

LE MINISTÈRE D'EDUCATION NATIONALE  
L'UNIVERSITÉ "VALAHIA" TARGOVISTE

# ANNALES

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## Problems of the parliamentary democracy during the first decade of the inter-wars period

*Gheorghe SBÂRNĂ\**

After the Great Union of 1918, the political system and the representative regime of the legislative power in Romania have suffered important changes, produced by the national, organizational, economic and social mutations, as well as by the wishes to renew and modernize the society.

Important changes have taken place, in the immediate period following the Great Union, within the structure of the political parties. All these led to the disappearance of the Conservative parties, to the appearance and development of a very strong Peasant Party and to success of some new political parties from the newly reunited provinces. The most important of these was the National Party of Transilvania. The situation also led to the appearance of some, one would say "meteoric" parties from the point of view of their influence and activity. One of those was the Party of the People, led by General Alexandru Averescu.

During the same period, a vigorous ascendant movement of the socialist parties was felt. However, after its splitting into two trends, socialist and communist, both lost their attractiveness. The Social-Democratic Party, in itself tormented by splitting movements, has generally had a reduced importance in the political and electoral life.

During these years, different extremist trends and political parties have appeared. In the left wing, the Communist Party appeared in May 1921. It was functioning as a part of the Communist International, which was representing the political interests of the Eastern European Communist state. This was what determined its going underground in 1924. It was reduced to small groups of members of a usually non-Romanian origin, having an influence over the political life of the country only during the periods of growth of the social tension.

The extreme right, with a more evident nationalist character, was more present on the political arena, especially after 1922. The most

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important group, the most xenophobe and one of the ones to fight most was the Iron Guard.

It is, at the same time, appropriate to have a look at the new political landscape and to point out the appearance and the activity of some groups formed on ethnic criteria. They were: the Hungarian Parties (1921, 1922), the German Party (1919), the Jewish Party (1926) and the Ukrainian party (1919).<sup>1</sup>

No doubt that the Electoral Reform had a very strong impact over the entire evolution of the political life in Romania during the period. It is known that, starting from November 1918, the universal vote for men was introduced. The Electoral Reform has been of great importance for the entire political evolution of Romania after 1918 from the political, social and national points of view. It marked an essential step towards a better application of the democratic rights and liberties.

At the same time, the electoral reform, as it was presented during the ideological discussion at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, was deeply connected to the Agrar Reform of 1918-1921. The process of evolution of the Romanian society united them so strongly that any change of the agricultural regime led to a change of the political regime based on the stratification according to the person's welfare. It reproduced in the political field the socio-economic stratification, especially the one from the rural area. A substantial change in the political condition of the peasantry could lead to obvious incompatibilities with its agricultural condition.

When a summing up was possible, in the new historical conditions, the number of voters all over the country, in 1920, was of 2.924.527 people, as compared to the approximately 200.000 people that had the right to vote under the system before the war. The numbers indicate a 15 times increase, which was, at the time, the most substantial in Europe, which was, at the time, the most substantial in Europe.<sup>2</sup>

The increase in the number of voters over the next year was greater even as compared to the demographic one. In 1937, it got up to 4.65 million people with a right to vote. Generally speaking, the participation rate was high in the after war years. The statistics indicate a rate of 65-70%. Then, between 1922-1928, the participation rate is over 75%, while, during the next ten years, the graphic is decreasing, getting to only 66% during the December 1937 elections.<sup>3</sup>

Although after 1918 a lot of rights were granted, including the right to vote, the right to a multi-party system, the liberty of press and the liberty to gather, rights and liberties that were essential for a democratic regime, in Romania, after the First World War, there were two fundamental limits of the electoral system and of the political regime. Firstly, the chief of State,



by Constitution of King, had the right to dissolve the legislative chambers and the revoke the Government. Secondly, the King was the one to name the Prime Minister, after consulting the leaders of the political parties. The Prime Minister was to form his Government, which was the one to organize the elections. Invariably, until 1937, the elections led to the victory of the leading party. So, Government and not the other way round formed the Parliament. This is what made G.G. Carp say the famous words: "Give me the power and I shall give you the Parliament".

These limits are undoubtedly the reason for the variations of the electoral curves during the analyzed period. So, the Liberal Party, which would get up to 6-7%, and never over 13.5% while in opposition, 2.5% of the votes, and, as a governing party, 52.9%. The variations of the electoral curve of the Peasant Party have some oscillations too, although they are not that significant.

The analysts of the electoral phenomenon in Romania, namely Marcel Ivan<sup>4</sup> and Matei Dogan<sup>5</sup> consider that the percentage of votes would have got, in the case of free, uninfluenced elections, up to 33-40% for the National-Peasant Party and up to 16-20% for the National-Liberal Party. The differences during the governing period form what was called "the governmental dowry", including part of the potential voters as well ones that would vote for the governing party out of opportunism.

Until 1928, the "dowry" was constantly rising, as it is shown in the study written by Marcel Ivan, and it reached the value of 34% in Transylvania, 65% in the Old Kingdom, and 74% in Basarabia. After 1928, the "dowry" showed a obvious decreasing tendency visible in the following percentage: 19% in Transylvania, 13% in Bucovina, and 20% in Basarabia.<sup>6</sup>

Under the conditions of a huge competition for power, present over the entire period following the year 1918, the parties that were in opposition would consider the "governmental dowry the result of forgery, pressuring and of all the corrupt means used by the executive power".

For example, after the elections in December 1933, the newspapers "Dreptatea" (Peasant Party) and "Viitorul" (Liberal Party) have discussed for months the problem of the results of the election being either false or correct.

Usually, before and after the elections, the opposition press would be full of reports and comments on the illegalities of the electoral campaign and of the elections as such. These made, in fact a very important aspect of the political disputes, although the effect was minimal. The situation would repeat itself again and again, no matter who the actors were. The Parliament was indifferent to all the signals and unwilling to take any measures as long as, for the greatest majority, the important fact was only that of winning the elections and nothing else.

A deeper analysis of the electoral mechanism leads to the conclusion that, evidently, the victory of the executive power in the elections was a matter of the mentality of the voter, of his experience as a voter. The voter was inclined to do something in order to please the ones in power, to win their attention. This is, after all, the instinct of the humble man, dependent on the administration and used to this kind of abuse.

The great winners because of all the circumstances that led to the nomination of the winners in the competition for power during the period that we are discussing were the liberals. They had until July 1927 (the moment of King Ferdinand's death) the trust of the Crown and thus they could influence the dissolving of two Parliaments, in 1920 and 1927. The liberals had a vast experience when it came to organizing "good" elections. They had experienced people, people of means and, generally, they had everything they needed in order to win. This is why, of the 15 years of evolution under a democratic regime (1922-1937), the liberals were in power for over seven years.

This reality had a great importance in establishing what the Romanian democracy looked like. It was a liberal democracy and that meant a regime, which had of imposed decisions and a obvious tendency towards an excessive centralization. The liberal governing has strengthened the banking structures of the country, especially the ones that were of immediate interest to the liberals and has given the Liberal Party a good position from the political point of view.

But the strategic play of the Liberal Party was not always successful. Although they were relying on the gratitude of the people for the party's merits during the war period, the November 1919 elections, led in a favorable climate for the Liberals, brought them only 21.3% of the votes, while the Peasant Party, established only one year prior to the elections, got 46%.<sup>7</sup>

This situation can be explained by the problems the greatest majority of the voters had during the war and, at the same time, by their hope for a different life.

During the first years after the war, the public was in favor of the newly formed party of general Alexandru Averescu, "People's League" which, later, became People's Party. It was the expression of the same hope for something new, the hope for the saving power of the general who was considered an example of the war period. He cultivated a certain sense of populism, he made promises that could have never been honored, he made unusual and abnormal alliances and he continued to be very tough, which explains his very short existence.

The most important event in establishing the main direction of the inter-wars political life was the union between the Peasant Party and the



National Party of Transilvania, which occurred in October 1926. Thus, there appeared the governmental alternative, a important device of the functioning of the two-parties political system.<sup>8</sup>

This system was even more necessary as the Liberals took power in 1922 and, through an intense legislative activity, they got more power and political influence. During the four years of governing, until 1926, the Liberal Party had a very intense legislative activity. They adopted a series of very important laws among which: the Constitution, in March 1923, the Law for the Administrative Unification, in June 1925 and a new Electoral Law, in March 1926. The adopting of the Constitution took place in a climate of tense discussions. Its legality and validity being contested by the National Party and by the Peasant Party, which chose not to vote.

After being accepted by the King and after it came into force, they accepted the Constitution that was so much attacked by the representatives of the two parties, the National and the Peasant, too. So that, in 1928, when two parties, united since 1926 in the National Peasant Party, came to take the power they never thought of changing the Constitution.

Of great importance for the evolution of the Parliamentary life and, in general, for the evolution of the political life, was the adopting, in March 1926, of the new Electoral Law which favored clearly the party which succeeded in getting at least 40% of the votes. This party would get a bonus of 10%. It would also participate, according to its percentage to the distribution of the other 50%. All in all, it would get 705 of the places in the Parliament. It should be mentioned here, that only the parties that had got over 2% of the votes could have participated in the sharing of the over percents.<sup>9</sup>

The necessity of this law, in the opinion of the liberals, was that of creating the political and governmental stability, in optimizing the activity of the executive power, which could not be now stopped by a too insistent minority or by a too diversified leadership.

The political personalities in opposition were accusing the ones governing of trying to perpetuate their staying in power, as it was known the fact the Crown in the electoral competition favored them. It was not something out of acceptance to get the 40% under the electoral conditions in Romania.

The applying of the Electoral Law would considerably diminish the will of the voters. Under such conditions, it is easy to understand that the voting of the laws in the Parliament was very much favored by the Government. By diminishing the value of the circumscription votes, the new electoral system was favoring a stronger centralization, a greater unity of the parties and of the authorities of the central forums.

Of course, the imposing of some parties to take power was not necessarily the result of electoral doings. During the December 1928 elections, the National Peasant Party won with an impressive majority: 77,8% of the votes. It won because of as a very sincere position of the voters and because of the willingness to end the "Liberal Decade". The meeting all over the country, and especially the imposing meeting in May 1928, in Alba Iulia, it was organized by the Peasant Party, there were signed of trying to capture the voters.

The political and ideological activity of the National Peasant Party, between 1926-1928, formed a trend in favor of the renewal of the political life. The greatest majority of those who formed this trend wanted a real change in the political life, a democratization of the society by creating a climate in which the liberties could be granted, the old and the poor would be socially protected, to do as the democracy not be a form of the domination of the strong.

As a consequence of such a politics, both the National Peasant Party, but others too, hoped a lot. It was to be expected even a change in the professional structure of the Parliament members. However, the changes were not so spectacular. It is true that they had 37 teachers and 17 poets in the new Parliament, representing 16% of the total number of deputies.<sup>10</sup> There were, as well, three peasants and a cooperatist. Still, there were 149 lawyers (46% of the number of members of deputies). There were there, as well, 31 important land owners.<sup>11</sup>

During the previous periods, the village intellectuals were less present in the Parliament while the land owners had more representatives there. Now, after the Great Union, the Parliament became even more a place of liberal professions, the lawyers having more that 41% of the places in the Chamber, during the period between 1922-1937. A significant presence had the teachers, either from high-school or from the University, about 31%, while the engineers and the doctors, the industrialists and the tradesmen had only 8-10%

In the middle of the economic and governmental crisis of the National-Peasant Party, the political life in Romania was strongly shaken in 1930. Entering the country without notice, on June, 6<sup>th</sup>, prince Charles, who five years ago, in December 1925 had given up, in writing all the rights he had by birth to the throne, was proclaimed king on June, 8<sup>th</sup> 1930 by the Constitutional institutions of the country.

The "Restoration", as it was called, ended the recency that dated since the 1927 death of king Ferdinand I. It had very serious implications in the political life of the country. The new king, Charles II, used his central position within the Constitutional scheme and played an active role in the crystallization of the governmental groups and in the process of



segmentation of the political groups and in the process of segmentation of the political parties. The role played by the king led to a decrease of the authority of the parties and of that of the Parliament. The fact that there was a group formed around the king led to various problems and adversities, to subtle back-stage works, which weakened the democratic governing tradition.

Of course, beyond all these is the intention of Charles II to instaurate a personal regime of force. That will be done in February 1938.

**Notes:**

1. see Mircea Musat, Ion Ardeleanu, Romania after the Great Union, second volume, first part, ed. Stiintifica si Enciclopedica, Bucharest, 1986, pp. 40-206;
2. see Marcel Ivan, The evolution of our Political Parties, 1919-1932, ed. Krafft, Sibiu;
3. see S. Cutisteanu, Gh. Ionita, The Romanian Voters during the Interwars period, ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1981, p. 269;
4. see Marcel Iva, as above;
5. see Matei Dogan, The Statistic Analysis of the Parliamentary Democracy in Romania, Bucharest, 1946;
6. see Matei Dogan, as above;
7. See Ioan Scurtu, The History of Romania between 1918-1940. The evolution of the Political Regime from Democracy to Dictatorship, ed. Didactica si Pedagogica, R.A., Bucharest, 1996, p. 58;
8. see Ioan Scurtu, as above;
9. see "Monitorul Oficial" No. 71, March, 27/1926;
10. see Matei Dogan, as above;
11. See Matei Dogan, as above.