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Presidential Elections in Post-December Romania - Bivalent Influences on Democratization

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Abstract: In the light of the realities of the 21st century, it is becoming increasingly obvious that the road to democratic consolidation is a two-way street.
Free, fair, competitive elections are, of course, the minimum condition for democratization for young democracies. Elections can, to a large extent, influence the way of democratic consolidation and intrinsic characteristics.
Highlighting a relationship between presidential elections and democratization requires an analysis beyond the procedures and the structural opportunities that the electoral context confers.
If, in the case of Romania, the transition game is considered to be concluded with the abolition of the totalitarian regime and the organization of the first free elections, the game of democratic consolidation continues. Each round of elections raises or lowers the stake of the upcoming competition. In this succession of elections, the post-December history holds a few moments as a landmark of democratization. If we overlap them with times of alternation in governance, the discussion of democratic consolidation is suddenly simplified, applying the double alternation rule. If, however, we interpret the key to the civic "pulse", we will overlap these moments rather over the presidential ballots. A first argument in this respect is the still high vote to elect the president, only competed with the vote for mayors and local councillors.
But does the presidential election more than other types of elections in post-December Romania influence the course of democratization and how? Does it impede or, on the contrary, boost democratic consolidation?
The answer can provide insight into the construction and institutional solidity of democracy in Romania over the last three decades.
The focal point of the analysis will be the dynamics of the relations between the main actors of the electoral arena: representatives of the power, opposition and voters.

Keywords: *presidential elections; democratization; democratic consolidation; institutional building; civic culture.*

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Introduction

Studies on democratization generally reveal a multitude of theoretical perspectives, but also a refinement of the research tools in this field, in the context of which it has become increasingly obvious that the democratic path is a two way street.

Once robust strokes delineating democracies from the non-democracies start to fade in the light of the 21st century reality, and, even if we cannot speak about a reflux of the third wave of democratization, there is an increasing need for a distinction between strengthened and fragile democracies.

Referring to Romania, we can see how the democratic path had unexpected turns: from a positive evolution of the country under the imperatives of the Euro-Atlantic partners, materialized in the accession to NATO in 2004 and to EU in 2007, continuing with remarkable progress of the anti-corruption struggle, an important factor in the democratic consolidation process, at twenty nine years from the regime change we find Romania on the limit between fragile democracies and hybrid regimes[1].

The present study therefore aims at analyzing presidential elections after 1989, from the post-December period, in order to identify, through a detailed analytical approach of the interactions between the main factors contributing to the formation of public decisions –governors, opposition, voters– the main potential factors influencing the democratic path.

One of the assumptions is that the influence of presidential elections on Romania's democratization after 1989 is important and bivalent. This type of voting, through its intrinsic characteristics, but also through its procedural results or provisions may favour or slowdown democratization.

Conceptual approaches to democratization

Analysing the relationship between presidential elections and democratization is not possible without a preliminary clarification of the concept of democratization. The abundance of theoretical perspectives emphasise that democratization, like democracy, is a difficult concept to define. For instance, the studies between 1970 -1980 provided the definition that democratization was simply the transformation of a non-democratic

[1] According to 2018 report of the European Intelligence Unit, Romania gets the lowest score after entering the European family. http://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index accessed on 10.01.2019

political system into one with responsible and representative government (Gruger, 2002).

In the decades following the *third wave* of democratization, while some countries advanced on the democratic path, there were others regressing and heading towards a hybrid regime and the evidence turned into new theoretical interrogations. Academic focus shifted from questions such as "why do transitions take place?" to "Which are the determining factors for some of the new democracies to resist and others to cope?" This is the context in which the concept of democratic consolidation takes precedence over the one of transition.

In the light of new realities, the concept of democratization also acquires new meanings, mainly related to the overlapping of some intrinsic characteristics of the solid democracies over formal change. According to Jean Gruger's definition, democratization means the introducing and widening citizens' rights and the creation of the democratic state". In other words, we speak about a rights based and substantial democratization in contrast with formal democratization. The democracy test does not check for the the rights on paper, but rather whether they have real meaning for people" (Gruger, 2002).

Cătălin Zamfir proposes a comprehensive operational definition in terms of transition – democratic consolidation: " the process by which the political system undergoes modifications from an authoritarian regime and allows open contestation of the results, competition in free and fair elections, inclusive participation in the decision-making process by means of representative institutions and prohibits power concentration for the benefit of a minority by means of a stable and institutionalised control and balancing system" (Zamfir, Stănescu, 2007)

Transition is, according to the literature in this area, a well-defined stage during which we pass from one regime to another with a regulated procedure agreement thus creating the grounds of democracy. It is a period characterised by uncertainty, a period of *abnormal policy* when the structure temporary suspends its restrictive effects on political action and the actors (mainly the elite) have a tremendous margin of manoeuvre in setting up the new regime. "A democratic transition is completed when a sufficient agreement is reached on political procedures designed to produce an elected government, when a government comes to power as a direct result of free and democratic elections, when this government has *de facto* the authority to create new policies and when the executive, legislative and judicial powers generated by the new democracy need not to divide *de jure* the power with others." (Linz, Stepan, 1996).

By contrast, there is a main characteristic differentiating democratic consolidation from transition, namely the substantial reduction of uncertainty, highlighted in the second part of Zamfir's definition by the phrase "a stable and institutionalised control and balancing system". Terry L. makes the same point:" it is about the institutionalisation of a rather high degree of certainty through a common set of rules (both formal and informal), about widely understood political roles and about well-delimited political arenas" (Karl, 2005). Linz and Stepan synthesise the essence of democratic consolidation using the metaphor of democracy as "the only game in the city" and analyses on three levels - behavioural, attitude and constitutional when operationally defines the concept:

„On behavioural level – a democratic regime, in a given territory, is consolidated when none of the significant actors at national, social, economic, political or institutional level spends important resources in order to achieve the objectives by creating a non-democratic regime or resorts to violence or foreign intervention in order to separate from the state.

On attitudinal level - a democratic regime is consolidated when the great majority of public opinion keeps confidence that democratic procedures and institutions are the best way to goverm collective life and when the support for the antisystem alternatives are quite small, more or less isolated by pro-democratic forces.

On constitutional level – a democratic regime is strengthened when, on the territory of a state, governmental and non-govermental forces equally obey and are accustomed to solve conflicts within institutional laws, procedures and sanctions established by the new democratic process" (Linz, Stepan, 1996).

Taken into consideration the abundance of the studies dedicated to both transition and democratic consolidation, driven by different research contexts and goals, we shall not insist on definitions and we shall only point out two relevant approaches for the present study.

The first concerns the conceptualisation of democratisation on two important dimensions: the procedural dimension and the behavioural dimension.

One of the banchmarks for the two levels analysis is Gerardo Munk's approach on organising the numerous studies on democratisation (mainly generated from the revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe). Starting from the observation that comparative theoreticians of transition and democratic consolidation share, generally, a common perspective on the regimes, Munk undertakes a detailed analysis of regime changes. Thus, he identifies specific characteristics of each stage – those referring to regime

change related processes (the transition from a non-democratic to a democratic regime, respectively) and those referring to new regime functioning related aspects (Munk, 1996).

The analysis of the behavioural dimension is necessary in the consolidaton stage of the new regime because it takes into account how the actors of the political scene comply (if they do) with the democratic rules which have previously been accepted and internalised.

Philippe Schmitter, another theoretician who was deeply involved in the debate on democratic consolidation, also emphasises the procedural and behavioural dimensions. In his opinion the democratic consolidation is a "transformation process of the accidental arrangements, prudential rules and contingent solutions arisen during the uncertain struggles of the political transition in the well known institutions, regularly practiced and formally accepted by the participants, citizens and subjects of these institutions." (Schmitter, 1997). Schmitter criticises the three level definition given by Linz and Stepan, arguing that such a definition is difficult to operationalize. It is not relevant to analize the attitude towards democracy and those towards political parties, Schmitter says, if "they are uttered by persons who still do not know which the rules will be and, conequently, they did not experience their effects". Thus, the attention of the researchers should therefore not be directed to the formal document (the constitution), but to the processes through which "the actors reach mutual accepted rules governing competition and cooperation" (Schmitter, 1997).

The second relevant theorical approach for the present study is Andrea Schedler's who proposes a non-theological perspective on democratic consolidation. His study focuses on the clarification of the concept, starting from Collier and Levitsky's typology of democratic systems (1996): electoral democracy, liberal democracy and advanced democracy. Schedler delimits the concept of democratic consolidation from other uses such as the development, organization and foundation of democracy, the author's choice being the "negative" meanings of democratic consolidation related to securing the levels reached by democratic governance. Thus, a first sense given by the literature is to avoid the collapse of democracy – the collapse of the electoral democracy or even the liberal democracy and restoration of authoritarianism.The second sense is the avoidance of democratic erosion, namely the situation in which a democracy would regress towards an electoral one. The overall picture of the evolution of democracies in the world confirms the correctness of Schedler's approach.

The headline on the latest Freedom House report[2] is "Democracy withdraws", emphasizing that 2018 is the thirteen consecutive year when there is a decline of the global index of freedom. The conclusion is valid for old democracies and even more for the classified regimes as consolidated authocracies such as China and Russia. The reflux of democracies is linked to the widespread phenomenon of corruption, the decline of the rule of law and the rise of the populist trend, a characteristic not only of the countries which stepped into the democratization path after the fall of the *iron courtain*, but also of those with long democratic tradition.

Even though Freedom House assign a good score to Romania, placing it among the free countries, the latest years events has brought it to the attention of the European institutions, of non-government organizations, of national and international mass media, and this entitles us to say that one of the lessons in progress for the actors on the political scene and citizens is that democracy is not a permanently given fact and democratic consolidationis is a difficult journey requiring efforts at the level of institutions, but ,especially, at the level of civil society.

In the light of the realities, we can only fully assume Schedler's view that "consolidated democracy should describe a democratic regime which the observers expect to last well into the future, and nothing more." (Schedler, 2002).

Conceptualization of the presidential elections – democratization relationship

A starting point in the conceptualization of the relationship between presidential elections and democratization is Staffan I. Lindberg's theory of democratization through elections grounded on a series of comparative studies starting mainly from the question: *Can elections encourage or develop democracy*?[3] (Lindberg, 2009)

Studies start from the general hipothesis that the organization of the elections itself stimulates the development and advancement towards a more solid democracy. The more rounds of elections, the more democratic the regime and society, in general, and the promoted central statement are.

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2 https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2019/democracy-in-retreat accessed on 25.01.2019

3 The democratization through elections theory model we took into consideration refers to any kind of elections. On the grounds of the argument of the next section – „ Why the presidential elections and not another kind of elections?" the present study emphasizes the presidential elections.

Starting in particular from Schendler's perspective a more sophisticated version is formulated: „*De jure*, competitive elections provide a set of institutions, rights and processes giving incentives and costs in such a way that they tend to favour democratization" (Lindberg, 2009).

The researchers' interest shifts to the importance of free, competitive and repetitive elections in the context of *the third wave* of democratization in the mid-70s. Electoral competitions are assimilated in the new research approaches with valid grounds of comparison which, beyond the factors differentiating the countries which initiated transition towards democratic regimes, account for the pace and the direction of democratization. One of the key statements of the democratization by elections theory is that the organization of elections itself stimulates the development and advancement towards a more solid democracy. Simply put, the more rounds of elections, the more democratic become the regime and society, in general. Lindberg details referring to an institutional learning of the democratization of the society: the repetitive experience of citizens of the inclusive and repetitive elections *de jure*, reflects on democracy, outside its electoral arena. Lindberg's argument goes further, stating that including the case of the elections which do not prove free or fair, both individuals and volunteer associations use, in other spheres of the society their resources, abilities and the norms acquired in the electoral arena. „The longer the period of uninterrupted string of elections of a country, the stonger the society of that country becomes impregnated with democratic qualities." (Lindberg, 2009)

According to the democratization through elections theory, the main factors granting elections characteristics designed to dynamize the meta-game of transition are: 1. High degree of activism reached by most individuals, political partis, civic organizations during election campaigns and the next period and 2. A large amount of citizens' demands for politicians, more than the ones during the non-electoral periods, even pressures to governors to become receptive, a phenomenon arising from the electoral competition logic of holding the executive and legislative powers, and the emerge of the possibility of replacing those in power who did not meet society's expectations or disappointed and 3. The favourable context of elections to create popular pressure for reforms as electoral periods in the new democracies are carefully monitorized by the international community and media such as Watch Dog Organizations – Election Watch, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch.

This complex of factors forms what Schedler calls *structural opportunities* for changes in the meta-game of democratization, the electoral context being interpreted as a strategic sub-game within the metagame. The

role of the presidential elections in transforming the nature of the regime is exercised, according to the model, beyond the electoral procedures, as defined.

The choice of the theoretical pattern of the elections as a way of transition has, as an alternative, the assumption that, in Romania, the natura of the change of the regime after 1989 has been gradually achieved, passing through an *authoritatrian situation*[4].

It would be forced to say that the transition from totalitarism to democracy was made suddenly, given that democratization is a difficult, lengthy process, involving changes in institutional, attitude and behavioural nature. Moreover, without giving Romania an exceptional character in comparison with the other Central and East European countries, out of the Soviet block, we need to remind, however, some specificities: it is the last country to start the transition; it has experienced the most violent change of regime, the solution to negotiating this change failed in the first years after 1989; there are flagrant human rights violations in Romania (miners and ethnic conflicts), Romania did not know until 1996 the change of government and a former communist leader was elected and re-elected as head of state (Ion Iliescu - 1990, 1992).

In this context, the multi-party system and the free and open elections competition become factors with major impact on the process of democratization after 1989. Schedler's theoretical constructions emphasizing the uncertainty of results in an open election competition[5] may be adapted to the Romanian reality of the transition period when the political scene was dominated by the Frontul Salvării Naţionale (National Salvation Front) - a party that took power after Ceausescu regime was removed and by the uncontested leader Ion Iliescu. Free and competitive elections acted in the hiatus created by the abolition of the totalitatrian regime in terms of probability and possibility.

On one hand there is the probability the elections strengthen the positions of those already in power (which happened in 1992) and, on the other hand, we can talk about the possibility that the elections create opportunities for the opposition forces to weaken or even to replace those in power (a fact confirmed by the outcome of 1996 presidential elections when the first alternation to government took place).

[4] The phrase belongs to Juan Linz and refers to a transitional stage, specific to residual type characteristics, being neither totalitarian nor democratic.

[5] Schedler circumscribes the analysis to the regimes classified as electoral autocracies. The present paper takes only the main argumentative lines, without resorting to a classification of the new established regime in Romania after 1989 in this cathegory.

Without deeply applying the theoretical model of democratization through elections in Romania after 1989, we will direct our attention to the arguments supporting the relationship of the presidential (and not other) elections with democratization.

The starting assumption is that the transition game in Romania and, by extention, that of democratic consolidation is "played" in each round of the elections after 1989, a special role in this series starring presidential elections.

Why the presidential elections and not another?

Why analysing presidential elections? What is their specificity?

Mainly because: the presidential elections arouse a high interest of the electorate, being direct, uninominal; through their entire dynamics, the presidential elections, pursued in pre-campaign, campaign, vote itself are important moments that can generate patterns of political socialization; presidential elections show greater permeability between the political and social environment, through the increased receptivity of the political factors to the demands of society.

Not to be neglected is the fact that, in the case of the presidential elections, we talk about more permissive electoral procedures – e.g. it is possible to vote in any electoral constituency in the country unlike the parliamentary or local elections where one can only vote in the county of residence.

As mentioned above, it is obvious that presidential elections greately rise the interest of citizens. According to some post-December electoral studies, Romanian citizens believe that national elections have a greater impact on heir lives (similar to the national politics), as compared with the local elections, and among the elections at national level, the presidential elections have greater importance, especially when it comes to the situation of the country. (Comşa, 2014)

Here it is about the instrumental perspective of the citizens on voting – seen as a means by which they can indirectly influence the way society works or their standard of living.

This study also reveals other mechanisms motivating Romanians to vote such as the sense of civic duty or the perception of a social pressure.

We recall, for instance, how the fate of the 2014 presidential elections was sealed by the influence the diaspora exerted on the Romanians in the country. We talk about the influence exerted by means of media or social networks as well as the immediate influence.

Furthermore, a brief look on the Romanian reality reveals a clash and a high consumption of resources from the political actors to win the presidential elections. In the same time, we witness the constant failure of the political parties in their mission to restore credibility and legitimacy to the institution of parliament, pillar of any solid democratic construction.

We add, to the conglomerate of variables influencing post-December democratic path, also the phenomenon of *going presidential* of the political parties, a manifesto phenomenon especially after the presidential elections in 2004. The concept was uttered by Samuels and Shugart and refers to the way how political parties are shaped by presidents. The authors emphasize the fundamental role of the parties in democratic government, showng that party politics differ according to constitutional format. If, in the historical periods dominated by parliamentary regimes, the parties were strongly connected to the modern concept of democracy, in direct presidential elections XXth century (for semi-presidential regimes), new challanges for democracies emerged.

Samuels and Shugart demonstrate how direct presidential elections make a difference of the outcomes, as they influence the political parties which, at their turn, have impact on the entire political process (Samuels, Shugart, 2010).

More over, in the study of the two, Romania is an example of how the presidential elections outcome (we refer specifically to 2004) change the pre-established political agreements and throws the political scene in an area of unpredictability. Otherwise, an unthinkable situation, in the two opinion, in a parliamentary regime. The example refers to the refusal of Traian Basescu, winner of the 2004 presidential elections, to accept the "cohabitation" situation, assigning a prime minister from Liberal National Party, not from the winning political coalition of the majority in the parliamentary elections, a coalition formed by the Social Democrat Party and the Humanist Party. Basescu managed to break the agreement between SDP and HP, attracting the Humanists in the new configuration of the executive and obtains the vote of the investiture for a right-wing government.

The results of the presidential elections in Romania, conclude Samuels and Shugart, "not only took the government forming from the hands of the greatest party of the greatest parliamentary coalition, but also served to break a preelection agreement, altering the partisan balance of the established forces by the parliamentary coalitions and elections (…) direct presidential elections produced outcomes that are unthinkable in pure parliamentary systems". (Samuels, Shugart, 2010)

Last but not least, when I linked the presidential elections with the democratization, I took into consideration the emphasis other authors as Linz and Stephan put on Romania's specificity compared with other Central and East European countrys out the influence of the Soviet block, in terms of the pre-conditions of democratization.

The pre-1989 political regime in Romania combined the totalitarian characteristics and the sultanist ones, which made democratization strongly marked by paternalist tradition. Citizens' trust was easily (re-)captured, especially in the transition period, by one person and not by the new institutions specific of the democratic regime. „It is precisely the sultanist components of Ceausescu's regime that enabled Iliescu to present Ceausescu as the embodiment of the system and to suggest that he, Iliescu, changed completly the economic and political system by slaining the "monster hydra". In no other country from the Warsow Treaty had the rhetoric trick of concentrating the atrocities on a certain person not on the system such a weight (...) The success of the Revolution was proclaimed to result in the destruction of the sultan himself, not in the creation of new, democratic institutions or in the destruction of the whole coercive apparatus around the dictator". (Linz & Stepan, 1996).

It was this *legacy* that imprinted the presidential elections with great importance in the eyes of the citizens and, in the same time, enabled the political actors to manipulate their steak in order to win the highest position in the state.

Research methods

In the present study we corroborate the structural and individual plans. We follow the democratization under the influence of the presidential elections, in the light of institutional evolution, while analysing the attitude-behavioural dimention against the electoral context.

Even if the vote is expressedindividually, it is an act of collective choice. As shown in an above mentioned study, the vote is a social fact, "the motivation of the vote should be sought at social level, of inter-human relations, obligations, norms and ways of doing and being entrenched in every society and community" (Comşa, 2014). Voting as total social fact is the reflection in the electoral behaviour of complex interactions manifested in and attitude-value field, where political communication plays a key role.

From an institutional perspective, we see political institutions as "rules of the game" (Goodin, Klingemann, 1996). The *de facto* routine of some electoral behaviours may be assimilated to informal political

institutions that can erode or strengthen the formal ones. Therefore, on one hand, the study implies the analysis of electoral campaign period behavioural dimension, following the development of the electoral campaign at local level (case study, Dambovita County). More specifically, there is followed the way of constructing and disseminating of the political message by the electoral communicators during the direct interaction with the voters (*door to door* campaign), electoral communicator being understood as that person with significant influence on the voters at local level (mayors, local councillors, other community influence centers)

Qualitative data were collected during 2016-2018, through 28 semi-structured interviews with local electoral communicators. More over, a focus group of local journalists engaged in electoral campaign - either as such or as councillors, strategists of some politicians was added.

It is worth mentioning that the selection of the respondents was made equidistantly, whenever possible. The selected respondents were equally engaged politically with PSD, PNL or other opposition parties respectively. The interview guide was structured so that the questions focused on the construction mechanisms of the electoral behaviour reflected by BOP data (voting presence, trust in institutions, the degree of optimism/pessimism).

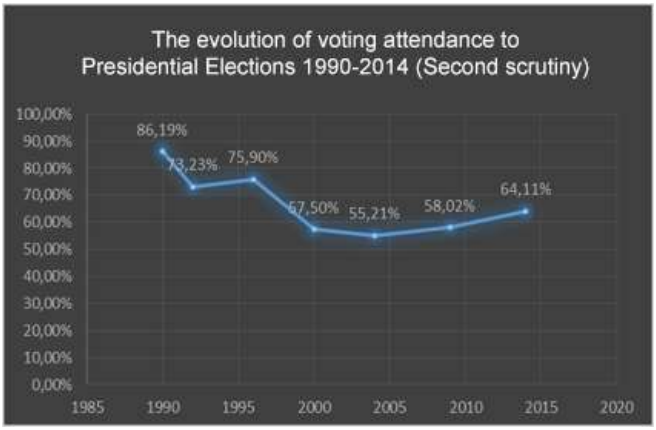
On the other hand, according to the levels of analysis, there were conducted descriptive analyses on the electoral periods, starting from graphic evolution of the level of trust in the political institutions and voting presence at national level (based on the Barometer of Publc Opinion and other kinds of surveys).

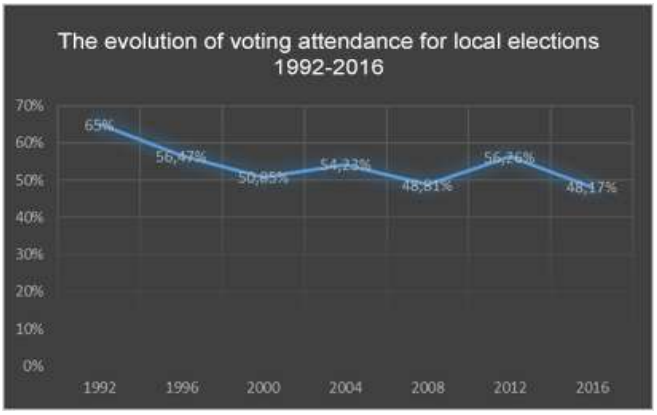
Due to the clearly exploratory character of the study, hypothesis was replaced by questions explicitly stated during the research, qualitative data having a role of validating and drawing up preliminary conclusions[6].

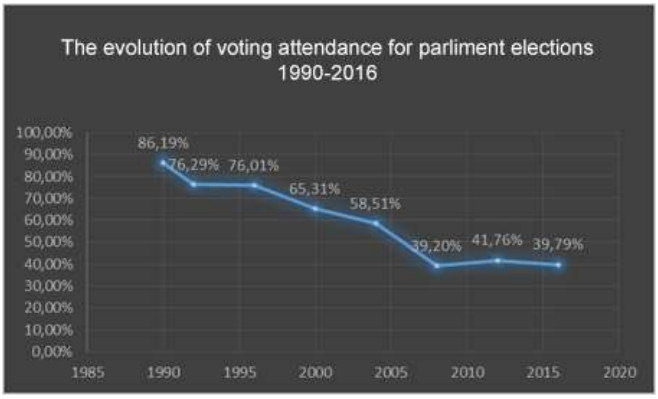
Findings

For the beginning, we illustrate by graphic representation the evolution of voting presence during 1990-2014, an objective picture of the importance granted by the voters to presidential elections:

[6] The final conclusions are part of a more elaborate work that calls for the qualitative data processing of the Grounded Theory Method







In order to compare vote presence to presidential elections versus parliamentary and local elections we used the data provided by the Permanent Electoral Authority reported in the second voting round. The

main consideration was the simultaneity of presidential and parliamentary elections, valid until 2008.

It is easily seen that, even up to 2008, the voting presence in the second round of the presidential elections is constantly higher than the one in the local elections.

As for the comparison between voting presence in parliamentary versus presidential elections, the discussion should be divided on two periods: 1990-2008 and 2008-2016, respectively. Since 2008, when the two ballots are offset, it is obvious that the interest in the parliamentary elections decreases sharply, while the voting presence during the presidential elections remains high.

For the period 1990-2008, two observations can be drawn:

1. voting presence in the second round of the presidential elections is in most cases slightly lower than the one in the first round of the parliamentary elections.

2. however, in the case of the first round, the percentage of votes obtained by the presidential candidate is always (with one exception, in 2000) higher than that of the political party or coalition which suppoted him.

Without being able to categorically state that the large presence at the polls, up to 2008, was rather generated by the increased motivation for the direct election of the president than the parliament representatives, we can, however, definetly talk of a contamination phenomenon of the two elections.

How is translated this picture of the voting presence in the relationship between presidential elections – democratization?

Even though the studie do not state a correlation between democracy and the presence at the polls (posive or negative), some authors highlight the need to point a nuance between democracy and the willingness to vote, especially in the case of new democracies, such as Romania's. „The predictors of the participation in the electoral game refer to the acceptance of its utility, the confidence in the gameplay safeguards and normativism, understood as an extention of the regulatory environment which must stimulate participation, in general, to produce a collective good" (Lăzăroiu, 1996).

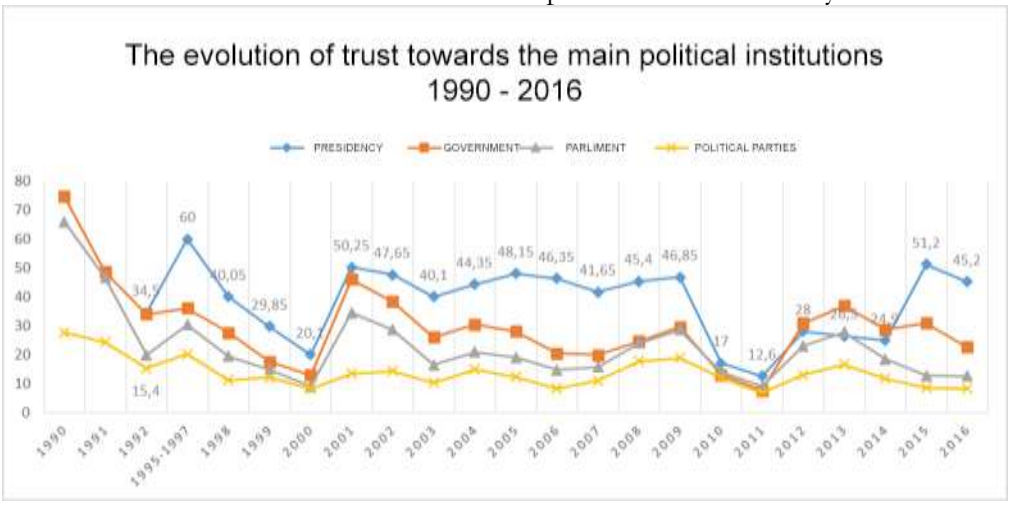
In other words, if we talk about a generalized tendency to decrease the voting presence in the present, a comparison between the old democracies and the new ones – a cathegory in which Romania falls – must be handled with caution. Causes may be comparable, but not the effects. In the case of young democracies, a high or low voting presence could make the difference in terms of democracy consolidation. Voters apathy in a still

fragile democracy cannot be, not by far, an encouraging sign and me put between brackets the efficiency of the democratic construction.

The constantly increasing interest of the citizens in post-1989 Romania's presidential elections justifies, to a certain extent, their assimilation with important exercises of learning and supporting democracy.

Regarding the evolution of the level of confidence of the citizens in the political institutions, it is noticed that during the entire period under analysis (1992-2016) the presidential institution is at a level clearly superior to the other political institutions. The only exception is the perios between 2012-2014, when the trust in the government is over the presidency. The drop in the level of confidence in the Presidential Institution starts in 2009 – the year of Traian Basescus's second term office. Note that the significant fluctuation points of trust overlap largely over the years with presidential elections, including here 2007 and 2012, when referendums were organized to dismiss the president.

What more can be noticed is that the last place in the citizens' trust is occupied by the political parties, precisely the organizations that set in motion and refine the mechanisms of the representative democracy.



We have address the issue of trust because, together with legitimacy, is an extremely important variable in the equation of democracy support.

Why have we illustrated an evolution of trust strictly related to political institutions?

Because political institutions, more than anything alse, get more relevance in the meta-gameof democratization, being conceived as second-tier institutions accounting how the others are shaped, or the mechanism by

which social predictability and order can be ensured at the level of society as a whole (Miroiu, 2016).

When, in citizens' perception, the performance of the government lacks, the question arises naturally: what happens if constant dissatisfactions of the citizens in economic terms erodes the confidence in the current regime form? Do the citizens make the difference between the concrete governance results, the way in which the institutions work and the benefits (truly perceived just in the long term) to live in a democratic regime?

It seems they do.

One of the answers comes from David Easton who describes the differences in terms of specific and diffuse support (Easton, 1975).

The diffuse support is defined as "a reservoir of favourable attitudes or benevolence that allow the citizens to accept or tolerate some results that they oppose or whose effects are considered contrary to their will", while the specific support is "the consequence of some specific satisfactions obtained from the political system in relation to a demand the individuals make, may do or is made on their behalf – a *quid pro quo* to fulfil these wishes" (Easton, 1975).

The one that matters and acts as a back-up for the young democracies when the governors disappoint is, thus, the diffuse support.

The specification should be supported by another one, namely that trust in institutions is based, according to specific studies at an intermediate level – between the specific and the diffuse support, between ideal and realistic evaluations of the political system. (Mishler, Rose, 2001).

In the light of the above, new interrogations arise: is the relationship of trust between citizens and the presidential institution a leverage in maintaining a reasonable level of diffuse support for democracy as to avoid the democratic erosion phenomenon? On the other hand, to what extent the presidential elections are a favouring factor of democratization, as they are heavily impregnated by the paternalist tradition?

The answers will be drawn up by corroborating the institutional and attitude-behavioural plans.

Starting, as specified above, from the assumption that the democratization in Romania crossed, immediately after 1989, a period called authoritarian situation, when the process of institutional reconfiguration was influenced by the political elites and the faction that took over the power after the removal of Ceausescu's regime and who tried to preserve as much as possible their dominant position in relation with the opposition forces.

Meanwhile, elections played and important role in the democratization process through the institutional learning of democracy.

Elections constituted favourable contexts to exercise the participatory dimension, knowing that democracy is the form of government which most needs the active involvement of the citizens in the decision-maaking process or, as Robert Dahl (1971, 1998) puts it, when the functions of political participation- the election of those in the government and the information about the requirements – are not fulfilled, then the quality of democracy suffers. We can talk of an even more important role of the elections in the democratization process, as Romania, unlike other Central or Eastern European countries, which went from totalitarism to democratization, such as Poland or former Czechoslovakia, lacks the *tradition of participation*, which is explained by the extreme control and repression mechanisms the state appealed through the Securitate.

So, the first free elections were organized on May 20th, 1990. The general elections were won by an overwhelming majority by Frontul Salvarii Nationale (the National Salvation Front), the political party organizing the ballot. The presidential elections were won with a detached score (85.1%) by Ion Iliescu, the leader dominating the political scene for another 14 years.

The right-wing foces represented by the Democratic Convention succeded, in 1996, to win both the general elections and the presidential ones, creating thus the precedent of the alternation to government. In this context, it's worth mentioning the victory of Emil Constantinescu and the wave of hope accompanying the victory of the opposition, celebrated by hundreds of thousands people in the street.

The marked end of the authoritarian situation largerly coincides with the 2000 presidential elections – a new "touchstone" for Romanian democracy, when amid the disappointing performance of the government in this period and the dramatic drop of living standards, we witnessed the accession in round II, together with Ion Iliescu, of nationalist extremist leader Corneliu Vadim Tudor.

Ion Iliescu's victory was interpreted for the first time by the political analysts in terms of "negative vote", indicating a wekening of theauthority of the former communist leader enjoyed so far.

According to the papers prepared by Pro Democratia Association on the occasion of 2003 constitutional reform (whose necessity arises mainly from Romania's accession conditions to European Union and NATO), president Ion Iliescu dominated the Romanian political life through stability in office and the duration of the exercise of power, transferring his own characteristics to the presidential institution.

First of all, we speak about the personalisation of the presidential institution, which focused and still focuses the attention of the public

opinion and the political actors. Moreover, the report speaks about the establishment of a new regime and political system on the ruins of the former communist system by taking over the institutional formulas: "Among them, the presidency Ceausescu introduced as rather a protocol institution. Attached by the founder to the cult of personality and following the myth of the leader, the presidency office was built as a continuation of political mythologies. And, as politics is a symbolic horizon, the presidential office was endowed, in the collective imagination, with more power than in its constitutional description. Occupying the presidential office for 8 years from the passed 12, president Iliescu put his mark on the institution. President Iliescu not only re-inaugurated the presidential office, but by his presence in this position between 1990-1996 and again in December 2000, also impressed a certain practice (…) The influence of the Romanian president comes from his position in relation with the main political actors, parties. As long as the presidential office is interesting for party leaders, it will have an important, if not decisive influence on Cotroceni Palace." (Romania's Constitutional Reform – Theoretical and historical aspects related to the evolution of the institutions, drawn papers by Pro Democratia Association, 2008)

During Ion Iliescu terms in the office, the presidency appears as dominant in relation with the other political institutions, a situation which is perpetuated after the presidential elections in 2004, won by Traian Basescu. Even if the model of the undisputed authority lost its pre-eminence after 2003 (the year of the constitutionalreform, which also includes the limitation of the number of presidential terms) , the model of the presidential player put in place by Traian Basescu contributed to maintaining (by 2009 and after) increased interest of the electorate for the presidential elections (reflected by the upward trend of the voting curve, reaching 65.11% in the II round of the presidential elections in 2004).

We will stop, however, here the approach at the institutional level in order to highlight, based on the qualitative data collected, some intrinsic characteristics of the presidential elections with a potential impact on democratization.

According to the undertaken interviews with political militants on both sides of the political spectrum, the stake of the presidential elections is undoubtedly, power. For many, the *de facto* power of the president means his political influence beyond constitutional prerogatives. At the same time, for the majority of the respondents, the victory of the party they support at the presidential elections also bring success to the subsequent ballots – local, parliamentary elections.

Also, the interviewed politicians are convinced that there is an erroneous perception of the voters over the President's prerogatives, and they also give him more power than he can actually do. Since the stake of the presidential elections is considered as high, it is obvious that the mobilised "electorate arsenal" is the one accordingly.

Going in depth, we discover within the electorate mechanism, a series of intentional errors, having the role to maintain the high stake of the presidential elections. We refer especially to the mechanisms of constructing the electoral message. This type of interaction between the political actors and the voters becomes relevant from the perspective of the promoted political culture. In Dambovita County there were identified as dominant the parochial political culture and obedience/ dependency one, to the detriment of the participatory type corresponding to the democratic systems.

Most respondents admit that thay deliberately distribute among the vothers distorted messages about the role and attributions of the candidate – regardless of the level of elections: local, county, parliamentary or presidential level.

The replies also point out, among other things, that since the first presidential elections, distinct from the local / parliamentary ones (in 2009) there was no change in the elaboration of the political message.

Politicians did not respond to the challange of creating a political message according to the specificity of the vote. On the contrary, they still used to release messages not aligned with the reality, not differentiated as per the type of ballot.

They explicitly deliver the message that the mayor, as well as the district parliament candidate or the presidential one can provide immediate and effective solutions to specific problems of the communities the come from.

Most respondents' replies highlight in the same time a strong trend to personalise the political power, regardle of the reference level (local, county or national level) and an icreasing incidence of the electoral campaign messages mythological significance. It seems that, at a significant distance, after almost three decades since the transition from a totalitarian regime to a democratic one began, myths, more than anything, still provide Romanians the satisfactory explanations to their questions, gives them a meaning for their existence (Fisichella, 2007).

In presidential campaigns, the Saviour myth and conspiracy have a guaranteed effect and are intensely used.

All these elements contribute to an increased presence in the presidential elections which, as mentioned earlier, significantly fills' the

voter's sense of direct contribution to the victory of the favourite candidate and, consequently to the decision making process.

Qualitative data also reveal the positive influence of the presidential elections on democratization.

Interviews highlighted, in the case of presidential elections, a phenomenon we could call *the intuition of the electorate of the check and balance mechanisms (check and balance)* between the institutions. The focus group with local journalists and some interviews with mayors in place reveal that the faith of the presidential elections is decided by a segment of the electorate who has the intuition of the danger of concentrating power in one part of the political spectrum: „They believe that at parliamentary elections everybody is of the same kidney, but the president means something, it's another institution (...) they consider that if the president is from PSD , then I do not know ... something happens, a total seizure of power they cannot accept – as people not so much interested in power. Right, it's a feeling, and then they always vote against PSD at presidential elections." (J1). „People make comparisons. They try not to grant full power to someone. Not to have a party taking over the system because, they say, there would be no opposition, there would be no one to shout when there are irregularitie and they try to have a balanced situation, as much as possible." (P1)

Some respondents emphasize not less than the idea that presidential elections are a barrier to the collapse of democracy: „This is the greatest luck of the fact that Romania is now a democracy and not a dictatorship – if this segment did not exist to turn back the presidential elections, PSD would win in the following hundred years – from this perspective the presidential elections and democratization are related." (P2).

According to the interview data, only in the case of the presidential elections we can speak about a balance between the electoral choice of a candidate as a person (vote on a person) and political vote.

As some of the interviewees say, for a segment of the electorate, there counts in the election of the president, along with the consideration of instrumental or civic nature, the ethical, moral considerations, which is reflected to a certain extent, in the rehabilitation of politics in the perception of the public. „In the presidential elections, the political factor counts less than in the local ones because the citizen votes to elect the president he likes, a serious, upright man, someone who should represent Romania internationally and, I come back to what I have said at the beginning of the interview, namely that the presidential elections are different from the parliamentary or local ones (...) I could not convince in the electoral

campaign in order to change the voting attitude in the presidential elections" (P3)

On the same key, a part of the answers reveal, in the case of presidential elections, a higher level of individual autonomy in voting at the expense of the "party machinery".

Some of the interviewed persons (including the local mass media journalists) admit in this respect that, in the case of the presidential elections, there is a reduced personal involvement of the local authorities during the campaign, their role being that of increasing the participation to vote.

Also as a characteristic of the presidential elections, the interviews highlight that the voter uses multiple and varied sources of information. Very important here is the *facebook phenomenon*, as a separate analysis cathegory, deeply felt during 2014 presdential elections campaign.

The qualitative analysis of the intrinsic characteristics of the presidential elections with potential impact on democratization, in terms of inhibitory vs favouring factors, is synthetically summarized in the below table:

Favouring factors	**Inhibitory factors**
Great participation to vote – including urban areas	Non-differentiation of the message in comparison with other types of elections – voluntary manipulation of the electorate; double language of political communication; the negative influence on civic culture formation – strong dependant political and parochial culture characteristics are revealed, to the expense of the participatory one
Voters' use of alternative sources of information	The success of the mythically built political messages (the Saviour myth, conspiration or unity myths)
Appearance of on line activism – facebook phenomenon	The affective dimension is dominant to the expense of evaluative and cognitive dimension – "the phenomenon of the golden bullet"/ the trigger event which inclines the balance at the lates moment
Decrease involvement of mayors	Revealing of the electoral reward phenomenon persistence
Higher level of individual autonomy in decision making process to the expense of the party machinery	Deepening cleavages in society

Higher degree of activism in young people – ussualy they mainly act for change/getting out of status quo	Defectous understanding of democracy
Voters' Intuition of check and balances mechanism	Deffectuous understanding of the role of political institutions
Maintaining increased interest in politics and the stimulation of a participatory side	Campaign messages – mainly negative, focused on personal attacks; manichaeistic/conflictive perspective on politics
Balancing the levels of trust in political institutions, a potential maintaining of an acceptable level of the difuse support to democratization	Revealing of the "negative vote"
Balance between the political vote and the vote on a person – revealing of choices of not only instrumental nature but also ethical nature, of principles	Failure to break with the past /to reform public perception of PSD and lack of real power of the opposition parties.
Revealing a voters' great expectation background and an important electoral niche for the parties	

Conclusions

The bivalent influence of the presidential elections on democratization after 1989, are mailnly translated, as mentioned already, in two major trends – on one hand, of favouring/stimulating democratization and, on the other hand, of slowing the democratic process.

At 30 years after the Revolution, we can say that presidential elections, analysed in pre-electoral, electoral and post electoral context are important moments of civic consciousness awakening, given that democracy by definition is a form of government that most needs the active involvement of citizens in decision making process.

But, this type of civism is "flawed" by the reminiscence of the old regime. A high paternalistic reflex determines the personalization of the politics to the expence of an institutional approach. Corroborated with the inability of political parties to reform themselves and deliver public policies following an electoral competition based on fair principles, we speak, from a democratization perspective, about lingering in an area of impredictibility, of unremitting prolongation of incertitude about the role and place of the representative institutions of state.

On the other hand, the increasing legitimacy of the president by high ballot presence makes him a *veto player*[7]. Enjoying a broad popular support, the president / presidential institution acts, particularly in cohabitation situations, as a counterweight to the majority holding executive and legislative levers.

Thus, we face an apparent paradox: although in strictly constitutional terms the president does not enjoy too much power, public perception on his prerogatives makes the presidency one of the most pre-eminent institutions of democratization rather than the parliament, as stated by political theory.

When we speak about bi-valent influence of the presidential elections on democratization, we cannot dissociate the analysis of the functioning of presidency as an institution itself. Hence the discussion about the presidential elections stake as a top rank variable in the political game.

The increased interest of voters in electing the president indicates the tendency to maintain the current constitutional configuration, if not, even to strengthen the position of the president in the existing configuration of a semi-presidential regime while some of the political scene actors who have repeatedly failed in these elections aim, on the contrary, the weakening of the presidential position.

Thus, we can interpret, for instance, the recent legislative amendments regarding the diminuition of the presidential prerogatives or the initiatives such as those which aim at returning to the simultaneous presidential and parliamentary elections.

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[7] The concept is used by George Tsebelis in his work:"Veto players: How Political institutions Work" where he undertakes an analysis of the political behaviour within the game theory. For Tsebelis a veto player (either an individual or a group) is the one who can stop a change from the status quo.

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