

What is Left from Democracy?

Electoralism and Populism in Romania¹

Abstract *What I shall present in my paper is the relation between the frequency of the electoral cycles as well as the redistribution policies, and the increase of populism. The density of the electoral cycles and the populist redistribution policies as bribes for the poor, but numerous electorates, has turned the electoral component of democracy in an end in itself. Politicians are focused on winning the elections, not in strategic governing and even less in consolidating democracy, even just a liberal one as it became before EU accession. The most popular enemy during the electoral campaign is corruption and because its form is "state capture", the fight against it is just populist and endless in terms of campaign and tends to be authoritarian in terms of government. With such threats we can see Romania and other new EU member states apparently as suicidal democracies due to the weak institutionalization of the democratic mechanisms. In the times of "democratic recession", EU protectorate is keeping its member states within a safety net which is blocking the suicidal attitudes and tolerates its new (sometimes even old) members rather as flawed democracies.²*

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General remarks

I do share an optimistic view. It is very plausible that all the people will live in democratic regimes, for, at least, three reasons: two are ethical and one is personal. My optimistic view has many things to do with a Kantian approach on morals and morality in politics³. Every person is an end in herself, an autonomous being, able to choose her own life-plans. Nobody is morally entitled to rule over another person without his or her informed consent. Consenting to lez-dignity is a moral betrayal of your own humanity. This is the basic moral argument and legitimacy in opposing any private or public authoritarian pressure.

The second reason belongs to my personal history. I lived for 34 years in a communist dictatorship. For an external, superficial observer, people like me we were all brain-washed, sharing the cult

of the dictator (in our case, Nicolae Ceausescu), applauding him, unable of independent critical thinking and unwilling to fight against authoritarianism. The observers were wrong. We took the first internal and international chance to turn against the most humiliating human condition and to the deepest offence against human dignity, against the moral slavery which is, in fact, every authoritarian regime.

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The third reason belongs to what I do think is the main ethical command for a political scientist/theorist: our field cannot exist or survive in non-democratic regimes. For a political scientist as well as for a Political Science department or association, to publicly stand for democracy, against authoritarian tendencies, in order to keep their status, is a moral duty. The main attack of each tendency towards authoritarianism consists in the banding of autonomous research in Political Science, more general, in Social Sciences, to enroll them under the power command, turning science into pure propaganda⁴.

The way towards a democratic regime means tremendous risks, efforts and sacrifice for extraordinary and often unknown heroes. The exits from most authoritarian regimes are paved with imprisonments, blood, human lives, pain, tears, orphans, widows and terror.

Few revolutions in Latin America, Africa, and Asia and even in some East European states had a "velvet" character as it was the case of the anti-communist one in Central Europe. Every state can be democratic if some preconditions are fulfilled: the willingness of a part of the nation for pluralism and democratic means of government, strong internal pressure, a consistent support from the international environment and, not at all the least, a very supportive neighborhood (see for e.g. Diamond, 2003, Karl, 2005). Even in the most authoritarian and fundamentalist states there are many seeds and tendencies which are leaving a room for a potential democratic turn: see the recent movements against dictatorship in North Africa. From 1989 until 2007 we were living in the best possible world: a global era of democratization. In 2004, 120 out of 192 countries were electoral democracies representing over 60% of the population of the world (Karl, 2005, p. 5). But the march towards democracy is not linear at all. After 2008, due to the global economic crises, "the retreat" (in Diamond's words, 2008) of democracy became obvious. *The Democracy index, 2010*⁵ (p. 1) is stressing on the tendency towards the decline: 50% of the population is living in democracies (full: 12,3%, 26 states or flawed: 37,2%, 53 states), the rest is living in hybrid (14%, 33 states) or authoritarian (36%, 55 states) regimes⁶.

In opposition to the optimistic view of the democratic future shared before the global crises, after becoming the disillusioned prophet of "the end of history", Fukuyama, came to consider that, for e.g., the democratization of Central Europe was a „miracle reflecting the uniqueness of circumstance" who determined „the democracy promotion community...to try to turn the miracle into a natural law" (Fukuyama, 2006, p.67).

It is understandable why the community of the „promoters of democracy" (many of them, transytologists) was and is trying to turn an empirical regularity into a natural law. We cannot be sure at all that democratization is an implacable law of the history, and, as the facts are proving, it is not (see for e.g. Europe in the middle of the 20th century). In some circumstances non-democratic regimes are looking more „efficient" (as, for e.g. it is the case of nowadays China, under the pressure of the economic crisis). But we can admit that human tendency towards freedom and personal autonomy is a moral law and it cannot be fulfilled in the states where the will of people is suspended. In some circumstances, the moral law has the necessary context to turn into a political movement. In the last 20 years the context was very friendly to a certain tendency even if, „transitions could also end in autocratic regressions, 'soft authoritarianism' (dictablanda), 'hard democracy' (democradura) or revolution" (Karl, 2005, p. 7). A recent research is showing convincingly that the orange revolutions in Eastern Europe, for e.g. have more in common with the wave of populist revolutions that took place in Latin America than with revolutions of Cen-

tral and other East European States. In Ivan Krastev words:

„The color revolutions expressed a strong desire for change, but not necessarily a desire for more democracy, let alone, more capitalism. The people on the streets of Kyiv, unlike the people on the streets of Central Europe in 1989 (but, like populist voters in Latin America today), were asking for the revision of the privatization process, not for more privatization. They were fighting corruption, not communism” (Krastev, 2009, p. 241).

Krastev's consideration are very well documented (see Forbrig and Demeš, (Eds), 2009), but is hard to qualify the orange revolutions' aims as nondemocratic, even if democracy has reached just its minimalist stage: the electoral one, and, in some cases the tendencies towards authoritarianism has increased. The scholars use to make parallels between the democratization process in Latin America, Africa and Asia and Eastern Europe. But, as Terry Karl remarked, the last one (Eastern Europe) has a legacy advantage of educated population and it started from a relative economic and social equality. In Latin America, with few exceptions, „social classes are deeply entrenched, political institutions are often 'captured' and democracy has often been oligarchic” (Karl, 2005, p. 21).

It is also true that, for Central and Eastern Europe the beatitude of more equity, low class division and lack of social polarization ended completely in the first decade of transition. In a few years many post-communist states became more similar with Latin America. Political institutions were 'captured' and democracy has often been oligarchic, then with their equalitarian past or even with Western Europe after a half of century of the predominance of social-democracy. I shall argue more about the subject in the section dedicated to the Romanian case-study.

The same author, Terry Karl⁷ has mentioned common fixtures of the transition in Africa and some post-communist countries. They have in common „the problematic of 'democratizing backwards', that is, introducing competitive elections before establishing the basic institutions of a modern state such as rule of law or the accountability of leaders” (Karl, 2005, p. 23).

For sure, the road towards democracy is not linear and unconditional. In Larry Diamond's words: „Democracy can emerge anywhere, but it can only take root if it brings about, however gradually, a more prosperous, just, and decent society” (Diamond, 2003, p. 1).

Enough or not at all enough, the electoralist stage (the will of the people) is the necessary step, a first threshold of a new democratic political building. In Diamond's words:

„Let us conceive of democracy in terms of two thresholds. Countries above the first threshold are, in the most minimal sense, electoral democracies, because the principal positions of political power are filled through regular, free, fair, and competitive (and therefore, multiparty) elections. Electoral democracy can exist in countries with significant violations of human rights, massive corruption, and a weak rule of law. But in order for a country to be a democracy, these defects must be sufficiently contained so that, in elections at least, the will of the voters can be reflected in the outcome, and in particular, unpopular incumbents can be booted from office. This requires an open electoral arena, with substantial freedom for parties and candidates to campaign and solicit votes, and thus to speak, publish, assemble, organize, and move about the country peacefully for that purpose. It also requires neutral and fair administration of the voting and vote counting, with universal suffrage, secrecy of the ballot, reasonable access to the mass media, and established legal procedures for resolving electoral disputes” (Diamond, 2003, p. 8).

In my view, to turn the electoral component of democracy in an end in itself means to reduce democracy to electoralism.

Guillermo O'Donnell's (1999) argument for a truly accountable political system (read a consolidated democracy⁸) is the main inspirer of my approach. In his view, such a democratic system requires three components:

The *democratic* one: which consist in citizens participation in free and fair elections, as well as their access to make public their interests and opinions. I shall assimilate it with the electoral stage.

The *liberal* component: state power limitation, the exercise of the basic individual rights, civil liberties, women's and minorities' rights. I shall assimilate it with the liberal stage.

The *republican* component: the domination of the rule of law and functional, efficient governmental institutions, accountability that check and balance executive (and other forms of) power, in order to insure the equality of all private and public actors before the law. I shall assimilate it with consolidate democracy.

All democracies are, *per se*, electoral. The problem is that some of them are just electoral, or, as in the case I'll present, they turn a step back of consolidation, to be just electoral once some external factors proved to be favorable as in the last two years: a the diminishing of the EU legitimate paternalism in the political sense: once you were accepted in the Club, you are like us, in spite of the low political culture and the economic crisis. The roots of democracy, in Diamond's terms: a more prosperous, just, and decent society, became weaker then few years before in spite of the safety net of EU belonging of its new members and affected even some Western states which declined trough flawed democracy, as it is the case of France, Italy and Greece (see *Democracy index, 2010*).

Scholars accepted largely that the latest wave of democratization was, in fact, a mix of consolidated democracies, unconsolidated democracies and hybrid regimes (*democraduras*) (Karl, 2005, p. 13). In terms of political evolution in Romania, for example, we have a fluctuant⁹ democracy once the republican component is systematically undermined by the political evolutions and the liberal component became rather nominal than real once the pressure from the hegemonic power (the EU as institutions) was removed. According to the *Democracy index, 2010*, Romania, placed in the position 56 between Sri Lanka (55) and Columbia (57), is the most vulnerable space of the EU in democratic terms.

From electoral, to liberal democracy

On May 20, 2011 Romanians celebrated 21 years from the first free elections after 51 years of royal, fascist and communist dictatorships (1939 – 1989). Apart from the bloody revolution in December 1989, the most significant moment happened 20 years ago: all citizens above the age of 18 (for the first time in the general free elections women were included) were asked to pronounce themselves about their representatives in the state structures of power. And they did it enthusiastically. In order to reach a liberal, republican democracy (in O'Donnell's terms, 1999), a succession of stages has fallowed: a new Constitution (1991), new elections within a constitutional framework (1992), the first peaceful change of power between parties (1996), political orientation towards NATO and European Union.

In the year 2000, under the pressure of painful reforms and the increase of poverty for above 34% of the population, after 10 years of the dominance of left-wing conservatism

(see Miroiu, 1999) we had the first major danger of populist nationalism, but the moment was overcome by the votes of the majority of the electorate.

In all the stages mentioned before the newly born civil society, mainly NGO's were playing a very important role. More, the NGO's built under international influence (read American and European) were the main actors in pushing the Government and the Parliament to cross the electoralist stage of democracy in the favor of a liberal one: to limit the power of the state to encroach on the basic rights of the person, and thus affirming civil liberties and minority rights¹⁰. How about the third component: the republican one which characterizes a consolidated democracy: the domination of the rule of law and functional, efficient governmental institutions, accountability that check and balance executive (and other forms of) power, in order to insure the equality of all private and public actors before the law? (in O'Donnell's view, 1999). For the third component of the democratic evolution, European Union looks to be the main actor, since Romania has started the accession process. As Krastev wrote, "the EU's soft power lies in the promise that "if you are *like us*, you could *become* one of us" (see Ivan Krastev, 2009, p. 243). Be like us meant to adopt the *Aquis communautaire*: the necessary Constitutional provisions, laws and institutions according to those promoted by the European Parliament and European Commission.

By the end of December, 1999, Romania was accepted as a candidate state. A large demonstration of formal conformity was taken by all significant internal political actors. In fact, EU and NATO accession were the only political strategy we had. As other CE and EE states, we borrowed the dreams of EU founding fathers.

Very few people expected that the institutions will function instantly and the laws will be enforced suddenly. For the first six years of antechamber „you are like us" meant: „you look like us" in terms of laws and institutions. Since January, 2007, the moment Romania joined EU, the main expectation was to overcome the show-room stage of Europeanization and to move towards a substantial, consolidated one. In democratic terms, that means to apply women and minority rights, equal opportunity policies, to enforce people's access to a justice (the liberal component) and, more, to realize the third component, the republican one: efficient governmental institution, accountability and transparency concerning the expense of public money¹¹.

Four years before accession, in Diamond's research (2003) Romania was classified, at the bottom of the list (with 2.2) as liberal democracy, as other EU states or candidates, compared to other East-European regimes classified as electoral democracies (Moldova, Albania, Serbia, Macedonia), competitive authoritarian regimes (Russia and Bosnia-Herzegovina) or even ambiguous regimes as in Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia. In the last years, the orange revolution succeeded to transform other Eastern states as Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine in electoral democracies (see Forbrig and Demeš (Eds), 2009). Compared to the states I just mentioned, we were at the luckiest side of the necessary context for a substantial, non formal democratic evolution, to cross beyond the reductionist electoralist democratization (read: a show-room democracy).

Underlying the legitimate paternalism of the EU in consolidating democracy for its candidates and the new member states and the statistic evidence that democracies tend to survive longer when they are located in good neighborhoods Terry Karl wrote:

"But (as any parent can attest) the quality of the immediate neighborhood is crucial. In Eastern Europe, the attraction of joining the European Union was so strong that even countries that had little in the way of pluralist traditions emulated democratic modes of po-

litical conduct in hopes of a genuine integration into the West. Indeed, one of the primary reasons Central European countries represent success stories of transition is that they are located closest to the core countries of Europe, while those countries geographically farthest from the West and with little prospect of EU membership have not fared so well" (Karl, 2005, p. 23).

But is this successful story guaranteed?

Probably, 2007, our first year as EU members was the best we had in our whole history of prosperity and democracy. Many conflicts aroused, mainly between Parliament and Prim-Minister and the President, but they looked to be coherent with democracy, even if costly in terms of stability. The enthusiasm of the first stages of democratization decreased dramatically, again, a confirmation of what transytologists have mentioned: "As any person who has lived through one can attest, regime transition is electrifying; with consolidation, in contrast, politics have 'become boring' (Karl, 2005, P. 32).

Many post-communist states had birth defects which legitimate the analysts to notice similarities with, for e.g. the Arab states. The ruling elites installed after the collapse of communism, overwhelmingly composed by the former Securitate (political police) and nomenklatura members „have hijacked the structures of state power and barricaded themselves inside". "The logic of rule is not to generate public goods that can lead to a sustain growth and broadly improve human well-being" (Diamond, 2003, p. 22), but is to generate private goods and to buy the loyalty of necessary categories for their own survival as: public servants in high positions, magistrates, members of secret services, the army and the police that sustain the regime in power.

Between the elections, political class can be self-sufficient even in a democratic regime. Post communist transition has created a proper environment for its self-sufficiency within the process of privatization. The reason is that not the fair competition was the main target of transition, but the privatization for those who were in a proper position to privatize the state property in their own and in their clients favor (See for e.g. Brucan, 1996, Pasti, 2006). Privatization, the messianic solution imposed by International Monetary Found and World Bank came in a non-competitional economic environment. The political parties were far from having their proper followers, according to the ideologies and labels borrowed form Western world. Social-democrats were, in fact, the main political force for building capitalism and social polarization. Liberals systematically focused their agenda mainly on the economic liberalism and national protectionism. Nowadays, Democrat Liberal Party (the ruling one) belongs to the European Popular political family and is supposed to be a rightist, Christian democrat and conservative. But, one can wonder: conservative to what in the post-communist circumstances when the strongest form of conservatism, embraced by a large population is the left-wing one? (Miroiu, 1999)

Since 2004 a large campaign against corruption with an impressive mass support has started. It is almost impossible to legally demonstrate the corruption once its main form is state capture. The redistribution process, vicious, dubious¹² and clientelistic as it proves to be is legally covert.

As I shall try to argue, the most obvious result of fighting corruption in an illusory, rather discursive manner is a high increase of populism in the electoral years, perpetuated by the opposition in-between the elections. The entire political class is the same: greedy

and noisy. Members of the Parliament are lazy, inefficient and corrupt. We need a strong leader to fight against them all. At least, we can tolerate a party who is able to support the strong leader who is willing to release us from the corrupt politicians. One can recognize the successful electoral slogan of Hugo Chavez; „Get rid of them all!” It is nothing specific neither to Eastern democracies, nor to Latin America ones, but to populism wherever it became popular.

It is a perfect ground for a false recall for people’s power instead of an institutionally consolidated democracy: “You are the true majority!” (Romanian President Basescu in the electoral campaign, November, 2009)

In my opinion, populism as a popular ideology and politics and the return to an electoralist democracy have two important reasons, apart from the low political participation, an even lower political culture and public trust¹³. The first one is the density of the electoral cycles which contribute to a very precarious capacity to govern strategically, not electoral, and, by consequence, populist. The second reason is related to the re-creation of the “renter state” - an overt patronage and state paternalism instead of a proper welfare state. Politicians, in power or in the opposition are addressing continuously to the electorate using populist terms: “simple people” or “man in the street”, not to the citizens and tax-payers. They are, or should be infantile, vulnerable, weak and dependent. One cannot wonder why the most vulnerable point of our democratic weakness is the political culture.¹⁴

Electoral cycles: Elections as an end in itself: institutional reasons

„Equating democracy with the mere holding of elections or assuming that such elections will subsequently generate further and deeper democratic reforms down the line commits the fallacy of electoralism”. (Terry Karl, 2005, p. 7)

Romanian politics was electoral oriented. Half of the years in power are spent busily with the electoral campaign. In the condition mentioned before, the quality of the government is decreasing, the rule of law is weakened, and public finances are less controlled and even less transparent. Public money is mostly wasted for electoral bribes.

In the first post-communist decade (1991-2000) we had 3 electoral years (1992, 1996 and 2000). In the second decade (2001-2010) we had 4 electoral years: 2004, 2007, 2008, and 2009. In the third decade (2011-2020) we shall have 5 electoral years: 2012, 2014, 2016, 2019, and 2020). Local, national and presidential elections are separate, as well as the elections for European Parliament. The presidential elections are separated according to the pressures made by the former Prim Minister Adrian Nastase in 2004. He prepared his own future as President, but finally his future proved to be in the opposition. Few politicians are able to think in Rawlsian¹⁵ terms. In the original position you have to take into account the situation of the most vulnerable actor in the political spectrum. Once in power, politicians use to think that it is for eternity. Being so frequent, all electoral years are populist. In a way or in another the significant electorate is bribed with higher pensions, salaries, social benefits, new jobs in the public sector (from 1 million in 2004 to 1, 4 millions in 2008). More, in 2008, because of a complete unrealistic increase of the pensions the whole public system of retirement benefits was threatened with collapse. A solid relation between contributions and benefits vanished (Ioniță, 2009, p. 3-4). Political parties demonstrated that they don’t have the human resources to adapt themselves to

the multiple tasks: the electoral and the administrative ones, they are focusing on the electoral, not on governmental strategies (Ioniță, 2009, p. 5). Even more, since in 2008 we adopted the uninominal vote which was largely seen as a solution for selecting good politicians and for getting rid of the corrupt ones. The main result is that because the elections are costly and the campaign financing system is still dubious and precarious, just those with money, read: *le nouveau riche* or their devoted representatives have the possibility to be successful candidates (see the analyses of Pro Democrația, 2009).

Due to this approach on the elections, in my opinion Romania went back to an electoralist democracy¹⁶. Elections became an end in itself. This is why the political analysts are predicting a continuous degradation of the quality of government, not to mention that this happened in the framework of the global economic crisis.

Until 2007 all Cabinets, apart from those resulted from the elections in 2008, will work for no more than 2-3 years, if not just for one. Even if, for e.g. the actual cabinet looks able to take dramatic measures (see the cuts of the budgetary salaries with 25% and the increase of VAT from 19 to 24% in 2010)¹⁷, the prediction is that it will be a populist attitude permanently reloaded due to the frequency of the electoral cycles. In these kind of circumstances is improbable to make the so called dramatic political choices as for e.g. concerning the pension system and the conversion to EU currency, or the state reform for a proper consolidated democracy. In the rhythm imposed by the elections and their consequences, the gap between the weaker democracies, as in Romania's case and the rest of the EU states will increase dramatically. Possible steps to avoid such new economic and social disasters are obvious, but improbable: to connect all kind of elections in the same time with the elections for the European Parliament and a clear separation between administration and politics. The general habit is to change the most important public servants once a new party or coalition won the elections (See Ioniță, 2009, p. 4-5).

Apart from the frequency of the electoral cycles, some important analysts have demonstrated that the constitutional and legal ambiguities give birth to a permanent rivalry between the Prime-Minister and the President, the President and the Parliament and usually undermine any possibility for a long and coherent cohabitation (see CPARPCR Report, 2009). In order to overcome the conflict, the recourse to "the people" as electorate looks to be the only solution even if the risk to transform the regime in an electoralist, ritualistic democracy is evident.

If a majority is stable and the Prime-Minister is obedient, a presidential tendency towards dictatorship can arise and any idea of check and balance is vanishing.

The rentier state¹⁸

In October, 2009 a group of sociologists and political scientists, coordinated by Marian Preda have launched the Social Risks Rapport (initiated by Romanian Presidency)¹⁹. The main conclusions of the surveys and secondary analysis are very eloquent.

Populism, the authors wrote, is so popular in Romania due to the incoherent and inefficient social policies. It is hard to conceive any sustainable strategy once the main leading position in the social protection system were submitted to political clientelism and all the necessary institutions which were created under EU, World Bank, International Monetary Fond (IMF) legitimate paternalism are populated with unqualified and politically controlled people. The rapid and too frequent political changes had a tough influence in creating

political incoherence and a permanent state of provisionally.

The provisions for social protection were redistributed in a nontransparent manner, according to the electoral interests of the local politicians.

"Successive early retirement, fraudulent retirement (especially disabled and agricultural ones), „luxury retirement” from the Army, Police and secret services led to the growth of the number of retired from 3.5 million in 1990 to over 6 million in 2000 while the employed population passed from 8.1 to 4.6 million thus creating major imbalances in the welfare system and leaving many persons and families with no income, under the threshold of poverty” (Social Risks Rapport, 2009, p. 2).

Bribing continuously the significant groups leads to an important increased dependency on the state of too many social categories and, at the same time, to the state ignorance concerning the categories which are morally legitimate dependents.

“At the same time the stipends for children, for the disabled, orphans, the young out of the orphanages, homeless, poor families with many children or mono-parental families, long-term unemployed, the HIV infected, victims of violence and trafficking and other social segments at risk were completely ignored or only superficially protected through programs that most often were inefficient and/or unsustainable” (Social Risks Rapport, 2009, p. 3).

The Report I mentioned demonstrates the „pathology of the system of distribution and redistribution”: the pensions and the salaries of the many are very low, under or at the limit of poverty in the same time there are extremely high salaries for the privileged: MP’s, magistrates, diplomats, secret services, army and the police, almost all masculinized domains (ibid. pp. 6-7). Due to such an unjust and arbitrary politic concerning the redistribution, the majority of the population cannot have access at the necessary resources to properly exercise their political and civil rights. All they receive is in the electoral campaigns.

Every party or coalition, once in power is getting rid of people of „the others” as well as of their political projects. The only continuity was the generosity for the parties’ electorate retired people and the trade-unionists in the public sector (Rapport Social Risks, 2009, p.5).

As Amartya Sen wrote: “There is very little evidence that poor people, given the choice, prefer to reject democracy” (Sen, 1999, p.13). But some of them will take an immediate profit from the electoral campaigns, knowing that keeping promises is not the best their representatives can do. Instead of medium and long term unfulfilled expectations, they will prefer to receive something today.

I shall give a pseudo-anecdotic, but very illustrative example: in a focus group on Gender and Everyday Citizenship, the elderly women have shown us their achievements from the politician’s activity in their interests as electorate: a liberal vessel, a socialist scarf (an electoral trophy), a Christian-democrat pencil and a nationalist cap. Other acquisitions, acquired thanks to political intervention, were already consumed: sugar, sausages, and little money. (See Bucur and Miroiu, 2009)

The main competition for the electoral majority had very simple strategies: how to bribe the electorate with minimal increase of the lowest pensions and salaries or by populist promises and by buying votes with cash. The perverse effect of the short electoral cycles is a competition for the best means to electoral fraud.

Buying votes directly is a very effective strategy for the excluded and marginalized people, read for the people neglected by the redistributive state policies. Apart from the

electoral campaigns, poorest people are practically non-citizens. They don't trust politicians; they understand the Parliament as a time, nerve and public money consumer. Their distrust became a political tool in the last electoral campaign with a message which, as I mentioned before, was very popular and very similar with the one launched by Hugo Chavez in Venezuela: "Get rid of them all!"

The vicious circle of populism and electoralism

In their volume *Twenty-First Century Populism*, Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell define populism as "an ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous 'others' who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice" (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008. p. 3). In the case of the last presidential elections in Romania (November, 2009), the dangerous others were: the opposition, "media moguls" and the members of the Parliament. If the attack against opposition and "media moguls", as the President called them, is not so problematic, the attack against Parliament has both authoritarian and populist connotations. As candidate, the President has focused his campaign on a referendum organized by himself: We need to get rid of a Chamber of the Parliament. The Parliament as it is costly because the MP's have indecent salaries²⁰ and benefits and, in general, they are nothing more than a bunch of profiteers. It is also inefficient because the parliamentary debates are a waste of time.

I shall quote the President's *Credo* addressed to „The People” in the last electoral campaign (Băsescu, 2009):

„In 2007 when the parliamentary „majority” wanted to get rid of me, you, the people came and voted against them. Now the members of Parliament have formed a 'new majority' against me because I want a better Parliament and fewer parliamentarians who will work for you. They are feeling threatened and now they are united to protect themselves against the country's interests. But in my capacity as President of Romania, the only majority which I do consider is and will be the Romanian people. I was elected by you and I shall never betray you. You are the true majority!" (Băsescu, 2009).

As I wrote before, the slogan of his campaign was very similar with the successful one of Hugo Chavez: „Get rid of them all!" Get rid of a half of them, those who oppose to my will! At least he knows that is impossible to get rid of pluralism as an EU state. *They will not escape from what is threatening them!* "(*De ce le e frica, nu scapa!*") was the slogan of his campaign.

With less than 1 per cent (gained from the Romanians abroad), people voted for the promise of a "strong leadership" for similar reasons as in the new democracies in the non EU states such as Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine. The popularity of populism is the result of the factors I mentioned before, as well as a low political culture. In association with the use of secret services and many institutions created to fight corruption, but rather are working as a blackmailing tool for the opponents, it proved to be a successful strategy. The manipulative statements: "pure people" is opposed to the "the corrupt elite", the continuous repetition of a democratic slogan that politics is the expression of the general will of the people and that social change is possible only as a radical change of elite is a common fixture of the last campaigns in Eastern Europe (See Forbrig and Demeš, (Eds.), 2009). It doesn't matter if such a strategy is reclaimed by the right or

the left. Populism can sit easily with ideologies of both Right and Left. (See Canovan, 1981, Lacau, 2005).

Political parties are sharing responsibility for the degeneration of liberal democracy in an electoralist one, based mainly on populist policies and ideology. But the success of populism have many things to do also with the dramatic decrease of the role of civil society (apart from the trade-unions), mainly of the NGO' which were the chief promoters of liberal democracy. As Krastev sharply noticed:

„The rise and success of populist parties and the populist agenda present a direct challenge to the public role of the civil society sector. Liberal ideas were very attractive to societies that were fighting totalitarianism. But, in the age of failed democratization, liberal NGOs are less attractive than the populist alternative. What liberals promise is institutional change. What populists promise is revenge on incumbent political elites. NGO does promote civic participation and deliberation as correction mechanisms for the failures of democracy, while populists promise strong leadership and an unmediated relationship between the leaders and the people" (Krastev, 2009, pp. 242-243)²¹.

The enthusiasm and influence of the liberal democrat NGO's decreased dramatically and the power of the civil society looks to be, with one exception: Pro-Democracy Association, at least for now, just history. The militants devoted to a cause were replaced by clerks devoted to a state salary. The pioneers of civil society became historical figures and research material for the young generation who knows and cares about communist dictatorship as much as their co-generational from the West.

The opposition coalition was not able to focus on the main issue: a liberal, consolidated democracy and they have played also the populist electoral game, opposing to the Ship Commander.²²

Once the leading role of NGO's and professional think-tanks in enforcing liberal and republican component of a consolidated and substantial democracy decrease dramatically, Eastern Europe is confronted with an amateurish democracy reduced to the electoralist aspects (See Forbrig and Demeš, (Eds), 2009). The step-back of the role of NGO's once Romania became member of the EU is obvious. The golden age of marriage between them and liberal political reforms ceased. The politicians feel the need to legitimate their actions not just trough „the people", but also to some important public intellectuals who became, the so called: Bănescu's intellectuals, eager to help the President to get rid of the corrupt political class. Switching from NGO's to public intellectuals means switching from liberal constituents of democracy, to a personalized populism. An immature democracy is more coherent with the idea of the messianic role of political and intellectual personalities instead of the institutions and associations.

Once in power again, the President had the necessary majority, an obedient Prime-Minister and has shown the other side of his populist coin: the authoritarian one. Never in its post-communist history the opposition, media and the general public wasn't so ignored and the "majority dictatorship" so obvious. None of the populist promises was respected. More, the economic crises and the pressure of IMF added new "responsible" for the decline: the employees from the public sector (teachers, doctors, public servants, policemen)²³. The decline as it was already shown in *Democracy index, 2010*²⁴. The overall score for Romania is 6, 60, with more then 0, 50 less then in 2008 and the last evolutions are consolidating "the retreat" of the democracy.

Conclusions

In its *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle was right: all sins can be reduced to two of them: the excess and the deficiency.

The lacks of the elections or elections without pluralism are the main signs of authoritarianism. But, as I tried to demonstrate before, the more frequent elections are, the more populism is expected. It is politicians and parties interest to win the elections. But they are in a restless, endless, almost uninterrupted race for getting the power, not for exercising it in a strategic manner. In such circumstances we are facing a permanent vote for the lesser evil, not for a constructive strategy. The collapse of public trust because of the systematic falsity of the electoral promises is obvious.

„Levels of public trust are exceptionally low in the Eastern Europe-12 (the 10 new EU member states...Less than 10% of people in this subregion trust political parties and less than one fifth trust their governments and their parliaments. The proportion that is satisfied with the way democracy functions in their countries fell from 40% in 2007 to only 33% in 2009. Economic crises can threaten democracy, usually with a lag, through increased social unrest" (*Democracy index*, 2010, p. 12).

In Kantian terms, refraining ourselves from false promises is the only perfect moral duty towards others. Populist strategies are the opposite of the informed consent and an attack against personal autonomy. The recourse to "the people" has replaced the recourse to the citizens and a proper political culture was replaced by „a culture of passivity and apathy", „an obedient and docile citizenry", both inimical to democracy (see also the reamarks of te Economist Intelligence Unit in *Democracy index*, 2010).

A full citizenship means the lesser possible political paternalism. In an electoralist democracy based on populist campaigns and authoritarian government, the goal of full citizenship is simply an illusion. To turn the electoral component of democracy in an end in itself means to reduce democracy to electoralism.

The context also matters a lot. With such threats we can see Romania and other EU member states apparently as suicidal democracies due to the weak institutionalization of the democratic mechanisms (see the liberal and republican components). EU protectorate is still keeping its member states within a safety net which is blocking the suicidal attitudes and tolerates its new members rather as fluctuant/flawed democracies.

To use the term democracy without any specification of the nature of it is oversimplifying for political scientists. For the politicians the generic use of the concept can be the best covert for their authoritarian, populist actions. Once they won the elections, they are legitimate to rule and to be called democrats.

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- 1 This paper was presented at European Consortium of Political Research Conference, Reykjavik Section: The State of Democracy in Europe, Panel What is Eastern about Central and Eastern European Populism(s): August, 25-27, 2011
- 2 This is mainly a case narrative. My approach was similar with the option of other theorists of the transition, well synthesized by Terry Karl: „Thus far, the tools of analysis of transition have been heavily tilted *in favor of case narratives*, and the most fruitful research has given priority to small N and medium N comparisons because they permit the sort of carefully constructed narrative and process tracing needed to capture the rapidly changing role of actors and to incorporate the extraordinarily dynamic and complex

interactions between them." (Karl, 2005) (See for example; Linz and Stepan 1996). I think the Romanian case is representative due to its position: the most powerful European dictatorship in the last communist decades and the closeness with the newly emerged democracies in non-EU Eastern Europe (Ukraine and Serbia).

3 Imm. Kant (1785), *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*

4 In the Romanian case, for e.g. Political Science was introduced as autonomous field just in 1991, after the collapse of communism. Before it was enrolled as a propaganda tool under the umbrella of Romanian Communist Party (Academia Stefan Gheorghiu).

5 *The Democracy index, 2010* is the product of The Economist Intelligence Unit and is operating with five categories of analysis: electoral process and pluralism; civil liberties; the functioning of government; political participation; and political culture.

6 According to Freedom House, 2007, at the end of 2007, 121 out of 193 states were classified as "electoral democracies";

7 It is in consensus with the findings of Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle (1997).

8 Full democracy, as classified by The Economist Intelligence Unit.

9 It is a flawed democracy, according to Democracy index, 2010

10 The most important NGO's which have played a very significant role in the liberal component of the democracy are: Alianta Civica (Civic Alliance), Pro-Europe League, Pro-Democracy, APADOR CH, Open Society Foundation, AnA. Society for Feminist Analyses, SEF (Equal Opportunities for Women), ACCEPT (Sexual Minorities Rights).

11 In a full democracy: „not only basic political freedoms and civil liberties are respected, but these will also tend to be underpinned by a political culture conducive to the flourishing of democracy. The functioning of government is satisfactory. Media are independent and diverse. There is an effective system of checks and balances. The judiciary is independent and judicial decisions are enforced. There are only limited problems in the functioning of democracy" (*Economist Intelligence Unit, 2010*).

12 In one of my works I tried to argue that it was also gender biased. Man became the favorite clients as well as the favorite victims of post-communist transition (see Miroiu, 2004)

13 *The last ones (political participation, political culture and public trust are the main indicators of the level of democracy.*

14 Political culture has 3,75 points in *Democracy index, 2010*.

15 The reference is at John Rawls ideas in *A Theory of Justice, 1971*.

16 *The Democracy index, 2010* is attesting this tendency. Romania have lost 0,54 points after 2008 and has consolidated her position as flawed democracy, further then before from a full stage of democracy.

17 Rather under the pressure of International Monetary Found concerning the austerity measures.

18 The formula of the renter state which means a high amount of state patronage was used mainly by the analysts of democratization in Latin America.

19 The significant findings confirm the results of the survey I was coordinated in 2007: *Gender and Political Interests*, CNCSIS Grant.

20 A salary of a member of the Romanian Parliament is no more than 1500 Euro, but compared to the pensions of the majority of retired people, the most numerous and disciplined electorate, 100-150 Euro, MP's salaries look „astronomic“.

21 It is important to notice the diversion created in many states in order to get rid of the politically uncontrolled NGO's: „The other factor contributing to the new context, in which pro-democracy NGOs are forced to work, is the strategy of non-democratic forces adopting democracy promotion rhetoric and creating their own NGOs as an instrument for promoting their foreign policy agendas. The creation of Russia-dominated NGO networks, including think tanks, media organizations and development centers,

on the territory of the post-Soviet republics, is an essential element of Russia's new policy of domination (Krajev, 2009, p. 243)

22 It is not just a metaphor. Before 1989 the President Traian Basescu was a Ship Commander.

23 President Basescu is publicly accusing them very often.

24 Overall score: 6,60; Electoral process and pluralism: 9,55; Functioning of government: 6,43; Political Participation: 5; Political culture: 3,75; Civil liberties: 8,24 (Romania in *Democracy index*, 2010, p. 4)

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