



**A New Right for a New Europe?
Basescu, the Democrats & Romania's
centre-right**

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Abstract

This paper examines the development trajectory of Romania's Democrat Party and explores the reasons for its growth to its current position as the country's largest centre-right party. While opponents brand the party as no more than a populist vehicle for its de facto leader, state president, Traian Basescu, there appears to be more coherence and depth to its development than first meets the eye.

The party has successfully crafted political appeals for a 'post-transition' electorate: moderate nationalism; political and economic modernisation; and improved public service delivery. Running through each of these has been a focus on tackling corruption (a proxy for anti-Communism) and an incongruous intertwining of the cult of victimhood and of strong leadership. Narratives, though, play only a part in explaining the Democrats' success – shared roots in political pragmatism, exploitation of political skills and a focus on organisation and party discipline have also helped ensure the formation has survived and grown.

It may be too early to tell whether the Democrats can be seen as a case-study of success for centre-right parties in Central and Eastern Europe but the party's approach at least tests some assumptions about both Romania's post-Communist political development and theories about party systems in the region.

A New Right for a New Europe? Basescu, the Democrats & Romania's centre-right¹

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In December 2004, Traian Basescu pulled off a narrow and surprising win in Romania's presidential poll. The mayor of Bucharest and leader of the Democrat Party had only entered the race a few weeks before, having stepped in to replace the candidate of the Truth and Justice Alliance who withdrew citing poor health but who also suffered from consistently poor poll ratings.²

Basescu has gone on to dominate post-Communist politics in Romania in a way that is only matched by Romania's first post-Communist president, Ion Iliescu. At the same time the Democrats (in their current guise as the Democrat-Liberal Party) are attempting to position themselves as a cohesive and credible centre right party to compete with the Social Democratic left – a development made all the more striking by the shared origins of the two parties as successors to the Communist regime on the left of politics.

In his recent book, Sean Hanley examines the performance of the New Right in the Czech Republic.³ He expresses surprise and frustration at a political landscape where parties ape the slogans of the Thatcherite revolution in the UK while at the same time overseeing a polity dominated by social democratic norms and a state run by a massive and inefficient bureaucracy. He points to the perceived dominance of a

¹ I am grateful to the politicians, party advisers and academics who shared their time, opinions and material to help with this paper. I would particularly like to thank Laurentiu Stefan and his willingness to open his cavernous address book, and Ionut Ciobanu for giving me access to his archive of policy papers and manifestos. I am also indebted to Aleks Szerbiak, Dan Hough and others at Sussex University who read and commented on a series of drafts; and also Sean Hanley and Professor Dennis Deletant who offered me the opportunity to present the original (and subsequently much altered) version of this paper to the Romanian and Moldovan Studies Group at UCL, London. Thanks are due also to the anonymous reviewers whose comments helped to focus the paper. All the input I received was hugely valuable although responsibility for the content and especially any errors is entirely mine.

² For an English language summary of the background and reaction to the change of candidate see Nine O Clock number 3273, 5 October 2004.

³ Sean Hanley, *The New Right in the New Europe* (London: Routledge, 2008).

single political leader - Vaclav Klaus – in shaping the fate of the centre-right, and to over-reliance on the stereotyped views of his opponents in analysing his role.

All of these elements can be seen in Romania too, and the story of the rise of the Democrat Party and President Basescu. While inevitably less detailed than Hanley's work, this paper draws on those parallels to examine whether Romania's Democrats offer a new departure towards a recognisable, stable, centre-right formation. Basescu's opponents suggest his party is an amalgam of opportunists which will not out-live the political career of its figurehead, but the questions remain: how did the Democrats emerge as the dominant force on the Romanian centre-right and what are the indications that this dominant position will endure?

To place Romania's political development in a comparative context, the paper begins with a brief survey of the debate as it stands on the nature and evolution of the centre-right in Central and Eastern Europe and sets out the electoral landscape created by the 2004 presidential and parliamentary elections. It then goes on to examine each of five key variables which might explain the rise of the Democrats: the exogenous factors present in the post-2000 political environment; the origin and genetic make-up of the party; the development of its ideology; its organisation; and the role of its most successful leader, Traian Basescu. The content of this paper is based on a series of interviews with Romanian political actors over the summer of 2008, supplemented by material from newspapers and other published sources.

At a superficial level it is easy to see why the personality of Basescu is so closely linked to the fate of his party. However, a deeper examination of the development of the Democrats appears to suggest that there is more to the party's story than the dominant character of Romania's President. The party was formed by ambitious young reformers in the wake of the 1989 revolution and even its most surprising manoeuvre – abandoning social democracy to affiliate with the centre-right European People's Party bloc – can be seen as fitting to an evolutionary pattern that has been consistent since its beginnings. After the local elections of June 2008, Romania appears to have entered a period of three-party politics. However, the Democrat-Liberal Party retains its leading position and by the end of the marathon election

season which concludes with the presidential poll in November 2009, the degree to which the party has succeeded in its long term objectives should be much clearer.

What's 'right' in Central and Eastern Europe? (And why it matters)

Analysis of post-Communist politics in Romania has been heavily influenced by the need to explain the distinctive early features of the country's development: sluggish economic reform; questionable democratic credentials; dominance of government by the post-Communist left (and a corresponding weakness on the centre-right) and the strength of radical nationalism. Comparative, and country-specific, works have focused heavily on the legacy of the last Communist President, Nicolae Ceausescu and his eccentric brand of personalised nationalist Communism, either to explain Romania's deviation from the norm or to excuse it from study altogether.⁴

A generation on from the collapse of Communism, the continuing explanatory powers of such legacy-based frameworks are understandably being called into question. Comparative analysis of party development in post-Communist Europe is still relatively thin on the ground, though, particularly so in examining the performance of parties on the centre-right. Among the small number of studies of the centre-right in Central and Eastern Europe, there has been a conscious effort by some to seek alternatives to historical structural/determinist explanatory frameworks.⁵ This paper aims to look beyond the communist-era's legacy – while acknowledging the enduring impact of the founding moments of Romania's democratic politics – to explain newly emerging patterns of development on the centre-right.

The post-Communist period has presented a number of difficult challenges for the European right: the reinvention of the left via the 'Third Way'; the rise of radical-

⁴ Examples are numerous, but for examinations of post-Communist Romanian politics which rely on legacy-based explanations see Mungiu Pipidi in Bozoki and Ishiyama, *The Communist Successor Parties of Central and Eastern Europe* (M.E. Sharpe, 2002) and Tismaneanu in Dawisha and Parrot, *Politics, Power and the Struggle for Democracy in South Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Verdery's influential work locates social and political developments in the personalised, nationalistic ideology of Ceausescu: Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next* (Princeton University Press, 1996). Grzymala Busse on the other hand opts to exclude Romania from her comparative framework on the grounds of its incomplete transition: Anna Grzymala-Busse, *Redeeming the Communist Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁵ See particularly Szczerbiak and Hanley, *Centre-Right Parties in Post-Communist East-Central Europe* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005) and the special edition of *Party Politics*, Vol. 14, Number 4, July 2008.

right nationalism; and the need to assimilate both neo-liberal economic ideas on the one hand and post-material concerns on the other.⁶ After a period of self doubt and critical reflection in the 1990s, the centre-right in Western Europe recovered much of its self confidence if not all of its old dominance. Central and Eastern Europe, though, has offered a more enigmatic story. As conservative forces in Western Europe 'righted' themselves, in the newer democracies the pattern remained one of inconsistency and division. In Poland, where the strength of the Church and the popular nature of the Communist-era opposition movement (Solidarity) might have suggested that the centre-right would dominate, the story has been one of consistent failure to unite centre-right forces into a coherent and successful entity.⁷ In Bulgaria and Slovakia the centre-right has gone through a series of incarnations with only fleeting periods of unity and electoral success.⁸ In the Czech Republic, the original 'anti-party' movement built around President Vaclav Havel gave way to a more conventional entity in the form of the Civic Democrat Party. The Civic Democrats have succeeded in establishing a dominant position on the right of Czech politics but their attachment to a distinctive neo-liberal ideology appears to have limited their electoral success and 'coalitionability'.⁹ Hungary, perhaps, offers the model for centre-right success. Four significant competitors to the Socialists emerged from the elite-led transition from Communist. Of these, FIDESZ transformed itself from a narrow appeal to young, liberal minded voters, to a broad conservative nationalist movement which eventually consumed or marginalised its competitors.¹⁰

In the only book-length comparative analysis of the centre-right in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), Szczerbiak and Hanley offer a framework for resolving both the question of definition – what actually is the centre right in the region - and the surprisingly problematic question of what constitutes measurable success for a

⁶ For more on the centre right in Western Europe, see S. van Hecke & E. Gerard, *Christian Democratic Parties in Europe since the end of the Cold War* (Leuven University Press, 2004) and F. Wilson, *The European Centre-Right at the end of the Twentieth Century* (MacMillan, 1998).

⁷ See Bale and Szczerbiak, *Why is there no Christian Democracy in Poland?*, *Party Politics*, vol. 14, number 4, July 2008, pp. 479-500.

⁸ See Lyubka Savkova, *Europe and the Bulgarian Parliamentary Elections of 2005*, EPERN Election Briefing Number 21, (Brighton: Sussex European Institute, 2006) for developments in Bulgarian politics and Henderson, *Slovakia: The Escape from Invisibility*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002) for Slovakia.

⁹ For developments on the centre-right in the Czech Republic, see Hanley.

¹⁰ See Brigid Fowler, *Concentrated Orange: FIDESZ and the re-making of the Hungarian Centre Right*, *Journal of Communist and Transition Politics*, Vol. 20, Number 3, 2004.

political party. Centre-right parties share opposition to the left (and to communism in particular) as a common feature and successful centre-right parties fuse conservative (essentially nationalist), pro-democracy and liberal market economy discourse within a single entity. Success itself can be defined as sustained dominance of a significant electoral territory (ie a single formation competing for power and monopolising the political right over an extended period of time.) They also suggest that beyond historical-structural and constitutional design explanations of party system development, it is the ability of centre-right parties to call on cohesive leadership elites and their ability to craft broad, integrative ideological narratives that is where the best explanations for party success can be found.¹¹

In Romania the centre-right failed, uniquely in the region, to monopolise the narrative of democratisation having seen ‘reform Communists’ take a leading role in the revolution of December 1989. Opposition to the left was initially highly fractured – divided between re-activated ‘historic parties’ on the centre right;¹² ultra-nationalists on the far right;¹³ and the representatives of the ethnic Hungarian minority.¹⁴ Heavy defeat in the ‘founding elections’ of 1990 prompted the centre-right to pursue its first co-operation project – the Democratic Convention which fought and lost the elections of 1992 but came to power following victory in the 1996 polls.¹⁵ The strains of government combined with the politics of personality and the strength of institutionalised loyalty to the historic parties to shatter the Democratic Convention. A much reduced electoral alliance fared so badly at the polls in 2000 that it failed to enter parliament at all.

¹¹ Szczerbiak & Hanley.

¹² Principally the National Liberal Party; the National Peasant Party; and the Social Democrats

¹³ Initially, the nationalist right was led by the Romanian National Unity Party although it was later eclipsed by the Greater Romania Party.

¹⁴ The Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania has monopolised the votes of the Hungarian community in Romania throughout the post-Communist period.

¹⁵ The Democratic Convention was an umbrella grouping for parties and civic society groups opposed to the post-Communist left. The most detailed account of the Convention’s story is provided by Iulia Huiu and Dan Pavel, *Nu Putem Reusi Decat Impreuna* (Bucharest: Polirom, 2003). The fullest English language account of the Convention’s time in power can be found in Tom Gallagher, *Theft of a Nation* (London: Hurst and Co., 2005). See also Edward Maxfield, What’s Right in Romania, *Sfera Politicii* number 123-124 (Bucharest: FSC, 2006) for an examination of the Convention’s failure to survive.

From Orange Revolution to ‘the Basescu epoch’ – political opportunities seized

Attempts to regroup the centre-right began immediately after the 2000 election fiasco. Two parties which were part of the governing coalition from 1996 – 2000 and which retained their parliamentary representation – the National Liberals and the Democrats – became the focus of attempts to re-craft a credible vehicle for the right.

One of the key actors in the dramas that were to unfold was Valeriu Stoica, justice minister in the Democratic Convention government and then president of the National Liberals. He is seen as both a compulsive back-room political operator and as the one leading politician with a consistent vision of centre-right political unity.¹⁶ His recently published book details his own efforts to forge a single political entity on the centre-right capable of competing with the Social Democrats.¹⁷ In it he makes clear that he initiated discussions about the fusion of the National Liberals and the Democrats immediately after the 2000 elections. It is interesting to note that his contact was with Basescu, not with the then Democrat leader, Petre Roman and moves towards co-operation received a further boost when Stoica and Basescu were elected as leaders of their respective parties in 2001.¹⁸

The National Liberals faced an extended period of internal conflict after the 2000 elections, centred on personalities to an extent but more critically on future party strategy. Chief opponent of Stoica and his unification project for the centre-right was Dinu Patriciu.¹⁹ Patriu’s group favoured a more cautious strategy, more willing to entertain the prospect of co-operation with the Social Democrats and preferring the National Liberals to play the role of a smaller but more ideologically coherent pivot party. In 2002, Stoica handed the leadership of the party to Teodor Stolojan and an extensive change of personnel at the top of the party followed – consolidating the hold of the new leadership.²⁰

¹⁶ Interviews with Radoi and Huiu

¹⁷ Valeriu Stoica, *Unificarea Dreptei*, (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2008).

¹⁸ Stoica claims that moves towards unity were stalled at that time because of the National Liberals’ decision to give formal backing to the minority Social Democrat government and because of the sense of competition between the two parties which came out of the 2000 election on a roughly equal footing.

¹⁹ Patriciu heads the Rompetrol Group and is one of Romania’s richest businessmen. He has been associated with the National Liberal Party since 1990 and was a leading figure among young radicals who promoted a neo-liberal economic programme for the party.

²⁰ A. Radu, *Prefata Unei Aliante*, Sfera Politicii number 105 (Bucharest: FSC, 2003). Stoica acknowledges trading heavily on the political capital of his close partner, Teodor Stolojan – see Stoica

In tandem with evolutionary changes in the strategy, electoral realities pushed the National Liberals and the Democrats closer together. Despite the fanfare that had greeted Basescu's election as party leader, his electoral impact soon appeared to wear off. Through the 2000-2004 parliament, he failed to buck the trend of declining public confidence in all political leaders and Democrat support was becalmed for much of the period – by the summer of 2003 there was little indication of the dramatic breakthrough to come a little over a year later.²¹

The Democrat-National Liberal co-operation project finally resulted in the creation of the Truth and Justice Alliance in September 2003. With Stolojan nominated as presidential candidate initial hopes were high. The Alliance did not function fully for the local elections of 2004 as in some localities candidates insisted in running as National Liberals rather than under the banner of the alliance. Yet the results were good enough to demonstrate the benefits of the joint ticket as Alliance candidates won notable victories in major cities such as Bucharest and Cluj.²² The Alliance was unable to build on the successes of the Spring, however, and by the start of the Autumn General Election campaign the governing Social Democrats appeared well set to extend their time in power and for the presidency to pass from Iliescu to prime minister and party leader Adrian Nastase.²³

The Social Democrats were united and had a convincing story to tell about Romania's economic and political progress. In the campaign, the Social Democrats continued the process they had launched after their 1996 defeat of creating a distinctive

(2008). Stolojan was Prime Minister from 1991-92 and returned from a spell with the World Bank to run as a presidential candidate in 2000. He is currently a Democrat-Liberal Euro MP.

²¹ Cristian Parvelescu, *O Construtie Alternativa*, Sfera Politicii, Number 105, (Bucharest: FSC, 2003) quotes BOP opinion polls showing Democrat support consistently between 8 and 10% between June 2001 and June 2003. Over the same time span, faith in Basescu fell from 50% to under 30% and the share of voters planning to back him in the presidential poll remained stuck between 11 and 13%.

²² See Stoica (2008) and Cristian Parvelescu, *Competitie si Bipolizare*, Sfera Politicii number 110/111 (Bucharest, FSC, 2004).

²³ An INSOMAR poll in September 2004 showed Nastase leading Stolojan by 41% to 24% in preferences for the presidential poll. For parliament, the Social Democrats led the Alliance by 36% to 26%. The sense of disappointment within the Democrat Party at the lack of progress and the internal demand for radical action to re-launch the party is confirmed by a report published by the Ovidiu Sincai Institute in the Summer of 2003. The Institute has close links to the Social Democrats but its analysis of the situation is not unduly influenced by partisan leanings.

mainstream centre-left identity.²⁴ Their campaign coupled an appeal to their older, rural voter base with messages emphasising modernisation and internationalism through membership of NATO and the EU.²⁵ It was Basescu's last minute entry into the presidential race that changed the electoral dynamic. The Alliance focused heavily on his personality, his drive and energy to tackle corruption. The one truly distinctive element of their policy prospectus was the introduction of a 16% flat tax regime (which was duly implemented after the election).

Traian Basescu won the 2004 presidential election on the second ballot by a margin of less than 250,000 votes from ten million that were cast. In the first round a fortnight earlier, he had trailed Adrian Nastase by seven percentage points but Basescu's momentum and the strength of the 'Communist Successor' fault line was sufficient to unite opponents of the Social Democrats behind the Alliance candidate. The surprise result of the run-off changed the course of government construction. Following the parliamentary election results (see Table 1, below), which were held on the same day as the first round of voting in the presidential poll, the Social Democrats had begun negotiations with the Democratic Union of Hungarians and with the Humanist Party (which had run on a joint platform and shared list of candidates with the Social Democrats). Basescu used his mandate to force a change of direction in the coalition negotiations, threatening the smaller parties with early elections if a government led by the Truth and Justice Alliance was not installed. Basescu's approach of 'total offensive'²⁶ changed more than the complexion of the government: it plunged the Social Democrats into a crisis of confidence and gave the Democrats the capital with which to engage in a re-casting of the right.

²⁴ The Iliescu-led conservative wing of the National Salvation Front evolved via various name changes into the Social Democratic Party. They should not be confused with the 'historic' Social Democrats although the two parties did ultimately merge.

²⁵ Florin Abraham, *Romania de la Comunism la Capitalism* (Bucharest: Tritonic, 2006).

²⁶ B. Teodorescu and D. Sultanescu, *Revolutie Portocalie In Romania* (Bucharest, Fundatia PRO, 2006).

Table 1: Chamber of Deputies election result, 2004

Party/Grouping	% votes	Seats
Social Democrats and Humanists (centre-left)	36.8	132
Truth & Justice Alliance (centrist)	31.5	112
National Peasant Party (centre-right)	1.8	0
Democratic Union of Hungarians (minority)	6.2	22
Greater Romania Party (nationalist)	13.0	48
Others	10.7	18
Total	100.0	332

Source: Central Election Bureau www.bec2004.ro

Soon after the Alliance victory in 2004, coalition tensions began to appear. Basescu's aggressive attitude towards the Humanists (who subsequently re-branded as the Conservative Party) and the Democratic Union of Hungarians in coalition negotiations meant relations within the government were strained from the beginning. The president's fondness for conflict also meant that he was soon at war with the Prime Minister and National Liberal leader, Calin Popescu Tariceanu.²⁷

The president's approach was to brand Tariceanu as being under the influence of the class of political barons who had held back reform and efforts to tackle corruption since the fall of Communism. He was aided by the revelation that oil magnate Dinu Patriciu had funded both the National Liberal and the Social Democrat election campaign.²⁸ Underlying Basescu's tactics was a desire to trigger early parliamentary elections aimed at increasing Democrat Party representation and influence in parliament (the Democrats had been the junior partner in the allocation of list places in 2004, electing 48 deputies compared to the National Liberals' 64).

By the end of 2006, the break-down of relations between president and government was such that the National Liberals decided to back moves to impeach Basescu. The Democrats withdrew from the coalition leaving the National Liberals clinging to

²⁷ The catalyst for the conflict was Tariceanu's decision in July 2005 not to resign and prompt early elections as he initially indicated he would.

²⁸ The bitterness of the conflict within the National Liberals is made clear by Valeriu Stoica. Referring to Patriciu's dominant role he brands opponents of Basescu within the party as 'petro-liberals', Stoica (2008).

power as a minority government with the support of the Social Democrats. A referendum triggered by the impeachment process was held in May 2007 and ended in triumph for Basescu as the move was rejected by 74.5% of voters.²⁹ Basescu supporters within the National Liberals then broke away to form a new party – the Liberal Democrats – led by Teodor Stolojan, which was committed to continued and closer co-operation with the Democrats. Although early parliamentary elections did not materialise, the parties braced themselves for months of conflict as Romania faced a series of electoral tests running through to the presidential elections.

It is apparent that the outcome of the 2000 elections had shaped the opportunities available for re-casting the centre-right. Only the Democrats and the National Liberals were left with the credibility of parliamentary representation and their support was roughly evenly split, reducing the prospects of one party dominating the electoral space on the right.³⁰ Leadership changes in both parties spurred co-operation both by changing personnel at the top but also by demonstrating that neither party was likely to achieve success on its own. The 2004 elections propelled the Alliance unexpectedly into power and key figures were clearly anxious to avoid the mistakes of the Democratic Convention and pushed for merger into a single party on the centre-right.³¹

Yet, political actors shape their environment as well as reacting to it and it does not seem sufficient to locate the success of the Democrats in their being in a position to exploit short-term tactical opportunities. To uncover a fuller explanation it is necessary to look more deeply into the make-up, outlook and leadership of the party.

From Communism to clientelism – explaining the genetic make up of the Democrats

The Democrats have their origin in the power-shift that took place in the wake of the anti-Communist revolution of December 1989. Romania's last Communist leader,

²⁹ Edward Maxfield, *Europe and Romania's Presidential Impeachment Referendum*, EPERN Referendum Briefing, (Brighton, Sussex European Institute, 2007).

³⁰ The Democrats had won 31 seats in the Chamber of Deputies in 2000, the National Liberals, 30. Essex University election archive.

³¹ The failure of the 1996-2000 government is widely attributed to its unwieldy nature being a 'coalition of coalitions' between the Democratic Convention, the Union of Social Democrats and the Democratic Union of Hungarians. Stoica, at the very least, saw this as a formula to be avoided in the future if popular support for the centre-right was to be sustained (interview with Horia Terpe).

Nicolae Ceausescu has cast a long, posthumous shadow over the country's politics and society. His leadership is seen as uniquely personalised and repressive and one which assimilated cultural and nationalistic narratives to an unparalleled extent. Ideological fossilisation through the 1970s was followed by steep economic decline in the 1980s and suppression of any dissent continued to the very end of the regime.³²

The collapse of Romania's Communist regime in 1989 provided some of the most dramatic images of a dramatic year. Popular protest in the western city of Timisoara was followed by the – literal – flight of President Ceausescu from the Communist Party Central Committee building in Bucharest and just a few days later by his execution. As street battles continued, the power vacuum was occupied by the National Salvation Front which began operating as a substitute government structure. The Front was dominated by second rank Communists who eschewed opposition calls to step aside and instead formed themselves into a political party which went on to win, overwhelmingly, the first democratic elections in May 1990.³³

The unusual nature of Romania's exit from Communism had a profound impact on the development of the 'democratic opposition'. For the centre-right it heightened distrust of former Communist politicians, creating substantial barriers to coalition building. And, as already mentioned, in the early post-Communist years it allowed the left to monopolise the discourse of democracy. The opposition's political priorities were built around strident anti-Communism and a desire to return to a perceived golden age of the inter-war years, despite their lack of resonance in the post-Communist era.³⁴ Fears that inter-ethnic divisions would form a significant political cleavage also undermined the democratic opposition as the centre-right parties were awkwardly positioned to respond to the challenge of radicalised nationalism.³⁵

³² Dennis Deletant, *Romania under Communist Rule* (Iasi, Center for Romanian Studies, 1999).

³³ The exact dynamics of the December revolution remain deeply contested within Romanian politics and society. Siani-Davies provides a detailed and balanced account of the overthrow of Ceausescu: Peter Siani Davies, *The Romanian Revolution of 1989*, (Cornell University Press, 2005).

³⁴ See Stan (2003)

³⁵ A good deal has been written about the role of radical nationalism in post-Communist Romanian politics but for an analysis of the Greater Romania Party's success see Michael Shafir, *The Greater Romania Party and the 2000 elections in Romania*, Romanian, Romanian Journal of Society and Politics, Volume 1, Number 2, November 2001. The National Salvation Front was less reticent than the opposition in adopting nationalist rhetoric meaning the historic parties were triply handicapped on

The weaknesses in the oppositions' narrative were compounded by an inability to match the organisational depth of the National Salvation Front in the short period before the elections in May 1990. Divided and out-manoeuvred, the opposition suffered humiliating defeat: Front candidate Ion Iliescu was elected president with 85% of the vote; and the party won two thirds of the seats in parliament. The comprehensive victory of the National Salvation Front, though, disguised divisions within the organisation which were ultimately to give rise to a split, with one side evolving into the Social Democrats, led by Iliescu, and the other into the Democratic Party.

The genetic core of the Democrat Party lies within the National Salvation Front and something akin to the counter elite that Hanley identifies as key in the Czech Republic and which there arose out of the historical turning point of the Prague Spring. While the heart of the Prague counter-elite lies in metropolitan intellectual attempts to come to terms with the failure of 'socialism with a human face', dissent within the National Salvation Front has more pragmatic origins. At its head was a contest for power between President Ion Iliescu and Prime Minister Petre Roman, underneath that was a difference of approach to the pace of change, and alongside developed a battle for control of local resources and power structures.

Teodor Stolojan, who succeeded Roman as Prime Minister, believes that there was consensus over the need for change – for economic liberalisation – among Romania's political elite, but there was substantial disagreement between conservatives and reformers over the *pace* of change that was required. For him, Iliescu's natural caution and Roman's conviction that Iliescu himself had called miner workers into Bucharest to protest against job losses and to force the sacking of his government, explain the depth of the split between the two men.³⁶

Roman comfortably won the internal battle for leadership of the FSN, but Iliescu subsequently launched a (successful) bid for re-election as state president in 1992,

the issue: political preference held opposition politicians back from radical nationalism; with nationalism acting as a proxy for resistance to social transformation, many voters were drawn either to the caution of the left's approach to reform or to ultra-nationalist parties; and the opportunity to gather support from among the ethnic Hungarian community was lost as a result of the Democratic Union of Hungarians' dominance.

³⁶ Interview with the author.

prompting a formal split within the party.³⁷ Excluded from government by Iliescu's victory, the depth of the Communist successor – anti-Communist fault line effectively kept the Democrats in quarantine for the next four years as far as the centre-right was concerned too.³⁸ And it meant that liberal dissidents, such as Ana Blandiana, who took a leading role in the National Salvation Front in December 1989 opted for other platforms as they grew disillusioned with the conservative leanings of the formation.³⁹ The only coalition structure successfully pursued by the Democrats in this time was the formation of the Social Democratic Union with the historic Social Democrats, under which banner they fought the 1996 election.

The battle Roman's supporters faced for survival as a political force after the split in the FSN shaped the party's political outlook – particularly its hostility to Iliescu – and its determined independence. This, in turn, perhaps helps to explain the Democrats' enduring image as troublesome political partners. It is a view especially strongly associated with the 1996-2000 period where the party was a government coalition partner with the Democratic Convention and the Democratic Union of Hungarians. The removal of Valerian Stan as minister responsible for dealing with communist-era corruption is viewed as a notable case of the Democrats acting to protect their own clientelistic interests after Stan announced an investigation into the expropriation of Communist Party villas by Democrat members among others.⁴⁰

The Democrats were attacked from within and outside the coalition as representing the 'privatisation of the nomenklatura'.⁴¹ One senior minister describes relations with the Democrats as 'tense and complicated', acknowledging that they were 'difficult partners'. Another describes them as 'unreliable' with a tendency to agree to one

³⁷ Roman won 64% of the vote in the FSN leadership contest, indicating the extent to which his supporters had captured control of local party organisational structures. Ion Ratiu, *Istorie unei candidaturi deturnate* (Bucharest: Regent House, 2001), p. 106.

³⁸ And beyond, in some senses. Roper's research showed considerable resistance among local leaders of the Democratic Convention parties to closer co-operation with the Democrats during the time they were in government together. Steven Roper *From Opposition to Government Coalition*, East European Quarterly, Volume 34, Number 1, January 1998.

³⁹ Notably the Civic Alliance, a civic society movement committed to promoting open and democratic government and inter-ethnic tolerance. See Pavel and Huiu, esp chapter 2 for the role of the Civic Alliance within the Democratic Convention.

⁴⁰ Henry Carey, *Romania Since 1989* (Lanham: Lexington, 2004)

⁴¹ *ibid*

thing in cabinet and to then say another in public.⁴² The Democrats were willing and able to dominate the coalition by exploiting the political weaknesses at the core of the Democratic Convention.

It might seem that the party relished the role of awkward outsider. By the end of the government, the Democrats had survived as an independent force across a decade which saw many other parties appear, coalesce, merge and disappear. It was led by a group of seasoned politicians whose experience and unity of purpose goes some way to explaining how it was able to make the most of the opportunities presented to it.

Left, right or anything for a deal? The ideology of the Democrats

It is perhaps impossible to measure the extent to which the split between the conservative and reform wings of the National Salvation Front was driven by ideology, by clientalism and personal ambition, or by simple personality clash. Doubtless all played a part but what is clear is that there was an effort to craft a modernising identity for the group which evolved into the Democratic Party.

The crucial contest took place at the Front's national convention in March 1992. While Iliescu supporters⁴³ called for the pursuit of a 'modern social democracy' and criticised the leadership for taking the party too far in the direction of social liberalism, Roman promoted radical reform. Yet the Roman platform was still firmly rooted in the Front's original national unity ideology. At the top of its list of political principles it placed belief in God; followed by human rights; devotion to the nation; and democracy. Its economic programme steers well clear of shock therapy while at the same time rejecting economic centralism and any vestige of Communist economic theory.⁴⁴

By 1996 there are clearer signs of moves away from a traditional leftist position, despite the Democrats' electoral alliance with the historic Social Democrats. Petre Roman's presidential manifesto prioritises security, stability, professionalism, national solidarity and tolerance. He rejects the notion that his values are of the 'left'

⁴² Interviews with Daniel Daianu and Virgil Petrescu.

⁴³ The principal group backing Iliescu – the Group for Unity of the Front – published its programme under the title 'For Romania of Today'.

⁴⁴ Programme of the Viitorul Azi (The Future Today) Group, March 1992.

or the 'right'. Strikingly, he states early and clearly that high taxes and high prices discourage initiative and his programme is centred on modernisation of the economy, tax cuts and the creation of a strong private sector. Equality of opportunity is sought by guaranteeing access to housing and education but economic growth is the central aim.⁴⁵ The manifesto of Social Democratic Union, produced for the parliamentary elections, lays rather less emphasis on tax cuts and gives greater priority to the provision of work, education and social security. Nevertheless, its third priority (after work and education) is giving everyone the opportunity to set up their own business should they wish it. And it also talks of guaranteeing property rights; democracy; equal access to the law and protection of rights for ethnic minorities – all concerns identified with the Romanian centre-right.⁴⁶

By 2003, the programme for government published by the Truth and Justice Alliance was located firmly on the centre-right. Its top ten priorities included: redefining the role of the state and reducing its intervention in the economy; protecting individual liberty; guaranteeing and developing private property; realisation of a functioning market economy; stimulating a spirit of enterprise; and the integration of Romania into euro-atlantic economic and security structures.⁴⁷

At its launch, the Democrat Party had called for radical reform of Romanian society in the form of the market economy, restitution of property and the elimination of blockages to reform. Its conventions repeatedly affirmed its social democratic values, including at its 2001 convention through a motion proposed by Traian Basescu.⁴⁸ It was in 2005, under Basescu's leadership, that the party made the dramatic move of abandoning its long-standing commitment to social democracy in favour of a 'popular party' ideology. The party was subsequently admitted to the pan-European centre-right grouping, the European Peoples' Party (EPP), an outcome which was widely seen as the objective from the beginning of the party's realignment.⁴⁹ It is difficult to

⁴⁵ Presidential election manifesto, Roman (1996).

⁴⁶ Parliamentary election manifesto, Uniunii Social Democrate (1996).

⁴⁷ Truth and Justice Alliance programme for government, September 2003. www.dapnl.ro

⁴⁸ Stoica (2003).

⁴⁹ Cadran Politic nr 27-28, July/Aug 2005. EPP membership brought direct benefits in terms of access to resources and international credibility, together with a reaffirmation of the party's anti-left credentials. It was, in the words of one young party activist (who wished to remain anonymous), 'a shock to go to bed a social democrat and wake up on the right but it was a strategy of getting support outside [of Romania] to get support inside.'

avoid the conclusion that the decision was an opportunistic move to exploit the empty space on the centre-right of Romanian politics and to capture funds and credibility from outside. Yet, viewed across the period from its formation, it is at least possible to discern an evolution in the party's thinking that makes the ideological leap less dramatic than the change of European parent would suggest.

Further critical analysis of the party's position, and a more deliberate attempt to rehabilitate and capture the narratives of the right came with the infusion of new blood from the liberal camp via the creation of the Liberal Democrats. The Liberal Democrats attracted a new generation of converts some of whom were intent on promoting a distinctive ideological project. The Liberal Democrats consciously pitched itself to appeal to Romania's emerging urban middle class. The model undoubtedly was the new right prospectus of the British Thatcherites. The publication of the liberal platform that presaged the creation of the new party sought to locate modern liberalism firmly on the centre-right and talked of mutual responsibility; opposition to oligarchy; the promotion of honest capitalism; recognition of the role of tradition, community, religion and family; and of national identity as a key element in politics.⁵⁰

After the merger of the Democrats and the Liberal Democrats, the founding statement of values and principles of the new party strikes a rather more collectivist tone while stating explicitly that the party is on the centre-right. Liberty, responsibility, equality, solidarity and subsidiarity are its key watchwords. Familiar concepts of protection of democracy and the promotion of the market economy and honest capitalism sit together with commitments to reduce economic disparities between regions and parts of society.⁵¹

However, important questions remain to be answered. The first is the depth of the ideological commitment within the new party. Opponents point out that it still appeared to be a party representing interests rather than ideology and question whether it will simply move on to a new ideology when times suit. The second question is whether the party's platform will actually be implemented in government.

⁵⁰ Stoica (2008), Annexe III.

⁵¹ Democrat-Liberal Party political programme. www.pd.ro.

The Liberal Democrats' policy making body transferred into the new party and filled a gap in the Democrat Party structure. Its nineteen policy commissions have the task of drawing up the manifesto for the November 2008 Parliamentary elections.⁵² Valeriu Stoica is seen as crucial to the success of this project in creating a distinctive centre-right prospectus and the former Liberal Democrat ideologues are relying on his and Teodor Stolojan's personal relationship with Basescu to ensure that the policy measures proposed will be implemented by ministers if the party forms the next government. Their success in doing so will help to determine the extent to which the crafting of a new ideological platform – beyond the pragmatism of the past – is significant in establishing the future path of the party.

The local elections of June 2008 offered an insight into the ideological and organisational development of the new party. In terms of symbolism, it is interesting to note that for its first electoral test the party retained its 'revolutionary' orange colours but it also saw the return of the former rose symbol of the Democrats with its distinctly social democratic overtones.⁵³ It is important to acknowledge that in Romania, local elections are just that – highly localised with a heavy focus on individual candidates.⁵⁴ Yet the dominant themes were constructed more around paternalistic claims that Democrat-Liberal candidates could sort out the electorate's problems, than appeals to a distinctive neo-liberal platform.⁵⁵ In common with all parties contesting the elections, Democrat-Liberal local programmes offered extensive shopping lists of public works (either delivered or promised) at their core. They revealed little in the way of an ideological underpinning.

The centre-right is not solely about neo-liberal economic analysis, of course. Basescu has made a conscious effort to colonise moderate nationalist discourse. In this he has

⁵² Interview with Mirella Radoi.

⁵³ The Truth and Justice Alliance had borrowed the orange motif of Ukraine's pro-Western revolutionaries in 2004.

⁵⁴ Mayors of 3,000 cities, towns and communes (and in Bucharest's case its 6 sectors as well as one for the city as a whole) are directly elected. So too are the presidents of 42 counties. County and commune councils are elected on a proportional basis from closed party lists.

⁵⁵ The party's main national election slogan 'Facem ce trebuie', translates roughly as 'We will do what has to be done'. The slogans of numerous individual candidates echoed this paternalist, interventionist theme.

been aided by the decline in popular support for the far-right.⁵⁶ To a greater or lesser extent, nationalism is a feature of all the major Romanian parties' appeals and Traian Basescu in particular has been criticised for a habit of exposing reflexive racism in some of his statements. The party has also faced criticism since the local elections for forming alliances in Bucharest with the New Generation Party for example and most recently for cutting a deal with the Greater Romania Party ahead of the parliamentary elections.⁵⁷ On the whole, the Democrats throughout their history have shown few qualms about adopting nationalist rhetoric but the moderating influence of new domestic liberal and European centre-right allies may well see the crafting of narratives based more on national self confidence than on national chauvinism in the future.

The narrative of democratisation, which had been lost to the left in the wake of the 1989 revolution, had already been successfully recaptured by the centre right but the Democrats sought to make it their own. Basescu has placed great emphasis on battling corrupt political oligarchs (real or imagined) and has linked this to pro-democracy and anti-left themes. Naturally enough the party's opponents have challenged the Democrats' right to be seen as champions of democracy, but the fusion of themes around modernisation and anti-corruption matched public concern over the issue as the 2004 elections approached.⁵⁸

Its opponents, though, are convinced that the defining characteristic of the party is its lack of ideology:

The Democrat Party has never had an ideology of its own. They were more convincing when they were on the centre-left. Roman was a centre left person

⁵⁶ In the European Parliament elections of November 2007, the Greater Romania Party fell below the 5% threshold for winning seats, as did the newer parties on the nationalist right, the New Generation Party and the National Initiative Party.

⁵⁷ The Bucharest alliance probably has more to do with the party's alienation of the other mainstream parties (and thus close out coalition options) than with a policy preference for allying with ultra-nationalists. The deal with the Greater Romania Party is more striking but press reaction seemed to present it mainly as a reflection of Vadim Tudor's declining influence.

⁵⁸ A BOP opinion poll in the summer of 2004 found that 45% of respondents felt levels of corruption had increased since 2000 and just 14% felt that it had declined. Parvelescu (2004).

but Basescu and ideology have nothing in common. They are two different concepts.⁵⁹

While notions of the political left and right are not deeply embedded with the Romanian electorate, polls appear to indicate that the Democrats are viewed widely as a centrist formation with the PNL more firmly identified as being on the right.⁶⁰ The pragmatic centrism that has characterised the Democrats' appeal and which is light on ideological commitments still seems to represent the positioning of the new party. The unspecific rhetoric of 'change' and 'Basescu' captures the party's narrative best of all. Conversations with party activists who were campaigning in the 2008 local elections indicate the breadth of reasons for backing the Democrat-Liberals, sometimes with potentially conflicting objectives. Older members spoke of concerns over price rises and the value of pensions; younger activists frequently spoke of the need to clean up and modernise Romanian politics along 'European lines'. Basescu was a common theme. As one activist in Bucharest's Sector 6 put it: "We are new and he is the only one who can make the changes that are needed."⁶¹ Neatly summarising Basescu's appeal while at the same time revealing the potential fragility of such vague commitments to change.

Organisation

There is consensus about one aspect of the Democrat Party – its organisational strength and party discipline. New allies from the Liberal Democrats acknowledge the impressive nature of local organisations and co-ordinated approach to campaigning at street-by-street level in some cases.⁶² The party was, of course, able to switch from social democracy to the centre-right without a serious split. And they have also been through two changes of leadership without damaging the party –

⁵⁹ Interview with Renate Weber

⁶⁰ A poll for the Open Society Foundation (Fundatia pentru o Societate Deschisa – FSD) conducted in October 2006 found 48% of Democrat voters identified themselves as in the centre, 19% on the centre right and 20% on the right. The corresponding figures for National Liberal voters were 38%, 22% and 31%. These figures exclude the 36% of respondents who were unfamiliar with the use of the terms 'left' and 'right' in politics.

⁶¹ Conversation with the author. I was able to speak to party activists in Bucharest, Puciuoasa (Dambovita county) and Targu Mures during May 2008. Although the sample was hardly scientifically selected, the themes that emerged were consistent.

⁶² Interviews with Radoi and Terpe.

something that other parties in Romania have found it difficult to do.⁶³ The impression is a party – at least a body of leaders – who have learned the value of investing loyalty in the party over pursuing either ideological or personal projects at the head of their own organisation. In a country where politicians are painted as ‘tourists’ willing to change parties to advance their careers, this appears to be a real source of strength for the Democrats, without, of course, dismissing the importance of internal dissent and occasional exit to other formations.

Following the electoral disaster of 2000, the Democrats retained a presence in parliament but their electoral support had eroded dramatically. The party reacted by initiating a wholesale leadership change. Petre Roman had faced mounting criticism of his autocratic leadership style and his poor performance in the presidential poll (he won less than 3% of the votes cast) gave a younger generation of members the impetus to move for change. The challenge to Roman’s leadership eventually came from Traian Basescu. Basescu built up his support through the party’s local organisations and launched a series of challenges to Roman via the party’s internal structures, culminating in his securing two thirds of the vote at a specially convened national convention in May 2001.⁶⁴ Basescu’s approach was to create an unsettling expectation of change. While Roman was promising to serve the party whoever won the election, Basescu was less willing make such reassurances. He promised that the party would become more decentralised and that women would play a more prominent role in the party leadership; and he hinted at changes to the structure of the party vice-presidencies, suggesting the possibility of promotion for those who supported him.⁶⁵

A split in the party was forecast but at the same time it was acknowledged that many would make a pragmatic decision, waiting to see if Basescu improved the party’s electoral prospects before deciding whether to stay or leave. There were prominent resignations and in the period that followed much of the party’s leadership cadre was replaced but this served to increase the unity of the party. The new group of leaders was on the whole younger but also politically experienced and united in their

⁶³ After Basescu’s elevation to the national presidency he was obliged to resign the titular leadership of the party. Emil Boc, mayor of Cluj, was elected as party leader in his place.

⁶⁴ *Romania Libera*, 20/05/01

⁶⁵ *Romania Libera*, 12/02/01

objectives – from the beginning Basescu talked of establishing the party as the principal challenger to the Social Democrats and he quickly settled on the need to tackle corruption as the core of his narrative.

Patterns of elite recruitment appear to suggest a consistent move to the right. After his election as leader, Basescu sought to attract members of the social democratic Alliance for Romania but in June 2001 he also secured the absorption of the National Alliance Party – which contained remnants of the nationalist Romanian National Unity Party – into the Democrat fold.⁶⁶ In the 2000-2004 parliament, the Democrats lost six Deputies and three Senators to the Social Democrats.⁶⁷ More recently, as well as the influx of former National Liberals via the merger with the Liberal Democrats, the party has recruited some prominent former National Peasant Party members.⁶⁸

There is little concrete data on the nature of the party's mass membership. Party registration figures from July 2003 show 86,461 members of the Democrat Party across 21 administrative districts. In March 2007, the Liberal Democrats recorded 66,872 members in 39 districts. By comparison, in March 2003, the National Liberals declared 116,134 members in 41 districts and the Social Democrats in July 2003 declared 290,116 members across all 42 districts.⁶⁹ This perhaps indicates that while the Democrat Party is famed for its organisational discipline, its strength before the merger with the Liberal Democrats was patchy with no functioning local entity in half of Romania's counties.

There is also little information about the motivations of individual members for joining – either the Democrats or other parties. There does not seem to be anything particularly unique in the assertion made by a former vice president of the Bucharest youth wing of the PD that indicated some distinctly utilitarian motivations for joining: members were drawn to the organisation from two distinct groups - young Romanians who were interested in politics and saw Basescu as the means to clean up the political

⁶⁶ Abraham (2006)

⁶⁷ A Radu and V Stoleru, *Mobilitatea Parlamentara*, Sfera Politicii Number 110/111 (Bucharest: FSC, 2004).

⁶⁸ Including, for example, the mayor of Targu Mures and Remus Opris, minister in the 1996-2000 government.

⁶⁹ Register of political parties, Bucharest Municipal Court. Available on-line at: www.tmb.ro/registrul_partidelor_politice

process; and those who joined because they wanted connections and were looking for rewards such as employment in mayoral offices and other state positions.⁷⁰ The ability of the Liberal Democrats to secure wholesale membership transfers from the National Liberals in some areas perhaps indicates that party membership has less to do with ideological commitments than with political opportunity – this is perhaps a feature common to most of Romania’s parties.⁷¹ Indeed, one party adviser suggests that there was no deliberate effort to recruit new members after the merger because there were already too many – members being a potentially troublesome source of challenges to party leaders.

The influx of members from the Liberal Democrats created a further organisational challenge for the party. After polling well in the European Parliament elections, many in the Liberal Democrats argued for delay or outright abandonment of plans to merge with the Democrats. Stoica and Stolojan pushed on with the merger project and it is acknowledged that the Liberal Democrat leaders won a better deal in the merger negotiations than their numbers and political capital would have suggested. The effort to create a unified party structure was underpinned by a decision to defer internal party elections until 2009, giving time for members from both sides to experience working together.⁷²

Basescu – the pirate politician?

After all of this, is one led to the conclusion that the success of the Democrats is a temporary illusion created by the force of Basescu’s personality? Under his leadership, rapid economic change has been coupled with radical rhetoric in the arena of political reform – with Basescu in particular equating a war on corruption with the fight against the political ‘oligarchs’ dominating Social Democrats and the National Liberals. As Teodorescu has pointed out, Basescu’s approach is to polarise every dispute in the starkest terms:

⁷⁰ Interview with the author

⁷¹ In the short term this appears to have had a major effect on the nature of local electoral competition. In Dambovita for example, the Democrat-Liberals won 43% of the vote in the elections to the County Council in June 2008 with the National Liberals reduced to below 10%. In the neighbouring (and demographically broadly similar) counties of Prahova and Vulcea, the National Liberals polled 18% and 27% respectively. Dambovita, parts of Bucharest and parts of the Moldavia region were marked by wholesale defection from the National Liberals to the Liberal Democrats.

⁷² Interview with Horia Terpe

Disputes between Traian Basescu and his opponents – whoever they are – are not between people or political structures, between political and economic interest groups, between doctrines for the support of a bigger percentage of the electorate in future elections, but between the representatives of absolute good and absolute evil.⁷³

So far he has achieved tactical success with a conscious policy of divide and rule. He led the party into the vacant space on the centre-right of politics following the demise of the Democratic Convention. He has benefited from a split in the radical nationalist vote and in the future may benefit again from splits in the ethnic Hungarian bloc. The left remains united, albeit bruised and confused by defeat; but the National Liberals have been pushed into an uncertain position, divided and suffering a loss of support. There is also an interesting sign of Basescu's capacity for learning since the 2007 European Parliament elections. Although the Democrats topped the poll there was a widespread feeling that they under-performed against expectations.⁷⁴ The party's election campaign had been closely linked to a Basescu-inspired initiative to change the electoral system – as part of his on-going war against those who sought to impeach him. The referendum failed because the required turn-out level was not reached, indicating that voters were less concerned with the battle within the political class than were the politicians themselves. It is interesting to note that by the end of 2007, his rhetoric in a highly political New Year's Eve speech to revellers in Bucharest showed signs that the president had taken on board this message as it concentrated on the theme of improving public services, in particular modernising the country's education system. Senior party colleague Teodor Stolojan acknowledges his ability to learn and makes a case for his journey being a consistent one. He asserts that the Democrats moved step-by-step to the right under Basescu who changed his mind thanks to his experiences in government.⁷⁵

⁷³ Teodorescu and Sultanescu (2007).

⁷⁴ The Democrats took 29% of the vote and the Liberal Democrats, running a separate list, 8%. The Social Democrats polled 23% and the National Liberals 13.5%. The combined Democrat/Liberal Democrat tally did not match the Democrat's opinion poll ratings and was well short of Basescu's own popularity.

⁷⁵ Interview with the author.

But questions remain about Basescu's leadership style and personality. Renate Weber, now a National Liberal MEP, worked as a presidential adviser to Basescu after the 2004 elections. She claims Basescu is incapable of being constructive, that he attempts to run the party and the presidency as though he was running a ship – not tolerating opposition and trying to control everything.⁷⁶

President Basescu has basically created his own government, with advisers on health, education, the economy. The problem for him is that the constitution does not give him much power.

Basescu's frustrations are thus taken out on those who seek to limit his power. Another opponent draws the maritime analogy out further to underline his destructive tendencies:

Basescu is only happy when he is using the sword. When he has run out of opponents in front of him he turns around and starts cutting at his supporters behind him. He is a pirate politician.⁷⁷

There is little doubt about the influence that Basescu has had on the development of the party. He was a prominent national figure during his time as transport minister in the 1996-2000 government. His drive, personal appeal and willingness to innovate delivered him a surprise victory in the Bucharest mayoral election of 2000, at a time when government candidates were suffering defeat across the country. He repeated the trick with the 2004 presidential election – and a key to both successes was his ability to utilise modern campaigning techniques in a way that has permanently transformed both the cost and appearance of election campaigns in Romania. And as the sponsor of the merger with the Liberal Democrats (in the face of opposition or scepticism from a number of other senior Democrats), he has created the opportunity for the new party to consolidate its position as the leading party on the centre-right.

⁷⁶ Traian Basescu's background as a ship's captain in the Romanian merchant navy is well known and indeed cultivated as part of his Everyman image.

⁷⁷ Interview with Csaba Sogor. Sogor is a young, radical member of the Democratic Union of Hungarians and a Member of the European Parliament.

Inevitably, as the focal point of the party's appeal, Basescu has attracted criticism. Some of it is borne of frustration, some from a form of snobbery because of his background, his approach and choice of language. But opponents have not yet been able to dent his position as the country's most popular and trusted politician. In the end, they are left hoping that time, and the nature of his personality will undermine Basescu and his party:

The Democrat-Liberal Party is a party without ideology. It is a party without doctrine, without values, which listens to a single person. It is a party without a past which will eventually disappear with its leader. The Democrat-Liberal Party is the biggest hoax played on the Romanian people...⁷⁸

The 30 month election campaign (and beyond?)

Does the answer lie with the electorate – is the Democrat-Liberal Party establishing a loyal centre-right electoral base which will carry the party beyond the Basescu Epoch? The series of electoral tests in the long campaign between the Spring of 2007 and the Autumn of 2009 may well give us some answers, although so far the evidence is at best patchy.⁷⁹

The presidential impeachment referendum, while not specifically a party contest, was so overwhelmingly in favour of Basescu that it is difficult to discern patterns within the voting. Exit polls indicated that rather more young people voted for the president than did pensioners (the latter traditionally being the constituency of the Social Democrats). But other indicators, such as education levels, gender and the urban-rural divide were less distinct.⁸⁰

The European Parliament elections offered an interesting landscape because voters had the choice between National Liberals, Liberal Democrats and the Democrats. The

⁷⁸ PNL (2008), pp78-79.

⁷⁹ Romania is in the middle of an extended period of intense electoral activity that begins and ends with Traian Basescu. The presidential impeachment referendum was held in the Spring of 2007 (together with the referendum on electoral reform); followed by European Parliament elections in the autumn; the local elections in June 2008; parliamentary elections in November 2008; another round of voting for the European Parliament in June 2009; and ending with the presidential poll in November 2009. Some Romanians will go to the polls eleven times over this period.

⁸⁰ INSOMAR exit poll, 19 May 2007.

Liberal Democrats performed better than many had anticipated, but their performance is heavily influenced by the localised nature of the organisational transfers from the National Liberals. The first electoral test of the new Democrat-Liberal Party was the local polls of June 2008. If a distinctive centre-right electoral constituency was forming for the party, we might expect to see it mapping on to areas of strong support for the Democratic Convention at its high water mark of 1996. In turn, we would expect these areas of strength to match areas with a growing middle-class: wealthier, more urban and better educated electorates opting to defend their gains by choosing the strongest centre-right alternative to the left.

Table 2 below shows how the Democrat vote has evolved in selected counties since 1996. The twelve areas shown are those where the Democratic Convention polled more than one third of the vote in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies in 1996. The 1996 % share for the Union of Social Democrats – the alliance in which the Democrats fought the 1996 election – is also shown for reference.

Table 2 – Evolution of the centre-right vote in selected counties

	CDR 1996	USD 1996		PD 2000		A-DA 2004		PD 2007		PD-L 2008
Constituency	% of Vote	% of vote		% of vote		% of vote		% of vote		% of vote
Bucuresti	47.0	11.5		10.8		47.6		34.7		36.8
Timis	44.6	13.1		6.1		35.6		35.6		33.9
Ilfov	41.2	15.0		8.1		33.2		34.6		30.3
Sibiu	38.8	17.1		7.7		39.0		34.7		32.2
Dolj	36.2	13.8		8.8		31.6		30.0		36.3
Caras-Severin	36.1	12.6		15.9		32.9		35.8		39.5
Prahova	35.8	18.0		9.3		35.9		33.0		26.8
Constanta	35.4	20.8		6.8		35.7		31.2		19.9
Alba	35.2	17.5		6.3		34.2		36.6		44.3
Arad	34.8	14.5		7.1		34.1		34.5		39.2
Brasov	34.6	17.7		5.7		42.1		32.1		31.1
Galati	33.4	10.8		4.8		30.6		24.1		18.8

Source: www.essex.ac.uk/elections and Central Election Bureaux reports

There are many health warnings to be added to looking at these raw aggregated figures – not only are the constituencies large and diverse within themselves but they also show votes at different types of elections (Chamber of Deputies in 1996, 2000

and 2004; European Parliament elections in 2007 and County Council lists in 2008), but some trends might be discernable. First, and least surprising, is the decline in Democrat support in Galati and Constanta, two industrial areas which demographically would be expected to fall more easily into the Social Democrat camp. Second is the ability of the Democrats to build new areas of strong support in places like Alba, Caras-Severin and Arad. There are other areas, not shown on this list, where the party has performed strongly in the most recent elections. But perhaps most striking is the apparent failure to convince the electorates in the most likely areas of centre-right support. Despite Basescu's links with the capital, the party has held on to just three quarters of earlier support for the centre-right in Bucharest. There has been a similar slippage in Timis county – centred on Timisoara which has strong emotional links to the anti-Communist revolution. And in economic growth areas like Sibiu, Brasov, Prahova and Ilfov, the party has also failed to retain or build on earlier centre-right support.

Has the rise of the Democrats been purely an accident of timing? The core of the centre-right's loyal vote in Western Europe is the middle class. Francisco Vega has argued that Romania's middle class was initially made up of Communist era administrators who were more willing to vote for the Social Democrats or even the Greater Romania Party.⁸¹ The 2007 European Parliament election results appear to show an expanding constituency for the centre right but a growing potential electorate of itself does not adequately explain the comparative performance of the Democrats and the Democratic Convention (or its constituent parts) who were unable to craft a *sustained* appeal among their potential electorate. Research into Romania's post-Communist electorate is limited but analysis by Roper and Fesnic offers another insight into evolving influences on voting patterns.⁸² They conclude that historic factors were more important in determining early voting patterns than socio-economic ones. Has the significance of economic factors in voting patterns grown in recent years and has this assisted the Democrats? The evidence at best seems somewhat confused – there was clearly a massive loss of faith in the government's ability to deal with Romania's economic challenges between 1998 and 2000 but the Democrats were,

⁸¹ Lavinia Stan, *Romania in Transition* (Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1997).

⁸² S Roper and F Fesnic, *Historical legacies and their impact on Post-Communist voting behaviour*, *Europe Asia Studies*, Volume 5 Number 1, 2003.

of course, part of the government too.⁸³ Again we are drawn to the conclusion that the Democrats have proved better able to craft an appealing narrative around modernisation (via membership of the EU), economic growth, tackling corruption and investment in public services which, in the short term at least, is benefiting them at the expense of their opponents, without necessarily establishing deep connections to a distinct electorate.

Towards a new politics?

In all the former Soviet satellites in Europe the political contest was initially polarised around attitudes to the countries' Communist pasts. At varying speeds around the region the political narrative moved to more familiar economic issues. There was a common, although not universal, pattern of defeat followed by recovery for the left as centre-right governments struggled with the electoral costs of market-oriented reforms. In some countries cohesive and durable parties were able to gain dominance on the centre right although rarely the formations which had led reforming governments immediately after the fall of Communism. In other states the centre right continues to be characterised by division and defeat.

Romania, where the left maintained unbroken dominance after 1989 until 1996, was marked out as exceptional because of the peculiar characteristics of its Communist regime. In fact it was more the nature of the *exit* from Communism rather than the former regime itself which left the centre-right particularly weak and its polarising influence affected Romanian politics well into the 1990s.⁸⁴ The speed and violence of the revolution allowed the left to capture the narrative of democratisation and the politics of nationalism was radicalised and dominated by the far-right and at the same time the left captured important resource bases in terms of local economic and power structures. This left the centre right to formulate a narrative around economic reform (and the closely related issue of corruption) which eventually delivered it victory in 1996; and a polarising narrative of radical anti-Communism which was a source of division and weakness.

⁸³ Gallup polls showed a majority of voters having a positive opinion of Romania's future prospects from the 1996 election through to the end of 1997 but a change to a massive net negative from the beginning of 1998 through to the 2000 election. At times the % of respondents having a positive view barely reached double figures.

⁸⁴ See Maxfield (2006).

The failure of the Democratic Convention, and the Democrats' survival as a parliamentary force in 2000, created an opportunity for the party to move into the now vacant space on the centre-right. The corrosion of the Democrats' links with its Communist heritage created an environment that made the party an acceptable coalition partner and home for supporters of the political right. The party's ideology has always been closer to a centrist programme of reform and modernisation than dyed in the wool social democracy, and the genetic make-up and organisational structure of the party meant it was relatively painless to move from centre-left to centre-right after the 2000 poll.

Traian Basescu is clearly a hugely significant part of the Democrats' story - in the Basescu era the party has risen from the edge of electoral disaster to dominate the political scene. Yet there are more factors than simply the personality of the president involved in explaining the party's rise.

Tested against Szczerbiak and Hanley's framework, the Democrat leadership group shares a common background and political objectives. Whether they maintain their dominance may depend equally on an ability to stay united at the same time as crafting a broad, distinctive and inclusive narrative, as distinct to a preference for short-term tactical opportunism. With nationalism once again available for the centre-right to lay claim to; with the economy performing well; and with the Democrats monopolising the narrative of clean government, the opportunities at least exist for the party to exploit. The National Liberals have responded to their own difficulties by a conscious effort to 'reclaim' liberalism – speeches and election material repeatedly refer to the party's place in the European liberal family. Electorally this may put them in direct competition with the Democrats for the young, urban, educated electorate that is a feature of centre-right support in the CEE region. Pragmatically, though, the National Liberals may be obliged to seek alliances with the left or face being consigned to the role of centrist coalition pivot surviving on a reduced electoral base. Romanian politics is clearly still in a state of flux, but by the end of 2009 it may be much clearer whether the Democrats will have found the formula for establishing a durable and dominant force on the centre-right or whether it will face the same fate as earlier formations such as the Democratic Convention.

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- Renate Weber – former presidential adviser to Basescu, now National Liberal MEP

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