

A Companion to Political Leadership in Central and Eastern Europe after 1990

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Maciej Hartliński (Ed.)

A Companion to Political Leadership in Central and Eastern Europe after 1990

Democratization – Political Parties – Elections



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Contents

1.	Introduction to Research on Political Leadership in Central and Eastern Europe	1
	<i>Maciej Hartliński</i>	
2.	Everything is Personal: Party Leaders in Bulgaria between Consensus Figures and Key Parts of Political Life	7
	<i>Petar Bankov</i>	
3.	The Party Formation, Executive and Political Leaders in Croatia	29
	<i>Davor Boban</i>	
4.	The Role of Political Leaders in the Institutionalization of Parties and the Exercise of Executive Power in Czechia in the Years 1993–2024	51
	<i>Michal Kubát</i>	
5.	Political Leadership in Estonia 1992–2023: Political Parties, the Executive and Presidents	69
	<i>Tõnis Saarts, Ott Lumi, Leif Kalev</i>	
6.	Hungary: An Increasingly Personalized Political System, Where Leaders Take Center Stage	93
	<i>Eszter Petronella Soós</i>	
7.	Political Leadership in Latvia: Challenges and Evolution from Democratisation Till Now	111
	<i>Inese Āboliņa, Mārvīne Strazdiņa, Iveta Reinholde</i>	
8.	Truth or Dare? Party Leaders, Institutionalization of Parties and Participation in Executive Power in Lithuania	135
	<i>Mindaugas Jurkynas</i>	
9.	The Role of Political Leaders in the Institutionalization of Political Parties and the Exercise of Executive Power in Poland in the Years 1990–2023	171
	<i>Maciej Hartliński</i>	

10.	The Search for the Savior: Political Leadership in Post-Communist Romania	187
	<i>Alexandra Iancu, Sorina Soare, Claudiu Tufiş</i>	
11.	The Role of Political Leaders in the Institutionalisation of Parties and the Exercise of Executive Power in Serbia in 1990–2023	211
	<i>Jacek Wojnicki, Dominika Mikucka-Wójtowicz</i>	
12.	Presidential Elections as a Search for a Leader? The Introduction of Direct Election of the President in Slovakia and its Consequences for the Stability of Political Parties	241
	<i>Juraj Marušiak</i>	
13.	Political Leaders in Old and New Parties and their Roles in Slovenia (1990–2024)	271
	<i>Alenka Krašovec</i>	
14.	Ukraine: The Permanent Transformation of Political Parties and the Role of Political Leaders in the Process	297
	<i>Paweł Pietnoczka, Oksana Kukuruz</i>	
	List of Contributors	325

The Search for the Savior: Political Leadership in Post-Communist Romania

Alexandra Iancu, Sorina Soare, Claudiu Tufiș

Introduction

The fall of communism in Romania was marked by images of harsh violence, a phenomenon that occasionally resurfaced during the first decade of post-communism (Gallagher 2005). Many accounts of the Romanian Revolution (Roper 2000; Siani-Davis 2005) have emerged, and numerous scholars have questioned whether it is conceptually justified to speak of a *Revolution* in a context characterized by a mixture of popular uprising and a coup originating within the communist regime itself (Verdery and Klingman 1992; Petrescu 2010; Gabanyi et al. 2020). In this regard, we fully agree with Bogdan's (2017: 101) analysis describing the December 1989 events as contradictory, complex, and bloody with a rather narrow scope: "What the revolution of 1989 demonstrates is that the overthrow and execution of a dictator operating under the yoke of communist ideology does not amount to the death of communism, nor does it even reflect a break with communist ideology."

This interpretation becomes even more compelling when considering the smooth continuity in political leadership epitomized by Ion Iliescu. From the early days of post-communism, Iliescu's political trajectory highlighted the blurred frontier between old and new in shaping post-communist Romania (Ionașcu 2008). Although he was in disgrace within Nicolae Ceaușescu's inner circle, he remained part of the communist regime's elite until the very end. On December 22, 1989, he famously read the statement of the newly created Council of the National Salvation Front (CFSN), declaring its purpose to establish democracy, freedom, and dignity for the Romanian people. However, from 1990 to the mid-1990s, authoritarian practices remained prevalent. Beyond the occasional use of physical violence, the literature chronicled widespread disdain for opposition and compromise, diffused nationalist rhetoric, and the stigmatization of minorities as undesirable or unhealthy for the majority of Romanians (Stan 1995; Mungiu-Pippidi 2002; Gallagher 2005; Preda 2005). Moreover, there were significant limitations on freedom of expression and association, as well as constraints on the system of private property.

From the beginning, the complexities and contradictions in Romania's transition to democracy echoed the enduring influence of former communist

elites in shaping the new political landscape. From December 1989 until the first alternation in power in 1996, Ion Iliescu and his close allies maintained an ambiguous stance regarding the communist past. They largely denounced the abuses of Nicolae Ceaușescu and his inner circle while carefully avoiding a total condemnation of the past or the implementation of lustration measures, such as the eighth point of the Timișoara Proclamation. This proclamation, endorsed by various civil society representatives in March 1990, called for a ten-year ban on all former nomenklatura and political police from holding public office, but it was never implemented.

Equally significant is that after the Romanian Communist Party (PCR) was temporarily banned following large street demonstrations on January 12, 1990, the ban was annulled five days later (Ștefănescu 1995: 46–47). The National Salvation Front (FSN), led by Iliescu himself, informally benefited from the material and immaterial resources of the former PCR. Stoica (2004) captures the essence of this Lampedusian change, quoting a successful entrepreneur from the early 1990s: “I was a good communist, and I’ll be an even better capitalist!”. Both Iliescu and the FSN epitomized this trajectory of radical changes without real transformation: communists who never openly renounced their creed, eventually becoming even more efficient post-communist leaders and paving the way for new political parties. From a Freudian perspective, “killing the Communist father” was necessary for Iliescu to create a post-communist order that retained the prominence of a leading national figure.

From the early days of post-communism, Romania favored the direct election of the President. Decree-Law 92/1990 was tailored to fit Iliescu’s profile, establishing a political regime that fostered a strong relationship between the President and the people. This regime adhered to a strictly etymological understanding of democracy, wherein all powers derived from the people and elections were interpreted as plebiscites, leaving limited space for compromise with the opposition. Institutionally, this regime was cemented with a democratic voting system for the Presidency and Parliament. In practice, as illustrated in the first post-communist election in May 1990, the political competition became a plebiscite that Iliescu and his party, the FSN, decisively won. Leadership figures changed over the past three and a half decades. Nevertheless, the predominant presidential leadership pattern has been replicated over time, primarily due to the lack of party institutionalization, organizational frailty, and political instability.

The early years of post-communism forged a long-lasting bond between Romanian citizens and the Presidency. The relationship between Ion Iliescu and the 1990s voters transcended ideological affiliations and emphasized

personal closeness, subsequently echoed by other presidents, notably Traian Băsescu. The presidency inaugurated under Ion Iliescu was associated with a sense of security and attachment that fostered feelings of trust and support among the citizenry. Surveys consistently revealed Romanians have more trust in their presidents than in political parties, a pattern that has not changed since the beginning of the transition (Tufiş 2014). Trust in the presidency peaked in the early 1990s, exceeding 70%, but notably declined to around 20% in both 2000 and 2011, varying in response to the electoral cycle and the political and economic context (Tufiş 2014). The high level of trust in the presidency correlates with consistently higher voter turnout in presidential elections compared to legislative ones, averaging 66.7% for presidential elections from 1990 to 2019, as opposed to 57% for parliamentary elections from 1990 to 2020 (Comşa 2015; IDEA Turnout Database).

The study of leadership within the Romanian context has been extensively explored, spanning a wide range of approaches, from the numerous biographies of Romanian Presidents and Prime Ministers to more scholarly analyses. Early contributions by scholars such as Dobrescu (1997), Radu (2000), Pavel and Huiu (2003), and Preda (2005) have touched upon the topic tangentially, embedding it within broader analyses of democratization processes and party dynamics. Conversely, scholars like Tanasescu (2008), Dima (2009), and Perju (2015) have concentrated on the intricacies of Romania's semi-presidential system, often through a predominantly legalistic lens. In recent years, Dimulescu (2010) and Gherghina and Mişcoiu (2013) have systematically analyzed Romanian political leadership, employing the theoretical frameworks of mainstream party politics literature. Broader analyses also outlined the personalization of electoral politics in Romania (Gheorghişă 2010) or the impact of leadership structures on the decision-making process (i.e., the role of political leaders in shaping European integration (Pridham 2007) or integrity campaigns (Ristei 2010), or how the centralization and autonomy of leadership structures impacted on policies related to ethnic representation policies Medianu 2012).

The complexities of party dynamics have been further elaborated in studies such as those by Chiru and Gherghina (2012), which offer a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms underlying party leader selection. This line of inquiry has been further refined by Gherghina and Volintiru (2019), who examine the interplay between party leaders' personalities and behaviors and the broader evolution of their parties in terms of electoral performance, intra-party cohesion, and membership. Building on these robust foundations, this chapter offers a comprehensive overview of political leadership in Romania, particularly emphasizing the interplay between presidential and party

leadership. By synthesizing and extending existing analyses, this chapter aims to deepen our understanding of the distinctive characteristics and challenges that define leadership within Romania's political landscape.

Drawing on the above, the remainder of this chapter aims to finetune the role of post-communist party leaders in shaping the political system and the consequences for the party system through interactions with the exercise of executive power. In line with the volume's objectives, we will first provide a general overview of Romanian democracy, continue with a focus on the role of party leaders in semi-presidential settings, and then examine their agency in the interactions between and within political parties.

Parties and Democracy in Post-Communist Romania

Schattschneider (1942) famously observed that "modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties". This observation is especially pertinent in the context of post-communist democracies, such as Romania, which emerged from a sultanistic type of communism characterized by the extreme personal presence of the ruler in all elements of governance. The system produced a wide space for unpredictable and despotic intervention by the leader, resulting in precarious pluralism (Linz and Stepan, 1996). Political parties rapidly proliferated in the aftermath of December 1989, though they faced uneven competition against the hegemonic FSN. Political parties were recognized as essential actors in the democratic process as early as December 1989 (Decree Law No. 8/1989). The brief legal text, drafted only nine days after the fall of the communist regime, adopted a permissive regulation of party formation, allowing Romanian parties to operate with minimal requirements for membership and organization.

Considering the adverse conditions under the previous regime, except for FSN, the parties that struggled to emerge in the early days of post-communism were, for the most part, extensions of leaders in search of visibility. These so-called 'sofa' parties had little or no organization and extremely fluid ideological programs, which systematically affected the parties' chances of survival. A partial exception were the so-called historical parties, which had been banned and dismantled by the communist regime starting in the mid-1940s but were nevertheless able to benefit from reservoirs of human and material resources. This was the case with the Christian Democratic National Peasant's Party (PNȚCD), the National Liberal Party (PNL), and the Romanian Social-Democratic Party (PSDSR). The three parties promoted highly visible leaders associated with the anticommunist resistance (e.g., the symbolic figure of the Romanian political

dissidence, the leader of PNȚCD, Corneliu Coposu), seeking, at the same time, higher levels of ideological coherence.

Both advantages and weaknesses accompanied the hegemonic position of FSN in the early 1990s. While the party and its leader could tailor the new regime to their interests, this hegemonic position became a major vulnerability by feeding contestation of its legitimacy, particularly regarding the visible linkages to societal groups and material assets connected to the communist regime. It also led to its isolation in the international arena. In this context, FSN encouraged the proliferation of parties as a show of democratic development. As such, an inclusive electoral system based on proportional representation with closed lists and mechanisms to guarantee ethnic minority representation was adopted. From 1991 on, an increasingly fragmented parliamentary arena radically altered the initial permissive regulation. The pressure for legitimacy exerted on FSN started to be counterbalanced by its primary aim of survival, as the party was confronted with a significant party split and a rampant decline of its hegemonic position within the party system. As a result, the legislator adopted increasingly rigid provisions concerning party membership, organization, and identity. The 1996 and 2003 laws prescribed more restrictive conditions for party registration and activities, and the frequent changing of the party finance legislation as well as the constant modification of the electoral system reflected parliamentary parties' interest in controlling the decision-making process, including the allocation of public resources (Ionașcu 2008; Iancu 2019). By 2015, Romania was considered to have one of the most restrictive models of party laws in the EU, requiring at least 25,000 members with no fewer than 700 persons in at least 18 counties, including Bucharest. In 2015, the legislation was, once again, radically amended, reducing the required number of signatures for a party to be legally registered to a symbolic number of three citizens (Popescu and Soare 2017; Iancu and Soare 2020). Similar to the early 90s, the permissive party regulation prompted the rapid proliferation of a new generation of political parties.

Despite these rather restrictive regulations, the number of political parties competing in elections remained quite high. In the first post-communist elections, 71 electoral competitors registered for the Chamber of Deputies in 1990, and 79 in 1992 (Preda and Soare 2012: 138). The number of parties competing in elections remained high until 2004, with an average of 61.3 lists registered between 1996 and 2004. The number of parties competing for seats in the lower house of Parliament diminished in 2008 (29 competitors), and a similar level was maintained in 2012 (30 competitors). Starting with 2016, the trend reversed, as the number of competitors increased to 35 in 2016 and 41 in 2020 (Collini and Soare 2024).

Romanian parties were born and grew around leaders, with less emphasis on ideas and values. The rigid regulations in effect until 2015 and the need to match the main competitor, the FSN (eventually transformed into the current Social-Democratic Party, PSD), incentivized parliamentary parties to build territorial networks, though with blurred programmatic appeals and pervasive openness to clientelism. However, few avoided party factionalisms and maintained some degree of party reach in territorial units (Iancu and Soare 2020). Consequently, political competitions in Romania are generally not rooted in socio-structural differences and do not distinguish between normative identities (Borbáth 2019).

In terms of party dynamics, the Romanian post-communist democracy has been shaped by a political landscape dominated by the classical post-communist division between the (informal) successor party and an ideologically heterogeneous anti-communist bloc (Ionaşcu 2008). Contrary to the rest of the region, FSN, as a peculiar successor party, hegemonically controlled the regime change and shaped the new norms according to its interests, values, and style. After the 1996 alternation in power, the prospect of joining the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) brought an alignment across the two founding party blocs regarding democracy and foreign policy. This consensus within elites and society activated the so-called integration magnet (Vachudova and Hooghe 2009), increasingly pulling parliamentary parties toward market-liberal economics and cultural liberalism. This alignment cushioned the initial division between parties originating from the communist nebulous and the anti-communist camp, producing a progressively closed party system with predictable competition around government offices and a high degree of regularity in inter-party relations (Casal Bértoa and Enyedi 2021).

For most of the time, the competition was organized bipolarly. In 2008, the Social Democrats and the Liberals found their common interests stronger than their differences, leading to a novel collaboration that has been repeated intermittently. While the center-left has been controlled by PSD, fully integrated into the European and international network of social democratic parties since the 2000s, the center-right has remained more fragmented and open to different clashes among leaders. The current setting on the center-right has been marked by the Democratic Party's realignment in 2005, orchestrated by then-President Traian Băsescu, who abandoned the social-democratic partners in the European Parliament by adhering to the ideological space of the European People's Party. Rebranded as the Democratic Liberal Party (PDL), it became the main competitor to the historical liberal party. In 2016, the two center-right parties merged, maintaining the name of PNL and joining the EPP group at the European level.

Table 10.1 Presidents and Prime Ministers of Romania (1990–2024)

President (Party)	Presidential Term Duration	Prime Minister (Party)	Prime Ministerial Term Duration	Reason for End of Prime Ministerial Term	Government Composition	Parliamentary Majority
Ion Iliescu (FSN)	1990–1992	Petre Roman (FSN)	1990–1991	Resignation	FSN	FSN
		Theodor Stolojan (Indep.)	1991–1992	End of term	FSN + PNL + MER	FSN + PNL
Ion Iliescu (FSN)	1992–1996	Nicolae Văcăroiu (Indep.)	1992–1996	End of term	FDSN (PDSR)	FDSN (PDSR) + PRM + PUNR + PSM
Emil Constantinescu (CDR)	1996–2000	Victor Ciorbea (CDR)	1996–1998	Resignation	CDR + UDMR + USD	CDR + UDMR + USD
		Radu Vasile (PNTCD)	1998–1999	Resignation	CDR + UDMR + USD	CDR + UDMR + USD
		Mugur Isărescu (Indep.)	1999–2000	End of term	CDR + UDMR + USD	CDR + UDMR + USD
Ion Iliescu (PDSR/PSD)	2000–2004	Adrian Năstase (PSD)	2000–2004	End of term	PSD + PUR	PSD + PUR + UDMR

Table 10.1 Presidents and Prime Ministers of Romania (1990–2024) (cont.)

President (Party)	Presidential Term Duration	Prime Minister (Party)	Prime Ministerial Term Duration	Reason for End of Prime Ministerial Term	Government Composition	Parliamentary Majority
Traian Băsescu (DA/PD)	2004–2009	Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu (PNL)	2004–2007	Reshuffling	DA + UDMR + PUR	DA + UDMR + PUR + Ethnic Minority MPs
		Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu (PNL)	2007–2008	End of term	PNL + UDMR	PNL + UDMR + PSD + PC + Ethnic Minority MPs
		Emil Boc (PDL)	2008–2009	Parliament Motion of No Confidence	PDL + PSD	PDL + PSD
Traian Băsescu (PDL)	2009–2014	Emil Boc (PDL)	2009–2012	Resignation	PDL + UDMR + UNPR	PDL + UDMR + UNPR
		Mihai Răzvan Ungureanu (Indep.)	02.2012–04.2012	Parliament Motion of No Confidence	PDL + UDMR + UNPR	PDL + UDMR + UNPR
		Victor Ponta (PSD)	05.2012–12.2012	End of term	USL	USL
		Victor Ponta (PSD)	12.2012–02.2014	Reshuffling	USL + UNPR	USL + UNPR

Table 10.1 Presidents and Prime Ministers of Romania (1990–2024) (cont.)

President (Party)	Presidential Term Duration	Prime Minister (Party)	Prime Ministerial Term Duration	Reason for End of Prime Ministerial Term	Government Composition	Parliamentary Majority
		Victor Ponta (PSD)	03.2014–12.2014	End of term	PSD + PC + UDMR + UNPR	PSD + PC + UDMR + UNPR
Klaus Iohannis (PNL)	2014–2019	Victor Ponta (PSD)	12.2014–11.2015	Resignation	PSD + UNPR + ALDE	PSD + UNPR + ALDE
		Dacian Cioloș (Indep.)	11.2015–01.2017	End of term	Technocratic Government + PSD	PSD + PNL + UDMR + UNPR + Ethnic Minority MPs
		Sorin Grindeanu (PSD)	01.2017–06.2017	Parliament Motion of No Confidence	PSD + ALDE	PSD + ALDE
		Mihai Tudose (PSD)	06.2017–01.2018	Resignation	PSD + ALDE	PSD + ALDE
		Viorica Dăncilă (PSD)	01.2018–11.2019	Parliament Motion of No Confidence	PSD + ALDE	PSD + ALDE

Table 10.1 Presidents and Prime Ministers of Romania (1990–2024) (cont.)

President (Party)	Presidential Term Duration	Prime Minister (Party)	Prime Ministerial Term Duration	Reason for End of Prime Ministerial Term	Government Composition	Parliamentary Majority
Klaus Iohannis (PNL)	2019–2024	Ludovic Orban (PNL)	11.2019–03.2020	Parliament Motion of No Confidence	PNL	PNL + USR + PMP + Ethnic Minority MPs
		Ludovic Orban (PNL)	03.2020–12.2020	End of term	PNL	PNL + USR + PMP + Ethnic Minority MPs + PSD (Pandemic)
		Florin Cîțu (PNL)	12.2020–11.2021	Parliament Motion of No Confidence	PNL + USR-PLUS + UDMR	PNL + USR-PLUS + Ethnic Minority MPs
		Nicolae Ciucă (PNL)	11.2021–06.2023	Government Rotation Agreement with PSD	PNL + PSD + UDMR	PNL + PSD + UDMR + Ethnic Minority MPs
		Marcel Ciolacu (PSD)	06.2023–	-	PSD + PNL	PSD + PNL +

Data source: Updated version of Preda and Soare, 2012 and Iancu and Soare, unpublished.

In 2016, two new parties entered parliament, both founded by post-communist leaders with party and institutional seniority: the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats Party (ALDE), founded by Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu, and the People's Movement Party (PMP), where Traian Băsescu served as honorary president. Additionally, the parliamentary arena has seen the rise of challenger parties since 2012 (Borbáth 2019), including the People's Party Dan Diaconescu (PPDD), the Save Romania Union (USR), and the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR). While all three parties share anti-establishment stances, they fit into different party families: PPDD and AUR combine anti-establishment platforms with populist rhetoric (with AUR also embracing nativist and authoritarian stances), whereas USR pairs anti-corruption stances with a liberal program (Soare and Tufiş 2023; Dragoman 2021).

After 2000, the political competition began to stabilize, leading to the consolidation of the political regime. However, the literature documents significant institutional clashes, such as the 2007 and 2012 referendums on impeaching President Traian Băsescu, which contributed to increased institutional instability (Gherghina and Soare 2016). Following the 1996 alternation in power, PSD maintained a significant presence in government (see Table 1), assuming the position of Prime Minister nine times, with notable leaders including Adrian Năstase, Victor Ponta, Viorica Dăncilă, and Marcel Ciolacu. Despite this success, after the presidency of Ion Iliescu, PSD failed to win any presidential runoff elections since 2004. The merger of the National Liberal Party (PNL) with the former Democratic Party (PD) and Democratic Liberal Party (PDL) significantly enhanced its political relevance, positioning it as a key competitor to the PSD. If we consider the PD/PDL as direct predecessors of the current PNL, the party has provided all Romanian presidents since 2004, each serving two terms. Regarding prime ministerial positions, PNL has led the executive branch eight times, including two terms with a PDL party president, E. Boc. Note also that both Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu and Ludovic Orban led their parties before their appointments as Prime Minister, while Florin Cîțu and Nicolae Ciucă were elected during their tenures.

As Iancu and Soare (2020) illustrate, the organizational strength of political parties directly and independently influences their electoral performance in the long run. Moreover, parties that invested in organizational strength and built strong territorial networks achieved valuable electoral assets and greater party unity in parliament (Borbáth 2019). However, intra-party dynamics often echoed extensive patronage and clientelism, valorizing personal networks of local leaders, which regularly clashed with central leadership, generating conflicts and eventual fissions.

On this ground, pervasive corruption (Iancu 2018) has spread to the highest levels of Romanian politics, with high-ranking politicians, from former Prime Minister Adrian Năstase to the powerful former PSD president Liviu Dragnea, being investigated and condemned over the last decades. This phenomenon has become a relevant aspect of Romania's struggle with corruption, as evidenced by its position among the most corrupt nations in the EU, according to the Transparency International rankings (Transparency International 2023).

Leadership Dynamics: Presidents and Party Politics in Romania

The relationship between Romanian citizens and their Presidents has profoundly shaped inter-party competition and intra-party dynamics. Beyond the foundational aspects discussed earlier, the direct election of the President within Romania's semi-presidential framework endows them with a level of popular legitimacy comparable to the one of the Parliament (Iancu and Tacea 2023). While ultimate political accountability rests with Parliament, the President's pivotal role in appointing the Prime Minister positions them as a central figure in political competition. The President arbitrates relations between opposition and majority factions during government formation, leveraging both formal and informal leadership ties within their party to influence policy and governance (Iancu and Tacea 2023).

According to Article 81 of the 2003 Constitution, Romania elects its President through a direct vote in a two-round majority system for a five-year term (previously four years under the 1991 Constitution). Since the inaugural elections of 1990, no president has secured an initial round majority, requiring runoff elections between the top two contenders in order to win. Despite consistent participation of PSD candidates in runoffs since 2000, none have managed to win. The Constitution limits Presidents to two terms, though Ion Iliescu's unique circumstance allowed him a third term (2000–2004), exploiting a loophole in the 1992 Constitution (Soare 2015).

Presidential leadership in Romania often transcends procedural duties to encompass substantive impacts on government agendas, especially during administrations with independent or outsider Prime Ministers. For instance, President Băsescu was able to actively shape economic policies and administrative reforms while his ally, Emil Boc, was Prime Minister (Iancu 2019). Presidents such as Ion Iliescu and Traian Băsescu strategically used their positions to nominate cabinets and steer policy directions, reflecting their party affiliations and strategic interests (Ionaşcu 2008; Iancu and Tacea 2023). During cohabitation periods, when the President and the Prime Minister have

different political backgrounds, the President's role as a mediator assumes pivotal importance. Despite constitutional constraints, the President's direct popular mandate often facilitates effective coalition management and policy negotiations (Iancu 2019). Instances during the Tariceanu II (2007) and Ponta I (2012) administrations underscore the President's efforts to mitigate tensions and foster cooperative governance through ad hoc institutional agreements.

Romanian Presidents have exhibited varying levels of leadership activism in response to political instability and governance challenges. Even during weaker presidencies, such as Emil Constantinescu's tenure, Presidents wielded substantial influence in resolving executive impasses and facilitating technocratic solutions (Ionașcu 2008). However, as Presidents near the end of their terms, their sway over party dynamics and governmental decisions often diminishes, influenced by electoral cycles and internal party conflicts (Ionașcu 2008, 2019).

Furthermore, Romanian Presidents have bolstered their leadership profiles by actively chairing governmental sessions. Empowered by Article 87 of the Constitution, Presidents participate in and preside over government meetings deliberating on matters of national importance. Dima (2009) documents that Emil Constantinescu utilized this prerogative three times, Ion Iliescu seven times, and Traian Băsescu ten times during his initial term. Băsescu notably increased his use of this authority during political tension or crises, such as in 2007 and 2012, where he convened sessions to address economic downturns and implement austerity measures. Since assuming office in 2014, Klaus Iohannis has also chaired several government sessions, albeit less frequently than Băsescu. Notably, Iohannis chaired sessions in response to the tragic fire and subsequent resignation of Prime Minister Victor Ponta, ensuring governmental stability and coordinating the national response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, Romanian Presidents have leveraged their partisan affiliations to orchestrate majority coalitions, thereby averting periods of cohabitation. Traian Băsescu exemplified this political strategy following the 2004 general elections, where his victory dismantled the PSD alliance with the Conservative Party (PC). This defection enabled the Justice and Truth Alliance (DA), comprising PNL and PD, to secure a last-minute parliamentary majority, including the Hungarian minority (UDMR) and other minority group representatives.

Despite constitutional prohibitions against party membership or holding other public or private offices (Article 84 (1)), all Presidents of Romania have actively campaigned and promoted their preferred parties in local and legislative elections. All Romanian Presidents have often been actively involved in party politics before their election, bringing significant experience in public offices and political institutions. Importantly, the Presidency does not

necessarily mark the end of a political career either. Ion Iliescu's trajectory is particularly illustrative in this regard. Despite setbacks, including defeats in the 1996 elections, Iliescu maintained his leadership within the PDSR, later rebranded as PSD. His enduring influence was evident in his reelection as President in 2000, followed by strategic positioning of loyalists within the party hierarchy, including Adrian Năstase's ascendancy to Prime Minister and PSD leadership (Ionaşcu 2008).

Emil Constantinescu, Romania's second President, took a different path. He did not pursue party leadership but instead occupied a coordinative role within an electoral alliance before the 1996 elections. His presidency, marked by social tensions and economic challenges, revealed limitations in mediating coalition disputes and intra-party dynamics, leading him to eschew a second term. Post-presidency, Constantinescu focused on civil society's engagement, aligning with numerous national and international NGOs.

Traian Băsescu, Romania's third President, diverged significantly by assuming leadership of the Democratic Party (PD) after 2000, subsequently transforming it into the Democratic Liberal Party (PDL) and forging alliances with other political forces to challenge the dominance of the PSD. His presidency was characterized by high levels of political activism and a direct role in party politics, influencing internal party dynamics and governmental decisions (Ionaşcu 2008; 2019). Following his tenure, Băsescu remained engaged in Romanian politics, initially within the PMP, a party he helped establish, then assumed the party leadership, eventually preferring an honorary position. Most recently he reemerged as a political commentator, regularly involved in talk shows (Iancu 2019). During the 2019–2024 mandate, he was also a member of the European Parliament.

Although the second mandate of Klaus Iohannis was in its last year during the writing of this chapter, the last years of his presidency have been marked by extensive discussions in the public space regarding his post-presidency career, partly fueled by his bid for leading NATO. This would indicate that Iohannis is looking for a different path, by comparison to the other Romanian presidents, one that would continue his career at the international level.

All in all, the engagement of Romanian Presidents in party politics after their terms reflects varied trajectories shaped by electoral outcomes and personal ambitions. Despite the constitutional prohibition against holding party membership during their tenure, Presidents have played decisive roles in shaping party directions and electoral strategies, contributing to the evolving political landscape of Romania. In conclusion, the presidency in Romania stands as a critical nexus of political power, blending constitutional authority with personal leadership and partisan engagement. Despite inherent complexities

and periodic challenges, Romanian Presidents have consistently influenced government formation, coalition governance, and national policies, underscoring their enduring impact on the country's political trajectory. Their leeway has been amplified by increasing governmental instability and portfolio volatility (Iancu 2019). For most of the post-communist period, presidential continuity was at odds with the disruptive governmental scene. Note also that all Presidents of Romania have been male, with only one female candidate advancing to a runoff. The average age of Presidents at the commencement of their terms is 59.3 years, with Traian Băsescu as the youngest President elected.

Table 10.2 Presidents of Romania (December 1989–2024)

President	Presidential Term Duration	Age at Start	Party Leadership before Presidential Election	Post-Mandate Activity
Ion Iliescu	1990–1992	60	Yes	Reelected President
Ion Iliescu	1992–1996	62	No (incumbent)	PDSR President
Emil Constantinescu	1996–2000	57	Yes (CDR)	Withdrew from political life
Ion Iliescu	2000–2004	70	Yes	Senator PSD and head of the PSD parliamentary group. Honorary president of the PSD
Traian Băsescu	2004–2009	53	Yes	Reelected
Traian Băsescu	2009–2014	58	No (incumbent)	Honorary President of PMP, Senator PMP
Klaus Iohannis	2014–2019	55	Yes	Reelected
Klaus Iohannis		60	No (incumbent)	--

Source: own elaboration

Party Leaders and Party Politics

Analyzing the dynamics of party leadership within Romania's recent legislative period (2020–2024) necessitates exploring leadership changes, intra-party conflicts, and their impacts on internal party cohesion and external political

interactions. While presidential leadership has been associated either with changes in the dominant faction within the party of the president or, more generally, with informally affecting internal party competitions (Iancu and Soare, unpublished), party leadership in Romania is primarily intertwined with the position of Prime Minister, granting significant leverage in managing inter-party relations and parliamentary dynamics. This interconnection underscores the crucial role of party leadership in shaping government policies, coalition strategies, and interactions with the President. It also varies according to long-term party practices and stability. Throughout the 2020–2024 legislative term, leadership changes within key parties such as PNL and USR have been pivotal in navigating complex institutional landscapes (see Table 3).

Table 10.3 Party Leaders in Romania (2020–2024)

Party	Party Leader	Terms in Office
PSD	Marcel Ciolacu	August 22, 2020–present
PNL	Ludovic Orban	June 17, 2017–September 25, 2021
	Florin Cîțu	September 25, 2021–April 10, 2022
	Nicolae Ciucă	April 10, 2022–present
USR	Dan Barna	October 28, 2017–October 1, 2021
	Dacian Cioloș	October 1, 2021–February 7, 2022
	Cătălin Drulă	July 16, 2022–June 10, 2024
	Cătălin Drulă	July 1, 2022–June 10, 2024
	Elena Lasconi	June 26, 2024–
AUR	George Simion and Claudiu Tarziu	September 19, 2019–March 27, 2022
	George Simion	March 27, 2022–present
UDMR	Kelemen Hunor	February 22/23, 2019–September 17, 2021
	Kelemen Hunor	September 17, 2021–April 28–29, 2023
	Kelemen Hunor	April 28–29, 2023–present

Source: Farcaș (2024)

Apart from the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR), all major Romanian parties have demonstrated considerable leadership volatility. This trend has been particularly pronounced among center-right parties over the past four years. The PNL has experienced frequent leadership changes during this period. Under Ludovic Orban's leadership until September 2021, PNL focused on consolidating its influence within a complex coalition government.

However, internal disagreements over policy priorities and leadership styles led to several changes. Florin Cîțu took over the party leadership from September 2021 until April 2022, followed by Nicolae Ciucă. These transitions highlight PNL's adaptive strategies in response to electoral outcomes and internal power struggles, as well as its ambitions regarding its role in coalition dynamics and governance priorities. Similarly, the USR has experienced rapid leadership turnover. Leaders such as Dacian Cioloș, Cătălin Drulă, and, more recently, Elena Lasconi, have successively assumed leadership roles. Given the party's relatively recent formation, these changes reflect both internal debates over the party's identity and an ongoing process of institutionalization.

External factors, including coalition politics and electoral performance, have significantly influenced leadership dynamics within both PNL and USR. In Romania, coalition negotiations and strategic realignments often necessitate leadership changes to adapt to shifting alliances and policy priorities. For example, PNL's strategies under different leaders have impacted its position within the government and influenced its legislative agendas. Leadership changes also underscore the political challenges of maintaining internal cohesion and navigating complex political landscapes.

Analyzing key leaders across various parties offers insights into their strategies, impacts on coalition dynamics, and governance approaches. Marcel Ciolacu, who assumed leadership of the PSD in August 2020 amidst internal strife, sought to unify the party and enhance its role within coalition dynamics. His leadership has been characterized by efforts to address ideological divergences within the party while positioning PSD as a significant player in policy formulation and legislative interactions. Notably, Ciolacu has focused on rebuilding connections with European partners following Liviu Dragnea's tumultuous presidency and legal issues. Ciolacu's tenure has influenced PSD's stance on economic reforms and social policies, shaping its governance strategies and coalition interactions, including collaborations in the 2024 European Parliament elections.

Ludovic Orban's ascent to the presidency of the PNL was marked by his strategic navigation through various internal party roles since the early 1990s, underscoring his influential positioning within the organization. His leadership was directed towards consolidating PNL's standing within different governmental coalitions. However, Orban's tenure was characterized by significant internal conflicts and shifts in policy agendas, which presented notable challenges. Substantial political crises, including coalition breakdowns and governmental reshuffles, marked following Orban, Florin Cîțu's leadership of PNL. These events critically impacted the party's stability and its electoral strategies. Cîțu's tenure involved efforts to stabilize PNL's position amid ongoing

difficulties in maintaining coalition cohesion, influencing the party's role in policy implementation and its strategic negotiations. Nicolae Ciucă, who succeeded Cîțu, continued to focus on coalition dynamics and governance stability. He confronted electoral setbacks and internal party challenges while striving to uphold PNL's political influence.

Hunor Kelemen's leadership of UDMR emphasized stability amidst coalition negotiations and minority rights advocacy. His tenure underscored UDMR's strategic positioning in Romanian politics, balancing internal cohesion with effective representation of Hungarian minority interests and influencing coalition dynamics.

Overall, both established and emerging parties have faced significant leadership challenges. Newer parties have grappled with intensified intra-party competition and the complexities of ideological clarification and factionalism. Leadership transitions within the USR, under Dacian Cioloș and Cătălin Drulă, have reflected internal power struggles and strategic realignments. Their leadership periods have influenced USR's stance as an opposition party, its ideological coherence, and its voter support amid competition with other political entities. Cioloș and Drulă were tasked with maintaining party discipline and strategic relevance while differentiating USR's platform within Romania's political landscape.

George Simion's leadership in AUR highlighted the party's rapid rise driven by populist themes, online campaigning strategies, and intensive canvassing (Soare and Tufiş 2023). Despite internal controversies, Simion's leadership shaped AUR's emergence as a significant political force, influencing electoral outcomes and public discourse on governance transparency and national identity. Nevertheless, Simion also had to cope, on the one hand, with the party's labeling as an extremist party and, on the other hand, with the political deflection of one of the party's notorious spokespersons, the Romanian senator Diana Șoșoacă. Her political deflection to the more radicalized SOS Party Romania helped SOS to gain EP representation.

Regarding the competitiveness of the intraparty procedures for candidate selection, the dynamics varied significantly across different parties. While Kelemen Hunor and Nicolae Ciucă faced no opposition in the leadership contests detailed in Table 3, other party leadership elections exhibited varying levels of competition. According to Farcas (2024), Marcel Ciolacu secured his position with a substantial majority, receiving 93.5% of the votes against Eugen Teodorovici. In contrast, the intra-party elections within the PNL demonstrated a more competitive landscape. Ludovic Orban achieved 78.7% of the votes in June 2017 against Cristian Bușoi, while Florin Cîțu won with 60.2% in 2021 against Orban. The most intense intra-party competition was observed

within the USR, where Dacian Cioloș narrowly won with 50.9% of the vote against Dan Barna. Subsequent internal elections saw Cătălin Drulă elected with 71.3% of the ballots amidst a field of five other candidates. In the aftermath of the 2024 European Parliament elections, Elena Lasconi confirmed her leadership with 68.1% of the votes against three challengers. Finally, in the 2022 contest for the presidency of the AUR, despite the presence of another candidate, Simion secured the leadership with a commanding 94.2% of the votes.

The period from 2020 to 2024 witnessed significant leadership dynamics within Romania's political parties, reflecting diverse strategic orientations, intra-party conflicts, and their implications for governance and policymaking. Analytically examining party leadership across PSD, PNL, USR, AUR, and UDMR underscores the complex interplay between internal party dynamics, coalition politics, and interactions with governmental institutions and the President.

Conclusions

Paraphrasing Burke, Romanian political parties can be largely characterized as bodies of individuals united primarily to promote a leader with presidential aspirations rather than a group committed to shared principles and a cohesive agenda. Unsurprisingly, political parties in Romania have been plagued by intra-party conflicts, often leading to the creation of new parties. Consequently, political parties have remained among the least trusted institutions by Romanian citizens. The conflictual relationship between the President and governmental parties has exacerbated instability, as exemplified during the mandates of President Traian Băsescu. This instability helps explain why Romanian voters frequently changed their preferences from one election to another, generating high levels of electoral volatility (Collini and Soare 2024). This volatility was particularly pronounced in the first decade of post-communism; although it declined sharply in the 2004 elections, subsequent elections saw increasing volatility again, with significant vote shifts among established parties (Gherghina 2015; Collini and Soare 2024).

Overall, the Romanian post-communist regime was tailored to fit the figure of the first post-communist leader, Ion Iliescu. The institutional choice naturally leaned towards semi-presidentialism, with the President as the leading figure. The political practices of Iliescu first established this custom and were later reinforced by constitutional court rulings rather than constitutional codification in 1991 and 2003 (Dima 2014; Iancu 2019). The Romanian dyarchy

was fine-tuned by Iliescu's role as the first popular and popularly elected fixed-term president. The existence of a Prime Minister responsible to Parliament was initially seen as of secondary importance. The balancing act foreseen in a bicephalous system, where the heads are unequal and oscillate between themselves (Sartori 1997: 123), was deemed highly improbable. This was directly linked to FSN's birth as a presidential party, a platform designed to endorse Iliescu's candidacy, spread his message at the territorial level, and provide parliamentary support (and discipline) for guiding the executive agenda. As a result, all post-communist candidates for the Romanian Presidency were geared to become guiding figures of parties organized to allow them to seize the executive branch and represent their political and policy stances. After the 1990's plebiscite, the degree of competitiveness of the presidential elections increased over time, leaving little room for independent candidates. While political parties formally control the processes of nominating presidential candidates, Romanian Presidents have been largely independent in managing their mandates, with notable exceptions during moments of potential tension such as impeachment or re-election efforts.

In terms of party politics, the centrality of the party leader has been seen as one of the explanations for two phenomena associated with Romanian democracy: government instability, reflected in both limited cabinet lifespans and significant reshuffles, and regular intra-party conflicts that led to the formation of numerous new parties, albeit with limited electoral success. Despite these challenges, Romania was considered to have a relatively institutionalized party system shaped by a bipolar logic, opposing the social-democrat-led pole to the liberal one and staging the main competitors for the Presidency. Starting in 2008, increased innovation in the composition of governmental majorities was counterbalanced by the fact that the constellation of new parties that proliferated over time had little chance of being elected in two consecutive elections and becoming significant governmental players (Casal Bértoa and Enyedi 2021).

The dynamics of Romanian party leadership are crucial in navigating contemporary politics in Romania. Leaders often wield substantial influence over their parties' strategies, coalition formations, and government policies, thereby impacting the stability of governmental majorities. The frequent reshuffles and the emergence of new parties can be attributed in part to leadership disputes and divergent visions within parties. While this has injected dynamism into Romanian politics, it has also contributed to a fragmented political landscape where party alliances and electoral outcomes remain fluid. Starting in 2008, despite increased innovation in forming governmental majorities, the proliferation of new parties has generally failed to secure sustained electoral

support across consecutive elections. This has limited their ability to transform into formidable governmental players, maintaining a semblance of stability within Romania's party system but also underscoring the challenges of leadership cohesion and intra-party unity.

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