

Yayın Geliş Tarihi: 21.06.2010
Yayına Kabul Tarihi: 22.07.2010

Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi
Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi
Cilt: 12, Sayı: 2, Yıl: 2010, Sayfa:77-88
ISSN: 1302 - 3284

THE ROLE OF ROMANIAN ECONOMIC ELITES IN THE PROCESS OF MODERNISATION, DEVELOPMENT AND EUROPEANISATION HISTORICAL DIMENSION & CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The actions of elites in general and economic elites in particular have played a decisive role in Romanian history, during the three prominent periods we have analyzed as most relevant in the process of development, modernization and Europeanisation of the country: the interwar period, the communist regime and subsequently, the post-revolutionary era. The purpose of this study is therefore to assess the most significant contributions of this highly dynamic social segment to the progress of modern Romania, with special emphasis on the most notable representatives of the economic elite and their evolution in the changing political context of the last nine decades. The study relies on extended personal research conducted over the years in national archives, as well as on a vast bibliography, which provides an original view of the subject and a coherent interpretation of the political and economic evolution fostered by elites - a process that is still in progress and opens to further research.

Keywords: *Elites, Modernization, Europeanisation, Economy, Transition.*

ROMEN EKONOMİK ELİTLERİN MODERNİZASYON, KALKINMA VE AVRUPALILAŞMA SÜRECİNDEKİ ROLÜ, TARİHİ BOYUT & GÜNCEL PERSPEKTİF

Özet

Genel olarak elitler ve özellikle ekonomik elitler, Romen tarihinde ülkenin kalkınma, modernleşme ve Avrupalılaşma sürecinde etkili olan üç önemli dönemde (savaşlar arası dönem, komünist rejim dönemi ve devrim sonrası dönem) belirleyici rol oynamışlardır. Çalışmanın amacı, bu oldukça dinamik sosyal kesimin modern Romanya'nın gelişimine katkılarını ekonomik elitlerin en dikkat çekici temsilcilerine ve onların son doksan yıldır değişen siyasi bağlamdaki evrimine vurgu yaparak

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değerlendirmektir. Çalışma ulusal arşivlerde yapılan kapsamlı araştırmalara ve elitler tarafından desteklenen ekonomik ve siyasi gelişim sürecinin orijinal ve tutarlı şekilde yorumlanmasını sağlayan geniş bir bibliyografyaya dayanmaktadır.

***Anahtar Kelimeler:** Elitler, Modernleşme, Avrupalılaşıma, Ekonomi, Geçiş*

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to study the process of economic development and modernization of Romania, which has centered from the very beginning around the actions of the elite, whose most notable contributions can be traced back to the interwar period. In fact, it is during the 17th century that the modern world began to take shape in this regard, which rendered economic processes inexplicable without proper reference to other essential segments in society, notably the political, social and cultural ones. The economic and social-political thinking began to share at the time a series of common elements, which ultimately led to the creation of an identity for the dichotomy state-economy.

Consequently, in interwar Romania, the relation between the state, the economy and society was structured, developed and continuously repositioned within the paradigm liberalism-interventionism, which had a great impact on the nation's modernity. In fact, the analyses conducted on the matter in the 20th century as to the nature of these connections do not differ greatly from the ones across Europe, as far as their findings are concerned. Society was confronted with a plethora of solutions for the modernization and development of the community, as humanist intellectuals, experimentalists, economists and jurists embraced solutions, ideas and theories, not only as beneficiaries, but also quite frequently as contributors, well appreciated throughout Europe¹. Politicians would get involved in the debate regarding modern integrationist ideas and thus transpose them into programmes and even political action.

Furthermore, this paper focuses on the gap between the arrival of the communist regime and its fall in 1989, from the point of view of the economic elite, who has been struggling since the Romanian Revolution to regain its former self-awareness. In so doing, the influence played by this particular group of intellectuals and technocrats in the process of reshaping the rebirth of Romanian capitalist economy has grown ever stronger, as they have attempted to bring the transition process to an end, at least from an economic perspective. Their success in this regard has been analyzed with objectivity within the contents of this paper and should be taken with a pinch of salt, although it is undeniable that Romania was and still is reliant on a limited number of skilful economists who have the

¹ We shall mention, amongst others, Eugen Lovinescu, Mihail Manoilescu, Dimitrie Drăghicescu, Virgil Madgearu, Victor Slăvescu and Mițiță Constantinescu, who generated within the Romanian society the necessary emulation and support meant to integrate the country into the western development model.

knowledge, ability and influence needed to keep its economy afloat in a time of downturn.

Hence, the role of the current economic elite needs to be analyzed by keeping in mind the historic perspective outlined in this study, which is meant to provide a thorough insight into this group's influence over what we may now refer to as modernity within the Romanian state.

The creators of the Romanian neoliberal doctrine started from the premise that the years of war had rendered the economic practice of classic liberalism obsolete, namely the principle of non-interference of the state into the economic life. Therefore, it was deemed necessary to progress towards a new type of liberalism, appropriate for the economic and political realities generated by the war.

Neoliberalism (Drăghicescu, 1921; Constantinescu, 1925; Madgearu, 1936), whose principles may easily be encountered within the Constitution of 1923, was transposed into economic policies, while the ideal of the so-called "peasant's state", proclaimed by the doctrine of the other major political party of the interwar period, the National Peasants' Party, went no further than the theoretical level. It is nonetheless quite interesting to analyze the manner in which this party combined state intervention and a regulated economy, admitting after 1935 the possibility for the individualist, governmental and cooperationist sectors to coexist - a theory that took the neoliberal approach even further on the way to modernization.

Mihail Manoilescu (Manoilescu, 1993) is the elite theorist whose ideas became most valuable at the time. Starting from a conceptual clarification of the neoliberal model in the 1920s, he soon moved on to a new economic theory, inspired from Italian corporatism, where the corporative state was supposed to be the answer to the failures of the democratic-bourgeois state. The latter was referred to as the failure of the system of political parties, one that was incapable of organizing itself and adjusting to the ever changing world order. Nevertheless, it was the merit of the Romanian economic elite to embrace, from an ideological point of view, the western, pluralist model, at least up to the eve of the Second World War, when the ideas of the interventionist economic school began to be widely accepted, in line with the general European trend. This did not minimize the importance of economic agents relying on individual property – it only promoted their interconnection with those forms of property that had already gained a significant level of economic power in the state.

Activating in political circumstances that were not entirely beneficial, the *Interventionist School of Thought* was led by prominent figures such as Mihail Manoilescu, Mitiță Constantinescu, Victor Slăvescu and Victor Jinga, who sustained the state's intervention within the economy, by means of *plans* and *programmes* and conducted analyses on the economic phenomenon. In fact, the plan that was conceived to function in the long term was applied to a type of economy that remained, at its core, genuinely liberal.

Having said this, the shaping of the Romanian economic complex in the period between the two World Wars, conducted by the elites, used as its primary instruments the intervention of the state, as well as legislation. The response of the economy materialized in the form of facts and processes, which are testimony to the evolution, development, modernization and Europeanization of all economic factors. In reality, the institutions of the state were the most active interface between Authority, Society and Economy, as they allowed for the existence of viable connections between economic theory and practice, which eventually structured the national economy both horizontally and vertically. The classification of these institutions in the interwar period may include the following categories: governmental, integrative/aggregative, parliamentary and non-governmental. Such institutions were in keeping with western patterns and ranged from governmental bodies to non-governmental agencies, under the influence of the dominant party and economic elite: belonging either to the National Liberal Party or to the National Peasants' Party, whichever dominated the country's political life (Păun, 2009). Governmental institutions often coincided with public services, under the leadership of ministries. In this respect, a central role in the development of economic policies belonged to sectors like agriculture, industry, trade, finances, transport and public works. The second category, that of integrative or aggregative bodies, represented, for instance, by the Superior Economic Council, the Chambers of Commerce and Industry or by Agricultural Chambers, maintained the role of promoters and accelerants of development.

The Romanian state organized and reorganized its institutional layout in various attempts by the leading parties, without attaining a position of balance and harmony between the state and the private initiative, which they often proclaimed in their respective doctrines. It is interesting, at this point, to conduct an analysis of the interactions between the state and the economic elite, on the one hand, and the former and consumers, on the other hand. The conclusions of such an attempt would emphasize on particular forms of association and dissociation, which guided the economic life of Romania in its 30 years of market economy before World War Two (1918-1948), when the state played a decisive role with regard to the orientation of the economy.

The development strategy concocted by the elites after the Unification of 1918 was largely reliant on mineral resources, which became part of the national patrimony with the adoption of the 1923 Constitution, stating so at article 19. Subsequently, a coherent development strategy was built on the foundations of this measure, which led to a change in the overall profile of the Romanian economy, from largely agrarian to agrarian-industrial, thus proving the advantages of the industrialization process.

Due to the joint effort of the state and the economic elite, the Romanian economy underwent a process of growth, partly due to the contribution of labour productivity. This significant economic growth was redirected towards the basic branches of the economy, agriculture and industry, while the banking sector flourished, fostering the expansion of an ever wealthier financial elite. The

awareness of these elite as to the need to enhance the level of qualification of workers triggered further interest towards professional competence, with a positive impact on education at all levels. Meanwhile, the state maintained itself on the course of parliamentary democracy, with inevitable particularities that differentiate the Romanian model from the western one. The economy inspired by western patterns organically rejected state domination, while the state itself and its institutions refused to slide towards totalitarianism, although this resistance was not always fully convincing. A reproach that can be directed towards the elite of the time is its inability to make use of the tremendous potential available in terms of labour force, as Romania could not elude the position of “source of raw materials” and, to some extent, “marketplace” for better developed neighbouring economies. Also, one may notice a certain hesitance from the part of the elite in terms of the acceleration of a technical modernization process of industry, taken as a whole, even though the economic level that was reached enabled Romania to compare itself to other Central-European states, even well-developed ones, in a number of industrial branches, such as oil extraction, energy, tractor production, aeronautics, precision instruments and weapons industry.

The start of the Second World War and the alliance with the Axis changed the Romanian economy to one dedicated to the purpose of the battlefield. The failure of Marshall Antonescu and his defeat in the war subsequently enabled left-wing extremists to gain momentum and weaken even further the resistance of traditional, democratic economic elites. A dramatic process of change was initiated on the 6th of March 1945, with the new government taking office, under the leadership of Petru Groza and following the guidelines set by the Kremlin. With oppression and deceit, the Communist Party seized the power and began “purifying” the national economic and political elites. In so doing, they compromised the very essence of the Romanian village and way of life, with such measures as the agrarian reform of 1945 or the nationalization of the National Bank of Romania and industry, literally placed under the state’s full control. Despite the apparent cover of Romania’s economic independence from foreign powers, the reality was that the major economic entities were under Soviet control, by means of a cleverly-crafted system of subjugation. The same can be stated about the ideological propaganda and social transformations rendered possible by the newly-adopted constitution of 1948, along with the restructuring of education, the monopoly on mass media and, last but not least, the deconstruction of western influence, deeply rooted in various segments of society.

During the communist regime, there was Romanian economic elite, but it was definitely deprived of its necessary means and thus failed to affirm itself at a European level, all the more because it was out of question for it to integrate into a western model. The economy taken as a whole was in fact fundamentally repressed by the omnipresent ideological factor. Nevertheless, a series of representatives that were highly skilled activists within the non-alignment movement, in the framework of the United Nations, as well as in other international organizations, are examples which prove the fact that it was possible to some extent for the Romanian elite to affirm its value. However, this only occurred at an individual level, without any

real institutional perspectives, as in the case of representatives of the Romanian Academy, like N.N. Constantinescu (Constantinescu, 1973, 1976, 1993) and other thinkers who retreated along with their analyses, interpretations and investigations beyond the reach of the communist regime.

Unfortunately, they were not validated, not even as being part of the dissidence² (there is a long list of people belonging to this group), as the latter manifested itself mainly in the fields of literature or politics, with members emerging from the interwar period. This lack of visibility was partly due to themselves, as there were too few members of the real economic elite, although it is of great significance that this embryonic matrix stood its ground and was able to expand quite fast in the 1990s, bearing an undisputed will to achieve a viable market economy and to implement the western model.

In fact, this change of elites that occurred after the Revolution is actually more like a formation of elites, as change is virtually impossible in this respect, despite the existence of true scholars before the moment 1989. Hence, the names that are currently relevant for the theory of the transition process were not visible figures before that time and do not belong to the generation that was dominant in the years of communism.

After the Revolution of 1989³, there appeared quite a lot of initiatives from the part of the civil society, whose purpose was to provide stakeholders with a competent research capability in the field of applied economics, so as to contribute to the debates and analyses of economic policies and thus find suitable solutions to the concrete economic challenges the Romanian society was facing at the time. Such initiatives, like the one of the Group of Applied Economics, represented by Daniel Dăianu (Dăianu, 1999) and Liviu Voinea, have contributed to the economic development during the transition period, by promoting a new type of elite, composed of highly-skilled young experts, along with experienced professionals. In this manner, the private sector has played a major role in the encouragement of partnerships with the public sector (Aligică, 2001), having the support of a new

² According to the Archives of the radio station Free Europe, the following qualified as *dissidents*: P. Alexandrescu, Gabriel Andreescu, Dan Badea, F. Balint, Ferenc Barabas, Petre Mihai Băcanu, Ana Blandiana, Geo Bogza, Mihai Botez, I.C. Brătianu, T. Brișcan, Silviu Brucan, Ion Bugan, Cristian Butușina, Liviu Cangeopol, Alexandru Călinescu, Liviu Cană, Mariana Celac-Botez, Doina Cornea, Mihai Creangă, Cs Gyimesi Eva, Dan Deșliu, Mircea Dinescu, Radu Enescu, Iuliu Filip, Radu Filipescu, Ion Fistioc, V. Hanu, Gheorghe Huțanu, Florentin Scaletchi, Lucian Iancu, Mircea Iorgulescu, Dumitru Iuga, Leontin Iuhas, S. Kanyadi, Karoly Kiraly, Mariana Marin, Alexandru Mateescu, Dumitru Mazilu, Corneliu Mănescu, M. Mesmer, Teohar Mihadaș, Dumitru Mircescu, Aurel Dragoș Munteanu, Gheorghe Năstăsescu, Adrian Niculescu, V. Opriș, Bodor Pal, M. Pavelescu, Nelu Prodan, Vasile Paraschiv, Constantin Pârvulescu, Dan Petrescu, Andrei Pleșu, N.C. Popescu, Ion Puiu, Lucian Raicu, Nicu Stăncescu, Mihai Stănescu, N. Stoia, D. Streza, I. Suci, Suto Andras, I. Tempfli, Sorin Toma, Laszlo Tokes, G. Târlescu, E. Ujvarossy, P.V.M. Ungureanu, Gheorghe Ursu, I. Vistea, Gheorghe Vasilescu.

³ For further information, see the literature on the Romanian Revolution and the transition period, included at the end of this paper.

wave of specialists, sometimes formed in western universities. Also, let us not forget the great University Schools of Economics in Romania, like the ones in Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, Iași and so on, where the new economic elite takes shape, such as in the case of the Faculty of European Studies and the Faculty of Business, both belonging to the *Babeș-Bolyai University* in Cluj-Napoca. The purpose of such high learning institutions is to recreate the Romanian economic space and place it within a global paradigm, by means of knowledge and interactivity.

A useful tool in this regard was the process of conducting conclusive macroeconomic analyses and market studies meant to paint a realistic picture of the overall economic reality in the first years of transition. The results of these endeavours, usually furnished by active groups belonging to the civil society, became useful tools for both public and private economic initiatives and opened the way for further institutional development. It has been a specific trait of the new Romanian economic elites to form viable research groups, capable of establishing partnerships with local and regional institutions, as well as with the ever more powerful business environment, which has eventually led to the creation of national and international research networks in the field of economic transition.

In fact, the development strategies whose guidelines were set by these new economic elite can be found in scientific journals, debated at workshops and colloquiums and traced in information materials and articles that focus on topics such as efficiency and innovation as pillars of sustainable development. Other major topics that have attracted such research campaigns are the financial markets, the public sector, competitiveness and marketing, all becoming part, to a larger or lesser extent, of the political agenda after 1989.

The goal of this paper is nonetheless to focus on those economic development routes that have become of paramount importance in the transition period. Hence, it is essential to analyze the role of the elite in the correction of a transition that seems to lack perspective and fosters numerous duplicities generated by the old regime, largely based on a controlled economy and on the rule of the single party. In the transition period, it is precisely the endeavour of the economic elite that has established the course of new legislation, which enabled society to move towards a market economy.

The economic elite regrouped around the National Bank of Romania, with the aim of generating a pole of economic stability and dynamics. One achievement of this group was to change the negative feeling towards foreign capital, which ultimately led to broader horizons for direct foreign investments, privatization, a more stable business environment and, last but not least, a change in mentality. The economic elite, chiefly the university one, has the crucial merit in the long-awaited theorizations that became the fundament of the market economy model around the year 2000, as this gave Romania no choice but to subscribe to the routes of this particular model (Ciumara, 1997).

The economic and technical intellectuality launched the debate on the opportunities for development and modernization in Romania, for instance in the field of information technology, as well as in the case of a type of agriculture based on ecologically friendly methods. The same principle applies to the automotive industry, thanks to the performance of the group Dacia-Renault, or that of the Ford factory in Craiova, along with numerous small production units, which build components ranging from tires to advanced electronic equipment. Why not mention here the progress attained in the field of medical and nuclear physics, as well as in other advanced technological branches, such as artificial intelligence, in which Romania has significant acquisitions. The economic elite have managed to make a difference by means of its credibility and to create an engine meant to guide Romania out of the political instability and turbulence. For instance, this refers to academic schools, national unions belonging to different business groups, the General Union of Romanian Businessmen, the economic mass media, all of these benefiting from a level of credibility which places them in first rank.

Moreover, it is the same economic elite, originating from the university environment, as part of the political class, the civil society or simply as prominent individual voices, that has managed to instill into the current debate an innovative agenda, after the year 2000, one that has been able to detach from the old stereotypes and nationalist approach (Vosganian, 1999). This new orientation includes elements such as the awareness of the advantages that come with regional development, discussions regarding the accession of Romania to the Euro zone, sustainable development, applied to the area of agriculture and the Romanian village, along with topics pertaining to technological development and the role of economic research and of the new technologies (IT development, environmental protection etc.). Another part of the elite that must not be overlooked is the engineering and technical one, since in Romanian business management; a fair part of the leadership has roots in the area of engineering.

The theoretical approaches of the abovementioned orientation are quite obvious, for instance, in the work of the Romanian Academy, whose actions have granted it a visible role in the structuring of the economic elite. This is however not the case of the private sector, for which we do not yet have sufficient data so as to define the role of the elite emerging from this dynamic environment in building the public-private binominal. In fact, the absence of theoretical and institutional foundations brings prejudice to the image of this binominal, one that has been marked by attempts to take roots in the Romanian society, with the downside of lack of self-confidence, corruption and so on.

The Romanian economic elite is the most highly qualified and credible segment at an institutional level bearing a European-oriented message and getting involved in the process of European integration. For example, Romania has sent a powerful message of change through Dacian Cioloș, the new Commissioner for Agriculture, proving that the traditional political elite, one with relatively modest achievements over the last twenty years, is gradually being replaced by a new, technocratic elite, with valuable competences, in the technical and economic areas.

If until 2000, National Bank Governor Mugur Isărescu (Isărescu and Postolache, 2000) was (and remains to date) an anchor of the apparently incessant and incoherent transition, today he has become part of a new wave, which he leads thanks to his very credible pattern. This new wave has already turned into a critical mass, one that defines the new generation in a Romania that relies on a process of change only this group can trigger. It is worth examining the transformations this new generation produces within the political class, whose structure exceeds that of any other in Romania, as it has committed itself to undertaking an ambitious reform of the state, mostly in terms of education, efficiency and the fight against bureaucratization.

When this newly-formed political elite⁴, whose credibility has not yet been gained in the collective mentality, unites with the economic one, the latter benefiting from the support of the Romanian economy, it will finally trigger a change of paradigm, bringing to an end the process of transition and integrating Romania into the western economic model.

CONCLUSION

The economic elite, situated at the top of the list comprising Romanian elites, through its involvement in the formulation and reform of essential concepts and the establishment of constructive dialogues on economic grounds, has the merit of being situated beyond personal interests. In fact, it has taken over the creation of the strategy and overall vision on the development of the country, which entitles us to conclude that it is this very part of the elite (mostly emerging from the university environment) that structures the message which helps to create the conditions for Romania to escape the obscure marginal zone of the integration process. Only in this way will Romania no longer be regarded as a country with rigid commodities that are stuck in the assistance project, aiming to be granted the real status of a European Union member state and incapable of undertaking the mechanisms and processes that manage European resources. In other words, only in this way can Romania become part of the challenging concept of governance.

Furthermore, if one analyzes the programmes of Romanian political parties, it will come as no surprise that the economic section has always been contoured in the most highly-qualified manner. Unfortunately, this has not yet been fully upheld within the act of governing itself, because of either the lack of political support or the dilution of the reform message, for populist purposes.

⁴ Of course, all the definitions and attempts to conjure inputs that are meant to define the elite are inevitably subjective, incomplete and often too simple. What we are interested in is that particular dynamic force that is capable of creating change, which is why we shall reject such superficial approaches as the ones classifying economic elites in “interwar elites”, “anti-elites” and “post-revolutionary elites”, each corresponding to one of the three periods we refer to in this paper, as the boundaries set between these groups are far more intricate.

We therefore believe that, in the light of this historic perspective, the elite should take over the agenda on development, modernization and Europeanisation, in order to create, with appropriate arguments, the beginning of a political, social and economic agenda that is able to incorporate into economic strategies the cultural and social areas as well. This is indeed the much-awaited future message of an economic elite already becoming self-aware and starting to affirm its identity.

The intellectual elite in general and the economic one in particular can play a crucial, decisive role in the reconfiguration of Romania, in the recreation of this country, haunted by experiments, short of competences and often poorly administrated. It is a country that completes to some extent its transition period after 2007 and, by using the exceptional input of science and knowledge provided by the young and highly-skilled elite, we are convinced it will regain its position on the map of Central and South-Eastern Europe. This will require a recalibration of the voice of Romania that has too long been awaited, so that it may become a prominent actor in the process of modernization and Europeanisation of the South-Eastern area and of the Black Sea. Why not, Romania can turn into a window of opportunity, wide open towards Central and Western Europe and the peoples of this region, so as to foster a mutually advantageous collaboration, a partnership for development and integration, which will be open to Turkey as well.

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