



## The radical right in Romania: Political party evolution and the distancing of Romania from Europe

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### ABSTRACT

Increasingly, European radical right parties have capitalized on citizen dissatisfaction with the European Union institutions. As a new EU member, to what extent have supporters of the radical right in Romania turned away from Europe? I evaluate this question by tracking the evolution of radical right parties in Romania. I find that supporters of the radical right in Romania are generally do not support or do not trust the EU. The Greater Romania Party is well-positioned to expand its electoral base in the foreseeable future if it can widen its appeal to those Romanians who are ambivalent to the EU.

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The European Union accession process was instrumental in facilitating Romanian economic and political reform during the post-communist period (Noutcheva and Bechev, 2008: 140; Phinmore, 2002: 233). EU membership offers Romanians citizens many opportunities for continued economic and political development. Deepened integration may even produce psychological benefits among Romanians who have long felt marginalized by the West (Ratesh, 1991: 151; Schimmelfennig, 2003: 183). For Romanians, membership to the EU provides a powerful symbol of acceptance.

Despite positive projections for Romania, most new entrants experience hardships to some sectors of society due to EU membership (Ingham and Ingham, 2002: 12). For example, Central European members have undergone major agricultural dislocations (Bojnec, 2007). EU accession promises mounting and painful adjustments as full integration unfolds for at least some Romanian citizens. In response, European institutions can become a lightning rod for criticism through which citizen's dissatisfaction is channeled (Cichowski, 2000: 1271; Moravcsik and Vachudova, 2003: 54). Under these conditions, parties of the radical right may exploit citizen disillusionment with the EU in the post-accession era (Vachudova, 2008: 875–876).

Since the overthrow of Ceausescu in 1989, observers of the Romanian political system have cautioned that the radical right poses a significant threat to democracy. In the wake of the political and economic upheaval, Tismaneanu (1992: 301) noted that, "Nationalism thus can easily gather momentum by offering a clear-cut, utterly simplistic explanation for all individual and social ills." Regarding EU accession within this context, Verdery (1991: 318) suggested that calls for Romania to "return to Europe" would elicit a strong reactionary response drawing on nationalist myths constructed and reinforced under the communist regime.

The 2000 national elections seemed to be a realization of this anti-democratic response. Not only did Corneliu Vadim Tudor of the Greater Romania Party (PRM) enter the presidential run-off with 28 percent of the first-round vote but the PRM won 84 seats in the Chamber of Deputies to become the leading opposition party. At the time, Tudor and his party had been the only openly Euro-skeptical party of relevance in the Romanian party system (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2001: 16–18). Alina Mungiu-Pippidi (2001: 249) asserted at the time that populist appeals from the radical right had become the only political force able to counter the former communist bloc lead by Ion Iliescu. Tom Gallagher noted further that,

Indeed, it should not be hard for an anti-system party like the PRM to depict Euro-Atlantic integration as a form of modernization imposed from the outside which is alien to Romania's true needs, a discourse which enjoyed powerful

appeal before 1945 when parliamentary democracy was described in these terms by the radical right (Gallagher, 2005: 340–341).

Tucker et al. (2002: 570) highlight the importance of a party's stance toward the EU to its electoral fortunes demonstrating that "post-communist citizens use their opinions about EU membership to direct their support toward particular political parties" despite the presence or absence of that party in the European Parliament.<sup>1</sup> The June 2009 election of PRM members to the European Parliament reinforces this point.

In this analysis, I evaluate the degree to which supporters of Romanian radical right parties favor or oppose the European Union. I concentrate on two radical right parties in Romania: the Greater Romania Party (PRM) and the New Generation Party-Christian Democratic (PNG-CD). Public opinion polls show these to be the two relevant Romanian radical right parties. Both assume the exclusive, ethnic-based nationalism characteristic of radical right parties despite some differences on economic policy. These two parties are emblematic of the radical right in the Romanian political system.

First, I provide an overview of the radical right in Romania concentrating on the fortunes of the PRM and the PNG-CD. I then assess the demographic characteristics among their supporters through individual level data analysis. I conclude with a discussion of the prospects for the radical right to seize control over anti-EU issues and stake out new claims within the Romanian political party system using survey data from 2000 through 2009. The analysis sheds light on the potential for the Romanian radical right to engender support through emphasizing an anti-EU message. More broadly, the discussion contributes to our understanding of how the radical right is evolving among new entrants to the European Union.

## Defining the radical right

Ramet (1999: 13) has defined the radical right as a particular brand of "organized intolerance" that refuses "to allow that alternative ideas have a right to exist." However, the nature of this intolerance requires further definition. Ideologically, radical right parties in Europe demonstrate wide variance across space and time (Bulgaric, 2008: 192; Norris, 2005). Indeed, the term, *radical right*, is somewhat misleading since these parties do not occupy a single space on the traditional class-based left–right ideological dimension commonly found among European political parties (Kitschelt and McGann, 1995: 89–90). Instead, radical right parties are "a collection of nationalist, authoritarian, xenophobic, and extremist parties that are defined by the common characteristic of populist ultra-nationalism" (Minkenberg and Perrineau, 2007: 30). These shared components interact and reinforce one another so that raising the banner of nationalism to defend the national community justifies limits on democratic freedoms in favor of paternalistic forms of decision-making (Kitschelt and McGann, 1995: 14). In this respect, they emphasize anti-egalitarian and anti-universalist ideas over cosmopolitanism (Ignazi, 2003: 22; Kitschelt, 1992: 14).

Elements of populism are also incorporated into the radical right programs. Charismatic leaders paint society as divided and conflict-ridden: the "people" against the corrupted elite or against an enemy within (Mudde, 2007: 24–25). Framing the polity as "us against them" defines exclusive networks of access to political resources that underpins nationalist imagery. Thus, the politics of exclusion through identity politics, authoritatively implemented, unites the European radical right across space and time.

European integration has emerged as an important issue for radical right parties. On the whole, they are skeptical and see the EU as an overly-bureaucratic and elitist encroachment on the national community (Hainsworth, 2008: 82). This plays well to the politics of exclusion and the pitting of the national community against a menacing, outside force.

In post-communist societies, the radical right shares the definitional features of other European radical right parties. Commonly, their brand of paternalistic nationalism blends with the authoritarian tendencies of the former communist states (Mudde, 2005). Romania's legacy of national communism under the Ceaușescu regime made an easy marriage between leftist economic appeals and political intolerance among radical right leaders, many of whom had been loyal to the former dictator (Gallagher, 2005: 269–70). As a product of austerity resulting from the Romanian command economy, exclusionary mechanisms such as ethno-national identity became a commodity through which cultural intellectuals gained and maintained status. Cultural-political conflict sharpened arousing:

the opposition of cultural producers whose formerly secure and protected situation had suddenly become vulnerable. (The presence of poets and critics in the post-Ceausescu government was in part a consequence.) Because their opponents and the Party leadership phrased the struggle in terms of national identity, and because of their own commitment to the national idea, these persons too were compelled to argue their alternative values in terms of what was best for the Nation. The result was to reinforce the significance of the Nation at the center of culture, in the politics of intellectual production, and, consequently, in the discursive space of ideology and legitimation. (Verderly, 1991, 304).

The early 1990's saw a proliferation of rightist parties and groups in Romania (Bugajski, 2000: 75–81). The rivaling PUNR and PRM, led by Gheorghe Funar and Corneliu Vadim Tudor respectively, gained the most attention and enjoyed some electoral success. Both the Greater Romania Party (PRM) and the Party of Romanian National Unity (PUNR) subscribed to

<sup>1</sup> The case of Poland is instructive. In 2007, two radical right parties (*Samoobrona* and the League of Polish Families) that were junior coalition members in the government merged in an effort to gain leverage over PM Jarosław Kaczyński's Law and Justice Party and block Polish ratification of a new EU reform treaty (EU Business, 2007). The electoral success of the Freedom Party of Austria also shows the potential for electoral backlash against EU accession (McDonald, 2006: 233).

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