation of the party in Romania since 1989:

1. The post-communist party fragmentation;
2. High electoral instability and an ideological vacuum;

3. The return of the „pre-communist” parties in new forms and new ways;
4. The growing abstention at the elections beginning with 2000’s elections and the moral confusion;
5. The declining confidence in Parliament and institutions;
6. The rise of the nationalist rhetoric.

As indicated earlier, my intention is not to analyze all these issues, although in many recent studies the approaches concerning the post-communist party system fragmentation, the high electoral volatility, the ideological vacuum, the growing absence at the elections or the decline confidence in central institutions played the most important role. My decision is not to approach an empirical analyze of the results of post-communist party fragmentation from the difficulty of determining the theoretical framework of the new democracy and the number of parties.

The following paragraph about the party system in Eastern Europe offers the basic reasons why it is important to study the connection between the emergence of party systems and the post communist cleavages: „Early overviews of post-communist Eastern Europe suggested that, of the three main cleavages that contributed to the emergence of party system in Western Europe, only that which produces autonomous or secessionist parties supported by national minorities was likely to appear with equivalent strength in the East. The socio-economic cleavage retained its importance but was likely to impinge in quite different ways on post-communist politics, whereas the resonance of religious cleavages appeared to be surprisingly muted. The kind of party then developing also seemed to militate against the likelihood of such a freezing taking place”¹.

Old Theories vs. New Parties:

The main question of the research is to establish whether and what forms of cleavages emerged in the post-communist political arena. Regarding different categories and definitions, for Kitschelt et al., Lipset’s and Rokkan’s theory (1967) develops a two-level model of political cleavage formation: firstly, „the historical account of the societal identities and alignments” and secondly, „the strategic moves of political actors at the time of democratization and the endogenous choice of institutions”².

¹ Paul G. Lewis, *Political Parties in Post-communist Eastern Europe*, London, Routledge, 2000, pp. 143-144.

² Herbert Kitschelt, Zdenka Mansfeldova, Radoslaw Markowski et al., *Post-communist Party Systems: Competition, Representation, and Inter-party Cooperation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 13.

Over the last decade there has been an increase in studies concerning political literature, among academics, surrounding the notion of „cleavages” in East Central Europe, and more specifically, the impact of cleavages on the post-communist development of party system. Deegan-Krause shows that the post-communist European society offered the image of a unique laboratory for political development³. Ovidiu Vaida notes that there are two major difficulties concerning the analysis of the post-communist cleavages: firstly, the time dimension, and, secondly, the various definitions and understandings of the concepts⁴.

Other studies found a connection between pre-communist historical legacies and institutional post-communist design. Márkus argues that in Eastern Europe countries (most notably in Poland) following the collapse of the communist regime, in a geographical space where the structure of state and nation has been unstable, „the struggle between center and periphery has inevitably become the dominant cleavage linked to conflicting cultural, linguistic, religious, ethnic, and economic claims, and exacerbated by economic collapse”⁵. If we follow Kitschelt et al., cleavages are divides that exhibit longevity and entrenchment⁶.

Surprisingly, post-communist cleavages in Romania have been the spotlight of relatively little attention. Indeed, as Crowther writes „if skeptics are correct, Romania should stand out as a strong case for the inapplicability of social cleavage analyses. Because of the peculiarities of its pre-communist and communist past, Romania is often taken as an archetypical example of the post-communist countries’ dearth of civil society”⁷. Or, in other words, it is almost impossible to test the theory of Stein Rokkan or S. M. Lipset. Without necessary sharing Crowther’s point of view on the inapplicability of social cleavage analyses, the present article will attempt to point some of the recent understandings:

³ Kevin Deegan-Krause, *New Dimensions of Political Cleavage* in Russell J. Dalton, Hans-Dieter Klingemann, *The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 538-544.

⁴ Ovidiu Vaida, *Clivaje politice în România postcomunistă* in „Sfera Politicii”, no. 123-124/2006, pp. 26-27.

⁵ György G. Márkus, *Hungarian Cleavages and Parties prior to 1989* in Kay Lawson, Andrea Römmele, Georgi Karasimeonov, *Cleavages, Parties, and Voters: Studies from Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Romania*, Westport, Connecticut-London, Praeger Publishers, 1999, p. 61.

⁶ Herbert Kitschelt, Zdenka Mansfeldova, Radoslaw Markowski et al., *op.cit.*, p. 262.

⁷ William Crowther, *Romania* in Sten Berglund, Joakim Ekman, Frank A. Aarebrot, *The Handbook of Political Change in Eastern Europe. Second Edition*, Cheltenham, UK–Northampton, MA, USA, Edward Elgar, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2004, p. 363.

- a. To outline the three cleavages patterns identified in post-communist Romania;
- b. To argue that common “cleavages” concepts suffer from conflation with substantive application of the Rokkanian model to other Eastern countries;

From a *general hypothesis* to a *special case* (Romanian post-communist party systems)

Most recent works on the concept „post-communist cleavages” commence with a few comments on Lipset’s and Rokkan’s cleavage theory applied to the case of Central Europe. Georgi Karasimeonov indicates that Lipset’s and Rokkan’s cleavage theory was formulated on the special conditions and terms of a particular European western model. Karasimeonov contributions to the debate can be interpreted in the tradition of the analysis of the electoral behavior and party formation in transnational societies revealing at least four types of cleavages: residual (historical), transitional, actual and potential⁸. De Waele, seeks to clarify and categorize the relationship between the original theory of cleavages as it is applied to Western model and the post-communist experience undertaking his project with the view of three cleavages⁹:

I. First there are questions of the socioeconomic level. The first set of objective considerations influencing the emergence of the post-communist party system concerns the *economic cleavage*. De Waele argues that the socio-economic cleavage („maximalist” vs. „minimalist”) comes from the communist regime’s successful orientation towards destruction of the capitalist economy¹⁰.

Other scholars are quicker to deal with notions of „maximalist” and „minimalist” tradition. Sonia Alonso requires broadening the policy program to emphasize socio-economic issues not directly related to the maximalist tradition¹¹. The problem in all this, as Alonso has put it, is that emphasizing

⁸ Georgi Karasimeonov, *Bulgaria, loc. cit.*, p. 418.

⁹ Jean-Michel de Waele (ed.), *Partide politice și democrație în Europa centrală și de est*, București, Humanitas, 2003, pp. 157-167.

¹⁰ Ottorino Cappelli, *The Short Parliament 1989-91: Political Elites, Societal Cleavages and the Weakness of Party Politics* in Stephen White, Rita Di Leo, Ottorino Cappelli, *The Soviet Transition: From Gorbachev to Yeltsin*, London, Routledge, 1993, p. 113.

¹¹ Sonia Alonso, *Enduring Ethnicity: The Political Survival of Incubent Ethnic Parties in Western Democracies*, p. 99.

socioeconomic issues encourages voters to be more attentive to the performance of the party in office¹².

De Waele himself flags up this problem with his own definition: the term „maximalist” is used to describe the adherents of a fast transition. In theory, the claim that the „minimalist” perspective is likely to have a socio-economic basis has been highly dependent upon overall record of mixed progress with uneven and slow reform implementation¹³. The fact that the first stage of post-communist level occurred within the economic arena would have extremely important consequences for party systems. Consequently, the first type of party (the „minimalist”), emerged after 1989, was composed of the Party of Social Democracy of Romania (PSDR) and Greater Romania Party (PRM). After their first election victory in 1990, this „new” political elite envisaged a „weak transition program as the populist approach favored by Iliescu”¹⁴.

On the contrary, the „maximalists” represented the turning point for the post-communism. In 1996, the new government of Victor Ciorbea was dominated by the Democratic Convention of Romania (CDR) and composed, primarily, by the National Peasant Christian Democratic Party (PNȚCD, the core of the Democratic Convention of Romania), the National Liberal Party, the Democratic Party (PD, a splinter of the National Salvation Front) and the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians from Romania (UDMR). „The maximalists” launched new reform programs, a macroeconomic plan stabilization and structural reforms, an ambitious “shock therapy” for the Romanian economy, including the liberalization of prices and the foreign exchange market as well as the acceleration of the privatization¹⁵.

2. The *second* cleavage to be analyzed, the so-called „authoritarian-democratic divide”, refers to the inability of a significant part of the society to renounce in discursive terms the communist legacy (although, in Romania this did not necessarily translate into a rejection of all kind of authoritarian

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ De Waele, *op. cit.*, pp. 163-164. See also, Cristian Popa, *Transition Experience and Challenges in Romania* in Gertrude Tumpel-Gugerell, Lindsay Wolfe, Peter Mooslechner, *Completing Transition: The Main Challenges*, Springer, Berlin/Heidelberg, 2002, p. 276.

¹⁴ David Turnock, *Aspects of Independent Romania's Economic History with Particular Reference to Transition for EU Accession*, Aldershot, Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2007, pp. 94-95.

¹⁵ See also ***, *Central and South Eastern Europe 2004*, London, Routledge, 2003, p. 493, Steven D. Roper, *Romania: The Unfinished Revolution*, London, Routledge, 2000, pp. 79-83, Milada Anna Vachudová, *Europe Undivided: Democracy, Leverage, and Integration After Communism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 205-206, Dimitris Papadimitriou, David Phinnemore, *Romania and the European Union: From Marginalisation to Membership?*, London, Routledge, 2008, pp. 99-101.

attitudes)¹⁶. In many recent studies on authoritarian attitudes in post-communist Romania, researchers have pointed the electoral success of Vadim Tudor in 2000, „as a distinctly unpleasant surprise for many in the West”¹⁷. The case in point was the increase of supporters of a latent antipluralist attitude towards the European values arena.

The other concept „the democratic” signifies more than a purely academic debate, because it has important implications for the future development of ethnic national consciousness¹⁸. From an empirical standpoint, there have been two distinct processes all over Eastern Europe: one concerns the formation of a different group consciousness defined by several authors as the group. Of course, each type of group: authoritarian and democratic exists, hardly in a pure form. The terms are often misused as a description of a social movement, group or association that may claim to embrace the democratic values.

Some scholars attempt to provide a clear and explicit definition of the two groups. Most seem to distinguish between the two groups mainly on the basis of the attitude toward the European integration¹⁹. Verdery argues that anti-European rhetoric has been associated with the old elite in the equation „nationalism equals Securitate plus Communist”²⁰. As a result, contradictory processes emerged in terms of “moral dichotomies between black and white, good and evil”.

On the macro-level the death of Party rule produced a crisis of self-determination. Parrott connects the exceptionally complex theoretical issues and the nature of political changes inside the post communist countries through the assumption that the study of the extension of democratic values in each post-communist country and the strength of countervailing

¹⁶ John S. Dryzek, Leslie Holmes, *Post-communist Democratization: Political Discourses Across Thirteen Countries*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 250-251.

¹⁷ George Schöpflin, *Nations, Identity, Power: The New Politics of Europe*, London, C. Husrt & Co. Publishers, 2000, p. 189.

¹⁸ Maria N. Todorova, *Etnicity, nationalism, and the communist legacy in Eastern Europe* in James R. Millar, Sharon L. Wolchik, *The Social Legacy of Communism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 96.

¹⁹ See also Reinhardt Rummel, *The European Union's Politico-Diplomatic Contribution to the Prevention of Ethno-National Conflict* in Abram Chayes, Antonia Handler Chayes, *Preventing Conflict in the Post-communist World: Mobilizing International and Regional Organizations*, Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 1996, p. 216.

²⁰ Katherine Verdery, *What was Socialism, and what Comes Next?*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 90.

authoritarian tendencies are essential in order to initiate the discussion about the variations of the post-communist dissimilarities²¹.

Finally, a few authors distinguish the starting point of the rights of the national minorities. There are also academics that use a multiple criteria. For example, Pilon analyzes the issue of authoritarian and democratic attitudes in four chapters: cultural aspects, political aspects of national integrity, metaphysical definitions of ethnicity and aggression or struggle for power disguised as nationalism²².

3. The *third* cleavage line is between the *communists* and the *anti-communists*. The „old” attitude, a so-called „pre-communist” behavior was usually reactivated after the emergence of the new parties. Given the discontinuity of the transition, Ágh concludes that the confrontation between the two groups led to the formation of a multi-party and the „first generation parties”²³. He also witnessed the fact that the new parties were formed „as second generation parties”, and the third category, the so-called small „third generation appeared much later²⁴. In a similar way, Gill argues that it is difficult to establish the real significance of the cleavage between the two types. He also indicates there have been at least three referential ways to see post-communism: „post-communism as a system”, „post-communism as a condition”, „post-communism as a situation”²⁵.

After this analysis of the main three cleavages that the Romanian post-communist system has experienced, it is almost impossible at this point to raise the discussion of a consolidated democracy. This article began by outlining a number of key issues of the post-communist transition, generated from literature, concerning post-communist political cleavages. Instead, we focused on the differentiated process of Romanian political dealignment reflecting the theoretical cleavages. With politics in Romania still changing, the outlines of the three families of cleavages advanced in this article constitute a significant obstacle towards consolidation²⁶.

²¹ Karen Dawisha, Bruce Parrott, *Democratic changes and authoritarian reactions in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 1-5.

²² Juliana Geran Pilon, *The Bloody Flag: Post-communist Nationalism in Eastern Europe: Spotlight on Romania*, New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 1992, p. 6.

²³ Attila Ágh, *The End of The Beginning: The Partial Consolidation of East Central European Parties and Party Systems* in Paul Pennings, Jan-Erik Lane, *Comparing Party System Change*, London, Routledge, 1998, p. 211.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 212.

²⁵ Graeme J. Gill, *Democracy and Post-communism: Political Change in the Post-communist World*, London, Routledge, 2002, pp. 201-202.

²⁶ See also Jon Elster, Claus Offe, Ulrich K. Preuss et al., *Institutional Design in Post-communist Societies: Rebuilding the Ship at Sea*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 267-268.