

## MASS MEDIA AS POLITICAL PARTY FOUNDER: THREE CASES OF POPULISM IN ROMANIA

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*Abstract: The democratization process in Romania after 1990 was sustained by the development of free mass media. The journalists often assumed a subjective and militant attitude in political debates, in a manner that gave birth to an interesting phenomenon: mass media become political party founder. After 1990, mass media profoundly changed under the impact of technology, they influenced political competition and electoral behavior. Three mass media generations formed three new parliamentary political parties: the print generation formed The Greater Romania Party; the TV cable generation formed The People's Party Dan Diaconescu; the social network generation formed The Save Romania Union. The first is a nationalistic and populist party, the second a pure populist party, the third represent sophisticated a high skilled public, with many populist characteristics.*

*Keywords: political party, mass media, digital media, populism, democracy*

### **Mass media and democracy in Romania**

The 1989 Revolution that ended communism and opened the door for democracy was live on TV. Freedom of the press, political and civic liberties were born together. The public television rebranded as Free National Television was a key factor for the power transition in revolutionary days of December 1989, under the rule of National Salvation Front – the organization that took the political power, transformed itself in political party and won the first elections in 1990. Several years, the public television had monopoly on televisual space and privileged the voice of political power.

The pluralism of mass media was accomplished through print media. A large number of daily newspapers and periodicals were founded early in 1990, many of them with militant political attitude. Peter Gross considered that the new journalism, based on rumors, opinions and biased information was far from Western professional standards<sup>1</sup>. Gross stressed that impartial information is essential for democracy, but in Romania and Eastern Europe, mass media used distorted information to influence political competition and the public opinion<sup>2</sup>. In the media discourse, there was no clear limit between news (impartial information) and opinion.

Romanian mass media evolved in the last 29 years, due to the societal, cultural and technological changes. After a golden decade print media registered a dramatic decrease of the sold copies, under the impact of new commercial TV stations, TV cable development and later on the shift to digital media. The circulation of good-quality newspapers fell significantly especially after the 2008 economic crisis. The print media audience is expected to survive digitalization if they expand their presence online.

The remarkable growth of Romania's television (people watching and the time spending in front of TV) increased the diversity of content, but not the quality of the news. The decline of print media strengthened television's supremacy as the main source of information and entertainment. Some media and business tycoons with deep connections to politics, like Dan Voiculescu, Dinu Patriciu and Sorin Ovidiu Vântu monopolized the communications sphere. The

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Gross, *Mass-media și democrația în țările Europei de Est*, p. 44 - 47

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 78 - 79

honest investigative journalism became marginal. The main television outlets are less interested in balanced news reporting and important topics, but more focused on promoting low level entertainment, sensationalism, crimes, scandals and trivial events.

The rapid digital shift is favored by the growing number of Internet consumers and most of all the expansion of mobile telephony connected to the Internet. The Internet is now a major information source. Electronic communications has grown significantly over the last years, particularly in the IT and mobile phone sectors. A shift to digital media is in process, but digitization is not expected to change the quality of content. The selection of relevant information and the speed of broadcasting is more valued than the accuracy.

A new development is media convergence, meaning the unification of several media channels through technology<sup>3</sup>. Convergence facilitates an interaction between new and traditional media, as permanent change. Digitalized media permits user-generated content, with important effects on political mobilization. Multimedia journalism is based on media convergence, characterized by interactivity and participation. *“Multimedia writing must be adapted to usability rules required by the technological support. There are thus specialized platforms for materials collection from users, and also social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, for information diffusion”*<sup>4</sup>. In media development there are five levels of «mature media»: newspapers, broadcast, television, Internet, and 3G. Each level is characterized by categories of multimedia information that are combined in a new form.

The complex context of Romania’s mass media change is described by Marian Petcu: *“Romania has a post-communist, post-transition, post-accession, post-crisis, post-digitization, etc. media system”*<sup>5</sup>. The change of the technologies for collecting, processing and disseminating information was concomitant with the international economic crisis.

Mass media evolution worldwide favored the personalization of politics. The Romanian politicians are well known figures on the TV scenes. They are acting as entertainers and compete for audience<sup>6</sup>. They have to adapt to mass culture, specific media environment and to avoid public’s disinterest. Some scholars like Roger-Gérard Schwardzenberg<sup>7</sup> and Vasile Dâncu<sup>8</sup> are not worried by the “infotainment” that characterize the media reports on political events and the personalization of politics. In their opinion, this type of political entertainment captures the public’s attention and help to humanize and understand this field.

A particularity of political competition in Romania is the strong partisan involvement of well-known journalists. Harsh disputes divide not only politicians, but media trusts, televisions, journalists. Often the main opponents of political power were journalists, newspapers and televisions, not political opposition.

### **Populism: ‘the people’ versus ‘the elite’**

As Gellner and Ionescu write in an influential work in 1969, Populism bobs up everywhere, but in many and contradictory shapes. The label Populism was used to describe different political movements, parties, ideologies, and leaders across geographical, historical, and ideological contexts. Scholars analyzed waves of populism, starting with Russian and US movements in 19th century, Latin America and Europe. They defined populism as an ideology, a discursive style, and a form of political mobilization<sup>9</sup>. As ideology, Populism considers society to be divided in two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the people’ versus ‘the elite’. The ideological features of Populism depend upon the context. Populism as discursive style is a

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<sup>3</sup> Georgeta Drulă, *Forms of Media Convergence and Multimedia Content – A Romanian Perspective*, p. 132

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 134

<sup>5</sup> Marian Petcu, *Mass Media and the Internet Challenges – Romanian Experience*, p. 1

<sup>6</sup> Roger-Gérard Schwardzenberg, *Statul spectacol: eseu asupra și împotriva star-systemului în politică*, p. 277

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 277

<sup>8</sup> Vasile Dâncu, *Comunicarea simbolică*, p. 41

<sup>9</sup> Gidron Noam, Bonikowski Bart, *Varieties of Populism: Literature Review and Research Agenda*, p. 5 - 10

rhetoric that constructs politics as the moral and ethical opposition between the people and the oligarchy. From this perspective, it is not an ideology, but a certain type of political expression. Rhetorical strategy is easy to reshape, unlike ideology. This approach renounces to the dichotomy (a party or politician is populist or not) and focus on the levels or types of populism. Scholars that define Populism as a political strategy are interested in different aspects of political strategy: policy choices, political organization, and forms of mobilization. Usual, populism is associated with policies aimed at economic redistribution, anti-establishment and anti-system appeals.

Many researchers describe Populism as toxic movement, irresponsible, a menace to democracy. Intellectuals, journalist and politicians tried to build a *cordon sanitaire* in order to isolate Populism and now they fear that mainstream politicians are tented to adopt populist language, attitude and politics. Critics consider that populists invoke democracy, but hidden behind that rhetoric is an anti-democratic impulse. The populists are obsessed with conspiracy, denounces critics as working for foreign interests.

Some thinkers focus on positive effects of Populism, inclusionary politics that expand democratic participation.<sup>10</sup> From this perspective, Populism is a distinctive conception of democracy, distinct from the representative democracy. The safety valve school considers it a necessary and healthy impulse to correct the tendencies of representative democracy.

Michael Cox wrote that Populism is old, but the new populism has assumed a more international form.<sup>11</sup> Populism relies on force ideas: the unrestricted sovereignty of the people (the will of the people to be unrestricted by the law), the sovereignty is inalienable (populists do not represent the people, they are the people), the rejection of pluralism (the people is a single entity). Jan-Werner Müller argues that at Populism is a rejection of pluralism. Populists always claim that they and they alone represent the people. He thinks that Populism is anti-democratic, the permanent shadow of representative politics<sup>12</sup>.

Christa Deiwikis argued that in theoretical literature there is agreement on at least two characteristics of Populism: a strong focus by populist leaders on the ‘people’, and an implicit or explicit reference to an ‘anti-group’, often the political elite, against which the ‘people’ is positioned<sup>13</sup>. An important question in order to understand Populism is “Who is the ‘people?’” “People” can refer to the whole population or a part of it, to those with a certain nationality or culture; sometimes, it refers to a social class or social base.

### **From print media to politics: Greater Romania Party**

The charismatic poet and journalist Corneliu Vadim Tudor founded de weekly Greater Romanian magazine in June 1990. Previously, in In March 1990 a Hungarian demonstration in Transylvanian town Târgu Mureş was followed by a Romanian counter-demonstration turned into violent street confrontation. The national conflict in Transylvania, frozen under the Communist regime, violently broke out. The ethnic divide was an important competition axis that structured post-communist party system. In this context, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, poet and former bard of Nicolae Ceauşescu, and the writer Eugen Barbu founded a nationalist weekly newspaper in Bucharest, Greater Romania. In several month, the publication jumped to over 600,000 riders. The editorial success was transformed in political action next year. This was the first time when mass-media founded a political party in Romania: Greater Romania Party (PRM). The weekly magazine was the main communication platform for the nationalist and populist party. Vadim Tudor used from the beginning the symbol of national unity, Greater Romania, the national territory from inter-war period, a clear political objective. He used

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<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 18

<sup>11</sup> Michael Cox, *The rise of populism and the crisis of globalisation: Brexit, Trump and beyond*, p. 16

<sup>12</sup> Jan-Werner Müller, *Ce este populismul?*, 2017

<sup>13</sup> Christa Deiwiks, *Populism*, p. 1

demagogic, violent languages and paranoid ideas about serious threats to national unity and sovereignty.

Nationalism has a strong tradition in Romanian political culture. PRM used the national-communist version of nationalism. As Grigore Pop-Eleches wrote, “*The most visible ‘heir’ of the nationalist dimension of Ceaușescu’s legacy was undoubtedly Corneliu Vadim Tudor’s PRM, which took Ceaușescu’s occasionally shrill discourse to its (il)logical extreme and tended to blame most of Romania’s post-communist ills on a combination of foreign plots and ethnic minorities (including not only Hungarians but also Jews and Roma).*”<sup>14</sup> PRM describes itself as “center-left, of a national direction” party and could not be labeled as extreme right party<sup>15</sup>.

PRM combined nationalist and chauvinistic ideas with openly anti-market rhetoric and gradualist economic reform approach. Hate speeches were directed at members of ethnic minorities. The nationalistic and demagogic discourse was relatively successful, PRM became a parliamentary party both in 1992 and 1996. PRM was not the only political party playing the card of nationalism: FSN intensively used nationalist appeals to discredit the anti-communist opposition, limiting growth possibilities for PRM.

The golden moment of PRM and Corneliu Vadim Tudor was the 2000 parliamentary and presidential elections. PRM became the second large party in Romania and Vadim Tudor acceded in the second round of the presidential race. In the context of alternation in government, after both left and right wing alternatives disappointed the Romania voters, PRM shifted from nationalism to populism. The primary electoral appeal of the party was no longer ethnic nationalism (not entirely abandoned, but considered as secondary message), but the anti-establishment appeal. Vadim Tudor skillfully captured the wave of protest voters angry with mainstream political parties’ performances and perceived high level of corruption. The corruption of political class became the central theme of a successful campaign. Vadim Tudor called himself “tribune” of the people, the true representative of all Romanians that felt themselves left behind in the process of transition to free market economy and democracy. He speculated the fear of social insecurity with strong and colorful anti-establishment rhetoric in his magazine and televised presidential debate.

Vadim Tudor’s campaign speculated an old popular idea: Romania is a rich country, but the Romanians are poor people. The electoral campaign virulently struck political class, “mafia” and promised social and political justice. He accused “huge theft” of the national treasure, and the alienated politicians, enriched business men and greedy foreigners were to blame.

Between 2001 and 2004, the configuration of Romania’s political landscape changed significantly. Former president Ion Iliescu could not compete again, but social-democratic party was still expected to win next election with prime-minister of that time running for the president. Center-right wing opposition united and formed Truth and Justice Alliance (DA), made of the National-Liberal Party (PNL) and of the Democratic Party (PD) and led by the mayor of Bucharest, Traian Băsescu. Charismatic, dynamic and aggressive speaker, Băsescu convincingly adopted anti-system and anti-corruption rhetoric. He built a political platform with elements of radical state reform, anti-corruption policies, the rejection of the state’s bureaucracy, anticommunism and moderate nationalism and promised an “orange revolution”. Traian Băsescu attracted right wing voters, but also anti-system and populist voters. With modern, intelligent and sense of humor campaign (first that efficiently used Internet in Romanian electoral campaigns), Traian Băsescu not only won the election, but took the voters away from populist anti-system parties like PRM.

The realignment of the political landscape in Romania was fatal to PRM. Vadim Tudor’s rhetoric focused on justice versus corruption was still adequate, but no longer efficient since Traian Băsescu convincingly monopolized it. The political style of the “tribune” Vadim Tudor

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<sup>14</sup> Grigore Pop-Eleches, *A party for all seasons: Electoral adaptation of Romanian Communist successor parties*, p. 472

<sup>15</sup> Radu Cinpoș, *The Extreme Right in Contemporary Romania*, placed PRM in the right wing of political spectrum.

was obsolete. The print newspapers influence that built PRM and his leader declined. A new generation of voters was interested in a different type of leadership and representation, was receptive to different discursive style. Since 2004 the party has failed to secure any seats in Parliament. In 2009, Vadim Tudor acceded in European Parliament, saved by the alliance with controversial business man, showman and for short time populist politician George Becali. It was the last notable political success of PRM and Corneliu Vadim Tudor.

### **The rise and fall of TV based People's Party Dan Diaconescu**

The second Romanian party founded by mass media was the People's Party Dan Diaconescu (PPDD). Like PRM previously, the new populist party was favored by general political context. The PD-L Government drove by president Traian Băsescu took drastic social and economic austerity measures in 2010. In general, they governed against the electoral promises of 2008 and 2009. A huge wave of popular discontent blamed the PD-L Government and "Băsescu's regime" for austerity, corruption, arrogance. The opposition built a big left wing and right wing alliance (Social Liberal Union – USL). One beneficiary of both PRM and Băsescu's PD-L decline was PPDD, party who gathered votes who distrusted Social Liberal Union (USL), adopting a pure populist rhetoric.

Dan Diaconescu is a journalist that gain national notoriety at live TV shows. His TV station, OTV (Mirror TV), called "People's television" override rules of professional journalism and legislation, covering themes like murders, disappearances, conspiracies, dirty affairs, cheap drama, gathering in studio strange people. Low standards promoted often lead to consequences like financial penalties and the suspension of TV station's license. The image of an outlaw amplified his popularity and created for a certain public the image of a victim, the victim of establishment. Dan Diaconescu created a unique communication style based on improvisation and controversy. Sergiu Gherghina and Sorina Soare<sup>16</sup> wrote that "*In addition, the language he used was simple, colloquial and sometimes very close to slang. In light of these traits, the term OTV-sation was coined to refer to the transformation of any type of information into a live show where people visibly gesticulate, scream, use a colorful language and make grammar mistakes, people with whom the viewer can easily identify*". They remarked that Diaconescu always involved the viewers in the OTV broadcast: they decided the topics, the rhythm, and duration of the shows.

Dan Diaconescu is definitely a different type of charismatic leader comparing to Corneliu Vadim Tudor. He isn't a strong leader with articulated discourse, rather he is a man from the people, who gives voice to the common people. He invited the Romanians to free themselves and proclaimed that his task is to make the people to speak freely. In this way, Diaconescu presented himself as the voice of ordinary people, honest and brave.

The decision to jump in political life was determined by his short time arrest in 2010. He proclaimed himself a victim of the corrupt political system, a threat for the establishment and decided to act on political field, as the true representative of the people. His intention was to run for presidency in 2014, but quickly organized a party for parliamentary election in 2012. He set up the bases of the party by using the TV stations. He included coworkers and collaborators, people selected in a national tour broadcast every night live on TV and from disgruntled politicians from other parties, different types of opportunists. PPDD quickly get up in voters preferences: in one year was the third party as the number of seats in Parliament. It was an outstanding performance, because it was the only new party that entered the parliamentary arena since 1992.

The force of TV stations in shaping political competition was already illustrated by Dan Voiculescu's Conservative Party evolution. PC had a low level electoral base, but the media

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<sup>16</sup> Sergiu Gherghina, Sorina Soare, *From TV to Parliament: Populism and Communication in the Romanian 2012 Elections*, 2013 p. 12

power of Voiculescu was used as political asset. PC acceded to Parliament using alliance politics with social-democrats and liberals. Even if the party's performance was conditioned by mass-media support, PC didn't emerge directly from media.

Diaconescu used OTV to spread left wing populist ideas, defending the poor people's interests. He accused the theft of the national fortune, all kind of conspiracies against the Romanians, criticized multinational companies and austerity measures (denounced as imposed by IMF and other foreign interests), revealed the timeless conspiracy against the Romanian people. PPDD proposed a 100 points manifesto for a "new revolution", using simple language. The diagnosis of society was dark: Romania was asphyxiated corruption and incompetence, because of politicians and political parties. The symbolic figure used for anti-corruption action was the medieval prince Vlad the Impaler, famous for the sense of justice and severe punishment. The program is characterized by the lack of consistency. PPDD promised low taxes and high expenditures, especially social spending and infrastructure investments (over 900 highway km in 4 years, hospitals, schools). Diaconescu promised to govern Romania as a private company, so he promised that each Romanian citizen older than 18 will receive 20,000 €!

PPDD disintegrated in a few years, the decline was as quick as it's becoming. Dan Diaconescu's conviction and imprisonment, shutting down of the OTV station, the weak organizational structures and the opportunism of PPDD's MP were the main cause of party's failure.

### **Save Romania Union: white collar anti-establishment party**

The civic public attitude of a young mathematician Nicușor Dan to protect the urbanism and environment in the crowded and fast developing capital of Romania successive transformed into a civic movement, local party and national party. The Save Romania Union (USR) was founded as a development of success of the Save Bucharest Union (USB) local party. USR is not a direct product of mass media, as I previously presented the cases of PRM and USB, but I consider that new media and social network mobilization were essential for the party's formation and success. My point is that without new technology like social networks, blogging, new media the movement that built USR wasn't possible. In less than one year, USR became the third largest political party in the Romanian Parliament after the 2016 legislative elections. USR is a white collar party, with anti-corruption and anti-establishment platform.

Former leader Nicușor Dan is in fact an anti-charismatic leader. He is not a very skillful speaker, is rather uncomfortable in front of TV camera. Yet, this anti-media hero generated a social and political movement against Romanian political class, an anti-establishment organization. Nicușor Dan was perceived as an anti-politician civic activist.

No political party in office gain national election in Romania after 1992. The alternation in government, the major failure to lead the economic and political transition and to fulfil people's expectations picked a high top in 2014 and 2015. At the end of 2014, Klaus Johannis surprisingly defeated Prime Minister Victor Ponta in presidential elections, after a huge on-line mobilization between first and second round, directed against corruption and arrogance of power. On 30 October 2015, a tragedy stunned Romania: a deadly fire at the Colectiv nightclub in Bucharest killed and injured over one hundred young people. 64 people died in the tragic incident. Most of the victims were poisoned by toxins released from the burning foam. The public fury was directed against the government and the political class: mass protests linked to the tragedy led to the resignation of the Prime Minister Victor Ponta. A huge mobilization on the streets and social networks promoted the message "corruption kills". The protest continued in November, president Johannis invited representatives from street people to consultations and asked for reforms proposals. The two events encouraged civic mobilization and the need to political action. The networks of protest and mobilization were crucial for USR formation and success. USR claim to be the voice of this civic attitude oriented toward fundamental changes and deep reforms. A program of the party is USR – It's your voice. USR affirmed itself as a

nonconventional protest party, that used creative and visible mechanism to fight against corruption and loudly opposed the attempts of modifications to the justice laws initiated by the PSD - ALDE government coalition. In 2018, USR helped and supported the promotion of a law project "No Convicts in Public Office", in order to bar the persons convicted to final imprisonment sentences for intentional offences from being elected in public office.

USR accentuates that the party is formed by ordinary people who normally don't want to act as politicians, they describe political activity as a civic duty, for a true and deep societal reform. USR described itself as a down to top built party, and indeed it passed untroubled upon its founder Nicușor Dan resignation. The assumed objectives are the change of political class, transparent government based on competent people. The platform is still unclear in terms of ideology, pretend that has left wing, right wing and center situated politicians with a generalist "catch all" platform. As Dan Barna, the actual leader of the party declared, "*in terms of economics we are centre-right, in terms of social policy and human rights we are the centre, and generally we are centre-right.*"<sup>17</sup> Dan Barna describe USR as "*a grassroots party (...) now in the political landscape the most pro-European, pro-state of law and modern political party*"<sup>18</sup>. He considers prominent members are professionals, uninvolved in politics before. Barna compared USR with Macron's En Marche have done in France, with the difference that USR involved mainly people who have never done politics before.

### **Conclusions: mass media created parties and populism**

In this paper I focused on a strange phenomenon: mass media as a political party founder. I described how each media generation generated a parliamentary political party: the print generation formed The Greater Romania Party; the TV cable generation formed The People's Party Dan Diaconescu; the social network generation formed The Save Romania Union. The three parties mentioned were successful in general elections with anti-establishment rhetoric.

Are these media-generated parties populist parties? All of them positively respond to one of the main characteristic of Populism: anti-system rhetoric. All of them are anti-establishment parties, oriented against "political class" as unreformable source of evil and poorness in Romanian society. All of them pretend that they give voice to the People. All of them encouraged colorful language, "out of the box" forms of expression, even if in very different styles.

Two of them – PRM and PPDD were highly dependent on charismatic leaders and could not survive to their difficulties. The two parties mentioned matched the concept of Casesaropartism: the leader/founder's increasing control over the party is activated through both formal and informal mechanisms, the party becomes a public extension of the leader<sup>19</sup>. USR is characterized by extreme internal polarization and distribution of power, ideological inconsistency and with no dependence on leader's performance.

Two of them (PRM and PPDD) are deeply anchored in classic populist characteristic: they consider society to be divided in two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the people' versus 'the elite' and consider themselves as unique and true representative of the people. USR founded their rhetoric on the opposition between political class and society, they consider themselves representatives of civil society, but not the only representative of the people. Their view on society is pluralistic and that feature clearly differentiate them from PRM and PPDD and exclude USR from populist category.

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