

How a Democracy Was Born: Romania as a Case Study of a Former Communist Country

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1. The Transition to Democracy: A Theoretical Approach

The collapse of communism in 1989 quickly revealed significant differences among the successor states, necessitating distinct analytical approaches. In Romania and East Germany, political power was forcefully removed, leading to the dismantling of the state-controlled system. In contrast, Poland and Czechoslovakia experienced paralysis of state institutions, while Hungary underwent a «constitutional revolution» characterised by dialogue between the ruling authorities and the opposition¹. As a result, defining a timeline for the completion of the transition to democracy – closely linked to the consolidation of a market economy – requires a country-specific analysis. Merely changing the political regime was not enough; it also required a broad social consensus on the necessity of democratisation and a free-market economy.

According to historian Florin Abraham, several pathways for Romania's transition to democracy were formulated early on. The first, advocated by historical political parties, aimed to restore the pre-communist political order. The second, inspired by liberal ideals, envisioned societal transformation driven by individual will without an elite-driven project. The third approach, promoted primarily by Ion Iliescu, envisioned a top-down social engineering project to be implemented through state institutions².

Scholars often identify two key milestones marking Romania's transition to democracy. The first was the 1996 elections, which saw opposition leader Emil Constantinescu win the presidency and a parliamentary majority shift away from the former regime's political influence – representing the first peaceful transfer of power. The second milestone is Romania's accession to NATO in 2004 and the European Union in 2007. On the other hand, Abraham introduces the concept of «permanent tran-

sition», a notion that dominated Romania's public discourse after 1989. This idea emerged because the post-revolutionary reality proved far more complex than initially anticipated. The transformation of society was not solely driven by well-defined national and international plans but had to continuously adapt to unforeseen challenges³, such as regional conflicts, geopolitical tensions, economic crises, and civil unrest.

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This study focuses on the period 1990-1996 in order to analyze the early phase of democratization in post-communist Romania. This temporal delimitation is based on the premise that democratization involves not only the dismantling of the authoritarian regime but also the establishment of the institutional and procedural foundations of a liberal democracy. In this sense, our analytical framework draws on the definition of liberal democratic regimes, which presupposes the existence of the rule of law, the separation of powers, competitive and fair elections, and the principle of majority rule.

The latter criterion implies that power results from free electoral competition, that the existence of a viable and legally protected opposition is ensured, and that alternation in government is possible. In Romania, this alternation occurred for the first time in 1996, when the parliamentary elections were won by the opposition coalition—the Romanian Democratic Convention (CDR) – and the presidency by its candidate, Emil Constantinescu. This moment marked not only a political shift, but also the symbolic confirmation of a functioning democratic mechanism. While Romania's Euro-Atlantic integration (culminating in NATO and EU membership) remains a critical milestone of the post-communist trajectory, we argue that it pertains more to the phase of democratic consolidation. The first important step in this direction was taken in the mid-1990s, when alternation in power became a reality and institutional reforms gained broader legitimacy.

The main research questions that guide this inquiry are as follows: What role did the former communist elites play in shaping the democratization process in Romania? How did the process of institutional construction evolve, and what structural or political challenges emerged along the way? What were the dominant themes and narratives that structured public and political debate during the presidential and parliamentary elections?

When discussing democratic transition, it is important to recognise the challenge of distinguishing it from democratic consolidation. While the former primarily pertains to the electoral process, the latter refers to the broader functioning of society – encompassing the widespread

acceptance of liberal democracy and the establishment of a functional market economy. In theory, during the initial stages of transition, public opinion is often divided on whether to embrace the principles of the new political system. Over time, however, democratic values typically gain wider acceptance, leading to stable support by the end of the process⁴. In Romania's case, support for democratic principles was strong from the outset, largely due to the deep rift between society and the former communist regime.

In recent years, Romania's success in transitioning to democracy has increasingly been associated with its integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. In 2018, Jean-Claude Juncker, then-president of the European Commission, stated during the Three Seas Initiative Summit in Bucharest that Romania's signing of the EU accession treaty in 2005 marked «the transition from dictatorship to democracy»⁵.

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The influence of external factors on the democratisation of post-communist Eastern European nations has been a subject of interest among researchers. Various perspectives have emerged regarding the role of international support in shaping democratic transitions. Adrian G.V. Hyde-Price argued that Western nations played a crucial role by offering assistance in key areas such as electoral and constitutional frameworks, fostering international civil society relations, establishing human rights standards, and promoting democratic practices. Organisations such as the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe facilitated free elections through direct collaboration and policy advising. Additionally, economic aid proved to be an important tool in supporting these transitions⁶. Karen E. Smith offers an insightful analysis of how Eastern European politicians perceived external influences. She suggests that during the 1990s, many ruling elites were highly concerned with their country's international image, which, in turn, influenced their policy decisions⁷. Meanwhile, Thomas Carothers, in his analysis of Romania, contends that the driving force behind the country's post-communist transition was the appeal of Western democracy and capitalism. He further emphasises that Romania's pursuit of Western approval stemmed from a psychological need for acceptance into the Western world—motivated not only by ideological alignment but also by the security and economic benefits associated with closer ties to the United States and the European Union⁸.

The structure of this study is designed to analyze the first half of the 1990s as a key phase in Romania's transition to democracy. The analysis begins with the 1989 Revolution, focusing on the identification of the

main actors involved and the origins of their post-communist political careers, often legitimized by their self-proclaimed role as anti-communist revolutionaries. In examining these events, alongside various books and academic studies on the fall of the communist regime, the study relies primarily on the most recent and significant contribution to Romanian historiography: the official report published by military prosecutor Cătălin Ranco Pițu, who led the investigation into the 1989 Revolution. The second section addresses the process of institution-building, particularly the establishment of Romania's first post-communist state structures. Special attention is devoted to the adoption of the 1991 Constitution, seen as a cornerstone of the new democratic order. This analysis draws on both official documents – such as provisional legislative decrees – and academic contributions from historians, political scientists, and legal scholars, including Florin Abraham, Eleodor Focșeneanu, and Lia Pop. The final section focuses on the presidential elections held between 1990 and 1996, analyzing the trajectories of the main candidates and the central themes of each electoral campaign. As previously noted, the 1996 elections marked the first peaceful transfer of power between government and opposition in post-communist Romania. For this reason, a diachronic analysis of these elections is particularly relevant to understanding the broader process of democratic consolidation.

2. The Romanian Revolution of 1989

In 1989, communist regimes collapsed across Eastern European countries that had fallen under Soviet influence after the Second World War. However, the transition of power took different forms in each nation. To explain this phenomenon, historians consider various factors and interpretive models, such as Mikhail Gorbachev's role in promoting reforms within the USSR, the domino effect of revolutionary movements across neighbouring countries, the involvement of foreign actors, as well as internal political actions and popular uprisings⁹.

In several Eastern European countries, such as East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Bulgaria, communist regimes relinquished power peacefully. In Romania, however, demonstrations were met with violent repression. On December 15th, protests began in Timișoara, primarily in support of Reformed pastor László Tőkés, who had openly criticized Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime. Tőkés gained international attention for condemning policies like systematization and the destruction of villages. By

December 16th, the protests grew to thousands, with demands escalating into a direct challenge to the regime. Clashes erupted with security forces, including the Miliția, Securitate troops (secret police), fire brigades, and border guards. On December 17th, under Ceaușescu's orders, the military intervened, leading to the first gunfire and fatalities of the revolution¹⁰.

On December 20, after returning from a state visit to Iran, Nicolae Ceaușescu, having been informed of the ongoing domestic unrest, delivered a televised speech in which he harshly condemned the Timișoara events. He accused «anti-national, terrorist groups» of attempting to «provoke disorder, destabilize the political and economic situation, and create conditions for the territorial fragmentation of Romania», while also alleging the involvement of foreign intelligence services¹¹. Thus, on December 21, Ceaușescu called a demonstration in Bucharest in support of the regime; it quickly turned into what historian Francesco Guida describes as a «resounding protest»¹², effectively marking the start of the revolution in the capital. That night, the army brutally repressed the protests, resulting in dozens of deaths, hundreds of injuries, and over a thousand arrests. One of the army commanders later reported: «The cadres and troops demonstrated revolutionary spirit in carrying out the supreme commander's orders issued at the December 21 rally»¹³. This statement underscores Ceaușescu's significant role in orchestrating violence against the population.

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In just three days, from December 22 – when Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu fled the Central Committee building by helicopter amidst mass protests¹⁴ – until their trial and execution on December 25, Romania underwent a pivotal transformation. This brief period shaped post-revolutionary institutions and established the legitimacy of emerging political leaders. Military troops were ordered to withdraw to their barracks, while public television became the platform for the revolution's first steps. Iconic moments, such as actor Ion Caramitru and poet Mircea Dinescu proclaiming victory, were broadcast live. A retired general, Nicolae Militaru, also appeared, introducing Ion Iliescu – then unknown to the people – and inviting him to the television studio. According to Cătălin Ranco Pițu, the prosecutor who drafted the indictment in the 1989 Revolution Dossier, Iliescu, Militaru, and other political and military figures had been part of a group that, since the early 1980s, sought to plot Nicolae Ceaușescu's removal from power. Although their original plan failed, the actions taken after December 22, 1989, closely mirrored the steps outlined by those involved in the scheme. Pițu concludes that Ion Iliescu's denial of involvement in such a plan stemmed from the fact

that the group's goal was not a full regime change but rather Ceaușescu's removal while maintaining Romania within the Soviet sphere of influence¹⁵. Furthermore, in his first televised speech, Ion Iliescu – who would later become Romania's president – condemned the Ceaușescu family, stating that they had «nothing to do with socialism or the ideology of scientific communism» and that they had «tarnished the name of the Romanian Communist Party and the legacy of those who gave their lives for socialism in this country»¹⁶.

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Starting on December 22, 1989, the Council of the National Salvation Front (CFSN) – the political body that seized power during the revolution – began its operations. It included several figures who had been part of the group that, as early as 1984, had planned to remove Nicolae Ceaușescu from power. Prosecutor Cătălin Ranco Pițu asserts that the Ministry of National Defence assumed the prerogatives of the supreme commander on December 22. He further argues that there was no leadership vacuum within the ministry, making it the primary state authority that coordinated revolutionary events and oversaw the transfer of power¹⁷. This perspective is echoed by historian Alexandru Gussi, who argues that Romania did not experience a true «power vacuum» as it may seem, but rather a lack of political legitimacy. He contends that the CFSN was fully supported by the army, which provided it with essential resources – access to media, telecommunications, and security – allowing it to present itself as an «emanation of the Revolution»¹⁸.

The CFSN initially assumed a temporary leadership role on December 28, 1989, but this changed on January 23, 1990, when its leaders announced their intention to participate in Romania's first post-communist elections. This decision led to the organisation's transformation into a political party – the National Salvation Front (FSN) – on February 6, 1990. Ion Iliescu, who assumed leadership of the FSN, claimed that the move was a response to «pressures from below»¹⁹, referring to the demands of the population. This shift was perceived by many as a betrayal of the revolution's ideals, prompting several former anti-communist dissidents to distance themselves from the FSN. Meanwhile, political parties, student organisations, and intellectuals staged protests, arguing that the FSN aimed to establish a new dominant party, effectively replacing the Ceaușescu regime. According to scholar Ioana Literat, the FSN held several advantages over its political rivals: it functioned both as a participant and an arbiter in the electoral process, operated as a provisional governing body rather than a registered political party, and maintained control over mass media²⁰.

3. Institution Building and the First Post-Communist Constitution

Starting from the end of December 1989, the CFSN took decisive steps in determining Romania's form of government. This provisional governing body initially held extensive powers, functioning similarly to a parliament. It had the authority to appoint and dismiss the government, draft decrees, approve the state budget, ratify or reject international treaties, and appoint or remove the president of the High Court of Justice²¹. Despite Romania's monarchical history prior to the communist regime, a decree-law issued on December 27, 1989 – signed by CFSN President Ion Iliescu – declared that Romania would remain a republic and that «all power structures associated with the former dictatorial regime are and shall remain dissolved»²². Legal scholar Eleodor Focșeneanu criticised this decree, arguing that the CFSN, as a provisional body, lacked the authority to make constitutional decisions²³. In practice, however, the new authorities upheld the institutional framework established since December 30, 1947 – the day King Michael I was forced to abdicate under pressure from the communists, backed by Soviet forces present in Romania.

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As public concern grew over the CFSN's monopolisation of state power – seen as merely replacing the former Communist Party – demonstrations by supporters of historical political parties led to a compromise. On February 1, 1990, an agreement was reached to establish the Provisional Council of National Unity (CPUN). Despite this change in name, the CPUN retained the same powers as the CFSN until parliamentary elections were held on May 20, 1990. While it symbolically included representatives from all political parties, the FSN maintained half of the seats, ensuring a dominant role and dispersing the opposition. The Decree-Law of March 14, 1990, which governed the elections for the Romanian Parliament and President, functioned as a «mini-constitution». It introduced a bicameral parliament consisting of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies, replacing the unicameral structure under the CPUN. The CPUN's executive arm was dissolved, and a government led by a prime minister was established, alongside the new office of the President of the Republic²⁴.

The post-1989 constitutional transition has been widely analysed, particularly concerning the office of the President of the Republic. In his work on Romanian constitutional history, Eleodor Focșeneanu argued that the decision made on December 27, 1989, to dissolve the power structures of the former regime should have included the abolition

of the presidential office, which had been created by the communist regime in 1974²⁵. According to Focșeneanu, constitutional principles dictate that a new constitution should have been adopted before holding presidential elections. Similarly, legal scholar Lia Pop viewed the establishment of the presidential office as a pre-constitutional act, lacking proper legal foundations²⁶. Lavinia Stan and Diane Vancea provide a historical analysis, arguing that the decision to maintain the presidency reflected a continuation of the communist regime. They suggest that this action centralised power in the hands of a single individual – Ion Iliescu – shortly after the execution of Nicolae Ceaușescu. The authors cite several motivations behind this decision, including the strong ties between the new political elite and the former regime, the strategic advantage provided to Iliescu over his political opponents, the reluctance to collaborate with anti-communist groups, and the desire to prevent the restoration of the monarchy²⁷.

The constitutional transition period concluded in 1991 with the adoption of the new Constitution through a national referendum. This document formally established the principle of separation of powers within the state. Under the new framework, executive power was divided between the President and the Government, while legislative authority rested with a bicameral Parliament consisting of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies, both serving four-year terms. During the Constituent Assembly's deliberations, there were proposals for a unicameral parliament, but the decision to adopt a bicameral system was influenced by Romania's interwar democratic traditions and internal political tensions within the ruling party. Until constitutional amendments were introduced in 2003, both chambers held equal powers, with the primary distinction being the differing thresholds for deputies and senators to secure their mandates. The Constitution introduced various mechanisms to ensure a system of «checks and balances», including the simple motion, allowing Parliament to express its position on government policies; the motion of censure, enabling Parliament to dismiss the government; and the vote of no confidence, serving as a parliamentary tool to hold the executive accountable. Despite these mechanisms, the executive branch has frequently overshadowed Parliament, using tools such as emergency ordinances and the government's accountability procedure to bypass legislative debate and swiftly enact policies²⁸.

4. The Transition to Democracy Through the Perspective of Elections (1990-1996)

After 1989, presidential elections, held alongside parliamentary ones, garnered greater public and media attention. Analysing these elections reveals key issues on the public agenda and debates over solutions to the country's problems. The early transition was marked by social unrest, including opposition protests and tensions between Romanian and Hungarian communities, as well as challenges in transitioning to a market economy and building institutions for a pluralist democracy.

Unlike other countries in the region, Romania organised general elections within the first six months after the fall of the communist regime. This rapid timeline posed significant challenges, as the political parties that emerged in early January 1990 had very little time to organise themselves effectively. Meanwhile, the FSN inherited the extensive organisational structure of the former Romanian Communist Party, with branches established across most regions of the country. Furthermore, the FSN maintained control over public television and radio, while newspapers that had operated during the communist period remained under state ownership and had yet to be privatised.

Three candidates successfully gathered the required signatures to run for president: Ion Iliescu from the FSN, Radu Câmpeanu from the National Liberal Party (PNL), and Ion Rațiu from the National Peasant Christian and Democratic Party (PNȚCD). The latter two represented parties that were re-established shortly after the revolution, inheriting two of the most significant political parties from the interwar period. Ion Iliescu's advantage over his rivals was clear from the outset – both institutionally, as president of the CPUN, and morally, as he was portrayed as a symbol of the revolution's victory. The other two candidates were relatively unknown to the Romanian public, having returned from exile only after the revolution. Ion Rațiu left the country in the 1940s, while Radu Câmpeanu went into exile in the 1970s following a long period of political imprisonment²⁹.

Regarding the electoral campaign, each candidate offered a distinct vision for Romania's transformation. Ion Iliescu argued that no major social imbalances should occur, advocating for a gradual transition from a socialist to a market economy. He conveyed his ideas through frequent TV appearances and rallies. His key themes included condemning communism as a political system – without criticising former members – promoting a moderate shift to a market economy, and addressing

pressing social issues. The FSN candidate benefitted from extensive media support, particularly in the press. Political scientist Alina Mungiu noted that some newspapers cultivated a mystique around the FSN, portraying it as the spontaneous product of the Revolution and suggesting that «the FSN platform is written with the blood of the Revolution», implying that those killed in the streets were all supporters of its ideals³⁰. Ion Rațiu's campaign, centred on four core values – freedom, prosperity, dignity, and national reconciliation – faced significant challenges. His efforts to raise his profile through visits across the country were met with hostility, fuelled by state-controlled media, which questioned his intentions and past³¹. Critics argued that his decision to leave Romania when the communist regime was installed meant he did not experience the hardships endured by the people. Meanwhile, Radu Câmpeanu promoted his party's program, rooted in liberal principles such as political pluralism, the unrestricted right to association, private property, free competition, and freedom of conscience, encompassing philosophical, religious, and aesthetic beliefs³².

The first electoral campaign primarily focused on plans for Romania's societal development and the programs proposed by each political party. Ion Iliescu won the election with 85.07% of the vote³³, while his party won two-thirds of the parliamentary seats³⁴, a result that reflects both the high level of trust in the FSN leader and the party's strong influence over state institutions and the media. Iliescu effectively addressed public expectations and concerns about the country's future by portraying himself as a moderate leader in contrast to his reformist opponents.

Following the victory of the FSN in the parliamentary elections on May 20, 1990, a new government led by Petre Roman was formed, with key objectives of ending international isolation and transitioning to a market economy. These goals were outlined in the «Program Declaration» of June 28, 1990³⁵. Romania's negative international image stemmed from factors such as poor management of interethnic conflicts, human rights violations, media pluralism concerns, and issues related to the former Securitate. Furthermore, between June 13-15, 1990, the «Mineriada» took place in Bucharest. The University Square demonstrations, which began on April 22 and ended on June 15, were fuelled by widespread dissatisfaction with the political developments in post-communist Romania. Protesters occupied University Square in Bucharest, and in June, police intervened forcefully to disperse them. The «Mineriada» was named after the miners who were summoned to Bucharest to restore order. The intervention resulted in six deaths and more than 700 injuries. President Ion Iliescu delivered a speech thanking the miners for their actions in support of

the authorities³⁶. As Flavius Cristian Mărcău³⁷ points out, these events had a significant impact on Romania's democratisation process and its international image.

During this period, several controversial decisions were made, raising concerns among the opposition about the country's foreign policy direction. In April 1991, the government signed a treaty with the Soviet Union, which Prime Minister Petre Roman later sought to distance himself from. Furthermore, after the August 1991 Moscow coup, Roman condemned the coup plotters without consulting Ion Iliescu, and media reports suggested that the president's dissatisfaction reflected a pro-Soviet stance³⁸. However, institutionally, this period saw the establishment of key bodies such as the Constitutional Court, the Court of Accounts, and the National Audiovisual Council. Moreover, essential components of the emerging post-communist state structure – such as the judiciary, the Romanian Intelligence Service, and the electoral system – were progressively institutionalized and rendered operational.

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The FSN, once perceived as a monolithic party in 1990, underwent significant and unexpected transformations. In early 1992, it split into two factions – one aligned with Petre Roman and the other with Ion Iliescu³⁹. Petre Roman's government ended abruptly in September 1991 when he refused to engage with the miners who had gathered in Bucharest during another protest. As a result, President Ion Iliescu dismissed Petre Roman from his position, and Teodor Stolojan, an experienced economist, took over the government leadership. President Iliescu aimed to form a national unity government, but his proposal was rejected by PNTCD leader Corneliu Coposu, who opted to remain outside any coalition with the FSN⁴⁰.

During Stolojan's mandate, Romania adopted its first post-communist Constitution, which clarified the president's responsibilities and defined the political regime the country would follow. Immediately after the Revolution, the president held powers typical of a parliamentary system – appointing the prime minister, promulgating laws, and mediating political competition – but did not directly govern. After the 1990 elections, discussions arose about the country's political framework, with many favouring a semi-presidential system inspired by France. The 1991 Constitution preserved the president's broad legitimacy and authority while establishing a dual executive system alongside the government. Although the president was not accountable to Parliament, they could be suspended. In 2003, a clarification was introduced to prevent authoritarianism, stipulating that the president could not dismiss the prime minister⁴¹. As André Krouwel notes, at the beginning of the 2000s there

was still no clear consensus on classifying the political systems of Central and Eastern Europe. Observers generally consider Hungary and Slovakia to be parliamentary systems, while Romania and Russia are often classified as presidential systems, although the degree of presidentialism in these countries remains debatable. To avoid the rigid dichotomy between presidentialism and parliamentarism, scholars have introduced new concepts such as «dual systems» and «limited presidentialism»⁴².

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The first elections based on a constitution were held in 1992. After Ion Iliescu's decisive victory in 1990, his position faced significant opposition from the newly formed coalition, the Romanian Democratic Convention (CDR), which supported Emil Constantinescu. This led to a second round of voting. While Ion Iliescu maintained his original campaign strategy, Constantinescu's team sought to appeal to a broader base, including civil society, trade unions, political parties, and cultural figures. This time, the campaign revolved around key issues such as relations with external entities like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the United States, government accountability for the miner protests, corruption and election transparency, the idea of a national consensus for major projects, and the direction of foreign policy⁴³. The CDR recognised that public expectations were less about restoring interwar-style democracy and more about addressing immediate needs. Consequently, its oppositional rhetoric shifted to a reformist approach, directly addressing these concerns. Although the anti-communist stance remained, the CDR revitalised the image of historical parties and positioned Emil Constantinescu as a symbol of the University Square phenomenon⁴⁴, just as Iliescu symbolised the 1989 Revolution. Iliescu's victory, however, was secured by his enduring popularity and the trust he commanded.

The political fragmentation resulting from the 1992 elections led President Iliescu to propose a grand coalition between the Democratic Front for National Salvation (FDSN) – Ion Iliescu's new party, which won 30% of the parliamentary seats⁴⁵ – and the CDR. This proposal was rejected by PNȚCD leaders, prompting the president to form a minority government led by Nicolae Văcăroiu, a technocratic economist with a background in the State Planning Committee during the communist era. This created a hybrid form of government in which political control remained firmly in Iliescu's hands, with the prime minister closely adhering to directives from the Presidency⁴⁶. During this government's tenure, significant economic measures were introduced, including the adoption of VAT and the complete liberalisation of prices. Economic decline was partially mitigated through interventionist policies and subsidies, while privatisation proceeded at a slow pace. To address economic pressures,

external loans were taken during 1995-1996, which had lasting effects on the economy. Although there were some achievements, such as the expansion of the private sector through tax reductions, these were overshadowed by persistent corruption, a widespread sense of stagnation, and Romania's isolation from the Euro-Atlantic community⁴⁷.

The 1996 elections took place after four years of governance under the FDSN, which formed an alliance with three populist parties nostalgic for the communist regime, with Nicolae Văcăroiu leading the executive. During this period, the economy failed to achieve the expected progress, as reforms were pursued without imposing significant social costs. Politically, the national agenda was shaped by efforts to join NATO and the European Union, which were established as key foreign policy objectives in the «Declaration of Snagov». Signed on June 21, 1995, by the leaders of Romania's parliamentary parties, the declaration reaffirmed their collective commitment to the national strategy aimed at preparing the country for EU accession. Significant strides were also made in Romanian-Hungarian reconciliation, culminating in the signing of a bilateral treaty in September 1996 during the electoral campaign⁴⁸.

The second round of the election once again saw Ion Iliescu and Emil Constantinescu facing off. The defeat of the Party of Social Democracy in Romania (PDSR) – formerly known as the FDSN – in the parliamentary elections to the CDR⁴⁹ significantly influenced Iliescu's campaign strategy, which took on a more negative tone. His approach was marked by attacks on Petre Roman, who had aligned himself with Constantinescu, as well as accusations, intimidation tactics, and the promotion of fears that a coalition of the CDR with the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) would turn Romania into another Yugoslavia. The campaign reached its climax with a speech delivered by Iliescu in Alba Iulia in the final days before the election, which was widely covered by the press. Departing from his usual image as a calm and cooperative candidate, he launched fierce attacks against the opposition and Emil Constantinescu. Iliescu raised concerns about Hungarian autonomy, reignited fears of a possible return to monarchy, and criticised Constantinescu's association with Petre Roman, after they announced a Parliamentary coalition⁵⁰. In contrast, Emil Constantinescu adopted a forward-looking and positive message, emphasising the need to build a new Romania⁵¹, and offering a reassuring vision for the future. His campaign stood in stark contrast to Iliescu's, which was heavily focused on criticism and drew inspiration from the divisive strategies of the early 1990s. Ultimately, Constantinescu's victory was largely driven by the clear contrast between the candidates' ap-

proaches—his constructive, optimistic vision resonated with voters, while Iliescu's negative and defensive campaign, lacking accountability, failed to inspire confidence.

5. Conclusions

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This study aimed to answer three research questions about Romania's democratic transition between 1990 and 1996: What role did the communist elites play in the democratization process? How did the process of building democratic institutions unfold, and what were the main challenges? What were the dominant themes in public debate during the presidential and parliamentary elections?

Regarding the elites from the communist regime, the analysis shows that they played a decisive role in shaping the new political order. Members of the National Salvation Front, led by Ion Iliescu, held key positions in the state, benefiting from both the institutional infrastructure of the former single-party system and control over the media. This continuity allowed for a negotiated and limited transition, in which the break with the past was managed by former actors of the system.

As I have shown, during the Romanian Revolution of 1989, just before the trial and sentencing of the communist-era state leaders, Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu, the country's leadership was taken over by the CFSN, an organism led by Ion Iliescu. His status as the new leader of the Romanian state was recognised on December 22, less than four hours after the helicopter carrying the two dictators took off. According to prosecutor Cătălin Ranco Pițu, the decision for the country to be governed by the CFSN was made by the leadership of the Army and the Securitate (the secret police)⁵², and all central press organisations previously under the control of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party became press organs of the CFSN⁵³. Ion Iliescu's name has become synonymous with the early period of regime change in Romania. He served as the country's president from 1990 to 1996, a time that culminated in elections marking the political and electoral end of the transition period. His tenure is associated with several decisions that profoundly impacted Romanian society, beginning in December 1989 and continuing into the early 1990s. For example, Iliescu is a defendant in the «Revolution Dossier», in which prosecutors concluded that, after December 22, 1989, the Revolution coexisted with a coup d'état. He is accused of repeatedly and systematically misleading public opinion through televised appear-

ances and communiqués. These actions allegedly fuelled a widespread «psychosis of terrorism», which, in turn, led to numerous instances of fratricidal fire. Between December 22 and December 30, 1989, this atmosphere resulted in 857 deaths, 2,382 injuries, 585 cases of severe deprivation of liberty in violation of international law, and 409 cases of extreme suffering⁵⁴.

The institution-building process was marked by legal ambiguities, a lack of clear separation of powers, and conflicts between the new institutions. The constitution adopted in 1991 established a semi-presidential system, but the balance of power remained skewed, particularly in favor of the president. Tensions between the executive and the legislature, the use of emergency decrees, and episodes of political violence – such as the miners' intervention in June 1990 – highlighted the fragility of democratic mechanisms in this early phase.

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As for the presidential elections of 1990, 1992, and 1996, they provided a relevant framework for understanding the priorities of Romanian post-communist society. The campaigns focused on issues such as the pace of economic reforms, the relationship with the communist past, the distribution of power in the state, and Romania's external orientation.

The first electoral competition, while reflecting the significant popularity of the FSN – a political party perceived as a product of the Revolution – did not provide equal opportunities for all political actors. Foreign observers identified several issues in how the campaign was conducted, including unequal access to media outlets, limited funding for campaign materials and methods of disseminating information for non-FSN actors, the FSN's monopoly on campaign financing, instances of intimidation and harassment, and ethnic tensions. While in 1990 the founding rhetoric based on the legitimacy of the Revolution dominated, by 1996 the electoral discourse had become more rationalized, and the alternation in government marked an important stage in the normalization of political life.

Despite these initial challenges, Romania succeeded in developing a functioning multi-party system, adopting a constitution that largely remains in place today, aside from a 2003 revision. New institutions were established to support the democratisation process and the transition to a market economy, paving the way for accession to Euro-Atlantic organisations like the EU and NATO. Romania's trajectory in the early 1990s paralleled that of other Central and Eastern European nations emerging from Soviet influence, but it also displayed unique characteristics, as outlined above. The transition to democracy unfolded in distinct phases: the constitutional transition (1991), the political and electoral transition (1996), and a significant reform period driven by Euro-Atlantic integration (2004 and 2007).

Note

¹ A. VISEGRADY, *Transition to Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe: Experiences of a Model Country – Hungary*, in «William & Mary Bill of Rights Journal», vol. 1, iss. 2, n. 6, p. 250.

² F. ABRAHAM, *Romania Since the Second World War. A Political, Social, and Economic History*, Bloomsbury, New York, 2016, pp. 117-118.

³ Ibidem, p. 118.

⁴ C.D. TUFÎȘ, *Learning Democracy and Market Economy in Post-Communist Romania*, Institutul European, Iași, 2012, p. 34; 123.

⁵ See the declaration of J.C. JUNCKER. Retrieved from <http://www.ziare.com/klaus-johannis/presedinte/juncker-spune-ca-a-fost-primit-ca-un-print-in-romania-1530143>.

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