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Government Instability Indicators and the Exercise of Limited "Consensus" in Post-Communist Romania 1992-2004

Anca Parmena Olimid

During the 1990s post communist societies faced similar challenges at the level of executive government. Since the early studies of Rosenthal (1978), political science literature's focus is on the different continuums of political stability. The literature argued that "political stability, political order and political structure belong to a single category of political concepts. One may call it the category of time oriented political concepts. *Political stability* indicates that a political phenomenon (unit of analysis) has stood unaltered throughout a period of time"¹ (italics added).

From an empirical standpoint, Jose Casanova argued "the greatest threats to *political stability* are likely to result from excessive democratization, that is, from internal cleavages, hyper-mobilization, the overload of social and political demands, and the ensuing *crisis of governability* of paralysis of centralized, unified command"² (italics added).

In recent years there has been an increased interest in analyzing the effects of political instability in post communist Romania. The cabinet structure, the period of governance, the reasons of termination of a government represented persistent variations over the period examined. However, in spite of the mounting interest, a close look at the socio-political situation of Romania suggests the vulnerable notion of *political instability*.

This article is an effort to look at the indicators of political instability (redefined as Government instability) in an unconsolidated democracy. The issue of political stability in post-communist Romania must of course be analyzed in relation to the challenges of reform and the sources of the limited consensus in government coalition in Romania (1992-2004). The methodology of the study concerns with the dynamics underlying political instability in any post communist society but with the determinants within all national political systems³. Svante Ersson and Jan-Erik Lane introduced new concepts of political stability that are suitable for the description of the cross-

¹ Uriel Rosenthal, *Political Order: Rewards, Punishments and Political Stability*, Alphen aan den Rijn, Sijthoff & Noordhoff, 1978, p. 48.

² Jose Casanova, *Ethno-Linguistic and Religious Pluralism and Democratic Construction in Ukraine* in Barnett R. Rubin, Jack L. Snyder, *Post-Soviet Political Order: Conflict and State Building*, London, Routledge, 1998, p. 84.

³ James Chowning Davies, James Davies, *When Men Revolt and why*, New Jersey, Transaction Publishers, 1997, p. 231.

sectional and longitudinal variation in basic aspects of the political systems of Western Europe. The analysis of standard indicators on political instability applied to European data revealed six properties: public sector deficit, inflation, government change, party system volatility, violence and protest⁴.

Citron and Nickelsburg (1987) propose a different model for the study of political instability. The model of country risk incorporates economic and political variables referring to a standard equation; the political instability indicator is proxied by the number of changes of government over a five years (the study showed that when a government is characterized by instability, "the increase in government welfare through spending depends essentially from domestic purchases"⁵).

In order to test the government instability in the period 1990-2004, we introduce two standard indicators of the institutional stability that can explain changes in government coalition:

- a. *the duration of a government*;
- b. *the optimal report* among the cabinets of the mentioned period⁶.
We adopt this focus as it provides the most significant insights into the issue of political stability, of how and why governments succeed.

I. Government Organization 1992-2004

Yet, although the process of institutional building is still very much unfinished, the foundation established in the last 18 years represents the basic direction taken seems to be one conducive to a political instability.

The period 1990-1996 covers the first period of government by the left of centre National Salvation Front (NSF) and its successor, the Party of Social Democracy of Romania (PDSR)⁷. However, Roman's successors, Theodor Stolojan and Nicolae Văcăroiu, vary from public hostility to radical,

⁴ See Svante Ersson, Jan-Erik Lane, *Political Stability in European Democracies* in "European Journal of Political Research", Volume 11, Issue 3, pp. 245-264.

⁵ *Apud* C. Zopounidis, K. Pentaraki, M. Doumpos, *A review of country risk assessment approaches: New empirical evidence* in Constantin Zopounidis, Panos M. Pardalos, *Managing in Uncertainty: Theory and Practice*, Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998, p. 11,

⁶ It should be noted that in the literature the conceptualization of *party government* focus exclusively on *cabinet government* (the core of government regards decisionmaking with respect to the control of ministries (See Jaap Woldendorp, Hans Keman, Ian Budge, *Party Government in 48 Democracies (1945-1998): Composition, Duration, Personnel*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000, p. 16).

⁷ David Phinnemore, *The EU and Romania: Great Expectations*, London, The Federal Trust for Education & Research, 2007, p. 32.

both pursued gradualist reforms involving the phased removal of price control, an ineffective system of privatization and insignificant structural reforms.

András Bozóki and John T. Ishiyama argued that while it is often taken for granted that the structure of government is reflected in the structure of the economy⁸. In the case of Romania, resistance to reform in the first years after the failure of the communist regime not only raised questions about the economic reform, but about the profound implications for the democratic institutions.

In 1996, Romania voted out of office President Ion Iliescu and elected in his place Emil Constantinescu who represented the Romanian Democratic Convention (CDR), the largest coalition of opposition parties⁹. The Convention's first Prime Minister was Victor Ciorbea. The government was a coalition between CDR, the USD and the UDMR (themselves coalitions)¹⁰. From the beginning it has to be acknowledged that this heterogeneous coalition was made of political actors with different memories, histories and different political convictions.

Under these circumstances in December 2000 the ex-communists returned to power (the Social Democratic Alliance in coalition with the Romanian Social Democratic Party and won 37% of the seats in Parliament). The most striking change between the two elections was the collapse of the center-right Democratic Convention (CDR), which had been the centerpiece of the post-1996 governing coalition¹¹. The new administration was sworn in on 3 January 2001 after having signed agreements with a number of opposition parties¹².

II. Determinant Indicators of Government Instability

a. *Duration of government*

In the literature on comparative government's stability it is a much-contested notion (most of the authors using duration as meaningful

⁸ András Bozóki, John T. Ishiyama, *The Communist Successor Parties of Central and Eastern Europe*, New York, M.E. Sharpe, 2002, p. 395.

⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 32-33.

¹⁰ Steven Roper, *Romania: The Unfinished Revolution*, London, Routledge, 2000, pp. 82-84.

¹¹ Grigore Pop-Eleches, *Whither Democracy? The Politics of Dejection in the 2000 Romanian Elections*, Institute of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, 2001, p. 5, <http://repositories.cdlib.org/iseees/bps/2001>.

¹² *A Political Chronology of Europe*, London, Routledge, 2001, p. 256.

‘proxy’ for stability¹³). This indicator of existence of a political stability refers to the ability of each govern to pursuit the social and economic program reforms. We consider 4 years as a normal period of government (1461 days).

However, in a new democracy, where government stability and effectively are still in question, the literature fall into three groups to explain the variation in government duration: features of parliamentary cabinet government (type of government, ideological composition of government, parliamentary support); institutional features (plurality, structure of parliament, executive power of the Head of State); party system features (the ideology of the relevant parties, the degree of polarization)¹⁴. More specifically, column three shows the difference in number of days in government. The intervals measured show the unequal number of days in government (from 491 days for Ciorbea Government up to 1489 days for Văcăroiu Government).

Table 1
Duration of governments in Romania 1992-2004

Government	<i>Period of governance</i>	<i>Duration of government</i>
Nicolae Văcăroiu	13 December 1992-10 December 1996	1489
Victor Ciorbea	11 December 1996-15 April 1998	491
Radu Vasile	16 April 1998-13 December 1999	616
Mugur Isărescu	14 December 1999-12 December 2000	366
Adrian Năstase	13 December 2000-21 December 2004	1469

Note: Duration is measured in days. The number in the last column (*average duration*) indicates the report between the effective and the normal period of government.

There are five governments listed in Table 1, but only two governments provide a very high rating of political stability (Văcăroiu government-1489 days and Năstase government-1469 days). Ciorbea government and Isărescu government, for example, score lower than might be expected. This could reflect the problems governing central institutions.

¹³ Jaap Woldendorp, Hans Keman, Ian Budge, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 78.

The also suggest that the reasons of termination of a government is the main dependent variable of interest. A close look to *reasons for termination* of a government shows that in only two of the cases elections are the reason for termination of a government in the mentioned period (Văcăroiu government and Năstase government account 40% of all cases).

- b. The second is the *optimal report*. The term “optimal report” is commonly used to express the report between the normal period of government and the effective period of government. This is an interrelated and determinant indicator for the institutionalization of a democratic legitimacy.

As we already mentioned, we consider 4 years as a normal period of government (1461 days). In pursuit of this last issue the paper indicates that we establish government stability when this report tends to 1; but if the value of this report tends to 0 we establish governmental instability¹⁵. The optimal report is a dichotomous variable which takes on a value of 0 under a governmental instability and a value of 1 when the period of governance takes place under political stability¹⁶.

Table 2
1st *Period of governance* (13 December 1992-10 December 1996)

Government	<i>Period of governance</i>	<i>Duration of government</i>	<i>Average duration</i>
Nicolae Văcăroiu	13 December 1992-10 December 1996	1489	1,02

According to table results, the level of government stability is very high. In this respect, the Văcăroiu government appears to be almost a paradigmatic model of the transitional democracy. As indicated below, the average score for Văcăroiu government is significantly higher than that for the rest of the period.

¹⁵ Răzvan Grecu, *Instabilitatea guvernamentală în România postcomunistă* in „Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review”, Volume I, no. 3/2001, p. 792.

¹⁶ The lack of interest in political science literature to the government stability in post communist Romania is explained by the varying changes in the number and character of governments in most of the countries in the region Cristian Preda and Răzvan Grecu report similar scores with respect to governments in the mentioned period. For more see, Cristian Preda, Sorina Soare, *Regimul, partidele și sistemul politic din România*, București, Nemira, 2008, p. 129; Răzvan Grecu, *op. cit.*, p. 792).

Table 3
2nd Period of governance (11 December 1996-12 December 2000)

Government	<i>Period of governance</i>	<i>Duration of government</i>	<i>Average duration</i>
Victor Ciorbea	11 December 1996-15 April 1998	491	0,33
Radu Vasile	16 April 1998-13 December 1999	616	0,42
Mugur Isărescu	14 December 1999-12 December 2000	366	0,25

Nevertheless, the November 1996 elections in Romania marked the democratic consolidation of the country since 1989. The lack of a clear majority in Parliament meant that every bill had to be negotiated. The analysis of optimal report data shows that there is indeed a high risk of government instability backsliding immediately after 1996. The numbers in the fourth column represent the average, minimum (Isărescu government) and maximum (Vasile government) for the period 1996-2000. The table also shows that very no substantial variation in numbers for the cabinets in the same period (from 0,25% up to 0,42%). However, the table shows that the results for the three cabinets are similar between 0,25% and 0,42%. Isărescu government has the lowest value of the period around 1999-2000. As already mentioned in this introduction, the scores are valuable for the analysis of the political instability.

Table 4
3rd Period of governance (12 December 2000-21 December 2004)

Government	<i>Period of governance</i>	<i>Duration of government</i>	<i>Average duration</i>
Adrian Năstase	13 December 2000-21 December 2004	1469	1,01

The table shows that Năstase government has one of the highest score of the period (1,01%). The table also indicates that the average duration of Năstase government is quite similar with the average duration of Văcăroiu government.

In conclusion, the two following particular hypothesis are related to political instability:

1. Under a situation of crisis, political instability is to be expected;

2. Political instability still may be predicted, given the following analysis: understanding the reasons behind frequently changes of government are important in any democratic context. The variations of the period of governance have a significant effect on the level of concentration of the government authority.