

## **Institutional Dimensions of Democratisation in Hungary and Romania: A Comparative Analysis**

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### **Abstract**

*The phase of transition initiated by the collapse of communist rule in the Eastern Central Europe (ECE) is a part of the processes of what Huntington called as the Third Wave of democratization which have also involved southern Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia in the last 40 years. Yet, the transition from communist rule and the construction of a post-communist order in the ECE countries followed different path. This study compares institutional dimensions of democratization which stand for distribution of executive power, electoral and party systems in Hungary and Romania. Despite having shared a communist past experience, Hungary and Romania followed a quite different path in their post Cold War political order: Hungary is accepted as being the clearest example of a peaceful negotiation, while Romanian Revolution was the most bloody of all in the region. In Hungary well-organized political parties decided for a strong parliamentary government, while weakly organized parties led to a presidential system and personal leadership in Romania. Furthermore, Political party systems in both countries were developed in different directions: Hungary that has experienced a regime discontinuity sees the successive creation of a new competitive multiparty system while Romania that is dominated by continuity succeeded a limited adaptation over time. But the electoral systems in both countries favor governability and stability over representativeness that eventually help larger parties and hurt smaller ones.*

### **Key Words**

*Hungary, Romania, Transition, Democratization, Change, Political Parties, Communism*

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### Introduction:

With the collapse of communist rule throughout the region, the socialist regimes in the Eastern Central Europe (ECE) disappeared and have been replaced by a quite different configuration of states and political forces (Lewis 1997: 405). However, the transition from communist rule and the construction of a post-communist order took different forms in each state (White 1993: 12). Hungary and Romania, the subjects of this essay, are not exceptional cases.

Hungary is accepted as being the clearest example of a peaceful negotiation (Bozoki & Lomax 1996: 187) while Romanian Revolution was the most bloody of all in Eastern Europe (Henderson & Robinson 1997: 80). The transition in Hungary was gradual and peaceful and a multiparty system emerged very early, even before the systemic change took place. Therefore, it has been quite successful in its stability of political formations and institutions during its democratic transition process (Agh 1998a: 74-75). However, transition in Romania with its violent overthrow of Ceausescu in 1989 and electoral frauds established only a facade democracy and authoritarianism remained alive until the mid-1990s (Dellenbrant 1991: 210). Even the Romanian political system in early 1990s proved to be a 'one-man show' for Ion Iliescu (Agh 1998a: 267) who was accused by opposition parties for seeking to establish a "republican dictatorship" (Eyal 1993: 134).

The distribution of executive power has also taken different forms in the states concerned. Well-organised parties in Hungary decided for a strong parliamentary government, on the other hand, weakly organised parties led to a presidential system and personal leadership in Romania (Agh 1998b: 109).

The development of electoral and political party systems during the early post-communist era in the mentioned countries has been different as well. The electoral systems in both countries favour governability and stability over representativeness that eventually help larger parties and hurt smaller ones (Lijphart 1996: 206). The Hungarian electoral system is a kind of mixed majoritarian-PR system "where some deputies are elected on the majoritarian system from single member constituencies and others are selected by PR from national or regional party lists (Henderson & Robinson 1997: 171)" In Romania, however, PR system is applied (Kuusela 1994: 147). Parties have been the main actors in the transition of Hungary (Agh 1998: 91), where the earliest development of party organisation in ECE countries appeared. As a result, Hungary has been successful in developing and consolidating democratic political institutions and a pluralistic multiparty system (Lewis, Lomax & Wightman 1994: 157-158). But in Romania, national Salvation Front, which was dominated by old communists, remained in power due to the oppositions' inability to present an alternative. Thus, the new political regime has a peculiar one-party character (Korosenyi 1991: 167) and held on until 2004, with the exception of the elections in 1996.

This essay is going to compare institutional dimensions of democratisation which stand for distribution of executive power, electoral and party systems in Hungary and Romania in the post-Cold War era.

### Parliamentarism versus Presidentialism

The distribution of executive power and the relationship between executive and legislative bodies developed towards different angles in Hungary and Romania. Hungary has become a parliamentary democracy following the German constitutional model with a strong Prime Minister and very powerful Constitutional Court (Agh 1998a: 82-83). Unlike Hungary, the Romanian new Constitution introduced a French-type of presidential republic where president is directly elected. However, because of lack of the usual 'checks and balances', the president in Romania accumulates much more power: S/he appoints the Prime Minister and can chair cabinet meetings. Consequently, parliament became weak and controlled by the ruling party (Agh 1998a: 268). The National salvation Front (NSF) headed by Ion Iliescu fully controlled state power by 26 December 1989, and managed to hold on power until the end of 2004 with the exception period of 1996-2004. Therefore, there is a strong continuity between the regime represented in the early 1990s by the NSF and its successor organisations (Agh 1998a: 263).

By March 1989 an opposition Round-Table had emerged in Hungary between different independent groups and parties to promote conditions for a fully democratic transition. The starting point of the Round-Table was to build a parliamentary democracy and not a presidential system as the necessary guarantee against arbitrary or personal rule (Lomax 1993: 82). Since it is argued that parliamentarism gives political parties real control over state machinery and social process (Szoboszlai 1991: 205). Therefore, the president in Hungary has not strong power but just ceremonial (Lomax 1993: 88). The president was to be elected not directly by popular vote but by parliament (Szoboszlai 1996: 123) according to an agreement which was concluded immediately after the general elections held on March and April 1990 between the two major parties; the Hungarian Democratic Forum (HDF) and the Alliance of Free Democrats (AFD) (Szoboszlai 1991: 205). The same agreement strengthened the government against the parliament by introducing no confidence-vote. Attila Agh (1998a: 82) puts it clearly:

This is a constitutional device through which the prime-ministerial government has become the dominant power centre... the president is relatively weak and the overwhelming power lies in the hands of a chancellor-like prime minister. In this constitutional set up, where the parliamentary control function towards the executive power has been weakened significantly, the other 'checks and balances' has gained extraordinary significance. In this respect, primary the constitutional Court and the 'negative' balancing and limiting powers of the president of the republic.

In Hungarian system ministers are responsible not to parliament but to the Prime Minister. But Prime Minister is responsible to parliament on behalf of the whole government (Agh 1998a: 82).

The composition of parliament is also different in the both states. Hungary is a unicameral while Romania is bicameral parliament, which has two chambers: the National Assembly and the Senate (Kuusela 1994: 138). However, the two chambers have the same task and power as well.

**Table-1**

<b>Presidential Elections in Romania</b>			
Elections	President	Party	Vote %
1990	Ion Iliescu	FNS	85.1
1992	Ion Iliescu	FDSN	61.4
1996	Emil Constantinescu	CDR	54.4
2000	Ion Iliescu	FDSN	66.8
2004	Traian Băsescu	PNL-PD	51.2
2009	Traian Băsescu	PDL	50.3

Source: Romanian Central Election Bureau

In Hungary Arpad Goncz a member of the SzDsz was elected to presidency for a five-year term by parliament in 1990 and he has been reelected to a second five-year term in 1995 (Karatnycky et al. 1997: 179) and remain in the office till 2000. Then he was replaced respectively with Ferenc Madl (2000-2005) and Laszlo Solyom (2005-...). But in Romania, Ion Iliescu won 1990 and 1992 presidential elections while Emil Constantinescu won the Romanian presidency in 1996 elections, the turning point in Romanian democratisation process (Karatnycky et al. 1997: 300). However, Ion Iliescu, was able to win again in the December 2000 elections. His successor, Trainan Basescu, has won the next two elections in 2004 and 2009 (see Table-1). Henderson and Robinson (1997: 168) claim that "If we look at post communist states, the tendency towards presidentialism increases as one move eastward."

**Electoral System: Majoritarian versus PR System**

How does electoral system affect party combination in parliament and representation? In this respect again Hungary and Romania applies different systems. Although founding electoral systems in both countries have guaranteed a reasonable connection between the parties' support among the voters and their representation in the parliament, the systems they apply are exclusively complex (Pridham & Vanhanen 1994: 8-9).

The Hungarian 1989 law on parliamentary elections introduced a complicated mixed system of PR and single member constituencies (Kuusela 1994: 136), while Romania has applied PR system in the elections for both chambers of the parliament (Jasiewicz 1998: 143).

The Hungarian mixed system favours governability and stability over representativeness (Agh 1998a: 93) that gives a bonus to strong parties (Henderson & Robinson 1997: 142)." Jasiewicz (1998: 142) explain clearly how this mixed PR-majoritarian system work:

Of the 360 deputies, 176 were elected in single member constituencies, according to unusually complex rules. (at least 50 per cent turnout in the first round and 25 per cent in the run-off required: if nobody gained overall majority in the first round, the three frontrunners or all candidates with at least 15 per cent of the vote would qualify for the run-off). The remaining 210 deputies were elected according to a party list PR system, with a 4 per cent threshold, 152 of them in the districts and 58 on the national level.

Attila Agh (1998a: 92-93) argues that although the proportional part in Hungarian electoral law is bigger than majoritarian one, it is substantially a majoritarian system. Since the electoral system provides an extra opportunity for leading party to obtain seats over and above its allocation on party lists. However, a political stability has been achieved through this system by which both 1990 and 1994 parliamentary elections have approved the same six parties.

As compare to the Hungarian mixed system, the Romanian PR system is less complicated. 119 seats were contested in the Senate and 387 in the National Assembly plus a further nine seats were allocated for national minority organisations. But minorities were not able to gain enough support from the voters to be represented in parliament. The electoral system for both chambers was a PR one, based 41 multi seats districts plus the Bucharest municipality. The district magnitude in National Assembly election ranged from 4 to 15 for the county districts and it was 39 in Bucharest. In the Senate election the range of magnitude was from 2 to 4 in counties, and Bucharest had 14 Senators. Elections in any constituency were valid only if turnout is above 50 per cent of eligible voters, if not new elections were to be held within two weeks, using the same list of candidates (Kuusela 1994: 139-140).

Electoral law in both countries introduced threshold to avoid party fragmentation and to reduce also possibilities for ethnic parties. In Hungary 4 per cent was applied in 1990 and 5 per cent in the next elections (Agh 1998a: 93). While in Romania a 3 per cent threshold was applied in the elections (Agh 1998b: 270). Application of threshold led underrepresented or lost votes in Romania more than Hungary.

### **The Emergence of Multiparty System**

Are parties the products of the transition period or main actors of it? To what extent did the regime continuity affect new party system? What is the place of historical and new parties in the new party system?

To start with the first question Attila Agh (1998b: 101). argues that " Parties have been the chief actors of systemic change...". However, these actors due to facing with different circumstances, played different roles in Hungary and Romania. Hungary that has experienced a regime discontinuity sees the successive creation of a new competitive multipar-

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ty system while Romania that is dominated by continuity succeeded a limited adaptation over time (Cotta 1994: 101).

Changes took place very early in Hungary. In the second half of 1980s reformist Kadar replaced leadership of the ruling party. Through this leadership change and long evolutionary development multiparty system emerged in 1987-88 (Agh 1998a: 74). But Ceausescu's totalitarian regime in Romania left no space for development either of political parties or the social movements (Pridham & Lewis 1996: 12).

Hungarian Democratic Forum, which proclaimed itself as a social movement, issued a manifesto in 1987 with 170 participants of the Lakitelek Meetings. "The manifesto called for introduction of a multiparty system and 'open democracy' in Hungary" (Grzybowski 1991: 189). After the oppositional Round-Table issued the Act on parties in 1989 (Agh 1998a: 78) most of the social movements or organisations which were some kind of umbrella organisations turned into political parties. Such as, "the Hungarian Democratic Forum [HDF] emerged from a meeting in Lakitelek in September 1987 as a typical loose movement party whose aim was to unite all moderate opposition force" (Agh 1998a: 77). The Alliance of Free Democrats (AFD), formed in 1988, was composed of the former democratic opposition, representing urban intellectuals. The Alliance of Young Democrats (AYD) emerged in 1988 with a liberal identity. The "Hungarian Socialist Party [HSP] emerged from reformers of the ruling party" (Agh 1998a: 77). Historical parties of the pre-communist era also reappeared in the democratisation period. These are, the Small Holders' Party, the Christian democratic People's Party, the Hungarian Socialist Worker's Party and the Hungarian People's Party (Agh 1998a: 78). Apart from the major parties mentioned, about 200 minor parties in addition to many movements and associations emerged (Grzybowski 1991: 180). Marian Grzybowski (1991: 190) argues that even at this stage the Hungarian party system was on the point of being into real pluralism.

Here an elaboration of the systemic change in Hungary will help us to understand the dynamics of regime change in the country. As a reaction to the 1956 crises, in order to increase support for the regime some economic reforms were introduced by the Hungarian authorities at that time. Therefore, the climate was favorable for reform even before the collapse of the Communist regime (Dicortona 1991: 316). In the words of Janina Frentzel Zagorska (1991: 95-114); "In Hungary, economic reform of 1968, relatively successful for about two decades, paved the way for more radical economic reforms and attempts at political reform from above in the late eighties." In Hungary the increasingly explicit reformist intensions of the ruling elite led to the opposition towards higher level of organization and activities (Dicortona 1991: 318). Minodora Adriana Buliga-Stoian (2009: 91-92) asserts that the ruling elites was in favor of a gradual change in the regime

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The opposition groups in Hungary not only benefited from a head start, but they were also to some extent aided by the ruling elites in an effort to encourage

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a negotiated solution to the regime's shortcomings... One of the essential elements leading to negotiations was the special relationship between the Hungarian Worker's Party (MSZMP) and the new political forces. The opposition forces had established a loose organization called Network for Free Initiatives (SZKH or Network) in May 1988. The Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) announced its formation at the second Lakitelek meeting in 1988, followed a few months later by the Alliance for Free Democrats (SZDSZ) and the Alliance of Young Democrats (FIDESZ). While the regime was still using force to disperse popular protests in the streets, the party had lost the will to eradicate the leading figures behind the reformist movements.

A new political and economic elite had emerged in the 1980s who had a vested interest in implementing radical reforms. The change was in everyone's interest including the reformers within the communist party who were hoping for a power-sharing agreement that would retain the hegemonic power of the party (Buliga-Stoian 2009: 93).

In late 1980s there was a period of transition when the system was transformed and dictatorial element of the political structure gradually weakened. From 1988, when Janos Kadar became Hungarian Socialist Workers Party (HSWP), till the country's first democratically elected government in May 1990, significant changes took place in the bureaucracy (Dunay 1993: 122). Radical changes took place not only in bureaucracy but also in the country's economy. During the last few years of communism Hungarian authorities began to introduce changes concerning centrally planned economy indicating their willingness to move to a market economy (Tiusanen 2004: 5).

General character of the systemic change in Hungarian economy is briefly explained by Karoly Lorant (2004: 53) as follows:

The systemic change in Hungary was carried out according to the principles of neo-liberalism. The prices, foreign trade, capital movement were liberalised, the state enterprises (the whole enterprise system, because being a socialist state all the means of production were in the government's hands) were privatised, the commercial connections with the Comecon countries were liquidated. Behind these measures there were the IMF and the World Bank who linked their loans to these "structural adjustment policies".

Romania followed a different path from Hungarian one. Soon after the execution of Ceausescu the National Salvation Front (NSF) emerged as a temporary body that took control over all state affairs and intended to introduce democracy and pluralism. Ion Iliescu, a leading figure of the former nomenklature, became the first president of the Council. Many

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NFS's new leaders were the former communist party officials (Eyal 1993: 122). Although the Front originally established as a temporary institution to guide the country towards free elections, then it decided to take part in parliamentary elections as a distinct party with all the advantages of representing the new state authority (Agh 1998a: 265).

Party formation process affected the elections, parliamentary composition as well as the nature of their democracies. Hungary was one of the first countries hold fully competitive elections in April 1990 after which democratic Forum was able to form centre-rights government coalition with the Independent Small Holders' Party and Christian Democrats. "The elections brought to an end the 'hundred party system' and established a six party parliament." In addition to the coalition parties Alliance of Free Democrats, Alliance of Young democrats and Hungarian Socialist Worker's Party were able to be represented in the parliament (Seroka 1993: 118-119). However in Romania where "in May 1990 the First of the Balkans elections were held" (Gallagher 1998: 47) the NSF came to power with a great majority in the both houses of the new assembly (Pridham & Lewis 1996: 13). The second largest representation in the Deputies Assembly was the Democratic Alliance of Hungary in Romania. The Liberals were the third biggest party with just 6.41 per cent of the vote and further six parties non of them with more than 3 per cent of the seats were able to join parliament (Eyal 1993: 129). The first elections brought about a clear victory of oppositions in Hungary, while in Romania as a result of weakness of the oppositions the old communist elite won the elections. Therefore, after the first competitive elections, it can be argued that in Hungary the new political regime has become more pluralistic while in Romania the emerging political scene has one party character (Korosenyi 1991: 167).

Table-2

<b>Parliamentary Elections in Hungary since 1990 -Major Parties</b>					
	1990	1994	1998	2002	2006
<b>Hungarian Democratic Forum-MDF</b>	24,7 (coalition)	11.7	2,8 (coalition)	Coop fidesz	5.4
<b>Hungarian Socialist Party-MSZP</b>	8.5	54.1	34.7	46.1	49.2
<b>Hungarian Civic Union-Fidesz</b>	9	7	28.2	41.1	42
<b>Chrstian Democratic People's Party - KDNP</b>	6.5	7	2.6	3.9	42.3
<b>Alliance of Free democrats-SZDSZ</b>	23.8	17.9	6.2	5.2	5.2

National Election Office; (ruling parties in green)

The second elections held on in Hungary and Romania respectively in 1994 and 1992. Hungarian second elections proved the same six parties to be represented in parliament. The only change was that Democratic forum has been replaced by Hungarian Socialist Party (reformed communists) with a majority of popular vote, (54 per cent, see Table-2). In the next elections Hungarian Civic Union (in coalition with MF) and Alliance of Free Democrats came to power in the last two elections (see Table-2). Since being emerged as a big umbrella organisation, Democratic Forum fragmented after the first elections. Meanwhile, HSP-ex-communist party- was successful to transform into a party of the modern European left. The both elections have produced a strong leading party and proved the same six parliamentary parties. This exhibits that compared to not only Romania but



also other ECE countries, the Hungarian party system is relatively well developed and consolidated with stable parliamentary parties (Agh 1998a: 93-94). In the Romanian second elections (1992) NSF, which splintered into two groups after the first elections, DNSF was able to come out as the single largest party but not majority (with 28 per cent). Democratic Convention of Romania, the umbrella organisation of oppositions in the 1992 elections, became the second party with 20 per cent of the votes. In addition to them five more parties were able to join parliament due to 3 per cent threshold (Dellenbrant 1991: 213). DNSF formed a new coalition government with some extremely nationalist parties. Peter Siani Davies before 1996 elections argued that:

Certainly with the victory of Ion Iliescu at the 1990, 1992 [and 2000] presidential elections and the continuing strength within parliament of the party, most closely aligned to his position... The party of Social Democracy in Romania, has not yet, at the time of writing, negotiated a peaceful and legal transfer of power to an opposition grouping, a process which arguable will be the real test of whether the country has reached full political maturity (Agh 1998a: 272).

However, the opposition won both parliamentary and presidential elections in 1996. This was accepted as a significant lead in Romanian politics that raised hope for the start of genuine democratisation (Agh 1998a: 266-267). But, Iliescu's victory in December 2000 elections brought new dimensions for analysing Romanian democracy.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, despite having shared a communist past experience, Hungary and Romania followed a quite different path in their post Cold War political order. It can be argued that in Hungary a multiparty system emerged and political stability has been achieved. That is why "[it] was commended by the EU for the best overall performance among the ECE states in 1997" (Agh 1998a: 107), it fulfilled EU membership criteria much before Romania and also is accepted as free democracy by Freedom House (2010) with the highest score. Yet in Romania transition towards a multiparty system is evident but not complete. Despite being the EU full member today and being accepted as free democracy by Freedom House it was not able to get the highest score (Freedom House 2010). The Romanian party system is still unstable which reflects the fact that Romania is one of the communist countries with the least development dissident movements. Politics is still largely conducted at an elite level (Henderson & Robinson 1997: 368). It might be a provocative argument but the victory of the opposition in 1996 elections raised hope for a new start in Romanian politics. However, Iliescu's return in the elections of December 2000 [and the victory of Basescu in the last two elections] shows that communist authori-

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tarianism is still strong although it took a new form and created a democratic façade (Agh 1998a: 107). The emergence of one-man in Romanian politics might be also due to the failure of oppositions. Or due to society's high expectation that sees democracy as a cure for its all-political, social, economic and cultural problems. However, it should be kept in mind that democracy is not necessary more efficient economically, administratively and also politically than the other forms of political systems (Smutter & Karl 1996: 59). Overall picture today is that Hungary is accepted as liberal and free democracy while Romania still keeps some authoritarian elements in the politic.

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