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Article

Symbolic Rules and Strategic Practices: Intra-Party Democracy in Romanian Mainstream and Anti-System Parties

Abstract: This paper investigates the degree and quality of intra-party democracy (IPD) in four major Romanian political parties – Partidul Social Democrat (PSD), Partidul Național Liberal (PNL), Uniunea Salvați România (USR), and Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor (AUR) – over the period 2014–2024. Although political parties remain essential institutions of representative democracy, they are increasingly criticized for declining legitimacy, limited participation, and excessive centralization. Building on comparative theories of party organization and change (Janda, Harmel & Janda,

Panebianco, Poguntke, von dem Berge), the study approaches parties as complex organizations whose internal structures and decision-making processes directly affect democratic consolidation. The research employs a mixed qualitative–comparative methodology, combining content analysis of party statutes with a coding scheme that evaluates three main dimensions of intra-party democracy: participation, competitiveness, and transparency/responsibility. Findings reveal significant discrepancies between formal democratic provisions and actual practices, with mainstream parties (PSD, PNL) displaying extensive institutionalization but strong centralization, while newer anti-system parties (USR, AUR) adopt more selective or symbolic democratic norms.

The analysis also shows how external shocks – such as electoral defeats, leadership turnovers, or institutional reforms – interact with internal power dynamics to shape organizational change. Overall, the study argues that intra-party democracy in Romania often functions as a rationalized myth: a set of formalized rules used to project legitimacy rather than to enable substantive member participation. By providing both a theoretical and methodological contribution, this work enhances understanding of the organizational underpinnings of party politics in post-communist democracies.

Keywords: intra-party democracy; party organization; Romania; political parties; institutionalization; democratic consolidation

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1. Introduction

Political parties remain essential institutions of representative democracy, even as they confront recurrent crises of legitimacy, participation, and representation. Although increasingly criticized for centralization and declining social rootedness, parties continue to fulfil crucial functions: they recruit elites, aggregate interests, articulate policies, and mediate between citizens and the state. The capacity of parties to perform these roles is shaped not only by their electoral performance but also by their internal organization, particularly the degree of intra-party democracy (IPD). Member rights, the distribution of authority, and decision-making rules are indicators of organizational maturity with direct consequences for democratic consolidation (Kittilson & Scarrow, 2003; Hague & Harrop, 2007).

Scholarship has progressively emphasized that parties must be understood as complex organizations, not merely electoral vehicles. Kenneth Janda's seminal work (1980) established a systematic, comparative framework for studying party organization. Panebianco (1988) highlighted the importance of origins and institutionalization, while Harmel and Janda (1994) explained party change as the outcome of strategic decisions taken under external shocks. More recent contributions (von dem Berge & Poguntke, 2017) refined the study of intra-party democracy by distinguishing between deliberative and plebiscitary forms of participation. Together, these approaches converge on the notion that party behavior cannot be understood without analyzing their internal structures, rules, and practices.

Parties that apply the principles of internal democracy empower members in territorial structures, who have the widest access to rank-and-file members and provide them with the means to transform their demands into political objectives (Wolkenstein, 2016). Compliance with these principles entails the application of democratic norms within the party organization. For political will-formation to follow a bottom-up logic, power should be dispersed across levels, bodies, and individuals, avoiding concentration in the hands of a single decision-making organ (Cular, 2004). Thus, intra-party democracy (IPD) is not a one-dimensional concept, but presupposes both inclusion – the participation of members in decision-making – and decentralization – the autonomy of territorial party structures. The analysis of parties' internal democracy is often carried out through the study of party statutes, even if these do not guarantee the implementation of norms. Nevertheless, the presence of such rules can have a socializing effect on members, reflecting dominant attitudes toward power relations within the party (March & Olsen, 1998; Katz & Mair, 1995).

Despite this robust theoretical foundation, the application to post-communist democracies remains limited. In Romania, political parties have undergone significant transformation since 1989, yet systematic studies of their internal democratic practices are scarce. Much of the existing literature focuses on electoral volatility, elite strategies, or ideological shifts, leaving underexplored the organizational dimension that links parties' internal life to their external performance. This research addresses that gap by analyzing four key Romanian parties – the Partidul Social Democrat (PSD), the Partidul Național Liberal (PNL), the Uniunea Salvați România (USR), and the Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor (AUR) – over the period 2014–2024. The decade is particularly relevant, encompassing multiple electoral cycles, leadership turnovers, and the 2015 reform that simplified party registration and expanded public funding, creating both opportunities and pressures for organizational adaptation.

The central problem examined in this study is the discrepancy between the formal codification of intra-party democracy in statutes and its actual implementation. While parties proclaim adherence to democratic principles, the extent to which members genuinely participate in leadership selection, candidate recruitment, or actual program formulation remains uncertain. This raises a set of guiding research questions: To what extent do Romanian parties institutionalize mechanisms of intra-party democracy? How do mainstream (PSD, PNL) and anti-system (USR, AUR) parties differ in their approaches to member rights, organizational structures, and decision-making? Are observed reforms indicative of genuine democratization or symbolic responses to external pressures? And how do critical events – such as electoral defeats or leadership changes – reshape the democratic quality of party organization?

This study contributes to political-party literature in several ways. Theoretically, it tests and refines frameworks of party organization and intra-party democracy in the context of a post-communist democracy, assessing their explanatory capacity beyond Western cases. Methodologically, it employs qualitative content analysis of party statutes combined with a coding scheme that measures three key dimensions of IPD: participation, competitiveness, and transparency/responsibility. This mixed design captures both the symbolic and substantive aspects of democratization. Empirically, it provides one of the first systematic comparisons of intra-party democracy across Romania's principal parties, offering insights into the broader dynamics of party institutionalization in emerging democracies.

Preliminary findings indicate that Romanian parties often adopt democratic rules in a formalistic manner, reflecting what institutionalist theory describes as “rationalized myths” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Established parties such as PSD and PNL display extensive institutionalization but strong centralization, limiting effective member participation. Newer parties such as USR (Uniunea Salvați România, 2022) and AUR (Partidul Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor, 2024) adopt selective democratic provisions that enhance their external legitimacy while leaving decision-making concentrated in leadership hands. In both cases, intra-party democracy serves more as a symbolic resource than as a functional mechanism of accountability and inclusion. These patterns suggest that internal democratization remains fragile and contingent, shaped more by external shocks and strategic adaptation than by genuine organizational commitment.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical framework, situating intra-party democracy within the broader literature on party organization. The second section describes the methodological approach, including data sources and the coding of statutes of PSD (2013, 2019, 2020, 2024), PNL (2013, 2015, 2017, 2021), USR (2017, 2022), and AUR (2019, 2024). The third presents the empirical findings through case studies of the same political parties. The fourth compares results across cases, highlighting differences between mainstream and anti-system parties. The concluding section discusses the implications for democratic consolidation in Romania and reflects on how the findings contribute to comparative research on intra-party democracy.

2. Literature review

The study of political parties has progressively evolved from an exclusive focus on their electoral performance (Sartori, 2011; Lijphart, 1999) to a more complex perspective that treats them as organizations with rules, internal structures, and competing power relations. Political

parties not only mobilize voters, contest elections, and govern; they are also communities of members whose participation in decision-making processes is critical for ensuring legitimacy and accountability. Intra-party democracy (IPD) refers precisely to this dimension of political life: the extent to which members can influence crucial decisions such as leadership selection, candidate nomination, or program formulation. The degree of IPD reflects the internal distribution of power and provides an essential indicator of a party's organizational maturity and its contribution to democratic consolidation.

This theoretical framework situates IPD within the broader literature on party organization. It traces how scholars have conceptualized parties as organizations, how IPD has been defined and measured, and what consequences it may hold for democratic systems, particularly in post-communist contexts. It also highlights the relevance of these debates for Romania, a country where political parties continue to face structural challenges of legitimacy and institutionalization.

The organizational study of parties has deep roots in political science. Early works by Maurice Duverger (1964) classified parties into "cadre" and "mass" types, emphasizing the importance of membership size and organizational structure. Robert Michels' classic thesis on the "iron law of oligarchy" (1911/1915) argued that, regardless of initial democratic intentions, all parties tend toward elite domination, as organizational complexity requires leadership specialization and discipline. These foundational studies raised enduring questions about the relationship between membership, leadership, and organizational democracy.

Kenneth Janda's *Political Parties: A Cross-National Survey* (1980) represented a turning point. His work offered the first systematic comparative dataset on party organization, operationalizing concepts such as centralization, cohesion, and institutionalization across a wide range of countries. Janda treated parties as empirically comparable entities, moving the study of parties beyond impressionistic or case-based approaches. His multidimensional indicators made it possible to analyze organizational structures as explanatory variables in their own right.

Angelo Panebianco (1988) soon advanced the field by highlighting the origins of parties as critical determinants of their institutional development. Parties created through mass mobilization, elite negotiation, or charismatic leadership would display different patterns of organization and resilience. His model emphasized institutionalization as a process in which rules become stable, routines entrenched, and leadership succession routinized.

Later, Katz and Mair (1995) introduced the "cartel party" thesis, arguing that as parties increasingly rely on state resources rather than membership contributions, their incentive to cultivate genuine internal democracy diminishes. Parties, they suggested, become professionalized organizations controlled by elites, with membership serving largely symbolic functions.

Taken together, these contributions frame parties as adaptive organizations. Their internal democracy is neither fixed nor accidental but shaped by historical origins, environmental pressures, and elite strategies. This perspective provides the foundation for analyzing IPD as an organizational variable that can evolve over time and vary across parties.

Intra-party democracy has been defined in multiple ways, but most accounts converge on the idea that it involves the inclusion of members in decision-making processes and the dispersion of authority within the organization. At its core, IPD concerns who gets to decide what in a party and under which rules.

Scholars have identified three broad dimensions of IPD: participation – the degree to which members can take part in crucial decisions, including the election of leaders and candidate

nomination; competitiveness – whether internal elections present genuine alternatives and whether leadership positions are contested; and transparency and accountability – the clarity of decision-making procedures, the reversibility of decisions, and the presence of mechanisms to hold leaders responsible.

Recent literature has refined these dimensions. Von dem Berge and Poguntke (2017) build on the model of deliberative democracy proposed by Fabio Wolkenstein (2016) who first remade that the current debate was ignorant to the process by which preferences are formed, and distinguish between Assembly-Based Intra-Party Democracy (AIPD), where deliberation takes place in representative bodies such as congresses, and Plebiscitary Intra-Party Democracy (PIPD), where decisions are taken through direct votes of members or supporters. This distinction captures two competing logics: deliberation versus direct participation. Scarrow, Webb, and Poguntke (2017) add a legitimacy dimension, noting that parties often adopt democratic procedures less to empower members and more to project an image of openness to the wider electorate.

At the same time, critique of IPD is not new. Michels' "iron law" suggests that IPD is structurally unsustainable, as organizational imperatives concentrate power in elites. Katz and Mair argue that plebiscitary forms of participation can themselves be tools of elite control, bypassing activists in favor of leader–member relations (Katz & Mair, 1995; Mair, 1996; Katz & Peter, 2002). Wolkenstein (2016) criticizes purely aggregative forms of democracy within parties, calling for stronger deliberative practices that shape preferences rather than merely recording them.

IPD is therefore best understood as a multidimensional and contested concept. It ranges from symbolic compliance to substantive empowerment, from centralized plebiscites to decentralized deliberations. Any attempt to study it requires both conceptual clarity and empirical sensitivity.

Beyond static descriptions, the literature also addresses how parties change and how internal democracy evolves. Harmel and Janda's (1994) "integrated theory of party goals and party change" argues that significant organizational shifts occur when external shocks – such as electoral defeat, leadership turnover, or institutional reform – threaten a party's primary goal. Change is not automatic but mediated by internal coalitions and elite decisions. IPD can therefore expand or contract depending on the balance of internal factions and the perception of external threats.

Panebianco's model also highlights path dependency: parties rooted in charismatic leadership or elite negotiation may struggle to develop participatory structures, while those with mass origins may institutionalize them more easily. Katz and Mair's cartel thesis, meanwhile, predicts a decline in IPD as parties increasingly rely on public subsidies rather than membership contributions, reducing the functional role of members.

Electoral systems also matter. Close, Gherghina, and Sirens (2018) show that in candidate-centered systems, greater internal democracy can foster independent behavior among legislators, sometimes undermining cohesion. This suggests a trade-off between inclusiveness and organizational discipline.

For post-communist democracies like Romania, these theories are especially relevant. Parties are often recent, shaped by fluid origins, and subject to frequent shocks (Gherghina, 2009, 2012; Gherghină & Jiglău, 2011). They also depend heavily on state funding, echoing cartel dynamics. IPD in such contexts is likely to be hybrid, unstable, and closely tied to external events.

Measuring IPD has long posed methodological challenges. Janda (1980) pioneered comparative indicators of centralization and cohesion. Building on this, von dem Berge, Poguntke, and Obert (2013) developed a coding scheme that analyzes party statutes to assess inclusiveness and decentralization. The Political Party Database Project (PPDB) now provides systematic cross-national data on leadership selection, candidate recruitment, and membership rights (Scarrows, et al., 2017).

Yet, statutes tell only part of the story. Scholars highlight the problem of “decoupling” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977): formal rules may proclaim democracy without ensuring its practice. Binary or ordinal coding of statutes provides useful comparability but risks oversimplifying the gap between rules and behavior. As a result, many scholars recommend combining content analysis of statutes with qualitative interpretation of practices, media reports, and organizational behavior.

This approach is particularly necessary in Romania, where parties often display formal democratic provisions in their statutes while maintaining centralized, leader-dominated practices in reality.

The relevance of IPD extends beyond organizational design. Normatively, parties are often seen as “schools of democracy” (Duverger, 1964; Almond & Verba, 1963), training grounds where citizens learn participatory skills. If parties themselves are oligarchic, the quality of democracy more broadly may suffer.

Empirical evidence, however, is mixed. Some studies suggest that greater IPD fosters inclusiveness, accountability, and legitimacy. Others highlight costs: more internal democracy can reduce party cohesion, encourage dissent among legislators, and complicate strategic decision-making (Close et al. 2018). Moreover, parties may adopt IPD measures strategically, as symbolic gestures to regain legitimacy without redistributing real power.

In post-communist contexts, IPD plays a particularly important role. Weak institutionalization, personalistic leadership, and volatile electorates make parties fragile. Internal democracy could enhance stability by distributing power and encouraging member engagement. Yet, if superficial, it risks reinforcing cynicism, as formal promises fail to translate into practice.

Romania provides a particularly fruitful context for examining IPD. The party system combines long-established actors with new challengers, each displaying different organizational legacies. PSD and PNL represent the mainstream: institutionalized but centralized, with strong leadership control. USR emerged as a reformist party promising participatory democracy but has been plagued by factionalism and volatility. AUR, by contrast, is a populist newcomer with strong personalistic leadership and limited organizational depth. By analyzing the statutes and organizational practices of PSD, PNL, USR, and AUR, this study evaluates whether intra-party democracy functions as an authentic mechanism of accountability and participation or merely as a rationalized myth. In doing so, it contributes both to the comparative literature on party organization and to the understanding of democratic consolidation in post-communist Europe.

3. Methodological Approach

The methodological design of this study is guided by the dual objective of capturing both the formal rules and the practical implications of intra-party democracy (IPD) in Romanian political parties. As IPD is often institutionalized in statutes but may diverge significantly in prac-

tice, the approach combines qualitative content analysis with systematic coding of party documents, focusing on the period between 2014 and 2024.

3.1. Research Design

The study adopts a comparative qualitative approach that allows the analysis of multiple parties across a decade of organizational change. Rather than relying exclusively on survey data or elite interviews, which can be limited by recall bias or strategic framing, this research privileges documentary evidence – the statutes and organizational rules of parties – as primary data. Statutes constitute authoritative expressions of organizational design, delineating member rights, leadership selection, decision-making procedures, and accountability mechanisms. Although aspirational rather than descriptive of everyday practice, statutes are nonetheless indispensable sources for assessing the formalization of intra-party democracy.

This design is particularly suitable for post-communist contexts like Romania, where political parties often seek legitimacy through formal democratic provisions. By analyzing statutory provisions, the study evaluates both the symbolic and substantive dimensions of IPD, identifying whether parties merely display democratic rhetoric or embed meaningful participatory rights.

3.2. Case Selection

The analysis focuses on four parties that structure contemporary Romanian politics:

Partidul Social Democrat (PSD) – the largest and most institutionalized party, representing the mainstream center-left; Partidul Național Liberal (PNL) – a mainstream center-right party with long historical roots; Uniunea Salvați România (USR) – a reformist, antisystem newcomer with explicit democratic ambitions; Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor (AUR) – a populist and nationalist challenger party that rapidly gained visibility after 2019. This selection captures both mainstream vs. anti-system actors and old vs. new parties, offering variation in organizational origins, ideological positioning, and institutionalization. It also allows the study to test whether organizational age and status in the party system correlate with different levels of IPD. Although including Uniunea Democrată a Maghiarilor din România (UDMR) would indeed have offered an interesting perspective, its unique status as an ethnic-minority party – governed by specific legal provisions and organizational logics – places it outside the comparative scope of this study. Moreover, gaining a reliable understanding of its internal dynamics would require triangulating statutory analysis with press coverage, a task made particularly challenging because UDMR is predominantly covered in local, Hungarian-language media outlets that rely heavily on funding that is either provided directly by UDMR or distributed through its networks, which raises concerns about the independence of available sources. For these reasons, incorporating UDMR would have demanded a distinct methodological framework and resources beyond the scope of the present analysis.

3.3. Data Sources

The primary sources consist of official party statutes, amendments, and related internal documents covering the period from 2014 to 2024. These were obtained from official party websites, the Permanent Electoral Authority, and public archives. Whenever possible, both the

original statutes and subsequent revisions were included, enabling longitudinal comparison across a decade marked by electoral volatility and institutional reform.

Because statutes are “living documents,” often amended in response to political crises or leadership turnover, press coverage was used to identify and contextualize major revisions. For instance, PSD’s statute revisions following Liviu Dragnea’s resignation were reported in Gândul (Grigore, 2019) and Mediafax (2019), while PNL’s procedural disputes ahead of the 2021 congress were covered by Digi24 (2021). For USR, press reports on the adoption of online voting procedures and internal referenda provided important context (G4Media, 2020; Libertatea, 2021). In AUR’s case, investigative articles in G4Media (2023) and Digi24 (2024) offered insight into the party’s limited statutory transparency and the concentration of authority in the president’s office.

To further contextualize statutory analysis, the study also draws on secondary sources such as academic commentary, and NGO analyses of Romanian political parties. These materials are not coded systematically but inform the interpretation of discrepancies between formal rules and actual practices.

3.4. Coding Scheme and Indicators

To analyze the statutes systematically, the study employs a coding scheme adapted from von dem Berge, Poguntke, and Obert (2013) and the Political Party Database Project (PPDB). The coding captures three overarching dimensions of intra-party democracy: participation – inclusiveness of membership in internal decisions, answering “who can join the party and under what conditions?”, “do members have the right to elect leaders and candidates?” and “are referenda or direct votes used to involve members in decision-making?”; competitiveness – the degree to which elections within the party present genuine alternatives, answering the questions “Are leadership positions contested?”, “Are there formal guarantees of competition, such as nomination procedures and thresholds?” and “Can incumbents be challenged, and under what rules?”; and Transparency and Responsibility – mechanisms of accountability and oversight, considering whether “decision-making bodies are clearly defined and rules publicly available?”, “statutes specify reporting duties of leaders to members?” and “procedures for removing leaders or revising decisions involve members participation?”. Each indicator is coded on an ordinal scale, reflecting whether provisions are absent, partially present, or fully institutionalized. The coding emphasizes formal rules as they appear in statutes, but contextual interpretation considers whether provisions are likely to be symbolic or effective.

3.5. Analytical Strategy

The coding results are synthesized into party profiles that describe the degree and type of IPD institutionalization in each case. Comparative analysis then identifies patterns across the four parties, paying special attention to: differences between mainstream and anti-system parties; the evolution of statutory provisions over time (2014–2024); and the extent of convergence or divergence in organizational design across parties. By combining cross-sectional and longitudinal comparison, the study avoids static snapshots and highlights processes of adaptation, reform, or retrenchment.

3.6. Strengths and Limitations

The methodological approach has several strengths. First, it allows for systematic comparison across parties using replicable coding rules. Second, by focusing on statutes, it captures formal commitments that parties cannot easily deny, since they are binding legal documents. Third, the longitudinal scope highlights how statutes evolve in response to external shocks such as electoral defeats, leadership crises, or legislative reforms. However, limitations must also be acknowledged. Statutes may not reflect actual practice; they may codify aspirational norms or serve as legitimizing rhetoric. To address this, the study complements coding with contextual interpretation, drawing on secondary sources to identify decoupling between rules and behavior. Moreover, statutes sometimes remain vague or ambiguous, leaving room for informal practices. Such gaps are themselves analytically significant, revealing the extent to which parties deliberately avoid codifying clear democratic procedures.

3.7. Contribution of the Approach

This methodological design contributes at two levels. Theoretically, it demonstrates how statutory rules embody both substantive and symbolic dimensions of intra-party democracy. Methodologically, it combines statute coding with press triangulation, offering a replicable model for studying party organization in contexts where official documentation is incomplete or inconsistently applied. By systematically coding statutes and cross-referencing them with press coverage, the study captures both the formal frameworks of IPD and their practical enactment in party politics.

4. Empirical Findings: Intra-Party Democracy in Four Romanian Parties

This section presents the empirical analysis of intra-party democracy (IPD) in Romania through four case studies: Partidul Social Democrat (PSD), Partidul Național Liberal (PNL), Uniunea Salvați România (USR), and Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor (AUR). Each case is assessed along three key dimensions – participation, competitiveness, and transparency/responsibility – based on statutory provisions and contextual interpretation. The comparative outlook highlights both continuities with broader theories of party organization and distinctive post-communist trajectories.

4.1. PSD: Institutionalized but Oligarchic

PSD, Romania's largest and most institutionalized party, formally grants members participation through local assemblies and congresses, with statutory provisions for electing leaders and approving programs (PSD Statute 2013; 2019). The PSD is one of the few parties that explicitly recognizes internal democracy and commits itself to upholding internal democracy, pluralism of opinions, and the responsibility to organize an internal referendum for amendments to its statute. The rights of members are detailed in the statute: they have the right to be informed and consulted on important decisions, and a framework is guaranteed for the expression of political initiative. In practice, however, grassroots participation is mediated by local elites, while referenda and broader consultations remain unused.

Competitiveness is minimal. Leadership elections – such as those in 2015 and 2019 – were dominated by consensus candidates, with challengers being marginalized rather than integrated, a point also made by Gherghina (2009, 2012). This reflects Michels’ “iron law of oligarchy” (1911/1915), where organizational stability takes precedence over openness.

Transparency is formally present – statutes require reporting and accountability – but in practice, responsibility is exercised mainly under external pressure, as illustrated by Liviu Dragnea’s resignation after legal conviction. PSD thus embodies a paradox: a highly institutionalized party that codifies democratic rules, but practices centralized control (Panebianco 1988). Party discipline, however, is strictly enforced within the PSD, as evidenced by the fact that members who did not participate in the vote on the motion of no confidence against the Orban government in September 2020 were expelled (Radio Europa Liberă România, 2020). Other examples of PSD members excluded for failing to respect party discipline include MEP Cătălin Ivan and city councilor Orlando Culea (Mihalaşcu, 2019).

Members of minority groups formally enjoy the most extensive political support. The party commits to ensuring a presence of 30% women in leadership structures, 20% youth, and 10% pensioners. The same percentages apply to their promotion on candidate lists. However, an independent report notes that this right is not reflected in practice, and women, for example, occupy only 15% of positions in leadership structures (Băluță & Tufiș, 2021). The condition of women’s representation on parliamentary lists is, however, better, as they represented 24% of the party’s elected officials in the last legislature (Funky Citizens, 2021). The situation is similar in the case of young people (Politoscop.ro, 2020).

4.2. PNL: Factionalized Competition without Grassroots Empowerment

PNL combines formal democratic provisions with the legacy of mergers, notably with the Democratic Liberal Party in 2014. Since 2015, internal democracy has been explicitly affirmed as a guiding principle of the party’s internal life, and it remains enshrined in the statutes adopted in 2017 and 2021. Members’ rights are outlined in a dedicated article and have grown increasingly complex in recent years, particularly following the 2014 merger with the Democratic Liberal Party (PD-L). A notable change concerns the right to candidacy. In the Statute adopted at the Congress of February 2013, this right was narrowly defined as the possibility of being ‘nominated and promoted to public offices and dignities’ and ‘elected to leadership positions within the party.’ By 2015, however, the formulation had expanded to encompass the broader right ‘to vote, to stand as a candidate, and to be elected.’ Statute currently grants members rights to elect leaders at various levels, but participation is largely mediated through county elites.

Unlike PSD, PNL has witnessed more competitive leadership contests. The 2017 and 2021 congresses featured genuine rivalries, reflecting the party’s factionalized nature (Chiru 2019). Yet, candidate selection for national elections remains centralized, with the national leadership exercising veto powers.

Transparency is partly ensured by statutory reporting and the balancing of factions, but accountability tends to follow electoral defeat rather than statutory review. Overall, PNL exhibits greater internal competition than PSD but lacks mechanisms for empowering ordinary members, aligning with cartel party dynamics (Katz & Mair 1995).

4.3. USR: Ambitious Participation and the Costs of Openness

USR emerged in 2016 as an explicitly participatory alternative to the mainstream parties, with statutes granting members direct voting rights in leadership elections and decision-making, often facilitated by online platforms (USR Statute 2017). These provisions distinguish USR as Romania's most ambitious experiment in IPD.

Competitiveness has been strong, with leadership contests involving multiple candidates, as in the 2021 Barna–Cioloș race, and primaries occasionally used for candidate selection (Soare & Tufiș 2021). Yet competitiveness has come at a cost: losing factions often exit the party, fueling instability and fragmentation.

Transparency provisions are extensive, including livestreamed debates and published decisions, but responsibility mechanisms remain weak, as leadership turnover is driven more by factional pressure than by statutory oversight. USR illustrates both the potential and fragility of participatory democracy in post-communist settings, echoing concerns that excessive openness may undermine cohesion (Close, Gherghina & Sierens 2018).

4.4. AUR: Personalism and Minimal Statutory Democracy

Founded in 2019, AUR presents the opposite model to USR. Its statutes are underdeveloped, and participation rights for members are minimal. Decision-making is concentrated in the hands of the president, with local branches serving as mobilization vehicles rather than deliberative fora.

Competitiveness is virtually absent: leadership selection is tightly controlled, and candidate nominations are centralized. Transparency and accountability mechanisms are vague, with reporting requirements often unfulfilled. The party's organizational dynamics are shaped by personalistic leadership and weak institutionalization, consistent with patterns observed in other populist parties in Europe (Mudde 2007).

4.5. Comparative Reflections

The four cases reveal a spectrum of organizational logics. PSD exemplifies institutionalized oligarchy: extensive statutory provisions but limited practical democracy. PNL reflects factional competition, where rivalry at the elite level coexists with centralized control over candidate selection. USR represents the most ambitious experiment with participatory democracy, but openness exacerbates instability. AUR epitomizes personalistic centralization, where statutes provide only a thin façade of democracy.

These findings confirm broader theoretical expectations: Michels' oligarchy thesis (1915) resonates with PSD's entrenched centralization; Katz and Mair's (1995, 2002) cartel thesis helps explain how PSD and PNL deploy plebiscitary or formal mechanisms as tools of elite control; the volatility of USR demonstrates both the promise and pitfalls of participatory models in weakly institutionalized contexts; AUR's trajectory underscores the risks of personalism and the limits of statutory analysis, as practices diverge sharply from formal rules.

Overall, the Romanian cases illustrate how statutes can function simultaneously as formal frameworks of authority and as legitimizing symbols. While new parties may experiment with openness, established actors tend to instrumentalize IPD for legitimacy without relinquishing elite dominance.

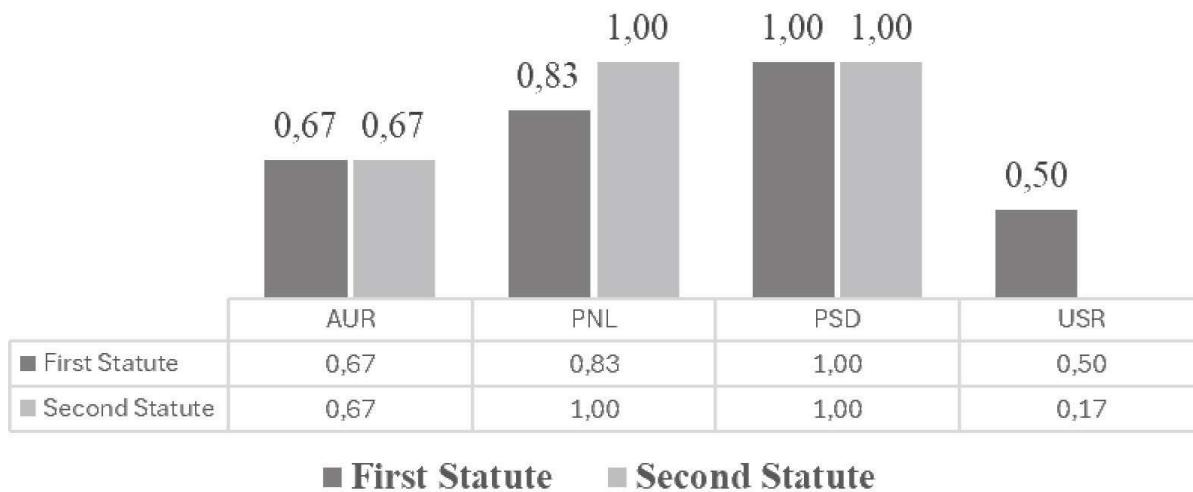
5. Comparative Analysis: Mainstream and Anti-System Parties

The four case studies illustrate how intra-party democracy (IPD) in Romania is codified in statutes but unevenly realized in practice. Comparing mainstream parties (PSD, PNL) with anti-system challengers (USR, AUR) highlights the extent to which organizational type and strategic orientation shape participation, competitiveness, and transparency.

5.1. Mainstream Parties: Institutionalization and Controlled Democracy

PSD and PNL reflect the mainstream trajectory of party development in post-communist Romania. Both possess extensive organizational structures, long-standing territorial networks, and detailed statutes that formally enshrine democratic rights. Yet, consistent with Michels' (1911/1915) "iron law of oligarchy," these provisions rarely translate into genuine empowerment. The statutes of Romanian parties reveal significant variation in the scope of rights formally granted to members. As Fig. 1 will illustrate, in PSD and PNL, rights are codified but largely mediated through local elites, limiting the direct influence of rank-and-file members in leadership or candidate selection. USR stands out by granting members extensive participatory rights, including direct votes in leadership elections and, in some cases, primaries and digital referenda. By contrast, as Figure 2 will demonstrate, AUR provides only minimal rights, concentrating authority in the party president (and leaving grassroots members with little formal role in decision-making). The following table summarizes these differences by presenting the comparative scores assigned to each party on the dimension of members' rights.

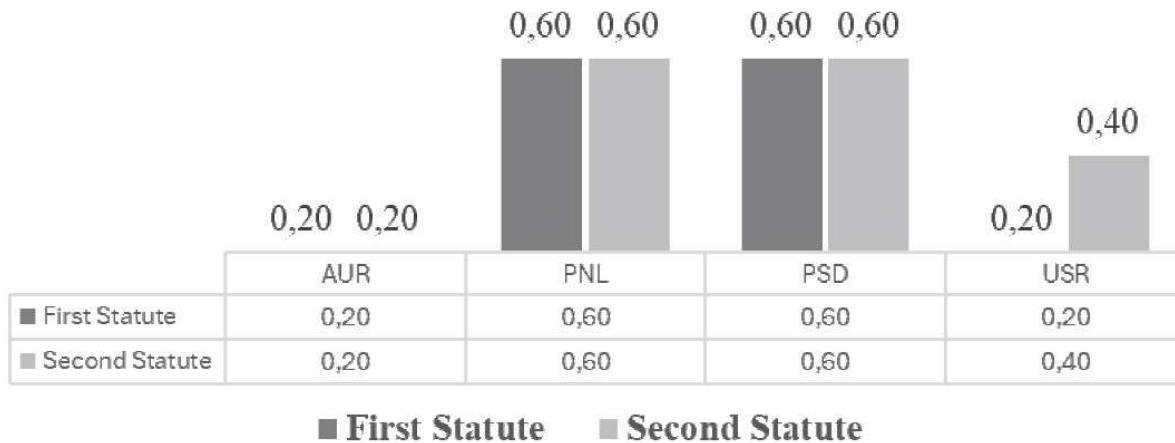
Figure 1. Member's General Rights



Party congresses remain the highest formal decision-making bodies across Romanian parties, yet their effective powers differ markedly. In PSD and PNL, congresses are convened regularly and are formally empowered to elect leaders and amend statutes, though in practice they often serve to ratify pre-negotiated elite bargains. USR's congress plays a more substantive role, functioning as a forum for debate and the adoption of digital procedures that extend participation beyond delegates. By contrast, AUR's congress has limited statutory authority, with most decision-making concentrated in the party president, rendering the congress largely sym-

bolic. The figure below illustrates these contrasts by comparing the scope of congress powers across the four parties.

Figure 2. Party Congress Powers



In PSD, member participation is largely symbolic. Local branches serve as conduits for central directives, and congresses merely ratify leadership choices. Leadership contests, such as those in 2015 and 2019, were dominated by consensus candidates, underscoring the oligarchic dominance of central elites. Statutory provisions for accountability, such as leader removal, exist but are rarely activated except under external pressures, as in the case of Liviu Dragnea's resignation. PSD thus exemplifies Panebianco's (1988) argument that organizational institutionalization stabilizes elite dominance rather than fostering democratization.

PNL demonstrates somewhat greater internal pluralism due to its factionalized structure, reinforced by mergers such as the 2014 integration of the Democratic Liberal Party. Its 2017 and 2021 congresses were openly contested, with rival elites competing for leadership positions (Chiru, 2019). However, despite this competitiveness, grassroots influence remains limited: candidate selection is centralized, and national leadership retains veto power. This dynamic aligns with Katz and Mair's (1995) "cartel party" thesis, in which formal democratic mechanisms are preserved to legitimize elite bargains rather than to empower members.

In sum, mainstream parties illustrate a pattern of institutionalized but controlled democracy, where inclusiveness and accountability are codified but subordinated to elite dominance.

5.2. Anti-System Parties: Experiments and Personalism

Anti-system challengers demonstrate more divergent organizational logics.

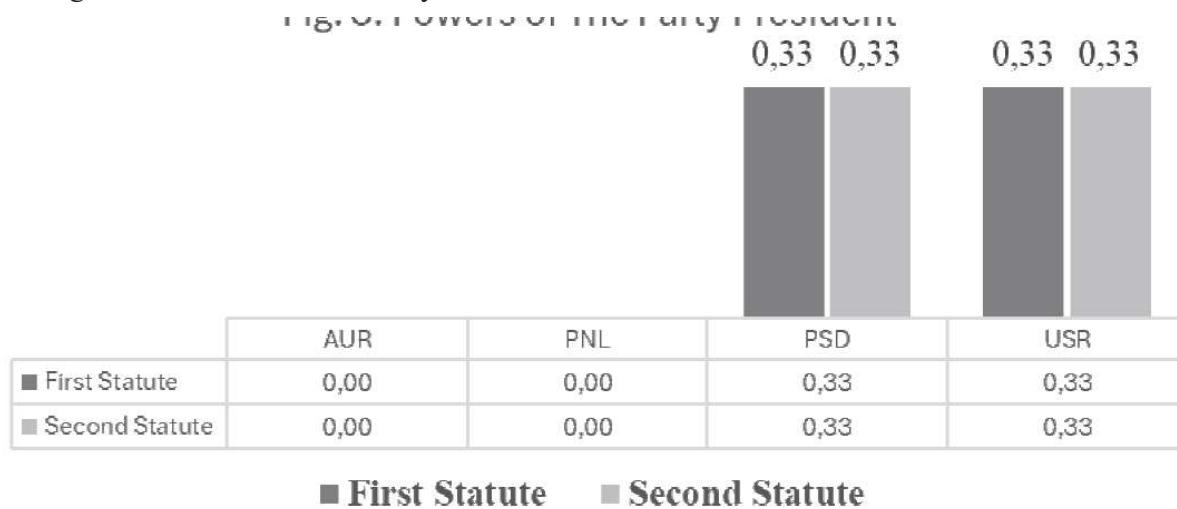
The subsequent statutes of USR grant members direct voting rights in leadership elections and programmatic decisions, often facilitated through online platforms (USR Statutes 2017, 2020). Leadership contests such as the 2021 Barna–Cioloș race showcased genuine competitiveness, while primaries for candidate selection reflected attempts at openness (Soare & Tufiș, 2021).

Transparency provisions are also robust, with livestreamed debates and published decisions. However, high competitiveness and openness have exacerbated factionalism, leading to fragmentation and splinter groups. This illustrates the dual nature of participatory democracy: while it enhances legitimacy, it can undermine cohesion in weakly institutionalized contexts (Close, Gherghina & Sierens 2018).

AUR, in contrast, occupies the opposite pole. Its statutes grant minimal rights to members, while decision-making authority is concentrated in the party president. Leadership selection is centralized, and candidate nomination processes are opaque. Transparency is superficial, with vague reporting requirements and little internal accountability. The party's organizational model is best described as personalistic, consistent with comparative findings on populist movements that prioritize charismatic leadership over institutional democracy (Mudde, 2007).

The role of the party president is central to understanding the distribution of authority within Romanian parties. In PSD and PNL, presidents formally coordinate party activity and represent the organization externally, but their powers are balanced by collegial bodies such as the Executive Committee or the National Political Bureau. USR's president has more limited prerogatives, sharing authority with statutory boards and subject to frequent member oversight through referenda and internal elections. By contrast, the AUR president enjoys sweeping powers, including control over candidate selection and organizational decisions, with minimal statutory checks. Values closer to 0 in Figure 3 illustrate a tendency of over-concentration of power with the party president. Anti-system parties therefore oscillate between participatory experimentation (USR) and personalistic centralization (AUR), reflecting distinct strategies of outsider legitimization.

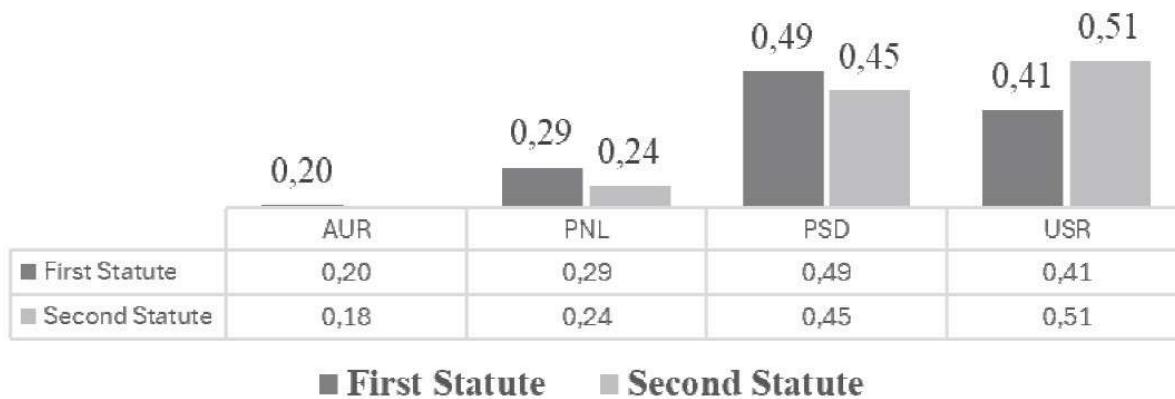
Figure 3. Powers of The Party President



5.3. Participation: Formal Rights versus Practical Empowerment

Across all four parties, statutes codify participation, but its substance varies widely. PSD and PNL provide formal avenues – assemblies, congresses, internal elections – but grassroots empowerment remains constrained by elite mediation. Figure 4 illustrates how USR offers the broadest formal participation, facilitated by digital tools, but the effectiveness of these mechanisms is undermined by internal conflict. AUR, meanwhile, offers no meaningful empowerment beyond loyalty to the leader.

Figure 4. Local Branches' Influence in Selecting Candidates for Public Office

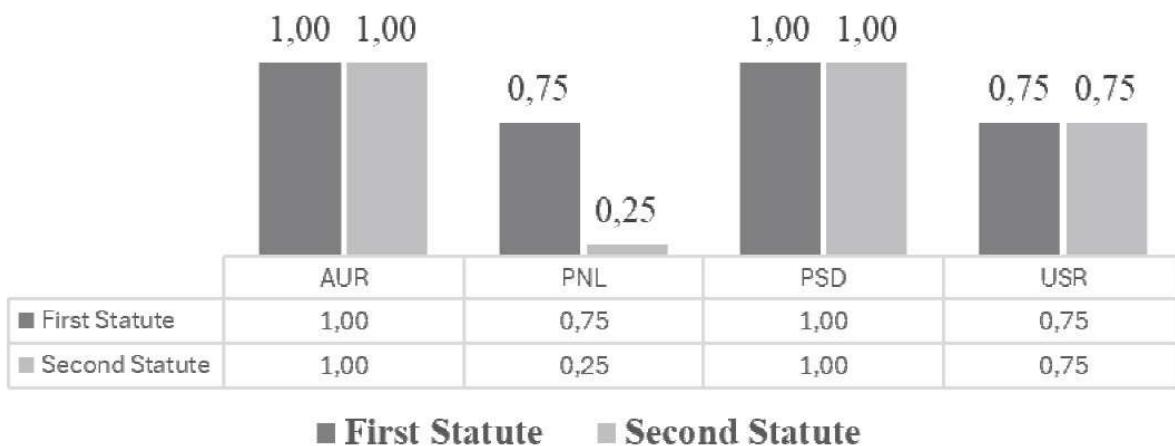


The key distinction lies between symbolic compliance by mainstream parties and divergent strategies among anti-system actors – substantive democratization in USR versus exclusionary personalism in AUR.

5.4. Competitiveness: Consensus, Factionalism, and Fragmentation

Competitiveness also varies systematically. Figure 5 demonstrates how PSD relies on consensus-building and discourages challengers, ensuring leadership stability but reinforcing oligarchy. PNL exhibits factional competitiveness, with genuine rivalries at congresses, though candidate selection remains tightly controlled at the national level. USR institutionalizes open competition, but its intensity often destabilizes the party, as losing factions exit. AUR eliminates competitiveness altogether, consolidating personalistic rule.

Figure 5. Local Branches' Autonomy

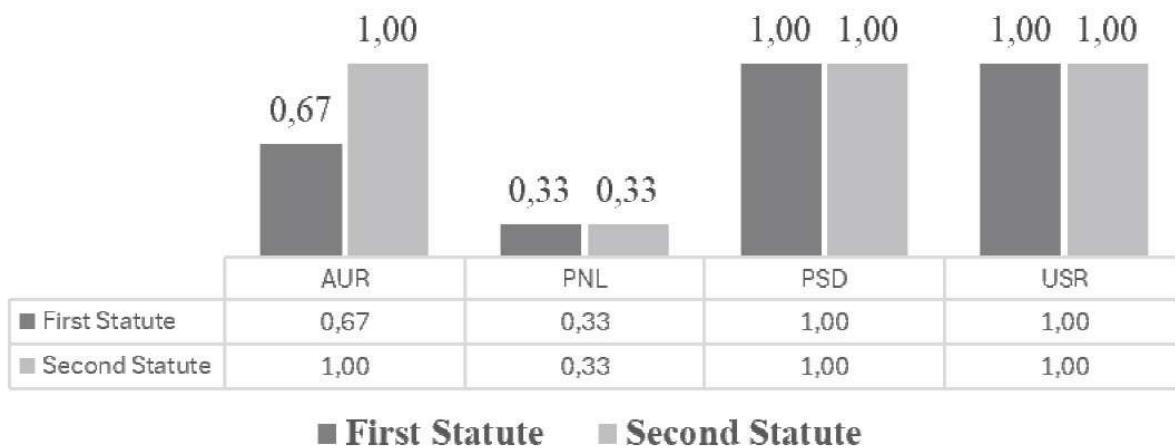


This variation highlights a trade-off: mainstream parties restrict competitiveness to preserve cohesion, while anti-system parties either risk fragmentation (USR) or authoritarian drift (AUR) when competitiveness is unbalanced.

5.5. Transparency and Responsibility: Symbolic versus Substantive Accountability

Transparency provisions are present in all statutes but differ in practice. PSD and PNL codify accountability through congress reports and leadership oversight, but enforcement depends on electoral performance or external scandals. USR pursues substantive transparency through open communication and online debates, but accountability mechanisms remain fragile, with leadership changes driven by factional pressure rather than statutory review. AUR, meanwhile, treats transparency as largely symbolic, with vague rules and opaque practices. Statute analysis, as captured by Figure 6, demonstrates that powers of the national executive are formalized similarly across parties, but it is the current practice that shapes party hierarchy and accountability on a vertical level.

Figure 6. Powers of the National Executive



Thus, mainstream parties demonstrate symbolic transparency, while anti-system parties exhibit either radical openness (USR) or opaque personalism (AUR).

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study of PSD, PNL, USR, and AUR highlights how party type shapes intra-party democracy (IPD) in Romania. Mainstream parties (PSD, PNL) are highly institutionalized and codify inclusiveness, accountability, and leadership selection in their statutes. Yet, consistent with Michels' (1911/1915) "iron law of oligarchy," these provisions remain largely symbolic. PSD relies on consensus and centralized authority, while PNL allows greater competitiveness but primarily among elites. For both, grassroots empowerment is constrained, and accountability typically follows external pressures such as electoral defeat or.

Anti-system parties (USR, AUR) diverge more dramatically. USR adopted plebiscitary and digital forms of participation, granting members direct voting rights and primaries (Soare & Tufiș 2021). These mechanisms expanded inclusiveness and transparency but also fueled factionalism and organizational fragility. AUR represents the opposite extreme: statutes grant minimal rights, leadership is centralized, and transparency remains largely symbolic. Together, USR and AUR demonstrate how anti-system challengers experiment with, or bypass, internal democracy as strategies of legitimization.

Comparing across cases, three patterns emerge. Participation is symbolic in mainstream parties, substantive but destabilizing in USR, and absent in AUR. Competitiveness is suppressed in PSD, factionalized in PNL, open but fragmenting in USR, and eliminated in AUR. Transparency and responsibility are ritualized in PSD and PNL, radical but fragile in USR, and superficial in AUR. These contrasts suggest that intra-party democracy in Romania functions less as a path to empowerment than as a resource mobilized differently by elites.

The implications for democratic consolidation are ambivalent. Mainstream parties stabilize the system but at the cost of member engagement and public trust, aligning with Katz and Mair's (1995, 2002) "cartel party" model. Anti-system parties energize participation or mobilize discontent but risk either organizational collapse (USR) or authoritarian drift (AUR). In both cases, IPD highlights tensions between stability, inclusiveness, and accountability in post-communist democracies.

Comparatively, these findings contribute to three debates. First, they reaffirm the resilience of oligarchic dynamics in institutionalized parties (Michels 1911/1915; Panebianco 1988) as well as the theory of institutional decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), where the presence of democratic norms in the statute is not a guarantee of their application in practice. Second, they extend cartelization theory to a post-communist setting, showing how mainstream actors preserve statutory democracy as legitimization. Third, they underline the dual logic of anti-system challengers: participatory innovation versus personalistic closure, echoing findings from von dem Berge & Poguntke (2017) and Mudde (2007).

In sum, intra-party democracy in Romania is best understood as a strategic tool rather than a linear path to democratization. For mainstream parties it legitimizes elite dominance; for challengers it either sustains participatory experiments or consolidates personalism. This duality underscores that IPD's contribution to democratic consolidation is contingent and ambivalent: stabilizing in some cases, destabilizing in others. Romania's experience thus enriches comparative research on intra-party democracy, showing how statutory rules and organizational practices interact with systemic position and party type in shaping both party and regime trajectories.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

About the author

Iulia-Marilena SBÂRCEA is a doctoral researcher in political science, specializing in democratic governance and party system development in post-communist Europe. Her current research focuses on institutional reform and the role of EU conditionality in shaping post-communist political systems. Her academic work is grounded in comparative approaches to constitutional design and democratic resilience.

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