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**Destination Cotroceni  
The Presidential Elections in Romania  
1990-2014**

Summary of the doctoral dissertation

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### **KEY WORDS:**

politics, semi-presidentialism, electoral campaign, slogan, propaganda, democracy, elections, liberalism, socialism, social democracy, transition, party newspaper, media, domestic politics, foreign policy

The revolution of 1989 marked the beginning of a new stage in Romania's history, and the challenges to which the Romanian society has been subjected to, consisted mainly in ensuring the transition to a democratic system with functional institutions. In this thesis, along with the analysis of the presidential elections, we try to determine the temporal limits of the end of the process of transition to democracy, starting from the political transformations and continuing with the achievements of the Romanian state at the external level. Along with other Central and Eastern European states which shared the common fate of communism for half a century, the new democracies benefited from the contribution of political elites in institutional construction, while their functioning was legitimized by the daily decisions of politicians and was approved by the people's vote.

Because the communist society was a closed one, even if the idea of a socialist camp was used adequately in many historiographical works, the nature of the regime and the social realities were not accessible to the population. As this was the framework for the first free elections after 1989, just five months after the collapse of the communist regime, we planned to carry out a prospective analysis of the electoral campaign and from it to follow the way the next presidential election evolved. Research objectives include identifying the extent to which the internal context has influenced campaigning, starting from the topics addressed by candidates and continuing to adapt the propaganda mechanisms to impregnate the collective mentality. In addition, we intend to determine the elements that are specific for organizing elections, to establish the main instruments (speech, slogan, posters, billboards) through which the political programs were promoted, the diachronic analysis of the presidential elections. An important part will be dedicated to establishing the role of the media in the election of a candidate, the extent to which the doctrine of the party was respected in the election, respectively identifying the convergence and divergence points of the two.

The present scientific paper starts from the premise that the presidential election was the type of poll that gave rise to the greatest interest from the public, so that the political attention was high, compared to the local, parliamentary or European Parliamentary elections. We also believe that internal and external policy issues have been the main topics for debate, and the candidates only on a few occasions raised also major public issues. Since the Western political model was the one that has been adopted as a benchmark, it has been constantly attempted to connect the Romanian political system to local strategies specific to other countries in terms of communication and promoting of candidates. In Romania, the political debates were followed with interest, whether live, on television, radio and more recently on the Internet, or indirectly through messages sent between candidates through the same

channels of communication. The paper empirically examines the influence of the traditional and new media in the increase of the effectiveness of the dialogue between the political system and the electorate, respectively the development of a relationship between civic involvement of citizens, the use of technologies in communication and the democratic process. We preferred not to present a general hypothesis, in order not to limit the analysis of pursuing a single aspect, but to allow for more coordinates, adaptable to each round of elections.

The structure of this thesis follows a single red thread of themes, each chapter having a similar structure, and the subchapters, which represent the analysis of a candidate's campaign or another segment of the electoral confrontation, follow the same information: candidate and political family, campaign strategy, public actions, elements of image, speech, ending with a partial conclusion. We believe that this form is appropriate because it makes order in the complexity of an electoral campaign in which people are overwhelmed by information and the media is taken over by political issues. For common people, there may be a certain difficulty in separating unimportant topics from those required for public debate and in identifying the factors that influence the conduct of the campaign.

The first chapter, refers to the elections of May 20, 1990, intends to be more than a simple analysis of the electoral campaign, but rather a radiography of the Romanian society in the first half of the post-Revolutionary year. It refers to the construction of the party system, the functioning of state institutions at the beginning of the transition period towards democracy and the social tensions. From this perspective, the subject of the campaign is complemented by information about foreign observers who oversaw the process of voting and how political confrontation was reflected in the media. The main themes of the campaign focused on the state of the national economy and the projections for the future, the consolidation of market economy by supporting the private initiative, solving the problems in industry and agriculture, the legacy of communism in political life and the moral responsibility of the leaders of the old regime.

The second chapter deals with the presidential election campaign of September 27 and October 11, 1992, which took place within the legal framework established by the 1991 Constitution and the new electoral law. As social and political developments took place, opposition parties began to unite their forces, and the political scowl became increasingly diverse. After a clear victory of Ion Iliescu two years ago, his position was challenged by the new coalition that supported Emil Constantinescu, which led to the organization of a second round. This time, the topics debated in the campaign referred to relations with foreign entities,

such as the IMF and the US, through the most favored nation clause, governmental responsibility for mining, corruption and fairness of elections, defining the concept of national consensus for country projects and the choice of a clear foreign policy direction.

The elections of November 1 and 17, 1996, the subject of the third chapter, took place after another four years of FDSN / PDSR governance, during which the economy did not make the expected progress backed by a "reform without social costs". The start of the campaign was in line with the "Snagov Spirit", which meant that joining NATO and the EU were chosen as the main foreign policy objectives, with a first step in the Romanian-Hungarian reconciliation, but at the end of the campaign the party in power evoked again the danger of territorial autonomy based on ethnic criteria, the danger of changing the form of government, nationalizing houses, etc. The chapter also seeks to transform the way the campaign unfolds in the media through the appearance of private televisions and the diversification of daily newspapers.

The fourth chapter follows the November 26 and December 10, 2000 elections, which proved to be the confrontation between Romania's Euro-Atlantic path and external isolation. This election campaign was characterized by the fragmentation of the ruling coalition through the participation of four candidates supported by the parties they also shaped and President Emil Constantinescu's refusal to run for a second term. It was the only round of elections in which no debate took place between the candidates before the second round, the reason being invoked the extremist character of the program promoted by Corneliu Vadim Tudor.

The fifth chapter is dedicated to the elections of November 28 and December 12, 2004. The four years of Adrian Năstase's government marked the first period of economic growth after many years of recession, as well as foreign policy successes represented by NATO membership and the conclusion of negotiations for integration into the EU. However, the period was impregnated with allegations of corruption, abuse of power and the transformation of the PSD into a state-party. The opposition materialized in the form of an alliance, which ultimately supported Traian Băsescu's candidacy as president. The themes mainly consisted in accusations against the party in power, such as the fight against corruption and the independence of the judiciary, the attributions of the president following the 2003 revision of the Constitution and election fraud.

The elections of November 22 and December 6, 2009 are discussed in the sixth chapter, following the same points as for the previous rounds of elections. We want to highlight the differences between the programs of the main candidates being a three-way race, and the way the political struggle between them evolved. Throughout the campaign, there

have been addressed issues such as the interference of media business people in politics, justice and the fight against corruption, national security and relations with Russia, the economic crisis and measures to mitigate its effects.

On November 2 and 16, 2014, the last presidential elections in the present paper took place in the context of the rupture of the political alliance that has held the governing and parliamentary majority since 2012. The most frequently mentioned themes were the support for the anti-corruption institutions, the adoption of a law on amnesty and pardon, the problems of the candidates, with incompatibility in the case of Klaus Iohannis, respectively with the entities empowered to award scientific titles in the case of Victor Ponta.

In the last chapter, we want to analyze a series of topics already dealt with in each chapter, but placed in a unitary interpretation, so that the conclusions allow the determination of some common features from a diachronic point of view. In addition, an interpretation such as the one we propose provides an overview on topics such as the evolution of the domestic and foreign policy promoting candidates.

Following the conduct of the seven rounds of presidential elections, we find the development of political themes and messages according to the historical context in which they took place, of the internal and international social and economic particularities. In each case, some of the directions emerged from the candidates' strategies, some influenced by independent factors, others built by the electoral staff themselves, in order to respond as much as possible to the communication objectives assumed by the candidates.

From this point of view, the two decades and a half of the free exercise of the right to vote can be delimited over two major periods: between 1990 and 2000, the main concerns of politicians were related to the country's economic status, the term "reform" being mentioned most often in the electoral campaigns. This circumstance was due to the legacy of a communist bankrupt economic system and the costs of transition. While the left-wing party opted to promote a gradual transformation, right-wing parties, especially re-established historical parties, preferred to return as quickly as possible to realities that would abandon any form of inheritance of the old regime.

Between 2004 and 2014, the political scene was dominated by two parties: PSD and PD, with certain adjustments, alliances, but direct FSN successors after the separation of Roman and Iliescu groups since February 1992. Within the three electoral cycles of this period, Social Democrats continued to promote a social agenda focused on supporting disadvantaged groups, while the newly-oriented party to the political right relied on the anti-corruption messages.



Over the past 25 years, electoral campaigns have become almost entirely based on political marketing, that is, proposing a product - in our case a candidate, along with its political agenda - and persuading people to "buy" it. Thus, as electoral practices have been refined and staffs have been formed, these groups being the ones who have to promote the candidate by television advertisements, rallies with the electorate and preparing him for confrontations with other candidates, but also by other means of propaganda. The Western models of an electoral campaign cannot be fully applied, and it is necessary to adapt the mechanisms of persuasion to the type of public they are addressing specifically their message. In the case of Romania, it was observed the preference for traditions, work and the idea of collectivities, all of these implemented through slogans. Although apparently every person enrolled in the race for the position of President of Romania started with equal chances, there were visible disparities from the beginning of the campaign among the public persons, those who held positions within the executive or legislature and the independents, or representatives of parties without parliamentary presence. The media has a significant contribution to this situation, because its purpose is to sell, and the public is particularly interested in the known figures.

Thus, for each election, we talked about two or three main candidates, these being in fact those designed from the outset with the main chances and those who were given the greatest attention. There were many instances when the televisions wanted to hold debates only among them, excluding the worst ranked as it happened in 1996, during the „Candidates Round” show and in 2009, when separate debates were projected between the favorites and the low-profile candidates. Some politicians preferred this practice if they were a part of the first platoon because they acquired the upward side of the collective mentality, and it also meant saving a resource because they were not supposed to answer the uncomfortable questions of other politicians.

The media played in many cases the role of an electoral judge, which is why politicians wished to subordinate it. As we have seen, between the beginning and the end of the analyzed period there is a certain symmetry determined by the existence of party newspapers in the first case and of the party televisions in the second.

Looking retrospectively, the paper aims to complete the historiography of the problem of the transition to democracy in Romania after 1989, putting the presidential elections in the front. We consider them the essential landmark of the transformation of the Romanian society for two decades and a half. The impact left by the Romanian presidents so far has been an important one, as evidenced by the "Iliescu era" or the "Băsescu regime", formulas used in

public space referring to the times they were in the country's leadership. This attitude was tributary to a state of fact due to historical evolution, in which the population looked up to the leaders.

The possibility offered by the electoral law of March 1990 of choosing directly the person with the highest position in the state has had an impact on the responsibility of the people, who participate directly in what political analysts call "participatory democracy". The higher interest in presidential elections compared to parliamentary elections can be explained by this key understanding, as the representation of the president is considered more important than that of the PM. Another reason is the personification of the presidential election, the political show that it offers and its coverage in the media.