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When the Post-Communist Left Succeeds: The 2016 Romanian Parliamentary Election

Endre Borbáth

Introduction

There are two ways to characterize the December 2016 election for the Romanian parliament. On the one hand, the election represented *continuity*. With it came a large-scale victory for the post-communist left, the Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat, PSD). The PSD has been the single largest party in the Romanian party system since the transition, and the significant victory in 2016 reinforced its dominance. In this regard, the election served to counter the narrative of Eastern Europe drifting to the right and being seen as the breeding ground of nativist and Eurosceptic forces (Ban 2016; Constantin 2016; Meredith 2016; Norocel 2017). On the other hand, this election represented a *break* with the past. Three new organizations entered parliament, and the centre–right Democratic Liberal Party (Partidul Democrat Liberal, PDL*)* merged with the National Liberal Party (Partidul Național Liberal, PNL) to compete as a single formation.

This chapter presents an analysis of the 2016 parliamentary election, embedded in the longer-term evolution of politics in Romania. The analysis aims to investigate the extent to which 2016 represents continuity or a break with previous patterns of party competition. More specifically, the chapter explores what explains the large-scale victory of PSD, since in similar countries post-communist left parties are in decline. For this reason, the analysis of the long-term dynamic is traced back to the economic crisis, the legacy of which—as the chapter argues— continued to shape the 2016 election. Beyond post-communist left parties, examining

the conditions that helped the PSD succeed allows us to assess the reasons behind the resilience of mainstream parties in an era characterized by their widespread collapse (Hernández and Kriesi 2015).

The chapter identifies two conditions, which not only allowed PSD to survive, but contributed to its success: ideological flexibility, and opposition status during the economic crisis. Each of these factors are discussed in light of an original dataset on the demand and supply sides of politics. The 2016 parliamentary election is assessed against the long-term evolution of party competition, going back to the 2008 parliamentary election and the start of the economic crisis. The chapter takes stock of the developments leading up to 2016 and examines the factors behind the overwhelming victory of the post-communist left.

The chapter proceeds as follows. It starts with a short introduction to the institutional design and the party system. Then, it introduces some of the crucial events shaping the dynamic of party competition prior to the 2016 election. As the chapter argues, to understand some of the reasons behind the Social Democratic victory in 2016, one must grasp the politics of crisis management in the aftermath of 2008. In the next section, the chapter presents the programmatic space of the 2016 campaign, in comparison to the two previous elections in 2012 and 2008. The chapter concludes by summarizing the results and discussing the implications for the long-term dynamic of party competition in Romania.

Institutional design and the electoral system

After 1989, Romania adopted a semi-presidential institutional structure, with a directly elected president, who has similar but somewhat weaker prerogatives than the French counterpart. Upon consulting with the parties in parliament, the president nominates the prime minister who shares his or her role as the leader of the executive. The prime minister chairs the government which formulates and implements public policies. The prime minister is accountable to parliament and most often comes from the party with the highest share of mandates. Even though the prime minister has the greatest power in formulating public policies, the president can veto the parliament's decisions and make it difficult for the government to implement its program. In turn, parliament can suspend the president, subject to approval by a popular referendum, which, to be valid, requires a turnout of more than 50% of the electorate.

The system requires close cooperation between the two offices. Cohabitations, i.e. when the president and the prime minister come from different political parties, considerably sharpen the political conflict. In such situations, the partisan conflict penetrates the executive branch, with the government and the president often working to undermine each other's position. Driven by the idea of strengthening checks and balances, the 2003 constitutional reform extended the length of the mandate of the president to five years (Gherghina and Hein 2016). As a result of the reform, since 2004 parliamentary and presidential elections do not overlap, which increased the chances of cohabitations. Although the president is supposed to stand above party lines, all elected presidents have tried to help their own party gain power. Therefore, conflicts arising from cohabitation tend to escalate beyond regular political debates and target the institutions themselves.

Beyond the semi-presidential design, the electoral system is another source of controversy. Throughout the history of democratic elections, the electoral system has been changed frequently, sometimes driven by parties' perceived self-interest, sometimes due to pressure from 'below', from civil society actors. Despite frequent changes, all electoral systems kept some level of vote redistribution and ensured proportional seat allocation. The 2016 election was organized according to rules similar to those in place in 2004: closed party lists with 41 electoral districts (all counties, plus Bucharest) and a 5 percent threshold.

Historically, both the electoral system and the regulation of political parties was successfully used by established parties to facilitate cartelization and create a legal barrier for outsiders to enter parliament (Popescu and Soare 2014). According to the law on parties, to establish a new party it was required to collect 25.000 signatures, from citizens residing in at least half of the counties. The provision made it extremely hard to register new formations, moreover the threshold kept them outside of parliament even if they were registered. Therefore, small parties often became satellite organizations of more established formations and ran in coalition with them to ensure they pass the threshold. The law was changed in 2015 and made it possible to register a new party with three founding members. Nevertheless, the reform maintained the high barrier for newcomers by requiring them to collect the signatures of one percent of the electorate to place candidates (180.000 signatures in 2016). Ultimately, seven new parties contested the 2016 election (Dumitru and Voicu 2016,

p. 18), three of which entered parliament (USR, ALDE, PMP). In comparison to other Eastern European countries, the dynamic created a party system with relatively stable party labels (Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015) and frequent pre-electoral coalitions.

The party system

Table 7.1 presents the electoral results and the development of the party system between 2008 and 2016. As the table shows, parliamentary elections in Romania have usually had a low turnout. Most of those who participate in these elections vote for a restricted number of mainstream parties. Until 2016 a relatively small share of voters was willing to vote for new parties (volatility A) and around 12% of the electorate fluctuated between existing formations (volatility B, see: Powell and Tucker 2013). As indicated in the introduction, this changed in 2016 when three new parties entered parliament and volatility A radically increased. Nevertheless, the effective number of parties stayed low, and vote for mainstream parties did not decline.

Table 7.1: Electoral results in parliamentary elections and party system indices (2008–16)

	Election	2008	2012	2016
Election results (vote shares)	Mainstream left			
	PSD	33.1	58.6[*]	44.1
	ALDE	-	-	5.5
	Mainstream right			
	PNL	18.6	-	19.5
	PD/PDL	32.4	16.5[**]	-
	PMP	-	-	5.2
	Ethnic Hungarian			
	UDMR	6.2	5.1	6.2
	Radical right			
	PRM	3.2	1.3	1.0
	PNG	2.3	-	-
	PRU	-	-	2.7

	Anti-establishment reform parties			
	PPDD	-	14.0	-
	USR	-	-	8.6
Party system features	Turnout (Chamber of Deputies)	39.2	41.8	39.5
	Volatility A	5.9	7.0	26.6
	Volatility B	11.6	11.9	4.0
	Volatility A+B	17.4	18.9	30.6
	Effective no. of parties	3.93	1.6	3.7
	Mainstream party vote	90.3	80.2	80.5

Based on their own characterization, mainstream political parties can be grouped into four families. Most of them have been present since the founding election in 1992: Social Democratic, National Liberal, Christian Democratic, and ethnic Hungarian parties. Even though these parties organized into all possible governmental coalitions, I discuss the National Liberal and Christian Democratic parties as the mainstream right, opposing the mainstream left, the Social Democrats. In addition, I introduce two types of challenger parties which have never been in government: the radical right and the anti-establishment reform parties.

As Table 7.1 shows, the single most popular party has been the Social Democratic PSD in all parliamentary elections examined here. The party usually ran in coalition with a small, Conservative Party (Partidul Conservativ, PC). In 2016 PC merged with a liberal faction and established the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (Alianța Liberalilor și Democraților, ALDE), under the leadership of former Prime Minister Tăriceanu. Although organizationally new, ALDE served as an electoral vehicle of established elites and acted as a satellite organization of PSD, representing continuity, rather than change.

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*   PSD ran in coalition with PNL, PC and UNPR, a small splinter party, as the Social Liberal Union (USL). I include the results of USL under PSD given PNL was the junior partner in the coalition

**   PDL ran in coalition with two small parties, FC and PNȚCD

Several structural conditions contribute to the strength of PSD. Firstly, in line with Kitschelt's (2001) expectation, the patrimonial–communist legacy helped the formation of an enduring regime divide, where PSD emerged as the representative of the economic and cultural losers of the transition (also see: Rovny 2014). Secondly, extreme levels of income inequalities contribute to vastly different opportunities in rural and urban areas and lead to the formation of political communities with different sets of priorities. Thirdly, a well-developed party organization allows PSD to emerge as the only party present in some areas of the country, invest in clientelistic linkages, and, nevertheless, remove leaders charged with corruption. Therefore, PSD ticks most boxes on the list of predictors of successful party survival (Deegan-Krause and Haughton 2018), but since these predictors barely change between two elections, they do not explain the dynamic over time.

The second largest block is represented by the mainstream right, formed by the National Liberal PNL, the Christian Democratic PDL and most recently, the People's Movement Party (Partidul Mişcarea Populară, PMP). In 2008 and in 2012 PDL has been the largest formation on the right while PNL was usually considered a smaller, '20%' party. In 2012, the PNL ran in coalition with PSD, forming an electoral alliance across the left–right divide. Despite its popularity, the PSD–PNL coalition did not prove stable and by 2016 PNL merged with PDL, re-establishing the left–right poles. The merger seems to have ended the existence of PDL, with its former leader, the ex-President Traian Băsescu establishing PMP and entering parliament as a candidate of this party in 2016. Similar to ALDE, despite organizational novelty, PMP acted as an electoral vehicle of established political elites. Parties on the right, especially PDL (Fesnic 2011) have a less clear programmatic profile, but they are associated with liberal economic positions, and an anti-communist ideology. There is hardly any consistent programmatic difference between parties in this block.

The last party considered to be part of the mainstream is the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România, UDMR), representing—as the name suggests—the 1.2 million ethnic Hungarians living in Romania. The party has often been in government in coalition with parties from both the left and the right. UDMR does not take a position on the left–right axis and represents the ethnic Hungarian community on programmatic and clientelistic basis (Kiss and Székely 2016).

The remaining 10–20% of votes are relatively volatile and served as a breeding ground for challenger parties in a new party 'subsystem', as described by Haughton and Deegan-Krause (2015). Traditionally, radical right parties managed to secure these votes. As Stanley (2017, p. 145) notes, Romania experienced the rise of one of the earliest and most successful radical right parties, the Greater Romania Party (Partidul România Mare, PRM). Over time the strength of radical right parties has declined, and they have not entered parliament since 2004. The 2012 and the 2016 elections saw the rise of a new type of challenger: anti-establishment reform parties (AERP) as defined by Hanley and Sikk (2016, p. 523): (1) the People's Party–Dan Diaconescu (Partidul Poporului–Dan Diaconescu, PPDD) and; (2) the Save Romania Union (Uniunea Salvaţi România, USR). As opposed to the challengers from the radical right, AERPs were less nationalistic and competed on fighting corruption. PPDD did not manage to endure the test of time, while USR benefitted from a wave of anti-corruption protests and survived until the time of writing.

From the economic crisis to the 2016 election[1]

Amongst the legacies which influenced the 2016 parliamentary election, the politics of the management of the economic crisis occupies a prevalent role. Based on analysis of the long-term effects of incumbency during structural adjustment programs in Latin America and in Southern Europe by Roberts (2013, 2017), Hutter and Kriesi (2018) argue that a similar dynamic played out in Europe during the Great Recession. Namely, in countries where social democratic parties implemented austerity programs, following what Roberts calls a 'bait-and-switch' strategy, a long-term process of programmatic dealignment of the party system followed. In the reverse scenario, if similar economic programs were implemented by centre–right governments, the party system benefitted from the programmatic alignment and party positions became more crystalized. The current section shows that in the Romanian case a centre–right government implemented austerity policies and set the stage for subsequent patterns of interaction. The crisis dynamic benefitted PSD, to the expense of centre–right parties, mostly PDL. The legacies of crisis management played into the 2016 election and contributed to the historic victory of the Social Democrats.

In Romanian politics the first signs of the economic crisis started to appear after the 2008 parliamentary election. As a result of this election, the two largest parties decided to form a 'grand coalition', and the centre–right PDL governed together with the centre–left PSD. In June 2009 the PSD–PDL government turned to the IMF for a €20 billion credit line but postponed any predictably unpopular austerity policy until the presidential election later that year. Shortly before the presidential election, PSD left the government and campaigned from opposition against the re-election of President Băsescu, supported by PDL. Băsescu won a second term and used his influence to facilitate intra-parliamentary party switching to form a majority behind a PDL–UDMR government.

The narrowly supported centre–right, PDL–UDMR government took over and stayed in office until 2012, becoming the symbol of draconian austerity measures. These measures included a 25% cut of the salary of public officials, a cut of thousands of state jobs and an increase of VAT from 19 to 24%. Most austerity policies were justified by the demands of the IMF and implemented in close cooperation between President Băsescu and the PDL–UDMR government. In the aftermath of these measures the unpopular centre–right government survived seven motions of no confidence and continued in office until the beginning of 2012.

As Figure 7.1 shows, during the time the PDL–UDMR government was in office, voters were the most disenchanted. The share of those who thought the country was heading in the wrong direction peaked (Figure 7.1A), and trust in all three national political institutions (presidency, government, and parliament) plummeted (Figure 7.1B). Generally, more citizens tend to think that Romania is heading in the wrong direction and they tend not to trust the political institutions. However, even by national standards the crisis period stands out, with voters being remarkably negative between 2009–2012.

Figure 7.1a: Mood in Romania after the 2008 Parliamentary Elections
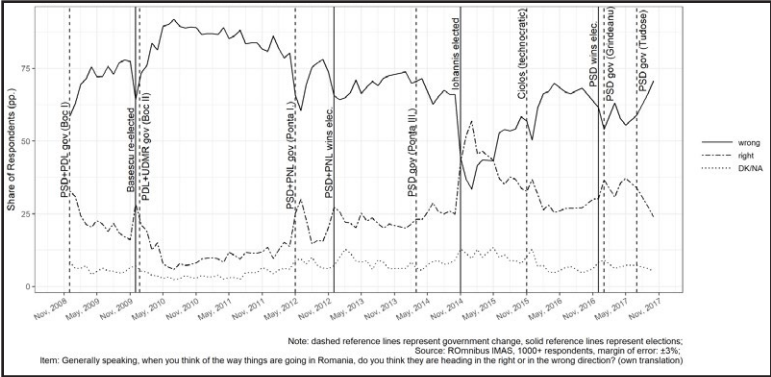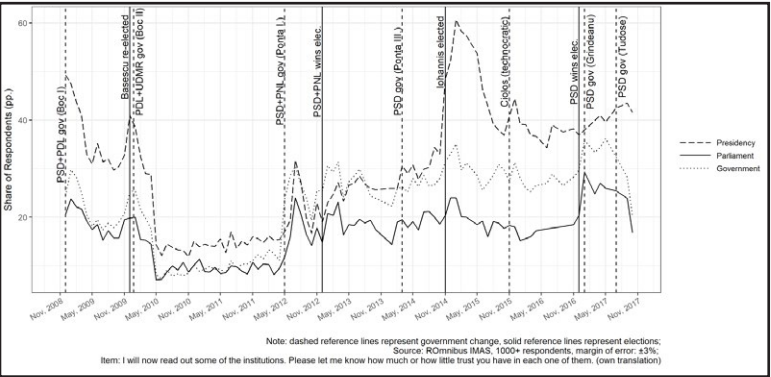

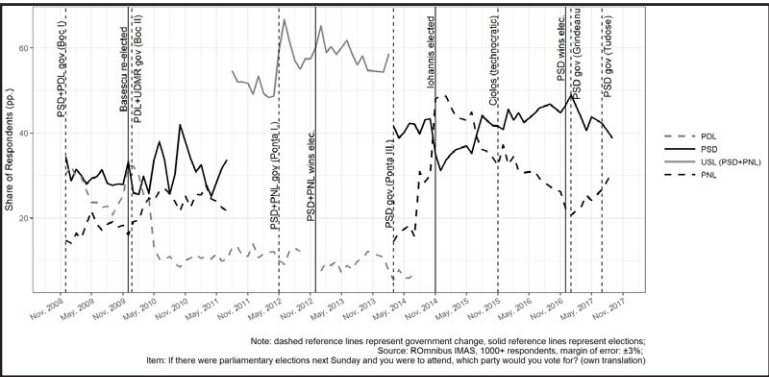**Figure 7.1b: Trust in Romanian Institutions after the 2008 Parliamentary Elections**

The change came in May 2012 when amidst heavy street protests and social opposition, the new PNL–PSD coalition managed to pass a motion of no confidence against PDL–UDMR and took over government. Shortly before the parliamentary election, the PSD–PNL organized a referendum to suspend President Băsescu. Despite the overwhelming majority voting against the president, the turnout criteria were not met and Băsescu stayed in office (King and Marian 2014). Given how institutions fell prey to parties' interests, many considered the 2012 events around suspending the president a political crisis. Later that year the popular PSD–PNL won the election with almost 60% of the vote.

The popularity of PSD–PNL was mostly driven by the collapse of PDL. Figure 2 shows the evolution over time of vote intentions for the

main Romanian parties. As the figure shows, the flight of PDL voters dramatically increased once the party entered government: by May 2010, five months into the PDL–UDMR government, most of the voters the party lost in 2012 had already left. PDL traded its electoral popularity for government participation, a bargain closed by their historic defeat in 2012. PDL eventually ceased to exist as an independent organization, and what remained of it merged with PNL in 2014. As the figure shows, before PNL left the PSD–PNL coalition, the coalition was remarkably popular, and it consistently polled above 50%.

Figure 7.2: Trust in Romanian Institutions after the 2008 Parliamentary Elections

Note: dashed reference lines represent government change, solid reference lines represent elections;
Source: ROmnibus IMAS, 1000+ respondents, margin of error: ±3%;
Item: If there were parliamentary elections next Sunday and you were to attend, which party would you vote for? (own translation)

In line with the framework set out by Roberts, after the deeply unpopular centre–right government, the new PSD–PNL government tried to reverse many previously adopted austerity policies. In fact, it was these decisions and their mutual opposition to PDL/President Băsescu which held the two programmatically distant parties together and drove their popularity. Once the antagonism faded, less than two years into their government, the PSD–PNL coalition collapsed. The final push came with the reluctance of PSD to support the PNL candidate at the 2014 presidential election. PNL became part of the opposition, while PSD managed to secure enough support for a single party government.

The 2014 presidential election proved to be less historic than many anticipated. Similarly, to 2009, PSD lost the election, and the PNL candidate Klaus Iohannis was elected to succeed Băsescu. As both figures 7.1A and 7.1B show, the election resulted in unprecedented euphoria: for the first time, more people thought the country is heading in the right

direction than those who thought it is heading in the wrong direction. Moreover, trust in the presidency jumped to 60%, a substantially higher increase than in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential election. Most of the increase was due to Iohannis being seen as a credible candidate, willing and capable to reform politics. Therefore, none of the other institutions benefitted from increase in the level of trust (Figure 7.1B).

However, most of this euphoria was not grounded in strong programmatic convictions, but in identifying Iohannis as the person who will curb corruption and 'reset' politics. Equipped with weak constitutional prerogatives and being faced with a parliament dominated by PSD, Iohannis was meant to disappoint in delivering the fast and thorough political reforms his electorate was hoping for. Moreover, Iohannis was not able to build on his initially broad support to replicate Băsescu's 'achievement' and form a PNL government. Therefore, PSD managed to stay in government until late 2015, when large anti-corruption rallies emerged, and Prime Minister Ponta resigned. The euphoria around the election of Iohannis proved short lived.

As a result of Ponta's resignation, Iohannis nominated Dacian Cioloș to form a technocratic government, supported by both PSD and PNL. By this time, it became apparent that PNL had not managed to capitalize on the euphoria around the election of Iohannis (see Figure 7.2), and it did not have enough parliamentary or societal support to govern. Given that PSD did not wish to continue in office, a technocratic government seemed the most viable option for both big parties. The Cioloş government was formed and continued in office until the 2016 parliamentary election.

Programmatic issue space and the electoral campaign

To understand the extent to which the 2016 election provide the continuity or a break with previous patterns of party competition, Figure 7.3 illustrates the issue space and parties' position in the 2008, 2012 and 2016 campaigns. The figure has been constructed based on a sample of articles from one daily right-wing newspaper (*Adevărul*) and one daily left-wing newspaper (*Jurnalul Național*). The coding follows the rules of core sentence analysis (Dolezal et al. 2012), with actors aggregated into parties, and issues aggregated into 15 larger categories (for additional analysis and further details see: Borbáth 2018). The figure has been constructed based on parties' issue positions and salience with the use of multi-di-

mensional scaling (MDS), weighted by similarities between issues and parties (Hutter and Kriesi 2018; Kriesi et al. 2012). Proximity represents parties' support for the respective issue.

Figure 7.3: MDS analysis of the programmatic space and party position in the 2008, 2012 and 2016 parliamentary electoral campaigns
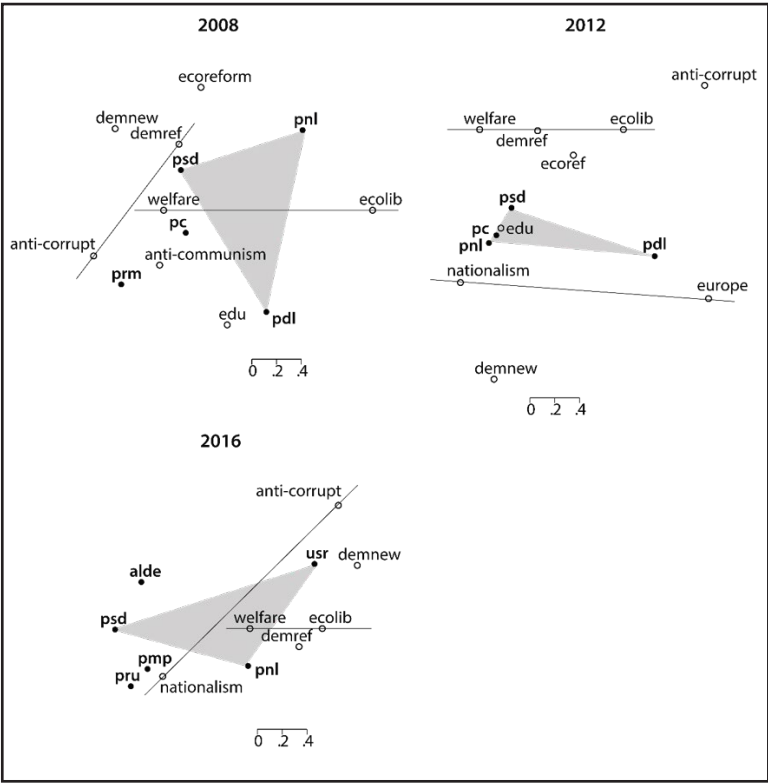
Source: Author's own elaboration.

Figure 7.3 shows the high programmatic fluctuation between consecutive elections. While the issue repertoire stays relatively constant, with issues related to the economy (economic liberalism/welfare), politics (democratic renewal/reform, fighting corruption) and culture (anti-communism, nationalism) re-emerging, the dimensionality of the political space and party positions change. The only issue disappearing over time is anti-communism, still relatively important in 2008.

The programmatic space of the 2016 election seems to resemble the 2008 election rather than the election in 2012. Not surprisingly, the 2012 election was exceptional to the extent to which two blocks, the programmatically heterogenous PSD–PNL and the largely unpopular PDL competed against each other. In 2012 the two most structuring issues were nationalism and Europe. On the one hand, PSD–PNL campaigned on a platform of returning Romania to the 'people' in the aftermath of what they saw as an illegitimate PDL government. On the other hand, the PDL campaigned with a program of saving democracy from what they labelled the anti-European PSD–PNL coalition. Economic issues provided a secondary dimension to the extent to which PSD–PNL attacked the austerity politics of the PDL.

The 2016 election stands out in several ways. First, during these elections, the most salient issue, 'fighting corruption' changed its role in party competition. As the 2008 and 2012 campaigns show, the issue had already appeared before, but its salience gradually increased. In 2008 'fighting corruption' was a small issue associated with the radical right PRM, which promised to 'clean' the corrupt elite. All mainstream parties (PSD, PDL and PNL) were equally distant to the issue. In 2016 the radical right disappeared but 'fighting corruption' stayed on as the driving force of challenger politics. The new anti-establishment reform party, USR entered politics on a promise to curb corruption. Unlike in 2008, in 2016 the fight against corruption became the pole associated with anti-nationalist politics and nationalist parties (PRU, PMP, PSD) were the most distant to the issue

Second, during the 2016 election the structuring capacity of economic issues radically declined. In the 2008 and 2012 campaigns PSD claimed its traditional pro-welfare position in party competition. Parties on the right, as much as they took a position on the economy, were closed to economic liberalism. For instance, in 2012, the PDL was forced to defend its record in office during the crisis years and was still seen as the party of austerity. By 2016, economic issues were only important for PNL. As the largest party on the right, PNL took the opportunity to distance itself from the legacy of austerity politics and claimed to represent a pro-welfare position. PSD barely addressed economic issues and focused instead on attacking the anti-corruption camp with a nationalist agenda.

Third, the 2016 election has shown the U turn of PSD on political issues related to reforming/renewing democracy. In 2008 and in 2012,

these issues were very salient in the PSD campaigns. Most of the positions PSD took on this issue were about limiting or counter-acting what the party identified as anti-democratic practices by President Băsescu. Given the long-standing animosity between President Băsescu and PSD, the president's willingness to bend the institutional rules to serve his political interests, such as during the 2009 government formation (see e.g. King and Sum 2011), and PSD's attempt to use its parliamentary majority to suspend/undermine the president. These issues formed a core part of the overall programmatic appeal of PSD. After Băsescu left office in 2014—and PSD was in government between 2012 and 2015—the party did not speak anymore about reforming democracy. Following on the promises made by Iohannis, and the popular expectations around his election, it was parties on the right who mobilized on this issue. The issue appeared forcefully in the discourse of the anti-establishment reform party USR, but in less clear terms, PNL also promised to reform the democratic process.

Conclusion

The chapter started by outlining two perspectives on the 2016 election: continuity or break with the past. This election was analysed in the long-term dynamic of patterns of party competition, with a view on the evolution of the demand and the supply side of politics over time. While there were important changes 2016 brought, the election rather provided continuity with previous patterns of party competition. The findings can be summarized through the following four points.

Firstly, the election represented continuity with regards to the ideological structure of party competition. Programmatic instability, mainstream parties' ability to switch their positions and incorporate new issues in their programmatic appeal helped them survive. There are two important examples: political issues centred on reforming/renewing democracy and nationalism. Whereas in 2012 and 2016 the radical right disappeared, its core issue lived on, and the Social Democratic PSD incorporated nationalism in its ideological profile. From this perspective the 2016 election is rather similar to the dynamic in other Eastern European countries. Except, the Romanian the post-communist left managed to incorporate in its ideological profile its challengers' demands and thereby to avoid electoral decline.

Second, the continuing role of the legacies of crisis management has shown the importance of critical periods in structuring party competi-

tion. The opposition status of PSD during the key period of the economic crisis allowed the party to challenge the austerity packages implemented by its centre–right competitor. These austerity packages led to disenchantment amongst voters, a loss of trust in the most important political institutions and above all, the abandonment of the centre–right PDL party. PSD managed to capitalize on voters' disenchantment and—first in coalition with PNL, then alone—achieved historically high electoral scores. Centre–right parties did not recover from being associated with austerity, and after merging into one organization, PNL still struggled in 2016 to convince voters on its pro-welfare position.

Third, the institutional design reinforced both dynamics. The strong role of the presidency shaped the agenda of the parliamentary elections, and the personality/decisions of both Băsescu and Iohannis appeared in these campaigns. Despite having alternative electoral dates, parliamentary elections are clearly concerned with the presidency. The split incumbency that the semi-presidential design creates further blurs the programmatic position of parties and makes electoral accountability difficult. For instance, Băsescu's support for the austerity policies of the PDL–UDMR, made it possible for PSD to continue some of its opposition tactics from government and frame the 2012 election as a challenge against the ruling president.

Fourth, the 2016 election provided the strongest break with the past with regards to the role of anti-corruption politics. The election brought the breakthrough of the anti-establishment reform party USR, due to the party's ability to present itself in opposition to what it described as corrupt practices associated with all other formations. USR took over the discourse on reforming/renewing democracy from PSD and in conjunction with its anti-corruption rhetoric, the party managed to build a 'progressive' pole against nationalist formations. Unlike in the case of PPDD, the party's organic link to some of the protest groups helped them survive.

The Romanian case stands out in the current volume for two reasons: it is the only election from 2016, and it is the only one from a post-communist country. Despite being associated with some of the typical marks of post-communist politics (ideological and organizational instability, frequent government changes etc.), I believe the election is closer to some of the cases from 2017 than it first appears. Namely, in Romania as well as in some of the other countries, the election brought the victory of a nationalist, culturally conservative platform. Except, in this case, not the populist radical right, but the nominal 'left' represented these views.

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