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THE 2000 ROMANIAN ELECTIONS**

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***WHITHER DEMOCRACY?
THE POLITICS OF DEJECTION IN
THE 2000 ROMANIAN ELECTIONS***

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The results of the parliamentary and presidential elections in Romania last November have raised serious concerns about the fragility of the country's democracy and, by extension, about the fate of democracy in other former communist countries. In marked contrast to the optimism following the 1996 victory of a broad anti-communist coalition centered around the center-right Democratic Convention of Romania (CDR), most Western and many Romanian observers have regarded the outcome of the 2000 elections as a discouraging setback for Romanian democracy. While the victory of the leftist Party of Social Democracy of Romania (PDSR) and its presidential candidate, Ion Iliescu, can be regarded as part of a broader pattern in Eastern Europe of former communists returning to power on a mandate of softening the rigors of market reforms, the Romanian political situation stands out in two crucial and inter-related ways: first, the dramatic rise of the extremist Greater Romania Party (PRM) under its charismatic leader Corneliu Vadim Tudor; and second, the quasi-collapse of the center of the political spectrum, including the failure of the Democratic Convention to win representation in parliament. Ironically, this setback occurred as a result of a free and fair election, which at least in theory could be considered as a milestone of democratic consolidation, since it marked the second peaceful change of power in the post-communist period.

This paper will argue that the polarization at the level of parliamentary representation does not, in fact, reflect a comparable polarization of the party system. Instead, the electoral platforms of both the PDSR and the PRM exhibited a movement towards the center. Moreover, survey evidence discussed in the final section suggests that voting patterns in the recent elections reflect a pervasive dissatisfaction with the country's political elite but not a radicalization of the electorate or a drift towards extremism. I will also analyze the roots of these political developments and their implications for the future of democratic politics in Romania and the region.

Electoral Results

In an effort to place the outcome of the 2000 elections in perspective, this section will compare it to the votes and parliamentary seat distribution for the 1996 elections. The results for the major political parties in the Chamber of Deputies are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Presidential Election Results in Romania 1996-2000

Party	PDSR	CDR	PD/USD	PNL	UDMR	PRM	PUNR/AN
1996 vote share	21.5%	30.2%	12.9%	*	6.6%	4.5%	4.4%
1996 # seats	91	122	53	*	25	19	18
1996 seat share	26.5%	35.6%	15.5%	*	7.3%	5.5%	5.3%
2000 vote share	36.6%	5.0%	7.0%	7.0%	6.8%	19.5%	1.4%
2000 # seats	155	0	31	30	27	84	0
2000 seat share	44.9%	0%	8.9%	8.7%	7.8%	24.3%	0%

In 1996 much of the current PNL was part of CDR, although one faction ran on separate lists, getting 1.9 percent of votes and no seats.

Table 1 illustrates the severe electoral losses suffered by the governing center-right political forces (CDR and the National Liberal Party, PNL), whose combined seat share dropped by over 75 percent. Of the two junior coalition partners of the former government, the center-left Democratic Party (PD) also suffered substantial losses (over 40 percent of its previous seats). Only the Hungarian Democratic Union (UDMR) succeeded in retaining the confidence of its ethnic electorate. This shrinking of the center benefited both extremes of the political spectrum: the leftist PDSR picked up an additional 64 seats but fell short of attaining an absolute majority in parliament. More dramatically, the extremist Greater Romania Party (PRM) more than quadrupled its seat share, partly at the expense of the center but also by capturing the majority of the nationalist electorate, which in 1996 had been evenly split between the PRM and the Romanian National Unity Party (PUNR).

A similar trend of political polarization can be observed by comparing the results for the presidential elections in 1996 and 2000, as shown in Table 2. The Romanian electoral system requires a second round runoff between the two highest-ranked candidates if nobody receives an absolute majority in the first round.

Table 2: Presidential Election Results in Romania 1996-2000

	Ion Iliescu	Emil Constantinescu	Theodor Stolojan	Mugur Isarescu	Petre Roman	Corneliu Vadim Tudor	Gyorgy Fruna
Party	PDSR	CDR	PNL	CDR 2000*	PD	PRM	UDMR
1996 – I	32.3%	28.2%			20.6%	4.7%	6.0%
1996 – II	46.6%	54.4%					
2000 – I	36.4%		11.7%	9.6%	3.0%	28.3%	6.2%
2000 - II	66.8%					33.2%	

*Although Isarescu nominally ran as an independent, he received the official endorsement of CDR 2000.

As was the case in the parliamentary elections, the left and the extreme right gained markedly in the first round of the presidential contest at the expense of a divided center. The relative distribution of gains and losses, however, differed in some interesting ways. The most serious losses were incurred by the center-left candidate, Petre Roman, whose vote share virtually collapsed between the two elections. On the other hand, the combined vote tally for the two center-right candidates, Theodor Stolojan and Mugur Isarescu, was relatively close to the first-round performance of the unitary center-right candidate, Emil Constantinescu, in 1996. The relatively better performance of the center-right candidates can be explained by their relative personal popularity—Stolojan was not associated with the mistakes of the previous government, whereas Isarescu had surprisingly high approval ratings given his record as prime minister in the year preceding the elections.¹ However, both candidates were weighed down by the low popularity of their backing parties, and more importantly by the inability of the center-right to agree on a single presidential candidate. Although the results suggest that such a candidate might have failed to out-poll second-placed Vadim Tudor, the dynamics of

¹ In July, just before deciding to enter the presidential race, Isarescu's popularity reached 66 percent, higher than any other politician at that time (IMAS survey).

the presidential contest would likely have been very different considering that as late as two weeks before the elections the combined vote share for Stolojan and Isarescu was 30 percent, compared to 19 percent for Vadim Tudor.²

As it turned out, however, the weakness and coordination failure of the center propelled the extreme-right candidate, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, into the front of the presidential race. Previously relegated by his virulent rhetoric to the fringes of the Romanian political spectrum (with less than 5 percent support in 1996), Tudor managed to exploit the lack of attractive mainstream political choices by painting himself as the only real alternative to Romania's corrupt and ineffective political class, which had ruled Romania in the last decade. Having hovered around 10 percent of likely votes for most of the electoral campaign until September, Tudor's popularity skyrocketed in the last three weeks before the election, rising from 15 percent in early November to 19 percent in mid-November, and finally to over 28 percent on election day. By contrast, the popularity of former president Ion Iliescu dropped from a high of 47 percent in October to 40 percent in mid-November, and then to just over 36 percent in the actual election.

Given Tudor's momentum and the low popularity of Iliescu among many center-right voters, the first-round results raised the possibility of a Tudor victory in the runoff. During the two weeks between the two election rounds, however, a combination of civil society activism and Western pressure resulted in an unprecedented show of unity among the key political actors, who overcame long-standing rivalries and endorsed Iliescu as the only viable presidential candidate for a democratic Romania. As a result, Iliescu picked up the vast majority of votes from the other candidates and soundly defeated Tudor in the runoff race.

This last-minute victory was achieved at least in part through a staunchly anti-Tudor campaign by the vast majority of media outlets. Although Tudor's claims of massive electoral fraud were in all likelihood unfounded, he did suffer serious disadvantages in terms of media access and coverage compared to Iliescu. While such an "ends justifying means" approach has

² According to an IMAS opinion poll from November 12-15, 2000, available at www.imas.ro.

precedents in other third wave democracies (including Russia), it nevertheless undermines formal democracy by compromising the spirit of liberalism and norms of democratic fair play.

Nevertheless, Iliescu's victory meant that Romania had managed to avoid a dangerous drift towards extremism and the unenviable position of replacing Yugoslavia as the international pariah of the region. While this relative "happy end" has been praised as a display of democratic maturity by both Romania's political elite and its electorate,³ we are still left with the task of explaining the roots and future implications of this crisis. My analysis will focus on the interplay among Romania's political elite, the electorate, and the international community.

The Political Elite: Undermining Democracy from the Top

Romanians like to say that "a fish starts to rot at the head," and looking at the political situation of the last decade, they seem to be right. According to a survey from mid-November, 86 percent of Romanians had little or no trust in political parties, and the figures were similarly grim for parliament and the government.⁴ This section will attempt to analyze the roots of this pervasive distrust by providing a brief profile of the main actors on the Romanian political scene. I will argue that the spectacular losses of the centrist forces were driven on one hand by their own poor track record in government and their inept campaign strategy for the 2000 elections, and on the other hand by the relative centrist drift in the electoral campaign messages of both the PDSR and the PRM.

A Vanishing Center

The most striking change between the two elections was the collapse of the center-right *Democratic Convention (CDR)*, which had been the centerpiece of the post-1996 governing coalition, and which thus bore the brunt of popular dissatisfaction with the economic policies of the last four years. By almost any measure, Romania's economic performance after 1996

³ See, for example, "Former Chief Of Romania Retakes Office Over Rightist," in *The New York Times*, December 11, 2000.

⁴ See the Soros public opinion barometer (available at www.sfos.ro) and the IMAS survey from November 12-15, 2000 (available at www.imas.ro).

has been disappointing. In 1997-99, the economy experienced three consecutive years of negative growth (with a combined output decline of around 15 percent); unemployment rose from 6.3 percent in late 1996 to 11.5 percent in 1999;⁵ and the poverty rate increased as did inequality. Equally damaging for the government's reputation were its inability to reduce inflation level below 45 percent, the slow and scandal-ridden privatization process, and the failure to live up to IMF conditionality. In effect, the CDR-led government delivered most of the costs and few of the benefits of market reforms, and it thus quickly exhausted the reformist mandate it had been given by the Romanian electorate in 1996. By the time economic recovery finally started in 2000 (with 1.5 percent growth and 30 percent inflation), it was too late to reverse the decline in popularity of the governing parties.

While the dire economic situation may explain much of the decline in approval ratings for the governing centrist parties, it cannot explain the relative timing of these changes. In December 1997, after more than a year of recession and high inflation, the popularity of the CDR was substantially higher than at the time of the 1996 elections (42 percent compared to 31 percent). However, by June 1998 its popularity had already dropped to 34 percent, and it continued to drop until it reached a low of five percent during the 2000 elections.

The sharp decline during the first six months of 1998 coincides with two related events—first, the fall of the Ciorbea government in April 1998 following a series of inter-coalition conflicts that marked the symbolic end of the center's campaign promise of clean government; and second, the rising tide of corruption scandals, which raised increasingly serious questions about the effectiveness of the government's much-publicized anti-corruption campaign. Whereas in December 1997 opinion polls indicated that 59 percent of Romanians approved of the government's performance in reducing corruption, that figure fell to 29 percent by June 1998 and finally to four percent in November 2000, which was below the 1996 approval ratings of eight percent of the PDSR government.

The CDR failure to live up to its 1996 campaign promises in both economic and moral terms was accompanied by the inability of the center-right to close ranks during the 2000

⁵ Data from the 2000 CD-ROM edition of *International Financial Statistics*.

electoral campaign. The CDR, which ran as *CDR 2000* in the elections, was also weakened by the defection of the liberals, who decided to leave the sinking ship of the coalition and ran instead a moderately successful independent campaign, which for the first time since 1990 united most of the numerous liberal factions under the banner of the PNL (National Liberal Party). Thus, while the popular vote for the center-right forces dropped from over 32 percent to around 13 percent,⁶ their representation in parliament fell even more drastically, due primarily to the failure of *CDR 2000* to pass the 10 percent hurdle imposed by the electoral law for multi-party coalitions.

The stringent electoral threshold can be blamed for part of this distortion. More important, however, were a series of tactical errors and a lack of coordination between the Liberals and the Christian Democrats (which formed the backbone of *CDR 2000*). When negotiations for a possible broad center-right coalition took place during the early summer, the leadership of the Christian Democratic Peasants Party (PNTCD) ignored the possibility that it might fall short of the electoral threshold and refused the Liberals' requests for reapportioning power within the coalition. At the same time, the PNL leadership sought to distance itself from the mistakes of the governing coalition, preferring instead to keep its options open for a number of potentially more promising political ventures, including cooperation with the PDSR. The center-right thus succeeded in wasting a large part of its diminished vote share, and it will accordingly have to be content with a marginal position in the new parliament.

The Resilient Left

After four years in opposition, the 2000 elections brought the PDSR and its leader, Ion Iliescu, back to power. Even though the PDSR's popularity declined from a high of 50 percent in October 2000 to only 36.6 percent of votes on election day, the party won a fairly comfortable victory, falling just short of achieving an absolute majority of seats in parliament (45 percent). Even without an absolute majority, the PDSR's decision to form a minority government with the PD, PNL, and UDMR will likely increase the government's effectiveness. Not only does

⁶ These figures include the vote share of the smaller liberal factions, which ran separately in both 1996 and 2000 and failed to cross the electoral hurdle.

the PDSR command a much larger share of parliamentary seats than during its previous ruling period (45 percent in 2000 compared to 34 percent in 1992-1996), it also faces a much more divided opposition. Thus, while in 1992-1996 the centrist opposition was adamantly opposed to cooperation with the PDSR, in the new parliament the mainstream opposition has little choice but to support the PDSR, given that further political stalemate and early elections would primarily benefit the center's main enemy, the PRM. Moreover, the PRM has signaled its willingness to form a coalition government with the PDSR, thus increasing the bargaining power of the PDSR in its negotiations with the democratic opposition.

Given this power constellation, much of the fate of the Romanian economy and democracy depends upon the orientation and actions of the PDSR and its leader, President Iliescu. Much of the Western media's coverage of Romania has emphasized that the PDSR is a party of ex-communists, and it has portrayed Iliescu as an apparatchik and former protégé and ally of Nicolae Ceausescu, Romania's communist dictator.⁷ While these roots may be morally and ideologically problematic to many Westerners and Romanians, the experience of other former communist parties in Eastern Europe and the Soviet successor states indicates that ties to the communist past are a poor predictor of the political trajectory of a given individual or party. Hungary's ex-prime minister, Gyula Horn, and Slovenia's president, Milan Cuccu, for example, occupied higher positions than Iliescu in the communist hierarchies of their respective countries, yet they presided over successful economic reforms and Western integration. At the same time, former anti-communists such as Slovakia's Vladislav Meciar and Albania's Sali Berisha have proven much more hostile to the principles of democracy.

The more relevant standard for evaluating the democratic and reformist credentials of Iliescu and the PDSR is their political evolution since 1990. In this respect, the evidence is definitely mixed, although there has been improvement over time. During the early post-revolutionary period, Iliescu and the ruling National Salvation Front (the predecessor of the PDSR) were responsible for a number of events that clearly violated basic tenets of democracy: the free but unfair elections of May 1990; the brutal suppression of pro-democracy student

⁷ See, for example, *The New York Times*, November 30, 2000; *The Independent*, November 27, 2000; and *The Daily Telegraph*, November 28, 2000.

protests with the help of miners in June 1990; and the second miners' march on Bucharest in September 1991 that resulted in the overthrow of the government of Petre Roman.⁸ In addition, following their victory in the relatively clean 1992 elections, the PDSR initially formed a minority government with the tacit support of three extremist parties—the extreme-left Socialist Labor Party (PSM), the nationalist Greater Romania Party (PRM) of Vadim Tudor, and the Romanian National Unity Party (PUNR) of Cluj's nationalist mayor, Gheorghe Funar. This cooperation, which resulted in a number of concessions to the nationalists including a controversial education law, culminated in the official inclusion of the three parties as junior governing coalition partners between January and October 1995. The nationalist drift of the PDSR peaked during the electoral campaign in 1996 in which Iliescu echoed the anti-Hungarian rhetoric of Funar and Tudor and argued that an opposition victory would lead to the "Yugoslavization" of Romania as a result of the secessionist ambitions of the Hungarians in Transylvania.⁹

Nevertheless, the 1996 elections were generally regarded as free and fair, and more importantly, the PDSR dutifully accepted the unfavorable election results in what constituted an important step towards democratic consolidation in Romania. Moreover, even while playing the populist-nationalist card domestically for much of the 1992-1996 period, the PDSR government pursued Western integration consistently and with at least a degree of success, including acceptance into the Council of Europe and cooperation with NATO through the Partnership for Peace initiative. As I will discuss in greater detail below, much of the PDSR's political program can be seen as a strategic attempt to balance the demands of its largely anti-reform domestic electorate with the imperatives of a post-Cold War international arena dominated by the principles of the "Washington consensus."

Following its 1996 electoral defeat, the PDSR did not undergo the type of drastic internal reorganization that resulted in reformed social democratic parties elsewhere in East-Central Europe. Even though an initiative in this direction was launched during the PDSR

⁸ The intervention was prompted by the falling out between Roman, who was himself part of the FSN, and his former ally, President Iliescu.

⁹ See Michael Shafir, "Romania's Road to 'Normalcy,'" in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (1997) 144-158.

conference in July 1997 by the former foreign minister, Teodor Melescanu, the motion only resulted in the defection of a reformist wing and the creation of a new party, the Alliance for Romania (ApR), which obtained 4.3 percent of the vote in the 2000 election and thus fell short of the electoral threshold. The majority of the PDSR, however, regrouped around the old leadership and proceeded to rebuild the party's popularity by taking advantage of the increasingly visible weakness of the governing coalition. As an opposition party, the PDSR used its superior party discipline and the rapidly deteriorating economic and social situation to challenge the policies of the government. However, it did so within the strict confines of parliamentary procedures. It further consolidated its democratic credentials by taking a firm stand against the miners' offensive of January 1999, which threatened to overthrow the government.

In line with these developments, the PDSR's electoral platform for 2000 lacked any of the shrill undertones of its rhetoric during the 1996 elections. Instead, the PDSR and Iliescu emphasized their adherence to European integration, democracy, and ethnic tolerance, while at the same time promising a coherent economic program that would spur economic recovery and fight poverty. This moderate message was further underscored by the PDSR's emphatic rejection of any cooperation with the PRM, as well as by its willingness to negotiate with the centrist opposition (PD, PNL, and UDMR).

It may be, of course, that the change in tone of the PDSR's rhetoric reflects a strategic response to the changing nature of the electoral environment. Whereas in 1996 the pro-reform swing of the electorate put the PDSR at a disadvantage compared to its center-right opponents, in 2000 the tide had turned and polls showed an electorate much more amenable to the slower, "socially sensitive" approach of the PDSR. As a result, the PDSR did not have to resort on this occasion to an *ad hoc* attempt to introduce nationalism as an additional dimension of electoral competition in the hope of diverting attention from the country's economic difficulties.

The preceding discussion raises an important and difficult question: to what extent has the PDSR completed its transformation into a moderate social-democratic party? The events of the last two years suggest considerable progress in this respect, but it is still too early for a

definitive answer. The final answer will depend on a number of factors, the most important being the balance within the party between reformers (clustered around prime minister Adrian Nastase) and hard-liners such as President Iliescu and former prime minister and current senate leader Nicolae Vacaroiu. If the economy recovers, and if Romania makes significant progress on EU integration, the prospects for the young technocrats in Nastase's government should be promising. If, however, economic stagnation continues and prospects for EU membership diminish, there may be a revival of populists and hard-liners within the PDSR, if only to counteract the danger of a further popularity boost for Tudor and the PRM.

The Rise of Extremism: Vadim Tudor and the PRM

The unexpected electoral success of the Greater Romania Party (PRM) and its charismatic leader, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, represents the most troubling outcome of the 2000 election and arguably the most serious threat to Romanian democracy in the last decade. Although the PRM ran a comparatively moderate electoral campaign claiming to combine a center-left economic policy with a center-right national doctrine, the political record of its leaders displays all the elements of an extremist anti-systemic party. These include (1) repeated, virulent attacks against Hungarians, Jews and Gypsies in the Party's newspaper, *Romania Mare* (Greater Romania), with references to isolating Gypsies in special "colonies";¹⁰ (2) the publication of a list of top intellectuals who should be shot for the greater good of the country; (3) a promise to rule Romania from the barrel of a gun; (4) expansionist claims against several of Romania's neighbors; and, most importantly, (5) support and the involvement of the PRM in the failed miners' insurrection of January 1999, whose purpose was to overthrow the centrist government. While there was a backlash against the PRM following the insurrection, including a sharp decline in popularity (from 16 percent for the PRM and 18 percent for Tudor in November 1998, to 10 percent and 8 percent respectively in June 1999), the party rode the bandwagon of Tudor's rising popularity to become the second largest political formation in the new parliament with roughly a quarter of the seats. This success is remarkable not only in the context of the party's modest showing in the previous elections but also given the dubious

background of many PRM leaders—apart from Tudor's past as a court poet for Ceausescu, the party's list of candidates also "boasted" a number of shady businessmen (at least one of whom is still in prison serving a five year corruption sentence), former high-ranking members of Ceausescu's infamous *Securitate*, and former Communist Party activists.¹¹

The PRM's success can be traced to a number of factors. First, given that as late as September 2000 Tudor's showings in the polls trailed significantly behind the expected votes for the two center-right candidates,¹² both the media and the political elite failed to take the PRM/Tudor threat seriously until the very last moment. As a consequence, Romania's mainstream parties spent most of the time attacking each other while largely ignoring the PRM's rising appeal with voters. This myopia may also explain the failure of the authorities to convict Tudor on charges of undermining state authority, even though in his open letter of January 7th 1999 he had encouraged the miners to go to Bucharest to overthrow the government.¹³ Since much of the PRM success was driven by Tudor's charismatic presence—he received over 28 percent of the votes in the first round, compared to under 20 percent for the PRM—his conviction in at least one of the numerous trials over the past several years might have been sufficient to ensure the continued marginality of the PRM.

Second, the rise of the PRM was also fueled by the decline of the Romanian Party of National Unity (PUNR), which lost more than two thirds of its 1996 vote share. This consolidation of the nationalist vote was primarily triggered by the decision of the controversial mayor of Cluj, Gheorghe Funar, to leave the PUNR and join the PRM in 1999. Funar brought with him a significant support base among Romanian voters in Transylvania who feel threatened by the autonomy claims of the region's 1.6 million Hungarians. Thus, whereas in 1996 the PRM's 3.8 percent vote share in Transylvania was well below its performance in the rest of the country (6.5 percent) and much lower than the 11.1 percent garnered by the PUNR

¹⁰ *Romania Mare*, August 29, 1998, cited in *Evenimentul Zilei*.

¹¹ From an exhaustive and well-documented list published in *Monitorul*, December 5, 2000.

¹² According to an IMAS poll from September 2000 (available at www.imas.ro), Tudor was expected to win ten percent of votes compared to 15 percent for Isarescu, 19 percent for Stolojan, and 43 percent for Iliescu.

¹³ Cited in *Expres*, January 21, 1999 (available at <http://www.expres.ro/arhive/1999/ianuarie/21/investigatii/6-5.html>).

in the region, for the 2000 elections regional differences practically disappeared, with PRM votes in Transylvania being almost identical to the national average. Moreover, the PDSR's decision to avoid nationalist appeals during the 2000 campaign helped to direct the nationalist electorate towards the PRM.

However, as the next section will argue on the basis on opinion surveys, it would be simplistic to regard the PRM gains simply as a successful effort to galvanize a substantial nationalist portion of the electorate. As a matter of fact, the 2000 electoral campaign was much less charged with ethno-political overtones, at least in part because the participation of the UDMR in the CDR government had failed to produce any of the "Yugoslav" scenarios predicted during the 1996 electoral campaign. Even the PRM tried to tone down its nationalist rhetoric during the campaign by denying racism charges and by claiming that it wanted to engage in constructive negotiations with the Hungarian minority in Romania. Instead, the PRM emphasized its outsider status¹⁴ and tried to fashion itself as the only real alternative to the increasingly unpopular political elite¹⁵ that had ruled Romania since 1990.

The following section will substantiate the argument that the PRM and Tudor were chosen not for what they were but for what they were not, which may explain the rapid rise in their popularity in the last few weeks before the election. However, the durability of this kind of negative vote is difficult to gauge. On the one hand, as the largest opposition party the PRM could be ideally positioned to take advantage of any mistakes made by the PDSR government. On the other hand, the novelty of Tudor's brand of scandal-politics may wear off in the next four years, in which case he and his party could experience the Zhirinovskiy syndrome and be relegated to a fringe position on the Romanian political scene. The outcome depends on a number of factors, including the country's economic trajectory, the ability of the centrist opposition to reinvent itself as a viable alternative to the PDSR government, and last but not least Romania's progress with respect to European integration.

¹⁴ Of course in doing so, the PRM chose to ignore the fact that they had supported and even taken part in the PDSR led government before 1996.

¹⁵ According to the Soros Public Opinion Barometer, by November 2000 86 percent of Romanians had little or no trust in political parties and 88 percent felt the same way about parliament.

To place these factors in the proper context, the next section will analyze the preferences of the Romanian electorate both in terms of how they affected the 2000 election outcomes and their implications for the future.

The Dejected Electorate

As the preceding discussion has shown, the failure of the political elite to address the country's economic and moral crisis was the main reason for the troubling outcome of the recent Romanian elections. However, the question arises: are the election results primarily a warning signal for the political elite, or do they reflect a more fundamental rejection of democracy and economic reforms? Based on survey evidence, this section will argue that, at least for the time being, the vote for Tudor and the PRM does not represent a clear anti-democratic constituency. Nevertheless, the current preferences of Romania's voters constitute a potential threat to democratic stability in the future.

The overall mood of the Romanian electorate, as reflected by a survey from early November 2000, is complex.¹⁶ On one hand, joining the EU and NATO was viewed favorably by 68 percent and 62 percent of Romanians respectively; 76 percent supported a market economy; and when asked about their ideology, only three percent described themselves as communist, with another five percent identifying themselves as nationalist.

These figures suggest a remarkable resilience of pro-Western and pro-capitalist views, which is somewhat surprising given that almost 80 percent of Romanians judged their living standards to be at or below the minimum level necessary for survival. But while the Western model is not challenged by any serious alternative, the data also suggest that the basic tenets of liberal democracy are by no means universally accepted. Thus, 36 percent of respondents agreed that it would be good if there were only one political party (only 49 percent disagreed), 72 percent said they would not want to have Gypsies as neighbors,¹⁷ and roughly one third did

¹⁶ Unless otherwise stated, all the data presented here is based on the Public Opinion Barometer survey commissioned by the Soros Foundation in Romania from the survey research firm CURS.

¹⁷ While this percentage is indeed very high, I doubt that it would be significantly lower in most countries of Eastern and even Western Europe.

not want Hungarians¹⁸ or Jews as neighbors. While the lack of a solid pro-democracy majority can be traced to historical precedents such as the faulty inter-war democracy and President Iliescu's calls for a one-party democracy in 1990, more decisive is the disappointing working of democratic institutions in recent years. Indeed, by November 2000 over 75 percent of Romanians had little or no trust in the justice system, while 86 percent distrusted political parties—and this despite the fact that, regardless of the alleged lack of a democratic political culture, Romania's democracy satisfaction rates immediately following the 1996 elections were higher than all the other former communist countries except Poland.¹⁹

A different way of assessing the state and the future of Romanian democracy is to compare the constituencies of the main political parties and candidates in the 2000 elections, which helps explain why voters chose certain candidates. Based on their stated vote intentions in the November 2000 survey, we can distinguish four main groups of voters: (1) Iliescu voters (46.2 percent); (2) center-right voters (26.6 percent);²⁰ (3) Tudor voters (14.3 percent) and (4) Tudor sympathizers (23.5 percent). The fourth group, consisting of respondents who did not express an intention to vote for Tudor but had a good or very good opinion of him, was included in order to account for the 14 percent vote share increase for Tudor in the three weeks between the survey and the elections. Table 3 summarizes the attitudes of the three groups for a few key dimensions:

¹⁸ Remarkably, in Transylvania, where the overwhelming majority of Hungarians live, only 15 percent of respondents objected to Hungarian neighbors, compared to 33 percent for the whole country.

¹⁹ See Central and Eastern Eurobarometer 7 and 8, from November 1996 and November 1997, respectively. Unfortunately, no comparable cross-country data is available for 1999-2000, since the CEEB was discontinued and has not been replaced by the Applicant Countries Barometer.

²⁰ Here I included votes for both Isarescu and Stolojan, given the similarity of their platforms and electoral bases.

Table 3: Voter preferences

	Tudor voters	Tudor sympathizers	Iliescu voters	Center-right voters	Overall population
Total respondents	14%	23%	46%	27%	100%
Would like Gypsy neighbors	21%	29%	28%	29%	28%
Would like Hungarian neighbors	54%	64%	58%	81%	66%
Would like Jewish neighbors	59%	66%	57%	82%	65%
Believe joining NATO would benefit the country	65%	65%	54%	78%	62%
Believe joining EU would benefit the country	70%	73%	60%	86%	68%
Agree that it is good to have a market economy	81%	81%	71%	90%	76%
Disagree that it is good to have a market economy	13%	8%	10%	5%	9%
Agree that it would be good if there was only one political party	43%	39%	45%	20%	36%
Disagree that it would be good if there was only one political party	51%	50%	40%	72%	49%
Think the country is moving in the right direction	7%	11%	9%	25%	12%
Think the country is moving in the wrong direction	77%	69%	72%	56%	66%

Note: The figures are based on the author's analysis of the raw data of the Public Opinion Barometer survey commissioned by the Soros Foundation in Romania from the survey research firm CURS. The survey covered a representative sample (N=2000) of the Romanian population and was executed between October 31 and November 6 2000.

The figures show that, as might have been expected, those who intended to vote for the two center-right candidates were on average more tolerant towards ethnic minorities (with the

exception of Gypsies) and more supportive of capitalism, multiparty democracy and Western integration than the rest of the population. These respondents were on average younger, better educated, and better off than the overall population, which may explain their somewhat more positive assessment of the country's evolution, even though a resounding 56 percent still thought that the country was moving in the wrong direction.

However, the more interesting question concerns the profile of the large groups of disaffected voters who intended to vote for either the PDSR or the PRM and their respective leaders. As expected, Tudor voters were more likely to describe themselves as nationalists (31 percent compared to five percent for the overall population), but Tudor sympathizers were actually less likely than average to be nationalists. Tudor voters were also more likely to be xenophobic/racist, but a majority of them was still willing to accept Hungarian (54 percent) or Jewish neighbors (59 percent), which was not far from the national average. Vadim sympathizers scored very close to the national average, and were actually more tolerant than Iliescu supporters, which suggests that at least part of the vote for Tudor and the PRM should not be considered simply a vote for nationalism and extremism.

Moreover, both Tudor voters and sympathizers were actually *above* the national average in degree of support for NATO and EU integration, as well as acceptance of market economics. Even regarding one-party rule, while slightly worse than the average, Tudor voters were actually more progressive than Iliescu's constituency. Except for being more tolerant of Hungarians and Gypsies (but not of Jews) than Tudor voters, Iliescu backers were on average more consistently opposed to the principles of democracy, capitalism, and Western integration than any other major group in the country.

The survey data thus suggests a rather puzzling situation in which an extremist candidate (Tudor) was actually backed by a more progressive electorate than a seemingly more progressive candidate (Iliescu), who by November 2000 had more or less consolidated his reputation as "a democrat, a moderate, and pro-European."²¹ This suggests that Tudor's rising popularity does not reflect a polarization or radicalization of the Romanian electorate—rather,

²¹ See, "Haider, but more so Romania's unlovely presidential aspirant," in *The Guardian*, November 29, 2000.

it suggests a general dissatisfaction with the political elite responsible for the poor governmental performances of the past ten years. Thus, 77 percent of Tudor voters and 69 percent of Tudor sympathizers thought that the country was moving in the wrong direction, whereas only 31 percent and 23 percent, respectively, subscribed to the xenophobic rhetoric of the party.²² This same reasoning also explains why in the presidential runoff Tudor received more votes in Transylvania than in the rest of the country, even though Transylvanian voters were actually considerably more tolerant of minorities than the national average. The explanation lies in the historically much lower popularity of Iliescu in the region, where in the first round he received almost 50 percent fewer votes than in the rest of the country.

Implications for the Future

The above analysis gives cause for both hope and concern. On the positive side, the lack of fit between Tudor's message and his electoral base in the last elections suggests a high likelihood that the 2000 elections could be an isolated spike in the PRM's electoral fortunes. The results of the presidential runoffs are a first indication that this may prove the case. Moreover, a reorganized and united center-right could well regain the confidence of many of its 1996 voters who drifted into Tudor's camp in 2000.

At the same time, the nagging question remains as to what will happen with the PDSR electorate in the next elections. Barring a very successful four years in government, the PDSR will very likely lose some of its current popularity among the losers of the transition. Moreover, given that the Romanian constitution prohibits Iliescu from running for the presidency again in 2004, the next few years may bring a struggle for succession among the party's leaders, with unpredictable repercussions on the party's electoral following. If the reformist wing of Prime Minister Nastase prevails, it could lead to a defection of the party's more reactionary voters, whose preferences are currently closest to the PRM electoral message.

²² These figures were obtained by identifying respondents who would not want Hungarians, Jews, or Gypsies as neighbors.

Most importantly, the fate of democracy in Romania will hinge on the ability of the mainstream political class to reverse the erosion in support for the country's democratic institutions. If by 1996 it had appeared that democracy was more or less the only game in town, the political spectacle of the last four years has undermined not only the credibility of the main democratic protagonists (especially on the center-right) but the credibility of the system as a whole. Even though the country is nominally democratic (and actually received a "free" rating from Freedom House for the last four years), the benefits of democracy have not materialized for most Romanians. Not only are they highly dissatisfied with their political leaders, but only 11 percent believe that they can influence key decision making in a meaningful way. This popular disaffection is visible not only in opinion polls and election results, but in voter turnout—whereas in 1996, 76 percent of Romanians voted in both election rounds, in 2000 turnout was 56 percent in the first round and barely 50 percent in the presidential runoff.

The long-term consequences of this decline in popular support for electoral democracy are difficult to predict. For the time being, democratic procedures are likely to survive for at least two important reasons. First, given the high level of support for Western integration and the explicit democratic conditionality imposed by both the EU and NATO on applicant countries, both the political elites and the electorate face strong incentives to play by the rules, even if many only believe in them half-heartedly. Even Tudor, citing the cases of Austria, Serbia and Iraq, has decided that it would be politically unwise at the moment to deviate from the Western canon,²³ and he consequently moderated his political message in the months preceding the elections. However, for democratic conditionality to remain credible and effective, the rewards of such "obedience" must be tangible for both politicians and voters. In this respect, progress in NATO and EU expansion in the next few years will play an essential role in maintaining democratic stability in Romania and other former communist countries of the region.

The second reason for guarded optimism is that there are no credible ideological alternatives to Western liberalism in Eastern Europe at present. Despite the rise of communist

²³ See Michael Shafir, "Radical Continuity in Romania: The Greater Romania Party (B)" in *East European Perspectives*, Vol. 2, No. 16.

nostalgia, few voters in the region would support a return to communism. Similarly, the far right, despite making inroads (as in other parts of Europe as well), has little to offer in terms of a coherent ideology. Finally, none of the authoritarian or semi-authoritarian experiments in the region (including Belarus, Serbia, Slovakia, and Croatia) provides attractive political and economic alternatives that could encourage imitation.

Nevertheless, the Romanian elections of 2000, with their unexpected boost for extremist "scandal-politics," serves as a warning of the possibility of the what Larry Diamond has called the "hollowing-out" of democracy. While the situation may have been more extreme in Romania than elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the frequent alternations in power and the appeal of untried political parties (such as the Young Democrats in Hungary) suggest that the same mechanisms are at work in other countries as well. Rather than becoming the only game in town as a consequence of democratic learning, democracy in the former communist countries of the region risks becoming reduced to lip-service paid to the dominant ideology of the day in ways that resemble compliance with Soviet dogma before 1989. Unless politicians on both sides of the former Iron Curtain manage to find solutions for immiserization and political marginalization of large sections of post-communist Eastern Europe, the probable long-term outcome could be a reversal of the third wave of democratization.