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Romania And The European Union: A Process-tracing Analysis Of Romanian Public Opinion On Corruption, The National Government, and The European Union

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ROMANIA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION: A PROCESS-TRACING ANALYSIS OF
ROMANIAN PUBLIC OPINION ON CORRUPTION, THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT,
AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the early twenty-first century, Romania has gone through significant economic, social, and political changes, many of which correlate with Romania joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2004 and the European Union (EU) in 2007. From the time Romania joined the EU the concept of Euroscepticism, or general criticism of the EU, did not gain significant holding in the country as it did in Western Europe. On the contrary, most of the negative opinion from the public was reserved for the national government, particularly the parliament. This paper performs a process-tracing analysis of Romania's history of corruption and political scandal on the national level, stemming from the mid-1990s, through Romania's complicated history with the EU, and concluding with the recent international events leading up to the rejection from joining the Schengen area Schengen in 2022. After this analysis, the paper will address how the dynamics between Romania's national government and the EU influence Romanian public opinion concerning both governing bodies, in order to identify the most prominent influencing factors, particularly focusing on corruption, international conflict, and economic recession. Since many countries, particularly in Eastern Europe, have complicated histories specifically regarding these factors, it would be of note to determine if these factors influence public opinion significantly, and look to see perhaps which holds the most poignant effect on Romania's political climate. Overall, this paper will contribute to the understanding of how perceived national deficiencies impact the favor attributed to the EU from national citizenries.

INTRODUCTION

Romania is a country that has long since been a unique case to study for various reasons, the foremost of which in recent years has been Romania's political atmosphere. Besides from vampires, the thing Romania is the most well-known for is having the most oppressive communist regime under the neo-Stalinist dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu. However, since its fall Romania has been much slower to democratize than the other nations of the Eastern Bloc. Much of this can be attributed to the remaining idea in Romania where individuals did not believe communism to be a failure, rather the consequences of the Ceaușescu regime were a result of poorly implemented communist ideology. However, while this was the case, Romania since 1989 has strived to become more involved with the international community, seeking approval from the United Nations (UN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the European Union (EU), among many other international organizations (IOs). Something that many of these organizations emphasize is the importance of democratic principles, or at the minimum, "promoting peace and security and respecting fundamental rights and freedoms."¹

In order to achieve these principles Romania had to take steps to improve its democracy, especially due to Romania's insistence on joining both NATO and the EU. Though there were various efforts in Romania to join the EU in the large addition of member states that would occur in 2004, there were still far too many institutional flaws perceived by the EU to join which pushed Romania's accession date to 2007, and even then there was a backup clause implemented stated that further improvements were necessary if Romania wished to remain a member until 2008.² However Romania did complete these additional reforms, allowing Romania to remain a member state after its accession in 2007.

¹ European Union. "Aims and Values." European Union, 2012.

² European Parliament *Committee on Foreign Affairs PE 349.831 Resolution on Romania's progress towards accession*, EP Document P6_TA (2004)0111, 16 December 2004, point 8

While the 2000s marked a period of significant movements towards democratization in Romania, the 2010s would act as a stark reminder of how failed democratic ideals would have been implemented through various corruption, embezzlement, and general malpractice scandals involving various members of the government. This paper will not seek to understand why these behaviors took place in the political sphere of Romania, as many papers look into the factors that have led to these cases in the previous years. This paper rather seeks to understand the consequences of these cases, and in particular to understand the effects that these cases have had on Romanian public opinion towards its own national government and the European Union.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study follows the methodology of a process-tracing analysis of Romanian democracy following 1990. Process-tracing is a method commonly used in social sciences that seeks to study causal mechanisms in an effort to connect them with specific causes and effects. This paper follows the variation of theory-building process-tracing, in which there is an idea of the prevalence of corruption and it, and that it has an effect on public opinion, however the specific mechanisms that lead to this connection have yet to be identified.³ After establishing the structural and institutional conditions of Romania in the 1990s, identifying the major social, political, and economic events up until the modern era, and creating a timeline of the most significant events, data will be gathered from the Eurobarometer and the Romanian parliamentary elections to identify the dynamics of trust in the EU, trust in the national government, and overall voter participation. The results of these public opinion polls will then be compared with what will be established as the key sociopolitical values for Romanians,

³ Beach, Derek, and Brun Rasmus Pedersen. *Process-tracing methods: Foundations and guidelines*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2019. 13

particularly the trust in the national government and trust in the European Union. In assessing the public opinion of Romania, most of the data used in this paper will be from the Eurobarometer, a regularly-performed, cross-country public opinion survey in which Romania became a subject in 2004, and has continued to be a subject since. The Eurobarometer is a polling instrument that was created by the European Union in order to regularly determine the state of public opinion in the EU. While there are different Eurobarometers, including flash ones for major events and more specific ones for a particular aspect of society, this paper uses the ‘Standard Eurobarometer.’ This bi-annual survey looks at the public opinion of member states regarding issues related to the EU and its member states. These public opinion polls will be used alongside the national elections as there are consequences like changes in voter turnout that will be assessed. After ‘key years of interest’ are established, those being in which there was a more drastic change in public opinion, they will be compared with the historical timeline to identify which events caused the most change in opinion, either towards the EU or the national government.

HISTORICAL PROCESS-TRACING

Though this study particularly focuses on public opinion after Romania became a regular country of study in the Eurobarometer, there are various patterns and trends regarding public political opinion in Romania that stem from the Revolution in 1989 and its immediate aftermath. The roots of modern public opinion in Romania begin at a point where public opinion was neither documented nor accounted for, under the neo-Stalinist dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu. Throughout this section, the developments that took place in Romania since 1989 will be

outlined in an effort to determine key events and trends that have the potential to significantly alter public opinion

The Remnants of the Communist Regime

During the notoriously oppressive regime, dissidents were violently put down, and depoliticization was occurring throughout the country. Nearly the entire country, whether they aligned with communist ideals or not, were still members of the Communist Party of Romania, as there were ample social and economic benefits. For example, in certain public and civic jobs, particularly those involving education at major universities, one needed to present their Communist Party membership card in order to be a competitive candidate.⁴ The population widely accepted the notion that if anything were to happen to Nicolai Ceaușescu, in which he would no longer be the leader of Romania, either his wife or one of his children would take on his role as the head of the government.⁵ As a result, Romanians were largely indifferent to political affairs, and this was even more of a prevalent sentiment outside of major cities. There were several pathologies that existed in Romania throughout the 1980s that would continue in modern post-communist Romania, some even seen in the current day. Aside from the depoliticization that occurred, there was an extensive understanding that the bureaucratic system was widely corrupt. Another lingering trait of Ceaușescu's Romania was the existence of the *Securitate*, or the Romanian Secret Police, which would continue to be prevalent in Romanian bureaucracy throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s. The *Securitate* was infamous for its

⁴ Phinnemore, David. *The EU and Romania: Accession and beyond*. (London, England: Federal Trust for Education and Research, 2006), 13

⁵ Phinnemore, *The EU and Romania: Accession and beyond*, 17

coercion tactics and the use of violence towards political dissidents and the grassroots level of Romanian society.⁶

However, these traits were all visible throughout either everyday political life or via the structural integrity of the institutions of Romania. The economic problems of Romania during the Communist era would also continue throughout the 1990s, and even up to the modern day. Ceaușescu's policy during the 1980s placed an emphasis on the rapid repayment of foreign debts via the unsustainable exportation of goods, goods that were to be pulled out of domestic markets at the consumers' expense.⁷ This led to incredible poverty and low quality of life throughout Romania, particularly in larger cities where there would be seemingly endless lines for minimal amounts of low-quality food. While many would agree that this sort of situation would require some sort of economic reform, that was especially avoided by the Ceaușescu regime, as Ceaușescu saw reform as being able to quickly bring crisis towards his own regime. This is contemporarily classified as a “no-win situation” for Ceaușescu because “no reform only worsens the crisis in Romania; reform opens the possibility of causing a crisis and toppling his regime.”⁸

The Emergence and Consequences of the National Salvation Front

After two decades with this sort of bureaucratic strategy and practice, dissent began to increase amongst the majority of Romanians, largely congested in the larger cities of Timișoara, Cluj, and Bucharest. One of the largest organizers of these revolutionary movements began to

⁶ Trend Gilberg, *Nationalism and Communism in Romania* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990).

⁷ Sislin, John. “Revolution Betrayed? Romania and the National Salvation Front.” (*Studies in Comparative Communism* 24, no. 4), 397

⁸ Sislin, John. “Revolution Betrayed? Romania and the National Salvation Front.” 397

call itself the National Salvation Front (FSN or NSF). This movement was largely headed by Ion Iliescu, a former member of the Communist party that was ousted by Ceaușescu for being ‘dangerously independent in political thought,’ mostly due to his perceived openness to the idea of implementing democratic features in Romania’s government back in the 1970s. Throughout the December revolution in 1989, the FSN spearheaded the movement that would bring the fall to Ceaușescu’s regime. The day before Ceaușescu’s arrest, three days before his eventual execution, the FSN organized a press release in which they laid out their plans of transition for the Romanian government. They explicitly stated these ten points.

1. The abandonment of the leading role of a single party and the establishment of a democratic and pluralistic system of government.
2. Free elections in April 1990.
3. The separation of political institutions; the establishment of terms for office; and the establishment of a committee to draft a new constitution.
4. Restructuring of the economy in accordance with the criteria of profitability and efficiency; the elimination of command and bureaucratic methods of centralized economic management.
5. Restructuring of agriculture and support for small-scale production.
6. Reorganization of education; removal of indoctrination; promotion of “genuine values of humanism;” and the placement of the media in the hands of the people.
7. Observance of the rights and freedoms of ethnic minorities.
8. A reorganization of trade so that the population’s daily needs come first.

9. The regulation of foreign policy so that it serves the aims of friendship and peace; the observance of Romania's international commitments.
10. Domestic and foreign policies that meet the needs and are in the interests of the people; respect for human rights and freedoms.⁹

At this point, it is clear that the proclaimed goals of the FSN were very much in favor of a democratic government. However, while the FSN was proclaiming its ideals for the best Romania of the future, it was clear that whatever government would emerge to replace Ceaușescu's regime would have a difficult task ahead. They would be met with an ongoing economic crisis, a lack of organized opposition, a corrupt and inefficient bureaucratic mechanism, and a powerful army that may resist change, with the *Securitate* closely associated.¹⁰

It would be these factors that would allow, or at least forgive, a largely communist government immediately after an oppressive communist regime. This was also aided by certain coinciding factors, particularly from both the army and the secret police, who were seeking a way to channel the popular anger directed at them by the people. They had been seen as puppets of Ceaușescu, mainly because they were the ground troops for coercion and terror under the Ceaușescu dictatorship.¹¹ Because of this, aided by the fact that much of the descent against the former regime was unorganized, the FSN became the de facto leader as the only major organized group. The FSN officially declared itself as a party to run in the interim government elections early in 1990, an action that was seen as popular amongst the Romanian population. What would ensue would be free but unfair elections that took place in May of 1990. There are many

⁹ Radio Bucharest, "The National Salvation Front Starts to Implement Its Program," Radio Free Europe, Report on Eastern Europe, Vol. I, No. 5 (February 2, 1990), 26-27.

¹⁰ Sislin, John. "Revolution Betrayed? Romania and the National Salvation Front." 398

¹¹ Phinnemore, *The EU and Romania: Accession and Beyond*, 19

complaints regarding how these elections were carried out, as amongst the population, there were still various protests occurring throughout 1990 and up until the next elections for the first official democratic government in 1992. Many of these protests were eventually broken up by vigilante groups, largely organized by miners from outside major cities. In 2015, it was discovered that Iliescu may have actually financed these vigilante groups, but as of 2023, he is still awaiting trial at the age of 93. ¹²

What drew the most attention were the final results of the elections. In the presidential election, Iliescu won with a staggering 86% of the vote, and in the parliament, the National Salvation Front won with 66.7% of the vote.¹³ When this was announced to the general public, it brought a lot of concern and controversy directed at the newly elected government, particularly from America and Western Europe. There was substantial unease from the international community, as it seemed that once again Romania would be subject to a one-party rule after only five months since its previous regime was ousted. ¹⁴ This is on top of the widely known attributes of the time, firstly that the FSN controlled the state TV, which in many areas was one of the only channels, and after the elections, foreign observers made it clear that there were voter intimidation practices at play alongside ballot stuffing practices. ¹⁵

¹² BBC. "Romania's Ion Iliescu Facing Crimes against Humanity Charges." BBC News, October 21, 2015.

¹³ IPU. "Parliamentary Chamber: Camera Deputatilor ELECTIONS HELD IN 1990." Romania: Parliamentary elections camera deputatilor, 1990. Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1990.

¹⁴ Williams, Carol J. "Former Communist Swept into Romania's Presidency : Elections: Iliescu Wins 86% of Vote. Protesters Say the Balloting Was Rigged. They Attack Two Officials of the Victorious Party." Los Angeles Times, May 23, 1990.

¹⁵ Williams, Carol J. "Former Communist Swept into Romania's Presidency : Elections: Iliescu Wins 86% of Vote. Protesters Say the Balloting Was Rigged. They Attack Two Officials of the Victorious Party."

A Flawed Democracy

Regardless of these practices, in October 1990, Ion Iliescu addressed the United Nations General Assembly. This is largely seen as an attempt to save face as even Iliescu himself stated that the elections in May of that year brought a lot of controversies directed not only at the government itself but most prominently towards Iliescu.¹⁶ Iliescu's Speech at the UN can largely be seen as an attempt to establish Romania's political legitimacy to observers abroad. In his speech, he states, "Romania is fully committed to the ideals of the United Nations. More than ever we now understand how dangerous isolation is, how contrary to our people's interests, where the former tendencies to surround us with the barbed wire fence of false ideals and assumptions. Those old policies in Romania were skillfully designed for pushing us backwards and cutting short of our aspirations to our human dignity and freedom. Nothing is more important than freedom."¹⁷ However, it must be noticed that during the speech, he mentions how he welcomed foreign observers to the elections themselves, and while he states that they largely saw free elections, these were, in fact, the same observers that noted voter intimidation tactics and ballot stuffing.

The developments in Romania from December 1989 until May 1990 exemplified how different Romania's transition of government was compared to other Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. The establishment and dominance of the FSN guided Romania's political transition to follow the more 'Balkan pattern' of political transition as opposed to that of the CEE nations. In this Balkan pattern of political transition, there are three main features: low political institutionalization, predatory elites in charge, and the so-called Red-Brown Alliance

¹⁶ *Romanian President Address*. C-Span, 1990.
<https://www.c-span.org/video/?14443-1%2Ffromanian-president-address>.

¹⁷ *Romanian President Address*. C-Span, 1990.
<https://www.c-span.org/video/?14443-1%2Ffromanian-president-address>.

strategy.¹⁸ In Romania, most anti-communist sentiments were not organized in Romania's institutions though, they were scattered through various social outlets, including media and student organizations. This allowed the much more institutionally organized FSN to dominate early Romanian politics in the 1990s. Concerning the predatory elites being in charge, in the case of Romania, these elites varied from the heads of the military, secret police, banks, and the heads of the former Communist Party. Many benefited from the centralization of the bureaucracy and economy they had profited from during the Ceaușescu regime. As such, they were largely seen as wanting to only privatize in a way that still benefited them. Finally, there was the Red-Brown strategy in which nationalism and socialism worked in tandem so that the far left and the far right parties could, in effect, form a coalition. This last feature largely benefited from the idea that communism itself was not flawed. Rather it was its execution under Ceaușescu that proved to be the failure. It is estimated that $\frac{2}{3}$ of the Romanian population thought along these lines, and Iliescu became known to Romanians as the 'humane Ceaușescu.' This was especially seen in the Romanian countryside, where largely only state media was prevalent, and in some cases, Ceaușescu was not even seen as a bad leader.¹⁹ The prime example of this reluctance to defer from collectivism would come in early 1991. At this time, the first post-communist prime minister Pietro Roman tried to introduce reforms to push Romania towards a market economy. However, following this, real wages fell alongside general consumption, negatively affecting the economy. Eventually, his parliamentary government would be overthrown by a vigilante group of miners storming government offices in September of 1991.²⁰ This uprising is yet another one currently being investigated as potentially having been arranged and supported by Iliescu.

¹⁸ Phinnemore, *The EU and Romania: Accession and Beyond*, 22

¹⁹ Phinnemore, *The EU and Romania: Accession and Beyond*, 25

²⁰ Phinnemore, *The EU and Romania: Accession and Beyond*, 31

In 1992, Romania would have its first constitutional set of elections post-Ceaușescu's fall, though there were still concerns that the voter intimidation that had been prevalent in the 1990 elections still continued. Even though Iliescu still won the presidency, the distribution of votes for the parliamentary government was much closer than it had been in 1990. As opposed to the 66.7% of votes that the FSN had garnered then, this time the FSN received 10.18% of the parliament's votes, and their splinter organization, known as the National Democratic Salvation Front (NDSF), received 27.71% of the votes.²¹ In this election, we also see the emergence of the Romanian Democratic Convention Alliance (RDC), which won 20.01% of the votes. This surfacing party was largely made of anti-communists working with the Hungarian minority, alongside many of the revolutionary forces that refused to align with the FSN in 1989. Under this new government that would remain in power from 1992 to 1996, Romania was largely seen as improving in steps toward democratization.

Suspicion from the International Community

However, it is important to note that alongside these political and economic changes occurring within Romania, the international community was heavily invested in witnessing the changes toward democracy in the nation. As mentioned before the FSN made various movements to garner favor from abroad, including speaking at the UN General Assembly and inviting foreign observers to watch over the elections in 1990 and 1992. But beyond this, Romania began to seek out legitimacy through other international platforms as well, particularly through the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

However, in a sort of backward effect, Romania seeking out acceptance from the international

²¹ IPU. "Parliamentary Chamber: Camera Deputatilor ELECTIONS HELD IN 1992." Romania: Parliamentary elections camera deputatilor, 1992. Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1992.

community also led to the international community becoming aware of the political and economic reforms taking place in Romania, or rather lack thereof. This would, in turn, create an interesting precedent that has continued to occur in Romanian politics, in that, “much of the impetus for reform has resulted from pressures by external agencies, including the EU, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank.”²² The significance of foreign opinion was later exemplified with the inclusion of thirteen seats in the Chamber of Deputies to represent Romania’s ethnic minorities, at the request of the EU.²³ This was in response to the numerous concerns towards Romania regarding the treatment of the Hungarian ethnic minority largely prevalent in Transylvania. The former communist regime often mistreated the Hungarian ethnic minority, and many of the protests that led to the revolution of 1989 were either organized by or carried out by that minority.

It should also be noted that alongside these international organizations (IOs), there was a specific country with which Romania actively sought better relations, that being the United States of America. Romania under Iliescu saw the United States as a bulwark of security and economic stability, so Iliescu largely saw that if Romania could gain favor with the US, it would secure Romania’s legitimacy with the world. In terms of the United States, Romania had been seeking its acceptance and cooperation since the 1970s. While during the latter years of the 1980s, this largely fell apart as Romania was seen as increasingly oppressive by the international community, after the fall of the communist regime Romania extensively wanted to be a partner of NATO. Romania has always been considered a strategic location for security involvement, especially from the US Military. With its location on the Black Sea and its proximity to Greece, Turkey, and Russia, there were various cases of American military cooperation after 1991, and

²² Phinnemore, *The EU and Romania: Accession and Beyond*, 31

²³ IPU. “Parliamentary Chamber: Camera Deputatilor ELECTIONS HELD IN 1992.” Romania: Parliamentary elections camera deputatilor, 1992. Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1992

Romania even partnered with NATO in various instances regarding peacekeeping in Iraq, Kuwait, and Yugoslavia.²⁴ However, in a newly released telegram concerning a meeting between the then EUR Assistant Secretary Holbrook and President Iliescu, it is seen how questions regarding Hungary and Romania, alongside questions concerning the state of Romania's 'market economy' affected Romania's international involvement. The US was apprehensive of Romania's inclusion in NATO, particularly because of the lack of privatization in Romania's economy in 1995 and the remaining tense relations between Hungary and Romania. America became aware of the lack of progress in Romania's economy via the lack of participation of US investors in Romania's economy, which was not comparable to America's investing participation in the other CEE countries.²⁵ While the economic situation of Romania's national economy would still be disputed as too centralized to be considered a market economy up until Romania's inclusion in the EU in 2007, the situation with Hungary progressed much faster. This was accomplished mainly by the historic Basic Treaty, signed in 1995, in which Hungary and Romania agreed on the degree of autonomy of ethnic Hungarians within Romania, and also finalized the disputed border between the two nations. This move was primarily seen as an effort by both Hungary and Romania specifically to alleviate tensions to better both of their chances of joining both NATO and the EU.²⁶

Economic reform, on the other hand, did not really begin until the FSN lost the 1996 elections, in an election that some argue is the true first election in post-Communist Romania as it involved a government coalition that did not have representation from the former Communist

²⁴ Bureau of Political-Military Affairs. "U.S. Security Cooperation with Romania - United States Department of State." U.S. Department of State, 2023.

²⁵ Holbrooke, Richard. "Cable, U.S. Embassy Bucharest to the Secretary of State, 'EUR Assistant Secretary A/S Holbrooke's Meeting with President Iliescu.'" Cable, U.S. Embassy Bucharest to the Secretary of State, "EUR Assistant Secretary A/S Holbrooke's Meeting with President Iliescu" | Wilson Center Digital Archive, 1995.

²⁶ Blocker, Joel. "Romania/Hungary: Historic Basic Treaty Signed Today." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, April 9, 2008.

party. When the Romanian Democratic Convention Alliance won the elections, Romania's path toward EU membership truly began to kick off and Romania began to more openly address specific reform measures, resulting in Romania's official candidacy in 1999.

The Romanian Democratic Convention

1996 brings the first peaceful transition away from the FSN towards a group that essentially banded together in an effort to get Iliescu out of office. There were more than ten different political parties that chose to become members of the CDR, chief among them being, the Social Democratic Party (PDSR), the Anti-Totalitarian Democratic Forum (FAD), and the Democratic Convention of Romania (CDR).²⁷ They grew in popularity so much that they were the only party to get more than twenty percent of the vote alongside the FSN, making this the first recognized free and fair election, six years after the revolution.²⁸ The CDR would work with the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR), the Hungarian Ethnic Party, and the National Liberal Party (PNL), in order to establish a majority government in Parliament.²⁹

While the CDR accomplished a great thing by ensuring Iliescu would not simply be a second Ceaușescu, the CDR struggled when it came to enacting legislation that was supported by the people. It is often credited that the reason that the CDR won those 1996 elections was that Romanians were dissatisfied with the general population's quality of life, especially because much of the economy was essentially stuck behind growing workers' strikes.³⁰ This would work

²⁷ Filip, Ioana. "The Democratic Convention – An Experiment of the Civic and Political Alliance of Post-Communist Romania." *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 183 (2015): 56.

²⁸ Filip, Ioana. "The Democratic Convention – An Experiment of the Civic and Political Alliance of Post-Communist Romania." *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 183 (2015), 56

²⁹ Filip, Ioana. "The Democratic Convention – An Experiment of the Civic and Political Alliance of Post-Communist Romania." *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 183 (2015), 57

³⁰ Filip, Ioana. "The Democratic Convention – An Experiment of the Civic and Political Alliance of Post-Communist Romania." *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 183 (2015), 58

to create a seemingly unapproachable level of expectation for the government. Largely due to the amount and variation of parties that were incorporated into the coalition there was internal fracturing in the CDR throughout its rule from 1996-2000. With this there were also varying levels of economic reform that did not successfully bring Romania out of its recession, something that many Romanians expected would happen if the FSN were to leave office.

However this administration succeeded in two major ways: it did not become ridden with corruption scandals in the 2010s such as nearly every other administration, and it was a shining beacon for international recognition that Romania was improving as a democracy. This center-right party would be so successful in garnering Euro-Atlantic integration that it became an 'effective and irreversible' process, in which even though Iliescu would return to power, he would continue along the same strides in 2000.³¹³² This was also exemplified with the first anti-communist President of Romania, Emil Constantinescu, as he changed Romanian foreign policy at the time in Yugoslavia in order to side with NATO and the EU in supporting Kosovo. This decision was largely a disappointment to voters as Romania up until that point was pro-Serbia, and this position was deemed as too radical by some Romanians.³³

As a result of this the CDR did not stand to win the 2000 election. President Constantinescu renounced his campaign for re-election, citing that he entered politics to represent the common Romanian, an intelligent individual who could see the truth. However, the government was filled with liars that thrived under populism, and he decided it was his time to withdraw from politics, though this was temporary and he would become a member of the PNL party in 2002.³⁴

³¹ E. Constantinescu, *Time of Tearing Down, Time of Building* (Bucharest: Universalia, 2005), pp. 338-39.

³² Phinnemore, *The EU and Romania: Accession and Beyond*, 28

³³ Phinnemore, *The EU and Romania: Accession and Beyond*, 25

³⁴ *Declarație Emil Constantinescu, Julie 2000. YouTube.* YouTube, 2015.

Iliescu's Return

The Presidential Election of 2000 saw Iliescu compete in a run-off election between him and Corneliu Vadim Tudor, a radical ultranationalist under the Greater Romania Party. Iliescu won the Presidential race, which is largely attributed due to the support of the ethnic minorities in Romania choosing Iliescu over Tudor. Iliescu ran as the head of the PDSR, but there was a change occurring in the party that had once splintered from his FSN. Iliescu and the other PDSR party members from his generation still had various illusions about the capabilities of Leninist regimes and Ceaușescu's government, but the newer generation of PDSR were much more open to implementing democratic practices, and they were also set on becoming an EU member.³⁵ Thus, an accelerated privatization, and occasional reprivatization began to occur in Romania, attracting foreign investors and improving Romanian living standards. It is largely these actions that take the credit for proving that Romania had begun to adhere to its market economy and democratic principles, which directly led to joining NATO in 2004.³⁶

The period from 2000-2004 marks significant improvements in Romania's accession to the EU. In order to join the EU, a country must abide by and implement the *acquis*, or the body of EU law, in their own nation's legislature. The *acquis* is organized into thirty-five chapters that organize the various laws, declarations, and adaptations the EU abides by. However, by the end of 2000, Romania had only submitted thirteen of these chapters to be reviewed by the EU Council, nine of which the Council voted to remain open.³⁷ In 2001 Romania founded its

³⁵Tismaneanu, Vladimir. "225. Romania's First Post-Communist Decade: From Iliescu to Iliescu." Wilson Center, 2001.

³⁶Marczuk, Karina Paulina. "Dwie Dekady Zmian: Rumunia 1989-2009 (Two Decades of Changes: Romania 1989-2009)." HeinOnline, May 3, 2019. 76

³⁷ Phinnemore, *The EU and Romania: Accession and Beyond*, 82

Ministry of European Integration, with its only focus to be on ensuring the progression of fulfilling the *acquis* in the effort to gain EU membership.³⁸ The provisional closing of chapters proceeded at a steady pace until 2004, a period referred to as Romania's 'negotiation marathon'.³⁹ Many of the CEE countries that had applied for EU membership had concluded negotiations in 2002, leaving only Romania and Bulgaria, alongside Malta and Cyprus, still negotiating their accession.

However, there were a couple of instances in which the government did not move towards completion of the *acquis* in Romania, specifically involving the freedom of the press. The European Parliament (EP) announced it was concerned at the "growing number of serious physical assaults on investigative journalists and also at the fact that many organizations active in the media field remain in a precarious economic situation, enabling the authorities to exert pressure..."⁴⁰ Also throughout these years Romania was repeatedly warned about the prevalence of corruption throughout nearly all levels of their democracy. In 2000, Romania received the worst rating of corruption from Transparency International out of the entire European continent, which the European Commission stated, "undermines not only the functioning of the legal system but also has detrimental effects on the economy and has led to a loss of confidence in public authorities."⁴¹

While the period of Romania from 2000-2004 did mark significant progress for the accession of Romania to the EU, the rife problems perceived to be present in the national government and the PDSR only worsened via controversial actions done by President Iliescu towards the end of his term. Throughout his presidential term, he had pardoned various

³⁸ Phinnemore, *The EU and Romania: Accession and Beyond*, 82

³⁹ Phinnemore, *The EU and Romania: Accession and Beyond*, 85

⁴⁰ European Parliament *Committee on Foreign Affairs PE 349.831 Resolution on Romania's progress towards accession*, EP Document P6_TA (2004)0111, 16 December 2004, point 8

⁴¹ European Commission, *2000 Regular Report from the Commission on Romania's Progress towards Accession* (Brussels, 2000), p. 18.

government officials suspected of bribery, occasionally taking back his pardons due to public outcry.⁴² Another scandal that also received international attention was when Iliescu gave national honors to his opponent from the 2000 election, Corneliu Vadim Tudor. A known anti-Semite and Holocaust denier, this move received widespread condemnation, even prompting Elie Wiesel, famed Holocaust survivor, and acclaimed novelist, to return his Romanian honors in protest.⁴³ During this time another coalition began to form with origins in PNL and the Democratic Party under the former mayor of Bucharest, Traian Băsescu, who would defeat the Social Democratic Party (PSD), which was the development from the PDSR party.⁴⁴

The Period of Accession

Traian Băsescu would remain President of Romania until 2014, winning reelection in 2009. His two terms were marked with great changes for Romania, most prominently was Romania's final accession to the EU in 2007. As Băsescu took office in 2004, the European Commission spoke on the final factors that were stopping Romania from becoming a member, most notably the dangerous elements of coercion that existed in the Ministry of Justice. Elements of the former *Securitate* were still present in the 'Independent Service of Protection and Anti-corruption' department of the Ministry, and there was even evidence that they were spying on judges in 2004.⁴⁵ Eventually Romania signed its membership to the EU with a safeguard clause, emphasizing the need of improving the quality of the judicial system in Romania. This was directly correlated with corruption, as the EU Commission would state that "Corruption in

⁴² HotNews.ro. "Ambasada Sua: Nu a Început Anchetarea Puscasului Marin." HotNews.ro, 2004.

⁴³The Associated Press. "Elie Wiesel Returns Award Also given to 'Anti-Semites.'" Haaretz.com, December 16, 2004.

⁴⁴ Marczuk, Karina Paulina. "Dwie Dekady Zmian: Rumunia 1989-2009 (Two Decades of Changes: Romania 1989–2009)." HeinOnline, May 3, 2019. 77

⁴⁵ European Commission, *2004 Regular Report from the Commission on Romania's Progress towards Accession* (Brussels, 2004), p. 21

Romania continues to be serious and widespread. Romania's anti-corruption legislation is generally well-developed, but its ability to curb corruption will depend on the effective implementation of the law. In particular, additional efforts are required to ensure the independence, effectiveness, and accountability of the National Anti-Corruption Prosecution Office.⁴⁶ There were steps taken in 2005 that would effectively remove the remnants of the *Securitate* from the Ministry of Justice.

Regarding the safeguard clause, also referred to as 'conditionality', it remains the only one that the EU has implemented in the accession process of any potential member nation, specifically given to the dual-accession of Bulgaria and Romania. This strategy begins a pattern that continues throughout the entire membership period of Romania in the EU, in which there is always this sense of if Romania wants more integration into the EU, they must improve upon their national government.⁴⁷ This concept further solidifies the notion that the EU has been impactful at getting Romania to enact more democratic practices. First, the EU membership itself was used as the motivational factor, however later years would show that Romania's potential to become a part of the Euro zone or the Schengen area would supplant membership as the motivational factor.

Regarding Romania itself, 2004-2009 was a period of economic and political strife. Beginning in the sphere of politics, ongoing calls for corruption investigations were seemingly falling on deaf ears. In 2007, opposition party leaders pushed a vote of impeachment for unconstitutional practices, claiming that justices that Băsescu appointed were actively stopping prosecutors from filing corruption charges.⁴⁸ In Romania, impeachment voting is left up to the

⁴⁶European Commission, *2004 Regular Report from the Commission on Romania's Progress towards Accession* (Brussels, 2004), 147

⁴⁷European Commission, *2004 Regular Report from the Commission on Romania's Progress towards Accession* (Brussels, 2004), 154

⁴⁸Constitutionala, Curtea. "România Curtea Constitutionala: Dosar Nr. 384H/2007." Wayback Machine, 2007.

Romanian people in a public vote. In 2007 there were not enough votes in favor of removing the President, and as such Băsescu continued to remain in office. This period was also one of harsh economic struggles for many Romanians with the Financial Recession of 2008, which prompted a relief package of 20 billion Euros being sent to Romania by the International Monetary Fund and other lenders.⁴⁹ This relief package was set to offset the amount of public debt Romania had acquired, after the public spending drastically outweighed the income of the government. The recession stifled international investment in Romania, and poverty levels began to increase in the country once more.⁵⁰ Meanwhile the bureaucratic elements of the nation were crumbling with the European Commission still warning about corruption and in 2009 a trial would begin of Former Prime Minister Adrian Năstase involving possible corruption that occurred during his time as a prosecutor.

Public Trust 2004-2009

While Romania's government between 2004-2009 was experiencing various issues regarding its national economy and bureaucracy, at the same time it began its membership with the EU. While certainly a rocky start, in terms of public opinion data this was a new beginning as Romania began to be included in the Eurobarometer data set. This brought with it a more consistent and comprehensive survey of public opinion than had existed in Romania prior. With this the Eurobarometer would ask the Romanian public if they trusted or distrusted certain institutions varying from religious institutions and the police to the EU and the EU Commission. As seen in Figure 1, the disparity between the trust in the EU and the trust in the Romanian

⁴⁹ BBC. "Romania Profile - Timeline." BBC News, October 8, 2018.

⁵⁰ Duguleană, Constantin. "Effects of the Economic Crisis in Romania." *SEER* 14, no. 1 (2011), 21

government was significant since the spring of 2004, and the disparity has remained consistent between them throughout those five years, even as both lost roughly ten percentage points.

“Do you tend to trust...?”⁵¹

| | Tend to Trust the EU (%) | Tend to Trust the Romanian Government (%) |
|-------------|--------------------------|---|
| Spring 2004 | 72 | 36 |
| Autumn 2004 | 74 | 38 |
| Spring 2005 | 68 | 43 |
| Autumn 2005 | 64 | 30 |
| Spring 2006 | 68 | 32 |
| Autumn 2006 | 67 | 27 |
| Spring 2007 | 65 | 19 |
| Autumn 2007 | 68 | 21 |
| Spring 2008 | 66 | 25 |
| Autumn 2008 | 63 | 25 |
| Spring 2009 | 61 | 24 |

Figure 1. Romanian Trust in the EU and Romanian Government from Spring 2004-2009. European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer 61-71. Eurobarometer Surveys. (European Commission, 2004-2009).

Băsescu’s Second Term

The period from 2012-2015 only increased political unrest in Romania, largely spurred by a second impeachment attempt and parliament’s attempt to alter the penal code. The second impeachment against Băsescu occurred in 2012 following similar reasonings to the 2007

⁵¹ Eurobarometer Data

impeachment attempt. In this instance there seemed to be more support to remove Băsescu from office, however, Romania had included the EU *acquis* law which stated that in order for the public impeachment election to be valid, a minimum of fifty percent of the vote is required. While only forty-four percent of Romanian voters cast ballots, resources show that nearly eighty percent of those ballots were in favor of Băsescu's removal from office.⁵² The parliament under Victor Ponta, an opposition force to Băsescu, attempted to rid the fifty percent voter turnout rule, however as that is a EU Constitutional Court ruling it would act against their own EU membership.⁵³

Later in the same year, the parliament under Ponta attempted to alter the penal code to spare certain politicians from corruption-related crimes. This alteration would have the president, senators, and chamber members not be considered as "public officials," and would hence not be able to be tried for bribery or corruption.⁵⁴ This led to mass protests in Bucharest and international condemnation. While the change in the penal code passed parliament, when it reached President Basescu he did not sign it and instead returned it back to parliament.

In 2014, then-Prime Minister and presidential candidate Victor Ponta would become involved in a series of political scandals, however this did not stop him from being a candidate in the upcoming presidential race. These scandals did however help his opponent Kalus Ionhannis obtain more popularity and he eventually won the presidential race of that year.

⁵²Ilie, Luiza, and Sam Cage. "Romanian President Survives Impeachment Referendum." Reuters, July 29, 2012.

⁵³Ilie, Luiza, and Sam Cage. "Romanian President Survives Impeachment Referendum." Reuters, July 29, 2012.

⁵⁴Pop, Valentina. "Romanian Mps Decriminalise Political Corruption." EUobserver, December 11, 2013.

‘A New Beginning?’

A ‘new-beginning’ seemed to be on the horizon, as many Romanians were looking towards their new President, conservative Kalus Iohannis, and his tough on corruption stance. Many viewed this as a victory for democracy and a victory for Romania, particularly in the face of his opponent Victor Ponta. Ponta represented the ‘elite politicians’ who thrived off of the corruption present in the Parliamentary chamber, even though he was still Prime Minister at the time. This would drastically change in 2015, as the scandals surrounding Ponta proved true and he resigned, taking with him an arrest regarding some twenty-two cases of corruption-related crimes.⁵⁵ The period of 2015-2019 would see a dramatic increase in the number of corruption cases against former members of the Romanian government, including Iliescu, Băsescu, Ponta, and many other ministers and public officials at the municipal level. While the presidency was largely supported by the Romanian people, especially as Iohannis remained either neutral or in opposition of the government, the Romanian people began to detest the government itself.

In 2017, the Romanian parliament would introduce a decriminalizing graft that claimed to alleviate the prison system, however it involved particular exemptions from so-called ‘abuse-of-power’ offenses that involved monetary payments of less than 200,000 Lei (equivalent to 48,000 USD). Dozens of political figures, mostly either previously incarcerated or awaiting trial, were clear to benefit from the passage of the decree.⁵⁶ While Iohannis did not ratify this graft, similarly to Băsescu regarding the penal code changes, this graft was pushed through as an emergency decree by parliament. This resulted in the largest protests in Romania since the communist regime, spanning over nearly two years. Some estimates put the crowd at 100,000

⁵⁵Marinas, Radu-Sorin, and Luiza Ilie. “Romanian PM Ponta Faces Trial in Corruption Case.” Reuters, September 17, 2015.

⁵⁶ Reuters. “Mass Protests Force Romania to Scrap Law Decriminalizing Graft.” Fortune, February 4, 2017.

people, as the protests were largely organized by Romanian expatriates who had returned to Romania to demonstrate.⁵⁷ At the time of the demonstrations the ruling party was the PSD, and the head of the party was a man named Liviu Dragnea. He was sentenced to prison earlier in 2017 for abuses of power, however, as the case was appealed he still remained in office.⁵⁸ Even though the graft itself was repealed five days after it was pushed through parliament, the protests ended up lasting until 2019, with a fluctuating number of participants throughout the years. They only ended after Dragnea was convicted to a three-and-a-half-year prison sentence for abuse of power, this time containing the specific instance of the decriminalizing graft as evidence.⁵⁹

While the graft itself was repealed only five days after it was passed, the protests that took place until 2019 stood up against the dangerous combination of corruption and abuse of power that has become common in Romania since 1990. The EU for its part actively sided with the protests throughout the whole process, especially through then-European Commission Vice President Frans Timmermans, who not only welcomed the repeal, yet rather cheekily offered Romania EU assistance in regards to improving their prison system.⁶⁰

Romanian Trust in the EU

As shown throughout Romania's history with the EU since their candidacy in 1999, the EU has proven itself to be a check for the Romanian government in many aspects to have Romania improve not only the quality of its democracy, but the quality of its economy as well. In many instances, the decriminalizing graft being the clearest recent example, the EU has sided

⁵⁷Domonoske, Camila. "Tens of Thousands of Romanians Protest Corruption, Demand New Government." NPR, August 13, 2018.

⁵⁸Domonoske, Camila. "Tens of Thousands of Romanians Protest Corruption, Demand New Government." NPR, August 13, 2018.

⁵⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/27/world/europe/liviu-dragnea-romania-corruption.html>

⁶⁰<https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-romania-government-corruption-eu/eu-welcomes-romanias-repeal-of-graft-decree-offers-help-for-jails-idUKKBN15V2JR>

with the Romanian people standing against their corrupt system of government. When looking at the Eurobarometer data concerning trust in the EU (Figure 2) trust in the EU has been seen as consistently high, especially in contrast to Romania's trust for their own government (Figure 3).

| | Tend to Trust It | Tend not to Trust It | DF/NA |
|-------------|------------------|----------------------|-------|
| Spring 2010 | 56 | 34 | 10 |
| Autumn 2010 | 54 | 33 | 13 |
| Spring 2011 | 62 | 27 | 11 |
| Autumn 2011 | 50 | 38 | 12 |
| Spring 2012 | 48 | 43 | 9 |
| Autumn 2012 | 45 | 40 | 15 |
| Spring 2013 | 45 | 43 | 8 |
| Autumn 2013 | 48 | 42 | 10 |
| Spring 2014 | 58 | 34 | 8 |
| Autumn 2014 | 60 | 31 | 9 |
| Spring 2015 | 68 | 24 | 8 |
| Autumn 2015 | 58 | 29 | 13 |
| Spring 2016 | 47 | 43 | 10 |
| Autumn 2016 | 52 | 41 | 7 |
| Spring 2017 | 57 | 36 | 7 |
| Autumn 2017 | 51 | 41 | 8 |
| Spring 2018 | 52 | 41 | 7 |
| Autumn 2018 | 50 | 41 | 9 |
| Spring 2019 | 52 | 41 | 7 |
| Autumn 2019 | 57 | 37 | 6 |
| Summer 2020 | 54 | 38 | 8 |
| Winter 2020 | 58 | 35 | 7 |
| Spring 2021 | 56 | 35 | 9 |
| Winter 2021 | 49 | 40 | 11 |
| Summer 2022 | 54 | 36 | 10 |

Figure 2. *How much trust do you have in certain institutions? For each of the following institutions, do you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it? **The European Union*** European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer 72-98. Eurobarometer Surveys. (European Commission, 2010-2022).

What can clearly be seen is from 2013-2015 there is an incredible rise in support for the EU, which this paper argues is largely attributable to how staunchly the EU supported the Romanian public throughout the protests against the alteration of the penal code. A similar, though not as sizable, increase in trust can also be seen at roughly the same time in which the decriminalizing graft protests were also occurring throughout Europe. The only clear instances of a rise in distrust occur in 2011 and from 2015-2016. The 2015 increase can largely be attributed to the Brexit referendum, as while Romanians were adamant that the British remain in the EU, once it became clear that the United Kingdom would choose to leave the EU it left many Romanians unsure about the possibility of future stability in the EU without one of its strongest members.⁶¹ The 2011 instance can also be attributed to certain instability in the EU brought by the United Kingdom, when David Cameron chose to veto a bill based on the Euro in an effort to revitalize the European economy after the 2009 recession.⁶² This began some concerns that the United Kingdom was more interested in preserving its currency more than it was interested in the overall state of the European Market, however such fears did fade in the years between this instance and the rise of Brexit in 2015.

Romanian Trust in their Government

Romanian trust in their own government could not be further from the opposite from Romanian trust in the EU. Romanian trust in the Romanian government has not seen a majority ever in the history of Romania's participation in the Eurobarometer. As Figure 3 shows,

⁶¹ Etehad, Melissa. "For Disheartened Brexit Voters, Romania Is Offering to 'Adopt a Brit.'" The Washington Post, December 1, 2021.

⁶² Traynor, Ian, Nicholas Watt, and David Gow. "David Cameron Blocks EU Treaty with Veto, Casting Britain Adrift in Europe." The Guardian, December 9, 2011.

Romanian trust in their own government has remained in the teens and twenties in regards to Romanians stating that they do trust the government.

| | Tend to Trust It | Tend not to Trust It | DF/NA |
|-------------|------------------|----------------------|-------|
| Spring 2010 | 12 | 85 | 3 |
| Autumn 2010 | 12 | 83 | 5 |
| Spring 2011 | 13 | 83 | 4 |
| Autumn 2011 | 10 | 84 | 6 |
| Spring 2012 | 16 | 76 | 8 |
| Autumn 2012 | 20 | 74 | 6 |
| Spring 2013 | 27 | 67 | 6 |
| Autumn 2013 | 16 | 78 | 6 |
| Spring 2014 | 47 | 45 | 8 |
| Autumn 2014 | 26 | 68 | 6 |
| Spring 2015 | 27 | 69 | 4 |
| Autumn 2015 | 23 | 66 | 11 |
| Spring 2016 | 24 | 73 | 3 |
| Autumn 2016 | 29 | 66 | 5 |
| Spring 2017 | 27 | 66 | 7 |
| Autumn 2017 | 18 | 77 | 5 |
| Spring 2018 | 20 | 76 | 4 |
| Autumn 2018 | 23 | 72 | 5 |
| Spring 2019 | 21 | 74 | 5 |
| Autumn 2019 | 20 | 65 | 3 |
| Summer 2020 | 27 | 66 | 7 |
| Winter 2020 | 26 | 69 | 5 |
| Spring 2021 | 29 | 65 | 6 |
| Winter 2021 | 26 | 71 | 3 |
| Summer 2022 | 29 | 65 | 6 |

Figure 3. *How much trust do you have in certain institutions? For each of the following institutions, do you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it? **The Romanian Government*** European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer 72-98. Eurobarometer Surveys. (European Commission, 2010-2022).

Unlike the EU, since 2014 Romanian public opinion on their own government has not changed drastically, only a slight increase of distrust at the start of the decriminalizing graft

scandal. What is interesting is that from 2011 to 2013 there was a slow increase of trust in the government, only for it to return to how it was prior in 2013. This small increase in trust can be attributed to the checks that seemed to be put in place via the opposition between Băsescu and Ponta, in that neither wanted to pass something that could benefit the other.

Voter Turnout

In terms of the oldest sets of data available for the purposes of this study, this paper looks at the parliamentary and presidential elections that have occurred since 1990. However, while the purpose of looking at election results is usually to determine the winner and the next leader of the government, that is not what this paper will do. Instead, the number of registered voters will be compared to the number of votes cast in order to establish a rate of voter turnout (Figure 4). The variations in voter turnout through the years will be used to measure willing political engagement on behalf of the Romanian population in order to determine if Romania is experiencing depoliticization. These results will also be juxtaposed with the voter turnout for EU parliamentary elections that have been occurring since 2007.

Romanian Parliamentary Election Turnout

| Year | Registered Voters | Total Votes | Percentage of Voter Turnout |
|--------------------|-------------------|-------------|-----------------------------|
| 1990 | 17,200,722 | 13,707,159 | 79.69 |
| 1992 | 16,380,663 | 12,496,430 | 76.29 |
| 1996 | 17,218,654 | 13,088,388 | 76.01 |
| 2000 | 17,699,727 | 11,559,458 | 65.31 |
| 2004 | 18,449,676 | 10,136,460 | 54.94 |
| 2008 | 18,464,274 | 7,238,871 | 39.20 |
| 2012 ⁶³ | 18,423,066 | 7,694,180 | 41.76 |
| 2016 ⁶⁴ | 18,403,044 | 7,047,384 | 39.49 |
| 2020 ⁶⁵ | 18,964,642 | 6,057,760 | 31.94 |

Romanian Presidential Election Turnout⁶⁶

| Year | Registered Voters | Total Vote | Percentage of Voter Turnout |
|------|-------------------|------------|-----------------------------|
| 1996 | 17,230,654 | 13,078,833 | 75.90 |
| 2000 | 17,699,727 | 10,020,870 | 56.62 |
| 2004 | 18,316,104 | 10,112,262 | 55.21 |
| 2009 | 18,303,224 | 10,620,116 | 58.02 |
| 2014 | 18,280,994 | 11,719,344 | 64.11 |
| 2019 | 18,286,865 | 9,359,673 | 51.18 |

EU Parliament Election Turnout⁶⁷

| Year | Registered Voters | Total Vote | Percentage of Voter Turnout |
|------|-------------------|------------|-----------------------------|
| 2007 | 18,220,601 | 5,370,171 | 29.47 |
| 2009 | 18,197,316 | 5,035,299 | 27.67 |
| 2014 | 18,221,061 | 5,911,794 | 32.44 |
| 2019 | 18,267,256 | 9,352,472 | 51.20 |

Figure 4. Voter turnout rates in the Romanian Presidential, Parliament, and EU Parliament Elections.

⁶³ IPU. "Parliamentary Chamber: Camera Deputatilor ELECTIONS HELD IN 1990." Romania: Parliamentary elections camera deputatilor, 1990. Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1990.

⁶⁴ News, ZCH. "Parlamentare 2016: Noutăți * Contravenții * Infrațiuni - Alegeri Parlamentare 2016." ZCH NEWS - sursa ta de informații, November 11, 2016.

⁶⁵ News, ZCH. "Parlamentare 2016: Noutăți * Contravenții * Infrațiuni - Alegeri Parlamentare 2016." ZCH NEWS - sursa ta de informații, November 11, 2016.

⁶⁶ IDEA. "Voter Turnout by Election Type: Romania." International IDEA, 2023.

⁶⁷ IDEA. "Voter Turnout by Election Type: Romania." International IDEA, 2023.

CORRUPTION'S EFFECT ON PUBLIC OPINION IN ROMANIA

Voter Turnout

Voter turnout is a particularly important metric in determining how engaged voters are for certain bureaucratic elements.⁶⁸ Since Romania has different elections for the EU Parliament, the Presidency, and the Romanian Parliament, one can see how engaged the Romanian electorate is with these political institutions.

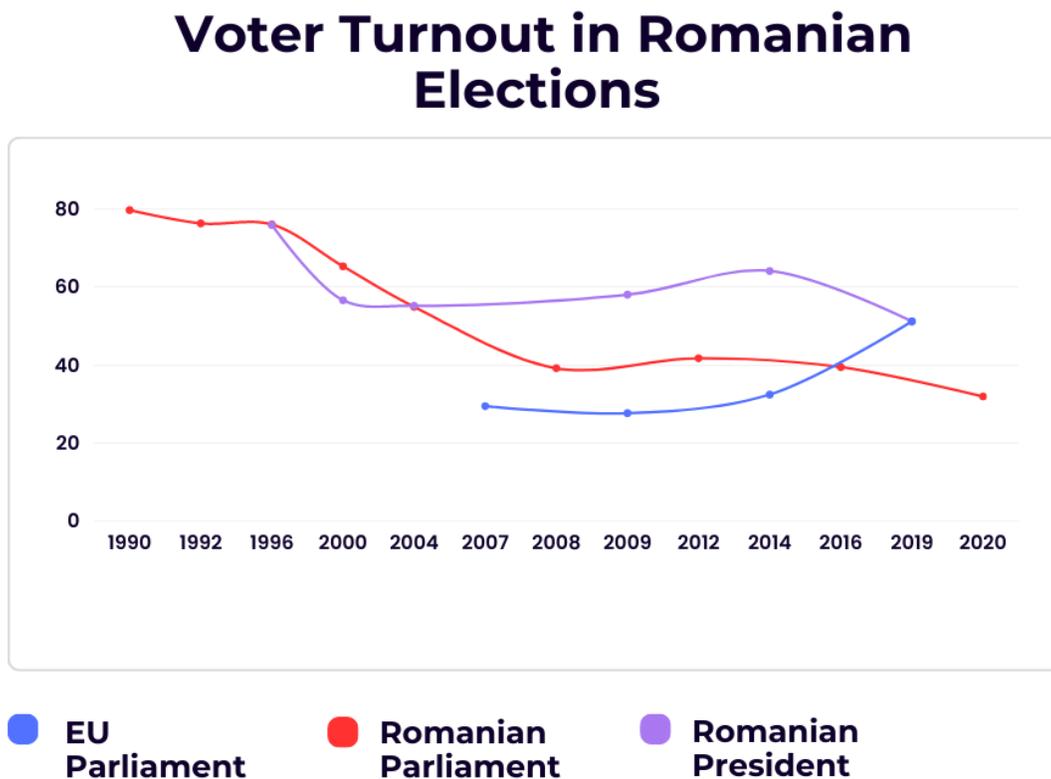


Figure 5. Voter Turnout in Romanian Elections-Graph

IPU. "Parliamentary Chamber: Camera Deputatilor ELECTIONS HELD IN 1990." Romania: Parliamentary elections camera deputatilor, 1990. Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1990. News, ZCH. "Parlamentare 2016: Noutăți * Contravenții * Infrațiuni - Alegeri Parlamentare 2016." ZCH NEWS - sursa ta de informații, November 11, 2016.

⁶⁸Esser, Frank, and Claes H. de Vreese. "Comparing Young Voters' Political Engagement in the United States and Europe." *American Behavioral Scientist* 50, no. 9 (2007): 1196

IDEA. “Voter Turnout by Election Type: Romania.” International IDEA, 2023.

When looking at the voter turnout from 1996-2000, there is a sharp decrease in both the Presidential and Parliamentary elections of 19.28 and 10.01 percent respectively. This can largely be attributed to how the CDR coalition government concluded and Constantinescu’s refusal to run for reelection. The fragmentation of political parties in 2000 proved how few political parties that were not the PDSR did not know how to lead a parliamentary government. The Presidential election, especially the run-off election, was not particularly enticing to most Romanians as the options of Iliescu and Tudor were not popular by any means. Throughout the 2000s voter turnout would only decrease, most drastically between 2004 and 2008, which coincided with the attempt to rewrite the penal code to exclude politicians from corruption charges, and the voter turnout has remained significantly less the Presidential election since. Unlike either the Presidential or Parliament elections, the EU Parliament elections have only seen a rise in voter turnout since they began in 2007, with the largest rise in turnout occurring between 2014 and 2019. What makes this especially interesting is that this occurred while Euroscepticism was spreading throughout Europe, however aside from the existing far-right parties, such as the AUR, incorporating Euroscepticism in their political ideology, it has not spread in Romania nearly as much as other countries in Europe.⁶⁹ However this can more prevalently be seen through the dynamics of trust in the EU shown via the Eurobarometer.

Corruption was consistently the reason that the EU claimed Romania needed to improve upon the most, not only throughout the accession process, but throughout Romania’s membership in the EU as well. Corruption itself is incredibly damaging for any democracy as it hinders economic development and social development, but most importantly a corrupt

⁶⁹Jones, Erik, and Sara B. Hobolt. “Public Opinion and European Integration.” Essay. In *The Oxford Handbook of the European Union*, 716–33. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2014. 717

democracy does not function effectively. The failure to establish trustworthy connections between citizens and representatives pushes citizens to distance themselves from the political system altogether.⁷⁰ Romania's elections in recent years only prove that point, with the National Parliament, riddled with corruption, experiencing its lowest voter turnout and the EU Parliament, not having a strong connection with corruption in the eyes of Romanians, seeing its largest voter turnout yet.

Trust

Romanians have seen throughout the course of two decades that the EU has been the primary reason that Romania has implemented any reforms, whether they are economic, judicial, or legislative. This results in Romania nearly always having more trust than distrust in the EU, particularly from 2014-2016, which is rather astonishing because this is the same time the Brexit referendum began gaining popularity in the United Kingdom and Euroscepticism began spreading throughout Europe. However it is important to note that during this time Romania was most adamantly following the EU's advice, cracking down on corruption and even putting high officials, such as Victor Ponta, in jail for their crimes, even after there had been attempts from the national government to avoid inflicting these penalties.

⁷⁰ Stockemer, Daniel, Bernadette LaMontagne, and Lyle Scruggs. "Bribes and Ballots: The Impact of Corruption on Voter Turnout in Democracies." *International Political Science Review* 34, no. 1 (2012): 83

Tend to Trust vs. Tend to Distrust Romanian Opinion on the EU

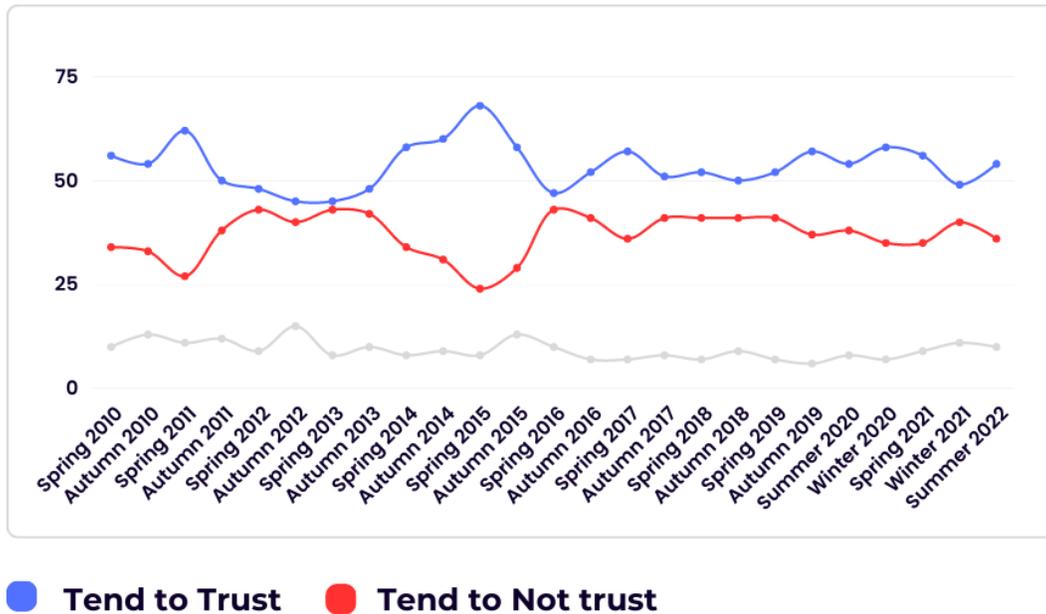


Figure 6. How much trust do you have in certain institutions? For each of the following institutions, do you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it? **The European Union** European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer 72-98. Eurobarometer Surveys. (European Commission, 2010-2022)

The interesting case of Romania however shows that Euroscepticism never really took that significant of a hold in Romania. This can largely be attributed to two factors: far-right nationalism has always had a rather significant footing in the Romanian political system and the EU is associated with being a bulwark for democracy and reform in Romania. Far-right nationalism has existed in Romania since the Revolution, and in certain years it was quite popular, exemplified by Tudor running for President in 2000 in run-offs against Iliescu.⁷¹ The EU

⁷¹ Mungiu-Pippidi, Alina. “The Return of Populism - the 2000 Romanian Elections.” *Government and Opposition* 36, no. 2 (2001): 242

was always hard against corruption in Romania, which was in complete contradiction with the national parliament that had repeatedly tried to have political officials be exempt from corruption-related charges.

Tend to Trust vs. Tend to Distrust Romanian Opinion on their Government

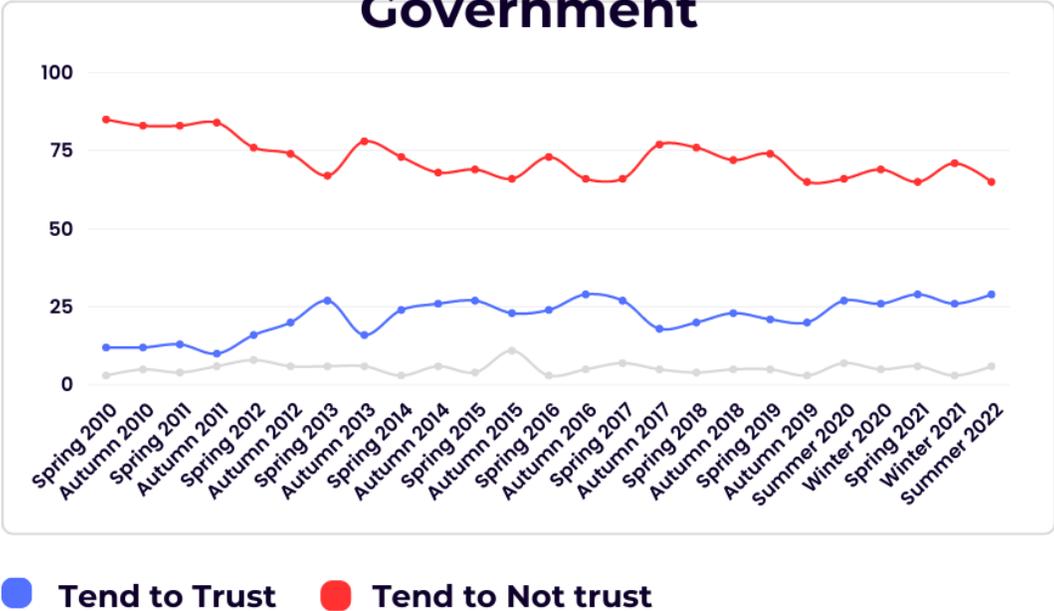


Figure 7. How much trust do you have in certain institutions? For each of the following institutions, do you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it? **The Romanian Government** European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer 72-98. Eurobarometer Surveys. (European Commission, 2010-2022)

This leads to the analysis of Romania’s trust in its own government. As Figure 7 shows, there has not been any real significant change since 2010. While there seemed to be an increase of trust from 2011 through 2013, which can largely be attributed to the economy improving after EU and IMF support, it only returns to its 2010 levels as the penal code alteration is attempted by Parliament. This pattern is also seen with the rise and fall of trust before the decriminalization

graft was passed by Parliament in 2017. Since 2019, there appears to be the beginning of a positive trend for trust in Romania's government again, and with more strict reactions to corrupt government officials and more democratic practices throughout the whole of the Romanian government, one can only hope that this trend continues at the current moment.

In comparing the Romanian trust in the EU in comparison to the Romanian government, the same patterns as shown in the voter turnout are reflected once more. The EU is consistently trusted more by the Romanian people, especially when they actively call for the Romanian government to improve upon its undemocratic practices, its market economy, its treatment of ethnic minorities, and other bureaucratic practices that went against the EU *acquis*.

THE PANDEMIC AND BEYOND

President Iohannis still remains a rather popular presidential candidate as he won the Presidency in 2019 with just over sixty-six percent of the votes.⁷² The same cannot be said of the Romanian parliament, which in December 2020 had the lowest voter turnout rate in Romanian history. It should be accounted that these elections were carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that could have also affected voter turnout as there were still about 6,000 new weekly cases throughout that month.⁷³ This coupled with the poorer-than-expected election results for the 'Force of the Right' Party led then-Prime Minister Ludovic Orban to be briefly replaced with Defence Minister Nicolae-Ionel Ciuca becoming acting prime minister.⁷⁴ He is soon replaced by Florin Cîțu, who only lasted a few months following him sacking Justice Minister Stelian Ion, a member of the USR-PLUS party, who was in the majority coalition. This

⁷² <https://www.rferl.org/a/romania-iohannis-dancila-presidential-election-runoff/30288488.html>

⁷³ <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/region/romania>

⁷⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17776876>

resulted in the USR-PLUS party, a liberal pro-EU party, to work together with the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR), a right-wing national party, in order to submit a petition to begin a vote of confidence against the Cîtu government.⁷⁵ This prompted immediate negotiations to form a new government, which resulted in the coalition of PNL, PSD, and UDMR under Nicolae-Ionel Ciuca as Prime Minister as a suitable interim government to last until the 2024 Parliamentary elections.

In terms of Romania's relationship with the EU in the most recent years, the 2022 rejection from the Schengen area is a stark showing of how Romania can still improve in the eyes of the EU. While Croatia was admitted into the Schengen area, a 'free-movement' area in Europe, both Bulgaria and Romania were blocked. An EU vote to add a member to the Schengen area must be unanimous with all members, and in this instance the Netherlands and Austria voted against Romania's inclusion. While Austria's Chancellor Karl Nehammer said that the Schengen area would not be able to cope with the influx of migrants from Turkey through Romania and Bulgaria, a statement that did receive quite a bit of criticism from other member states, the Netherlands gave the reasoning that "the prevalence of corruption and organized crime in Bulgaria and Romania posed "a risk to the security of the Netherlands and the entire Schengen Area."⁷⁶ Some political scientists argue that these events demonstrate a way the EU is attempting to solve the 'Copenhagen dilemma,' or how the EU struggles at reshaping law in member states post-accession. By keeping Romania out of certain aspects of the EU, particularly the Schengen area, it is only a final check to show that Romania does have various factors it should improve upon, its corruption being chief of them.⁷⁷

⁷⁵Rosca, Matei. "Romanian Government Falls after Losing No-Confidence Vote." *POLITICO*, October 7, 2021.

⁷⁶Liboreiro, Jorge. "What's Keeping Bulgaria and Romania out of Schengen?" *Euronews*, December 2, 2022.

⁷⁷Iusmen, Ingi. "EU Leverage and Democratic Backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe: The Case of Romania." *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 53, no. 3 (2014): 606

LIMITATIONS AND POTENTIAL FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations, one coming from its broad scope. This study aimed to focus on establishing the most influential factors on public opinion, specifically focusing on the trends of perceived corruption and its effect on the trust of the Romanian national government and the EU. However, there are certainly other factors at play, specifically regarding the fluctuations of the Romanian economy that should be looked into more. There is also significant potential for comparative research analysis between Romania and other countries, as corruption trends are common not only throughout the CEE countries, yet the rest of the world as well. Also for the sake of clarity, public opinion polls were limited to election cycles prior to 2004, and just the Eurobarometer after 2004. Since then there have been many other outlets that have done extensive work regarding public opinion in Romania, particularly the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, so data from those outlets could also be implemented in further research.

CONCLUSIONS

Romania has always been politically unique in comparison to many other CEE countries, stemming from its revolution in 1989, throughout the accession process, and continuing through to its membership. What has been most consistent throughout the past two decades of Romania's politics has been the specter of corruption, which had thrived underneath the structural insufficiencies that persisted throughout the 1990s, and went on largely unpunished until a crackdown on corruption in the mid-2010s. Romania's public opinion data throughout the past

two decades is reflective of the impact that the systemic corruption and abuse of power have had on the perspective of Romania's Parliament. This view is unique to Romania's own government and often does not include a negative view of the office of the Presidency. This is in direct contrast to the consistent trust the Romanian people have for the EU. Over time the EU has transformed from an organization of trade liberalization and now includes a focus on the retention and reinforcement of democracy in its member states, particularly in the face of corruption.⁷⁸

This had substantial effects on Romanian public opinion, as shown through both Romanian voter behavior and Eurobarometer public opinion data. The election cycles of the Romanian parliament, the Romanian president, and the EU parliament have shown that perceived corruption in Romania has led to a decrease in voter turnout exclusive to the national parliament elections, even when tens of thousands of Romanians showed their political activism in the 2017-2019 protests.

In contrast to this Romania continues to maintain a significant amount of trust in the EU, with it even increasing throughout the beginning stages of the Brexit referendum. Through the process of conditionality in its accession period, and with the rejection of Romania from the Schengen area, the EU continues to work as a check in order for Romania to improve upon the quality of its own democracy. Interestingly, Romania has not shown a rise of Euroscepticism like much of Europe, which can be exemplified by the repeated attempt to join the Schengen area in 2022 and the continuation of constant trust in the EU. Another interesting notion is that the dissatisfaction in Romania's parliament has continued throughout the 2010s and early 2020s, regardless of Romania's rapidly growing economy.

⁷⁸ Jones, Erik, and Sara B. Hobolt. "Public Opinion and European Integration." Essay. In *The Oxford Handbook of the European Union*, 716–33. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2014. 716

This paper holds that Romania is heading towards the right direction in regards to handling its corruption and becoming further integrated in the EU. Also, to a certain regard, the Netherlands was correct in rejecting Romania from joining Schengen as there are still ways in which corruption manages to survive in Romanian democracy, and it poses a danger to not only the Romanian government but also the EU. However it is important to state the valid counter-argument to this point in that there are still plenty of countries already present in the Schengen Area that suffer the same corruption-related issues as Romania. Internally, President Iohannis has maintained a satisfactory effort thus far in overseeing that the justice system prevail in fighting corruption in Romania, however the forced passage of the decriminalizing graft draws attention to the abuse of power that is not only rampant, but incredibly powerful in the Romanian parliament, which can overtake any of the President's efforts.

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