



ORIGINAL PAPER

Tales of Post-Communist Transition and Right-Wing Extremism. An Analysis of the 2000 Romanian Elections, 20 Years after

Mihaela Ivănescu¹⁾

Abstract

In recent years, several European states have witnessed the emergence and / or intensification of the radical right, whose exponents have even managed to obtain very good electoral results in some cases. In Central and Eastern Europe, the success of right-wing extremism has been more visible in Poland or Hungary, but other states have also had their fair share of extremist movement in the years since 1990. Compared to the other states in the region, where political formations on the far right of the political spectrum became, in recent years, electorally viable, in Romania this trend did not take hold. Instead, the right-wing extremism has manifested itself outside the political class, within different groups or social movements. Of the Romanian right-wing political formations, the Greater Romania Party (PRM) had been the most successful, and the presidential election from 2000 represented the peak of the extremist political discourse in post-communist Romania. In this paper, we will analyze the Romanian general and presidential elections from 2000, with an emphasis on the PRM and its candidate, as the main center of right-wing extremism. PRM, as the analysis will show, had registered a double electoral success during these elections. On the one hand, it became the main opposition party in the Romanian Parliament; on the other hand, its candidate entered the second round of the presidential elections, managing to obtain, in the first round, almost one third of the valid votes cast. Consequently, the main thrust of the paper will be on discourse analysis, focusing, in particular, on the themes used in the electoral campaign for the presidential elections by the two candidates who qualified for the second round. Given that the incumbent president did not seek to be reelected, we argue that the right-wing surge witnessed during this period can be premised, in part, on the poor performance of the outgoing president and government from the 1996-2000 period. Similarly, electoral absenteeism also played a major role in PRM's electoral success to a certain extent.

Keywords: *Romania; post-communism; right-wing extremism; Greater Romania Party; presidential elections.*

¹⁾ Lecturer PhD, „Ovidius” University of Constanța, Faculty of History and Political Science, Political Science specialization, Phone: 0040723238228, E-mail: miha.ivanescu@yahoo.com.

Introduction

The presidential elections from 2000, the fourth electoral contest held in Romania since the fall of the communist regime in 1989 and the third since a new Constitution was adopted in 1991, took place in a context where a significant majority of Romania's population was dealing with a complex economic situation. The political coalition that had been in power since 1996 and whose main political member was the Democratic Convention of Romania (CDR) had been catastrophically incapacitated by the disunity showcased by its members. Where the office of the prime-minister was concerned, it had undergone three successive changes: one by one, Victor Ciorbea, Radu Vasile și Mugur Isărescu came, governed for a short amount of time and then they were replaced. President Emil Constantinescu recorded very low approval ratings at the end of 1999. In light of this, he declared his helplessness towards an entrenched political system that refused to reform itself and announced that he will not seek a second mandate.

Twelve candidates announced their presence in the presidential race from that year (by comparison, 16 had run in 1996). The main candidates were: former president Ion Iliescu (PDSR); the senator Corneliu Vadim Tudor (PRM); former Prime Minister Mugur Isărescu (independent candidate); Theodor Stolojan (PNL); György Frunda (UDMR); Petre Roman (PD) and last but not least, Grațiela-Elena Bărlă, the first woman to ever run for the presidential office in Romania.

By the second round of the presidential elections, the remaining two frontrunners were Ion Iliescu and Corneliu Vadim Tudor. The public opinion from Romania and abroad was shocked that Corneliu Vadim Tudor ended up being such an attractive political option for so many voters. On top of that, his political party, the Greater Romania Party (PRM), had just won a fifth of the parliamentary seats. These two political developments signaled the existence of a growing extremist threat in Romania. It was for the first time in Romania's recent history when a candidate that appealed to an extremist political discourse succeeded to attract to his side such a significant part of the electorate.

This paper proposes an analysis of the 2000 parliamentary and presidential elections that focuses on identifying the conditions in which the extremist parties gained visibility and viability on the political scene and also locates the factors which enabled their success. In this sense, the study will focus preeminently on PRM and the discourse of its presidential candidate during the electoral campaign.

The 2000 Electoral Year and the Evolution of the Legislative Framework and Economic Context

The Decree-law no. 8/1989 not only restored the much needed political pluralism in the Romanian society – an aspect so very important after the fall of the communist regime in December 1989 – but during the early 1990s, also gave everyone the possibility to establish their own political party (“Monitorul Oficial” [*Official Bulletin*], no. 9, December 31, 1989). Over 200 political parties appeared in Romania prior to the 1992 election. Since the majority of them were practically inexistent and had never participated in any election, subsequent legislative acts tried to dissuade this practice of party inflation. In this sense, the law regarding the political parties adopted in 1996 stipulated that in order to establish a party, the signatures of at least 10,000 founding members were required and those members needed to belong to at least 15 constituencies. Moreover, at the constituency level, another provision stated that there

Tales of Post-Communist Transition and Right-Wing Extremism...

needed to be 300 founding members at the very least (Law no. 27/1996, published in "Monitorul Oficial" [*Official Bulletin*], no. 87, April 29, 1996).

Prior to the elections held in 2000, the electoral threshold for entering the Parliament had been raised through an Emergency Ordinance (OUG). The Ordinance stipulated that the threshold would rise from 3% to 5% for political parties, and where political coalitions and alliances were concerned, the threshold would vary from 8% to 10%, depending on the number of members (two, three, respectively four or more than four) (OUG no. 129 from June 30, 2000, published in "Monitorul Oficial" [*Official Bulletin*], no. 311, July 5, 2000). If the 5% threshold for political parties was with the limits generally accepted at the international level, the one of 10% for political alliances was thought to be too restrictive. A report issued by the OSCE with regard to the 2000 parliamentary elections criticized both this aspect as well as the fact that the changes to the electoral law had been made by way of an OUG (OSCE, 2001: 5-6).

The 2000 electoral campaign had been gravely affected by a series of economic scandals like "Costea" and "FNI". Once again, these scandals brought the problem of corruption in the Romanian society to the forefront of the debates (European Commission, 2000: 5-6). The first of these scandals was centered around the controversial businessman Adrian Costea who was accused of money laundering through a scheme where funds from Romania would be deposited to a group of French enterprises for the purpose of printing electoral materials, images and posters. A scandal of such a magnitude could have seriously damaged Romania's image abroad, by reopening the discussions about corruption practices of which notable Romanian institutions and personalities had been accused before. The accusations against Adrian Costea were made in France and he was accused of embezzling public funds from Romania on behalf of various Romanian politicians. The fraud involved several members of the Party of Social Democracy in Romania (PDSR) and from the Alliance for Romania (ApR). Given the personalities involved, the scandal could have significantly affected the presidential electoral campaigns of the three main candidates: Teodor Meleşcanu, Emil Constantinescu and Ion Iliescu.

The second scandal regarding the National Fund for Investments (FNI) started a month before the local elections, when massive capital withdrawals from FNI began and the depositors started to worry after the payments were discontinued. FNI was a company owned by SOV Invest, a firm owned in turn by another controversial businessman, Sorin-Ovidiu Vântu, who held stocks and state banks like CEC (*Casa de Economii și Consemnațiuni*, Eng. version: Savings and Consignments House) or the Agricole Bank. The collapse of the Fund would have shaken the people's trust in the entire banking system. All across the country, the offices of CEC and BCR (*Banca Comercială Română*, Eng. version: Romanian Commercial Banks) were overrun by thousands of people who wanted to withdraw their money, for fear that in the near future these institutions will eventually struggle with their own financial problems (Stoica, 2010: 118-119).

Consequently, the local elections were overshadowed by this scandal especially when multiple FNI investors organized several protests at the national level, demanding to get their savings back and threatening to boycott the elections unless they would receive what was owed to them. One of the immediate effects of this social and economic instability was reflected in the massive wave of absenteeism that affected the local elections. The registered rate of participation had been of only 50.85% (Autoritatea

Electorală Permanentă [*Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority*], 2000a), reflecting the lowest electoral turnout up to that point.

How Was the Electoral Campaign Conducted and Who Won the Elections?

In the four years since it had been in opposition – from 1996 to 2000 – PDSR registered some political victories in the Parliament thanks to Corneliu Vadim Tudor and PRM, which they had let, on several occasions, take the lead in the opposition. In the 2000 election campaign, aided by the CDR-PD-UDMR government's disorganization, lack of vision, and disappointing results, PDSR only tried to propose solutions that were more democratic than PRM's extremist ones. PDSR also put forth a much more pro-European national project than the xenophobic and extremist nationalism promoted by Corneliu Vadim Tudor. Therefore, as Teodorescu et.al. remarked, despite the negative campaign triggered by the Costea and FNI scandals, it seemed that PDSR was not negatively affected in the parliamentary elections (Teodorescu, Guțu & Enache, 2005: 91-92). CDR was hit, however, not only by the extremely poor results of its own government, but also by a new scandal, launched by Corneliu Vadim Tudor. The scandal focused on President Emil Constantinescu, who was accused of having extramarital relations with an actress, Rona Hartner. Despite the fact that the evidence presented by Vadim Tudor was disputed by all the media and that the PRM leader himself admitted, at one point, that he may have been misinformed, the scandal managed to generate some questions about the morality of President Constantinescu, which led to an even greater decline in his approval ratings.

Moreover, President Constantinescu's image was also negatively affected by his decision to support NATO military forces in Kosovo, strongly contested by PDSR and PRM. In three years, amid all these crises and scandals, the intention to vote for President Constantinescu had dropped from 70% in 1997 to about 10% in the summer of 2000 (Câmpeanu, 1999: 10-11). Immediately after the local elections, he announced that he would no longer run for a new term, which meant, in fact, the final breakup of CDR, the alliance that had managed to win the parliamentary elections four years ago, after gaining almost 10% more votes than PDSR. After the President's decision not to candidate, Ion Iliescu remained the only contender that the polls placed at 40% in terms of voting preferences, while the other main opponents – Petre Roman, Theodor Stolojan, and Corneliu Vadim Tudor – were far behind him (Teodorescu et.al., 2005: 100). Ion Iliescu's electoral campaign was a relatively quiet one. The tone of the messages transmitted and of the electoral spots was a calm and positive one, and the electoral slogan of Ion Iliescu, "Close to the people, together with them", offered the citizens dissatisfied with the government exactly what they wanted to hear: that the future president would be much more concerned about the citizens' problems, and that the decisions would be taken in collaboration with them.

We can assert that this way of constructing the discourse in the electoral campaign was based precisely on the premise that the citizens will balance the realities of the former government with a new way of making politics, promised by Ion Iliescu and PDSR. Basically, Iliescu relied for the electoral campaign on the power of the retrospective vote. According to Morris Fiorina, who theorized the explanatory model of the retrospective vote, the evaluations that voters make about the previous performances of governments have a particularly important role in constructing the voting decision and the only situation in which they are not considered by voters is the one in which the solutions (namely the public policy proposals) of the opposition are extremely

Tales of Post-Communist Transition and Right-Wing Extremism...

convincing (Fiorina, 1977: 601-625). Iliescu's slogan prompted a response from citizens that had been the result of such an "electoral calculation": they were invited to evaluate the gains they had benefited from as a result of the policies pursued by the former government (or the losses incurred in their standard of living), and to compare them with the promises of change that came with the PDSR and its leader.

At the opposite pole, the electoral campaign of Corneliu Vadim Tudor was a very agitated one, sprinkled with speeches in which he attacked in an extremely vehement manner all the candidates and offered only radical, extremist or racist solutions to the political problems of the moment. His electoral slogan, "Justice, prosperity, national reconciliation", came in clear contradiction with the type of speech practiced by the PRM leader, in which he uttered insults against the candidates and proposed extreme and immediate measures, which any moderate citizen could understand that they were not permitted in a democratic country. To the question of how to solve the problem of corruption facing the Romanian society, the PRM leader answered as follows: "by shooting the octopus right in the eyes" (Teodorescu et.al., 2005: 102). Although his main campaign themes were patriotism and the fight against corruption, his nervous outbursts, insults against other candidates, as well as racist or xenophobic statements determined Ion Iliescu to refuse any face to face debate before the second round of the presidential elections. This was the first time in post-communist Romania when there was no electoral debate between the two candidates in the second round of the presidential elections.

The big winner of the parliamentary elections was PDSR, which not only won after four years of opposition, but also improved its previous electoral performance by about 300,000 votes, given that turnout (and, therefore, the total number of votes) was lower than in 1996 (65.31% of the electoral body voted, compared to 76.01% in 1996). PDSR obtained the most spectacular increase in Bucharest (where it doubled its share of votes compared to the 1996 elections) and in Muntenia. The victory of PDSR did not shock anyone, while the rise of PRM was the surprising one: Corneliu Vadim Tudor's party ranked second and achieved the best score of his entire career. Vadim-Tudor's statements that he will "liquidate corruption in 24 hours", that he will shoot journalists, brought him, in the first round of the presidential elections, more than 5 times more votes than in 1996. The voting structure for the PRM candidate explains the drama of the political situation in 2000. It was voted by a large part of the young electorate, from the richest areas of the country, Transylvania and Bucharest. Moreover, according to the exit polls, 29% of Emil Constantinescu's 1996 electors voted for Vadim Tudor in 2000. The tables below, with the results of the parliamentary elections and the first round of the 2000 presidential election, reveal these aspects.

Table 1 – Distribution of votes at the parliamentary elections 2000, compared with 1996 (Chamber of Deputies)

Party Year	PDSR	PRM	PD	PNL	UDMR	CDR 2000	CDR	USD	PUNR
2000	36.61%	19.48%	7.03%	6.89%	6.79%	5.03%	-	-	-
1996	21.52%	4.46%	-	-	6.63%	-	30.16%	12.92%	4.35%

Data source: Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority (2000b); (1996a)

Table 2 – Distribution of votes in the first round of the presidential election 2000, compared with 1996

Candidate	Year	I. Iliescu	C. Vadim Tudor	T. Stolojan	M. Isărescu	G. Frunda	P. Roman	E. Constanținescu
		2000	Votes	4,076,273	3,178,293	1,321,420	1,069,463	696,989
	%	36.35%	28.34%	11.78%	9.53%	6.21%	2.98%	-
1996	Votes	4,081,093	597,508	-	-	761,411	2,598,545	3,569,941
	%	32.25%	4.72%	-	-	6.01%	20.53%	28.21%

Data source: Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority (2000c); (1996b)

In the second round of the presidential elections, the regional distribution of votes was much more uniform than in the first round, as can be seen in Table 3 below. That the voters of the other main candidates that had lost in the first round, favored Ion Iliescu increased his advantage in areas where his opponents had obtained better scores in the previous round, respectively in Bucharest. The aversion towards Iliescu manifested by the Transylvanian electorate in all the previous elections was maintained, Corneliu Vadim Tudor registering in this region his best score, especially in the counties with a predominantly Romanian electorate. In fact, the largest variation in results was registered precisely in this province, where it ranged from 55% in favor of Corneliu Vadim Tudor, in Bistrița-Năsăud, to 91% in favor of Ion Iliescu, in Harghita.

Table 3 – Distribution of votes in the second round of the presidential election 2000

Candidate	Province	Ion Iliescu	Corneliu Vadim Tudor
Transilvania		62.69%	37.31%
Muntenia		66.70%	33.30%
Moldova		69.97%	30.03%
București		73.23%	26.77%
Total (votes)		6,696,623	3,324,247
Total (%)		66.83%	33.17%

Data source: Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority (2000c)

As A. Aldea observes, if the mass of Ion Iliescu’s voters increased from the first to the second round by over two and a half million, in the case of Corneliu Vadim Tudor the increase was insignificant, below 150,000 (Aldea, 2001: 36). Moreover, Vadim Tudor’s criticism of the media and his contempt for journalists generated a strong campaign against him. Thus, the majority of important parties and candidates who failed to enter the second round, as well as the most important newspapers and television channels called on citizens to vote for Ion Iliescu and against Corneliu Vadim Tudor (OSCE, 2001: 20).

The results of the first round of the presidential elections produced a real shock in the Romanian political life and triggered an alarmed response on the part of the international community. The example of Austria, where Jörg Haider, the extremist

Tales of Post-Communist Transition and Right-Wing Extremism...

leader of the Freedom Party won the elections and subjected the country to a European political boycott, sent a poor message given that Romania had been invited just one year before to start the negotiations for the accession to the EU. The mobilization of the society against the extremist danger, which was less premeditated and more conjectural in nature even on the part of old opponents of Ion Iliescu, decided the fate of the second round of elections; from his position as the “savior of the democracy”, Iliescu had to make important changes in how he would conduct himself politically compared to the previous mandates.

Analyzing Ion Iliescu’s and Corneliu Vadim Tudor’s Political Discourses

The 2000 presidential elections were without a shadow of a doubt the height of Corneliu Vadim Tudor’s political career. The electoral campaign that preceded these elections was the moment when Vadim Tudor’s strongly nationalist and extremist political discourse succeeded to attract to his side many of the voters who had previously voted with right wing and center-right parties and which had grown disillusioned by the CDR’s leadership.

According to the program adopted at the first Congress, on March 6, 1993, PRM defined itself as a center-left party, based on the values of social democracy and Christian democracy, even if some of the provisions courted the extreme left, promising a redistribution of national wealth along the lines of the principle that everyone should be treated in accordance with their needs. Externally, PRM was a supporter of nation states, clearly opposing the Europe of regions, even if it favored Romania’s integration into NATO and the European Union. However, it had become very clear that, through its anti-Hungarian, anti-Semitic and anti-Gypsy attitudes, PRM was actually more of a far-right party. Moreover, elements of nationalism, identified in motifs evoking national greatness, historical injustices endured by the Romanian people or intolerance of national minorities were found in the party’s platform, which identified the Romanian state with the dominant nation and visibly discriminated any other national groups. For example, in several of his speeches, Corneliu Vadim Tudor argued that the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) should be outlawed and that the attempt by Romania’s former king, Michael I, to visit the country was an attack on the territorial integrity of Romania. Moreover, through the PRM strategy adopted following a 1996 national conference, Corneliu Vadim Tudor aimed to rebuild Greater Romania, change the country’s political system and, therefore, the Constitution, which would have enabled him to create two vice-president positions (one of which would belong to Bessarabia), to set up a Ministry of Propaganda (!!!) and to outlaw the UDMR.

Of the political speeches analyzed in this paper, we consider that the most relevant was the one given by the PRM candidate at the launch of his candidature, entitled “Romanians, I order you: Cross the Century” [orig. ver.: „Români, vă ordon: treceți veacul!"]. Besides this speech, an interview given to the Public Television on November 14th, 2000 played a crucial role in gaining wide popular support. Most of Vadim Tudor’s speeches were based on negative themes, the language used being characterized either by invectives or virulent attacks aimed at his political competitors (in one of these speeches, Vadim Tudor referred to President Emil Constantinescu as a “political cadaver”) (Vadim Tudor, 2001: 359), either by excessive nationalist tropes, here and there even hitting tragic notes.

One of the recurrent themes present in Vadim Tudor’s speeches was about Romania’s ongoing problems with poverty, crime, and degradation:

“The Real Country is the womb of the woman who started to sell her babes ahead of being born [...] the children sold this way to the organ banks of the world’s richest men, are sent to certain death. This does not mean that in Romania, people are not dying! They are dying [...] in some of the most horrific ways. Here, I am talking about [...] crimes and suicides. Never in the entire history of Romania, have so many of our peers been killed or have killed themselves on a yearly basis! [...] the weeds which make the life of Romanians’ unbearable [are]: poverty, misery, anarchy, the organized crime” (Vadim Tudor, 2001: 344-347).

The “political and media Mob” was also a target in Vadim Tudor’s speeches: “This is one of reasons why the political and judicial Mob involved in the traffic of children, obtains billions of dollars in financial profits. My slogan is: “Down with the Mob! Up with the Motherland! [...] but the Mob has preyed upon us even during these Autumn days, some 280 million dollars on a so-called foreign medical technique that’s for all intents and purposes, second-rate. [...] the Gypsy Mob ravages everything in its surrounding and the authorities shield it from facing any consequences!” (Vadim Tudor, 2001: 366-367).

The only positive theme of Vadim Tudor’s speeches and of his overall electoral campaign was probably the one praising the greatness of the Romanian people and language. This topic was closely connected with his main stated political objective, namely that of forging the Great Romania by achieving the union with Bessarabia and Bukovina:

“Research the archaeological background of the Romanian language and you will see that the most important words – *Patrie* [Eng.: Homeland], *Popor* [Eng.: People], *Țară* [Eng.: Country], *Biserică* [Eng.: Church], *Armată* [Eng.: Army], *Pâine* [Eng.: Bread], *Muiere* [Eng.: Wife], *Soț* [Eng.: Husband], *Făt* [Eng.: Babe], *Frate* [Eng.: Brother], *Soră* [Eng.: Sister], *Sănătate* [Eng.: Health] – and even the glorious word that is *Dumnezeu* [Eng.: God] [...] have Latin origins; We are dealing, in effect, with two aspects that each are unique in their particular way: The country is singular under the sun [...] while its People is absolutely brilliant” (Vadim Tudor, 2001: 358); Peacefully accelerating the historical and irreversible unification project with Bessarabia and Bukovina, [which are] ancient Romanian territories, [is something] we will never give up on” (Vadim Tudor, 2001: 358).

The speech “Romanians, I order you: Cross the Century” published in the magazine „România Mare” (Eng: “Great Romania”), from October 6th, 2000 was structured around the idea that the Romanians are a passive people. The discourse was built on an enumeration of multiple quotes and affirmations with a religious bent. For the regular citizen, the main themes and ideas of this speech are quite difficult to follow due to the quick transitions and, in some places, due to the lack of eloquence and relevance: from the count of Salaberry (who was of the opinion that tyranny had made the Romanians timid) to Marmier (who considered that the Romanians pass their apathy

Tales of Post-Communist Transition and Right-Wing Extremism...

and fatalism from one generation to another), from the considerations on the philosophy of destiny and luck found with the Romanian peasant to Mihai Viteazul or Tudor Vladimirescu, finally arriving at Marshall Antonescu and Ceaușescu (Florea, 2005: 108-111). Throughout the speech, the political campaign is transformed into a military one, aimed at saving Romania and the Romanian people from those who had given up on their destinies up until that point. Electoral fraud, the recurrent theme in Vadim Tudor's political discourses, is invoked on this occasion as well. Vadim Tudor urged his supporters that they should not accept this fact lying down and that instead they should be proactive and counterattack ("Such a thing is not possible! Charge ahead!") (Florea, 2005: 112).

Despite positioning himself in the second half of the decade as a critic of the policies enacted by the European Union (EU) and NATO, especially from his position as a Member of the European Parliament, Vadim Tudor adopted a rather moderate stance towards these two entities during the analyzed period. This was likely attributed to the fact that most of the Romanians were very supportive of the idea that Romania should be included in the EU and NATO. In other words, an anti-integrationist speech would have had adverse electoral effects. In light of this, Corneliu Vadim Tudor sent a message to the U.S. President George W. Bush on November 29th, 2000 in which he declared his full commitment for the future inclusion of Romania in NATO and EU: "[The future membership was] a fundamental aspect of the party's politics given that it allowed [Romania] to share the benefits with all the other nations from within the geographical, political, economical, social, and multicultural frontiers of both the Euro-Atlantic organization and of the European Communities" (Gheorghiuță, 2006: 124).

Vadim Tudor utilized a vocabulary riddled with archaisms, hyperbolas, and metaphors that were used in order to invoke an exacerbated form of nationalism and traditionalism. By doing this throughout the electoral campaign, Corneliu Vadim-Tudor tried to build for himself the image of a national savior or Messiah which was thought to resonate with a more traditionalist, rigid electorate that might even entertain authoritarian sympathies. These being said, as some authors have noted, this strategy would ultimately prove to be insufficient since throughout the electoral campaign, the PRM candidate neglected to convey to the wider electorate what were those political and managerial competences that set him apart from the other candidates and that made him the best choice for the presidential office (after all, one of the main constitutional attributes of the president is that of being a mediator between the various political and social forces present in a society) (Gheorghiuță, 2006: 125). As such, he was not perceived as a veritable politician and because of this he failed to attract the electorate towards his side especially where the second round of the elections was concerned. This aspect coupled with Vadim Tudor's political discourse rooted in passé extremisms, cheap nationalist potshots and acerbic xenophobia made so that the gap in electoral support – reflected in the votes cast – be the highest ever registered in Romania's post-communist history.

Unlike his main counter-candidate, Ion Iliescu built his entire electoral campaign around the ideas of balance and unity as evidenced by his political slogan: "Together for Romania". Maybe the only topic that both Vadim Tudor and Iliescu had in common was the one concerning poverty and social degradation. These being said, Iliescu's speeches – even though they also cite this negative theme – are more nuanced and balanced than those of Vadim Tudor. One such example is seen in Ion Iliescu's televised address to the nation given at the National Television electoral headquarters:

“We are all feeling the effects of an unprecedented poverty that affects a majority of our fellow Romanians. Every day we are learning about incidents where people have taken their own lives out of despair or because they could no longer deal with hunger, the lack of medicine, the extreme poverty” (Haineș, 2002: 156).

We can clearly see that Ion Iliescu's speeches have been neither as virulent or emotional, nor as traditionalist or dramatic as Vadim Tudor's. For the most part, Iliescu used the negative themes only as a modality to showcase his own political program, his speeches being preponderantly about socio-economic issues:

“We will built a functional market economy, founded on fair competition and efficiency. On the short term, our economic recovery requires from us to develop the small and medium enterprises [...] a[nother] vital strategic objective concerns the recovery and development of the Romanian agriculture” [...] “I will recommend to the future Parliament and government several measures aimed at combating extreme poverty and helping the families with numerous children as well as the single-parent families [...] the social welfare system will become the backbone of our national solidarity” („Bună ziua Iași”, October 5, 2000).

In the speech accepting his party nomination from October 5th, 2000, Iliescu talked about the “duty” that motivated him to seek another mandate, about the high degree of responsibility that the highest office in the state required from a leader: “I committed to this presidential competition for a new constitutional mandate by stating the firm belief that I will responsibly do my duty to the fellow citizens of this country” („Bună ziua Iași”, October 5, 2000).

Obviously, the result of the 2000 presidential elections was one in which for the first time after 1989, the Romanian vote was a preponderantly negative one. In the second round of the 2000 presidential election, the Romanian voters found themselves between a rock and a hard place. Ion Iliescu had already been the president of Romania between 1990 and 1996 and had his fair share of negative issues to contend with (see for example “the mineriads”).

Still, for Ion Iliescu it had been relatively easy to built himself a positive image given who was his competitor: Vadim Tudor was not perceived as a supporter of the democratic principles and, instead, was proposing an extremist, radical alternative which would remove Romania from its Euro-Atlantic journey at the end of which Romania was to become a member of both the European Union and NATO. Furthermore, it would also set her back in terms of the much awaited democratic consolidation (Gheorghîță, 2006: 127):

“Unfortunately, I find myself in a situation where I am dealing with an extremist, xenophobic and Anti-Semitic politician which proposes a return to a totalitarian regime with all that it entails. Such a thing is unacceptable. We cannot allow for such thoughtless political adventurism to take roots. Democracy, citizen rights and liberties, tolerance, dialogue, the protection of minorities, the property rights are values that my counter-candidate either reneges or ignores altogether” (Haineș, 2002: 157).

Tales of Post-Communist Transition and Right-Wing Extremism...

Eventually, the political calculation made by the Romanian electorate was for the most part a rational one: instead of opting for Romania to distance itself from gaining the much awaited statute of a consolidated democracy – won with so many sacrifices during the Revolution – and maybe even risking “a fall” into a new type of authoritarianism, the Romanians preferred to give Ion Iliescu a new mandate. Though Iliescu was himself a contested leader, where he was concerned the voters were more assured that he will not pose such a great threat to the democratic future of Romania – both in terms of becoming a full-fledged consolidated democracy and of becoming a full member of the European Union and NATO.

Conclusions

At the end of 1999, it was clear to everyone that CDR would no longer have the strength to win the 2000 general election. One year later, Romania was struggling and the popularity of CDR had eroded so strongly that it even failed to exceed the electoral threshold. The only survivors who managed to enter the Parliament were PD and PNL, while PDSR won almost half of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. On the backdrop of the right-wing parties fall from electoral graces, the PDSR program proposed a viable alternative to revive the economy, combat poverty and unemployment, integrate into NATO and EU. The electoral strategy used was a very simple one, in the context of the political and social crisis faced by the country, PDSR presented itself as a stable political force, able to govern and avoid the mistakes of the former power.

The real surprise of the 2000 elections was the ascension of Corneliu Vadim Tudor and of the Greater Romania Party. The unexpected electoral success of Corneliu Vadim Tudor occurred amid an acute crisis in Romania. Among the factors that facilitated the presence of Vadim Tudor in the second round of the presidential elections we find a wide array of issues: divided opponents, popular dissatisfaction with the traditional political class, a depreciated standard of living, the uncritical promotion of the extremist electoral message by the media. Vadim Tudor was voted by the disadvantaged social categories, pessimistic about their own future, but in the decisive round he was easily defeated by his counter-candidate, who was the beneficiary of the anti-extremist media campaigns initiated between the two rounds. The electoral success of extremism had highlighted the relative influence of xenophobic, nationalist, and racist tendencies which, in the context of a difficult social and economic situation, could have blocked the processes of democratic and economic transformation.

Despite the limited alternatives that the voters had at their disposal and in light of the emergence of extremism, which brought back into public debate the fear of returning to an undemocratic regime, Romania continued to advance, albeit with considerable difficulties, on the path towards democratic consolidation and European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Although in recent years there have been many social, political and economic problems, the radical or extremist parties that emerged on the political scene in Romania have been unable to replicate similar levels of success. From this point of view, Romania remains in recent years a positive example among the Member States of the EU and, especially, in Central and Eastern Europe, where, increasingly, radical parties not only obtained very good electoral scores but they even managed to govern in some cases. As a final thought we could argue that either the memory of communism, still very present in the Romanian collective consciousness, or the adherence to the values of the European Union, have kept the radical currents at bay, on the fringes of the Romanian political scene. In today's volatile European and

international political context, this political achievement represents an extremely important victory in the struggle to maintain democracy as a political and social ideal.

References:

- *** (2000). Ion Iliescu speech of accepting his party nomination. „Bună ziua Iași”, October 5, 2000. Retrieved from: <http://www.bzi.ro/aproape-de-oameni-impreama-cu-ei-ion-iliescu-16530> (official website of „Bună ziua Iași” newspaper).
- Aldea, A. (2001). *Sondaje de opinie. Mod de utilizare: Alegerile 2000, prezentare și analiză*. București: Paideia.
- Câmpeanu, P. (1999). Cozia: înainte și după. *Sfera Politicii*, VII (67), 9-15.
- European Commission (2000). „2000 Regular Report from the Commission on Romania’s Progress towards Accession”, 8 november 2000. Retrieved from: http://aei.pitt.edu/44601/1/Romania_2000.pdf (official website of the University of Pittsburgh, Archive of European Integration).
- Fiorina, M. P. (1977). An Outline for a Model of Party Choice. *American Journal of Political Science*, 21 (3), 601-625.
- Florea, L. (2005). *Extrema dreaptă azi: ideologie, discurs, electorat*. Iași: Lumen.
- Gheorghită, A. (2006). Discurs politic și construcția imaginii candidaților în alegerile prezidențiale din 2000. *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai. Seria Politica*, LI (1), 115-131.
- Haineș, R. M. (2002). *Televiziunea și reconfigurarea politicului*. Iași: Polirom.
- OSCE, Oficiul pentru Instituții Democratice și Drepturile Omului (2001). *România. Alegerile prezidențiale și parlamentare (26 noiembrie și 10 decembrie 2000). Raportul final*. Varșovia. Retrieved from: <http://www.osce.org/ro/odihr/elections/romania/16256?download=true> (official website of OSCE).
- Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority (1996a). Retrieved from: <http://alegeri.roaep.ro/?alegeri=alegeri-parlamentul-romaniei-1996> (official website of the Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority).
- Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority (1996b). Retrieved from: <http://alegeri.roaep.ro/?alegeri=prezidentiale-1996>.
- Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority (2000a). Retrieved from: <http://alegeri.roaep.ro/?alegeri=alegeri-locale-2000>.
- Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority (2000b). Retrieved from: <http://alegeri.roaep.ro/?alegeri=alegeri-parlamentul-romaniei-2000>.
- Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority (2000c). <http://alegeri.roaep.ro/?alegeri=prezidentiale-2000>.
- Stoica, S. (2010). *România după 1989: enciclopedie de istorie*, București: Meronia.
- Teodorescu, B., Guțu, D. & Enache, R. (2005). *Cea mai bună dintre lumile posibile. Marketingul politic în România (1990-2005)*. București: Comunicare.ro.
- Vadim Tudor, C. (2001). *Discursuri – Corneliu Vadim Tudor*. București: Fundația „România Mare”.

Article Info

Received: April 30 2020

Accepted: May 14 2020
