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# ROMANIA'S POLITICS OF DEJECTION

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In November and December 2000, Romania conducted largely free and fair elections for both parliament and the presidency, resulting in the second peaceful turnover of power in its short postcommunist history. But what might in theory have been considered a milestone of democratic consolidation was in practice regarded by many foreign and domestic observers as a serious setback for Romanian democracy. For whatever the merits of the election process, its outcome was highly discouraging for Romania's democrats. The Democratic Convention of Romania (CDR), a broad anticommunist coalition of Liberals and Christian Democrats that had come to power in the 1996 elections, was crushed at the polls.

The chief beneficiary of the collapse of the center was the leftist Party of Social Democracy of Romania (PDSR). The PDSR won a decisive plurality in parliament, and its leader Ion Iliescu, an ex-communist who had served as Romania's first postcommunist president from 1990 to 1996, regained the presidency, succeeding the CDR's Emil Constantinescu. While the victory of Iliescu and the PSDR can be regarded as part of a much broader regional pattern of former communists returning to power on a platform of softening the rigors of market reform, another aspect of Romania's 2000 elections was largely unprecedented. This was the strong showing of the extreme nationalist Greater Romania Party (PRM), whose charismatic leader Corneliu Vadim Tudor soared in popularity to finish a strong second to Iliescu in the first round. Thus, in the presidential runoff on December 10, Romanian voters were confronted with a choice between an ex-communist and an extreme nationalist.

**TABLE 1—CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES ELECTION RESULTS, 1996–2000**

PARTY	PDSR	CDR	PD/USD	PNL <sup>1</sup>	UDMR	PRM	PUNR/AN
1996 VOTE SHARE	21.5%	30.2%	12.9%	<i>n/a</i>	6.6%	4.5%	4.4%
1996 NO. OF SEATS	91	122	53	<i>n/a</i>	25	19	18
1996 SEAT SHARE	26.5%	35.6%	15.5%	<i>n/a</i>	7.3%	5.5%	5.3%
2000 VOTE SHARE	36.6%	5.0%	7.0%	7.0%	6.8%	19.5%	1.4%
2000 NO. OF SEATS	155	0	31	30	27	84	0
2000 SEAT SHARE	44.9%	0%	8.9%	8.7%	7.8%	24.3%	0%

<sup>1</sup>In 1996 much of the current PNL was part of CDR, although one faction ran on separate lists, getting 1.9 percent of votes and no seats.

**TABLE 2—PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION RESULTS, 1996–2000  
(PERCENTAGES)**

	ION ILIESCU	EMIL CONSTANTINESCU	THEODOR STOLOJAN	MUGUR ISARESCU	PETRE ROMAN	CORNELIU VADIM TUDOR	GHEORGHE FUNAR
PARTY	PDSR	CDR	PNL	CDR 2000 <sup>1</sup>	PD	PRM	UDMR
1996—I	32.3	28.2			20.6	4.7	6.0
1996—II	45.6	54.4					
2000—I	36.4		11.7	9.6	3.0	28.3	6.2
2000—II	66.8					33.2	

<sup>1</sup>Even though Isarescu nominally ran as an independent, he received the official endorsement of CDR 2000.

In order to place the 2000 elections in the proper context, it is necessary to compare them to the elections held four years earlier. Table 1 illustrates the severe electoral losses suffered by the governing center-right political forces (the CDR and the National Liberal Party, or PNL), whose combined seat share dropped by more than 75 percent between 1996 and 2000. Of the two junior coalition partners of the former government, only the Hungarian Democratic Union (UDMR) succeeded in retaining the confidence of its electorate (which is ethnically based), while the center-left Democratic Party (PD) lost over 40 percent of its previous seats. This shrinking of the center benefited both extremes of the political spectrum. The leftist PDSR picked up an additional 64 seats, although it fell short of attaining an absolute majority in parliament. The extremist PRM made even larger gains, more than quadrupling its seat share, partly at the expense of the center but also by capturing the majority of the nationalist electorate, which in 1996 had been evenly split between the PRM and the Romanian National Unity Party (PUNR).

Table 2 shows a similar trend of increasing polarization between the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections. (In both years a runoff was required as no candidate won a majority in the first round.) Again, the centrist parties were the main losers in 2000. The most serious decline was suffered by the center-left candidate, former prime minister Petre Roman of the PD, whose vote share virtually collapsed between the two elections. Meanwhile, the combined tally for the two center-right candidates in 2000, Theodor Stolojan of the PNL and Mugur Isarescu of the rump CDR (which ran as CDR 2000), was relatively close to the first-round performance of the single center-right candidate in 1996, Emil

Constantinescu. In 2000, both center-right candidates enjoyed relatively high levels of personal popularity—Stolojan because he was in no way associated with the mistakes of the previous government, and Isarescu due to his surprisingly high approval ratings as prime minister in the year preceding the elections.<sup>1</sup> Yet both candidates were weighed down by the low popularity of their parties and, more importantly, by the inability of the center-right to unite behind a single presidential candidate. Although the ballot results suggest that even a unitary candidate might have failed to outpoll extreme-right candidate Corneliu Vadim Tudor for second place, I would argue that the dynamics of the presidential contest would have been very different, considering that in opinion polls as late as two weeks before the elections the combined vote share for Stolojan and Isarescu was 30 percent, compared to 19 percent for Vadim Tudor.<sup>2</sup>

As things turned out, however, the centrists' weakness and failure to coordinate propelled Vadim Tudor toward the front of the presidential race. Previously relegated by his virulent rhetoric to the fringes of the Romanian political spectrum (with less than 5 percent of the vote in 1992 and 1996), Vadim Tudor managed to exploit the lack of attractive mainstream political choices by painting himself as the only real alternative to the corrupt and ineffective political class that had ruled Romania for the past decade. After hovering at around 10 percent in the polls until September, Vadim Tudor's popularity began to rise and then skyrocketed in the last three weeks before the election, going from 15 percent in early November to 19 percent in mid-November and finally to over 28 percent on election day. By contrast, the popularity of former president Ion Iliescu dropped from a high of 47 percent in October to 40 percent in mid-November and to just over 36 percent in the actual election.

Given Vadim Tudor's momentum and the dislike of Iliescu among many center-right voters, the first-round results raised the specter of a possible Vadim Tudor victory in the runoff. During the two weeks between the election rounds, however, a combination of civil society activism and Western pressures resulted in an unprecedented show of unity among Romania's key political actors, who overcame longstanding rivalries and endorsed Iliescu as the only viable presidential candidate for a democratic Romania. As a result, Iliescu picked up the vast majority of the votes from the other first-round candidates and soundly defeated Vadim Tudor in the runoff. This last-minute victory of democracy was achieved at least in part through a blatantly anti-Vadim Tudor campaign by the vast majority of media outlets. Even though Vadim Tudor's claims of massive electoral fraud were in all likelihood unfounded, he did suffer serious disadvantages in terms of media access and coverage.

Thus, at the last moment, Romania avoided a dangerous drift toward

extremism and the unenviable fate of replacing Yugoslavia as the international pariah of the region. While this relatively “happy ending” has been praised as a display of the democratic maturity of the political elite and the electorate,<sup>3</sup> we are still left with the task of explaining the causes of this near-disaster and its implications for Romania’s future.

### **The Vanishing Center**

The most striking change between the two elections was the collapse of the center-right CDR, which had been the centerpiece of the post-1996 governing coalition and thus bore the brunt of popular dissatisfaction with the economic policies of the past four years. By almost any measure, Romania’s economic performance was disappointing: In 1997–99 the economy experienced three consecutive years of negative growth (with a combined decline in output of around 15 percent); unemployment rose from 6.3 percent in late 1996 to 11.5 percent in 1999;<sup>4</sup> and poverty and inequality continued to grow. Equally damaging to the government’s reputation were its inability to reduce inflation below 45 percent, its failure to live up to the conditionality imposed by the International Monetary Fund, and the slow and scandal-ridden privatization process. By delivering most of the costs and few of the benefits of market reform, the CDR-led government quickly exhausted the reformist mandate given it by the Romanian electorate in 1996. By the time economic recovery finally started in 2000 (with 1.5 percent growth and 30 percent inflation), it was too late to restore the fortunes of the governing parties.

While the dire economic situation may largely explain their plunge in popularity, it cannot properly account for the timing of this decline. In December 1997, for example, after more than a year of recession and high inflation, the popularity of the CDR was substantially higher than it had been at the time of the 1996 elections (42 percent compared to 31 percent). By June 1998, however, the CDR’s popularity had already dropped to 34 percent, and it continued to drop until it reached 5 percent in the 2000 elections. The sharp decline during the first six months of 1998 coincided with two related events: First, the fall of the government of Prime Minister Victor Ciorbea in April 1998, following a series of intra-coalition conflicts, marked the symbolic end of the center’s campaign promise of clean government. Second, a rising tide of corruption scandals raised increasingly serious questions about the effectiveness of the government’s much-publicized anticorruption campaign. Whereas December 1997 opinion polls indicated that 59 percent of Romanians approved of the government’s performance in reducing corruption, that figure fell to 29 percent by June 1998 and all the way down to 4 percent in November 2000—even below the outgoing PDSR government’s 1996 approval rating of 8 percent.

The situation of the center-right parties (whose vote share dropped from over 32 percent in 1996 to around 13 percent in 2000<sup>5</sup>) was further aggravated by the inability of the Christian Democrats and the Liberals to coordinate their strategies and candidate choices during the electoral campaign. The Liberals decided to leave the sinking ship of the CDR coalition and ran a moderately successful independent campaign, which for the first time since 1990 united most of the numerous liberal factions under the banner of the National Liberal Party. As a consequence, the weakened CDR failed to pass the 10 percent threshold for multiparty coalitions and wound up without any seats in the new parliament.<sup>6</sup> Thus the parliamentary representation of the center-right declined from 35.6 percent to 8.7 percent between the two elections, relegating the former governing parties to a marginal role.

### The Resilient Left

The 2000 elections brought the PDSR and its leader, Ion Iliescu, back into power after four years spent in opposition. Even though the PDSR's popularity had declined from a high of 50 percent in the polls in October 2000 to only 36.6 percent on election day, the party nevertheless won a fairly comfortable victory, obtaining 155 of 345 seats in parliament. Even without an absolute majority, the PDSR's decision to form a minority government with the parliamentary support of the PD, the PNL, and the UDMR should not undermine its ability to govern. Not only does the PDSR command a much larger share of parliamentary seats than it did during its previous ruling period (45 percent in 2000, compared to 34 percent in 1992–96), but it also faces a much more divided opposition. While in 1992–96 the centrist opposition was adamantly opposed to cooperation with the PDSR, in the new parliament the mainstream opposition has little choice but to support the PDSR, given that further political stalemate and early elections would primarily benefit the centrists' main enemy—the nationalist PRM. Moreover, the PRM has clearly signaled its willingness to form a coalition government with the PDSR, thereby increasing the bargaining power of the PDSR in negotiations with the democratic opposition.

Given this constellation of power, the fate of the Romanian economy and democracy will depend largely on the orientation and actions of the PDSR and its leader, President Iliescu. Much Western media coverage has focused on portraying the PDSR as a party of former communists and Iliescu as an *apparatchik* and a former protégé and ally of Ceaușescu. While these historical roots may be morally and ideologically problematic for many Western and domestic observers, the evidence from former communist countries over the past decade has proved that ties to the communist past are a poor predictor of the political trajectory of a given individual or party. For example, both

Hungary's former prime minister Gyula Horn and Slovenian president Milan Cuccan occupied higher positions than Iliescu in the communist hierarchies of their respective countries, yet they presided over successful efforts toward economic reform and Western integration. At the same time, former anticommunists such as Slovakia's Vladislav Mečiar and Albania's Sali Berisha proved to be much more hostile to the principles of democracy.

Therefore, the more relevant standard for evaluating the democratic and reformist credentials of Iliescu and the PDSR is their political evolution since 1990. In this respect the evidence is mixed, though it shows signs of improvement over time. During the early postrevolutionary period, Iliescu and the ruling National Salvation Front (the predecessor of the PDSR) were responsible for a number of developments that were clearly at odds with the basic tenets of democracy: the free but unfair elections of May 1990, the brutal suppression of prodemocracy student protests with the help of miners in June 1990, and the second miners' expedition in September 1991, which resulted in the overthrow of the government of Prime Minister Petre Roman. Following its victory in the relatively clean 1992 elections, the PDSR initially formed a minority government with the tacit support of three extremist parties: the extreme-left Socialist Labor Party (PSM), the nationalist PRM of Vadim Tudor, and the PUNR of Gheorghe Funar, the nationalist mayor of Cluj. This cooperation, which resulted in a number of concessions to the nationalists (including a controversial education law), culminated in the official inclusion of the three parties as junior governing coalition partners between January and October 1995. The nationalist drift of the PDSR peaked during the 1996 electoral campaign, in which Iliescu warned that an opposition victory would lead to the Yugoslavization of Romania through the secessionist plans of Hungarians in Transylvania.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the elections were generally regarded as free and fair, and, more importantly, the PDSR dutifully accepted the unfavorable election results and peacefully transferred power to the new administration.

Moreover, even while it was playing the populist-nationalist card domestically for much of the 1992–96 period, the PDSR government consistently pursued Western integration with at least a certain degree of success, including acceptance into the Council of Europe and cooperation with NATO forces as part of the Partnership for Peace. In fact, the PDSR's political strategy can be seen as an attempt to balance the demands emanating from its largely antireform domestic electorate with the imperatives of a post-Cold War international arena dominated by the West and the principles of democracy and the market economy.

Following its 1996 electoral defeat, the PDSR did not undergo the type of drastic internal reorganization that has produced reformed social-

democratic parties elsewhere in East-Central Europe. Although an attempt in this direction was launched during the PDSR conference in July 1997 by former foreign minister Teodor Meleşcanu, it resulted only in the defection of a reformist wing and the creation of a new party, the Alliance for Romania (which obtained 4.3 percent of the vote in the 2000 election, falling short of the threshold for representation). The majority of the PDSR regrouped around its old leadership, which proceeded to rebuild the party's popularity by taking advantage of the increasingly visible weakness of the governing coalition. In opposition, the PDSR used its superior party discipline and the rapidly deteriorating economic and social situation to challenge the policies of the government. It did so within the strict confines of parliamentary procedures, however, and further consolidated its democratic credentials by taking a firm stand against the January 1999 miners' offensive that threatened to overthrow the government.

In line with these developments, the PDSR electoral platform for 2000 avoided the shrill tones of its 1996 campaign. Instead, the PDSR and Iliescu emphasized their adherence to the values of European integration, democracy, and ethnic tolerance, while at the same time promising a coherent economic program to spur economic recovery and fight poverty. This moderate message was further underscored by the PDSR's emphatic rejection of any cooperation with the PRM and by its willingness to negotiate with elements of the centrist opposition (the PD, the PNL, and the UDMR). At the same time, however, the change in PDSR rhetoric may well reflect a strategic response to the changing nature of electoral competition. Whereas in 1996 the proreform mood of the electorate put the PDSR at a disadvantage, in 2000 the tide had turned and the polls showed an electorate much more amenable to the PDSR's slower, "socially sensitive" approach to economic reform. As a consequence, in 2000 the PDSR did not have to resort to nationalist appeals in hopes of diverting attention from economic issues.

To what extent, then, has the PDSR completed its transformation into a moderate social-democratic party? Its actions during the last two years and the preliminary evidence of its first few months back in power suggest that it has made considerable progress in this respect, but it is still too early for a definitive answer. The final verdict will depend on the balance within the party between reformers, clustered around prime minister Adrian Năstase, and hardliners, such as President Iliescu and former prime minister and current senate leader Nicolae Văcăroiu. If the economy recovers and Romania makes significant progress with respect to Western integration, then the prospects for the young technocrats in Năstase's government to gain influence should be promising. If, however, economic stagnation continues and the prospects of membership in the European Union appear to grow dimmer, one may expect a resurgence of populists and hardliners within the PDSR, if



only to counteract the danger of a further boost in popularity for Vadim Tudor and the PRM.

### The Rise of Extremism

The unexpected electoral success of the PRM and its leader, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, represents the most troubling outcome of the 2000 election and arguably the most serious threat yet to Romania's new democracy. Although the PRM ran a comparatively moderate electoral campaign claiming to combine a center-left economic policy with a center-right national doctrine, the political record of its leaders displays all the elements of an extremist antisystemic party: repeated, virulent attacks against Hungarians, Jews, and Gypsies in the party newspaper, *România Mare* (Greater Romania), including references to isolating Gypsies in special "colonies"<sup>8</sup>; publication of a list of top intellectuals who should be shot for the greater good of the country; a promise to rule Romania from the barrel of a gun; expansionist claims against several of Romania's neighbors; and, most importantly, the support and involvement of PRM leaders in the failed miners' insurrection of January 1999.

Even though there was a backlash against the PRM following the 1999 insurrection, including a sharp decline in the polls (from 16 percent for the PRM and 18 percent for Vadim Tudor in November 1998 to 10 percent and 8 percent, respectively, in June 1999), the party rode the bandwagon of Vadim Tudor's rising popularity during the 2000 campaign to become the second largest political formation in the new parliament, with roughly a quarter of the seats. This success is remarkable, not only in the context of the party's modest showing in previous elections, but also given the dubious background of many PRM leaders: Apart from Vadim Tudor's past as a court poet for Ceaușescu, the party's list of candidates included a number of shady businessmen (at least one of whom is still in prison on a five-year corruption sentence), former high-ranking members of Ceaușescu's infamous secret police (the *Securitate*), and former Communist Party activists.<sup>9</sup>

The PRM's success can be traced to a number of factors. Given that as late as September 2000 Vadim Tudor trailed significantly in the polls behind each of the two center-right candidates, both the media and the political elite failed to take the threat seriously until the very last moment.<sup>10</sup> As a consequence, the mainstream parties spent most of their time attacking one another, largely ignoring the PRM's rising appeal with voters. This myopic attitude may also explain the failure to convict Vadim Tudor on charges of undermining state authority, even though his open letter to the miners of 7 January 1999 encouraged them to go to Bucharest to overthrow the government.<sup>11</sup> Since much of the PRM's success was driven by Vadim Tudor's charismatic presence—he received over 28 percent of the vote in the first round of the presidential contest, compared

to under 20 percent for the PRM in the parliamentary vote—convicting him in at least one of the numerous court cases against him over the last several years might have been sufficient to ensure the continued marginality of the PRM.

The rise of the PRM was also fueled by the decline of the Romanian Party of National Unity (PUNR), which in 2000 lost more than two-thirds of its 1996 vote share. This consolidation of the nationalist vote was primarily triggered by the decision of former PUNR leader Gheorghe Funar to leave his party and join the PRM in 1999. Funar brought with him a significant base of support among Romanian voters in Transylvania, who felt threatened by the autonomy claims of the region's 1.6 million Hungarians. Moreover, the PDSR's decision to avoid nationalist appeals during the 2000 campaign further helped to funnel the nationalist electorate to the PRM.

It would be overly simplistic, however, to regard the PRM gains merely as the result of a successful effort to galvanize a substantial nationalist portion of the electorate. As a matter of fact, the electoral campaign in 2000 was much less charged with ethnopolitics than in 1996, at least in part because the participation of the ethnic-Hungarian UDMR in the CDR government had failed to produce any of the Yugoslavization scenarios predicted in 1996. Even the PRM tried to tone down its nationalist rhetoric during the campaign by denying charges of racism and claiming to want to engage in constructive negotiations with the Hungarian minority. Instead, the PRM emphasized its "outsider" status and tried to present itself as the only real alternative to the increasingly unpopular political elite that had ruled Romania since 1990.<sup>12</sup>

As I argue below, the PRM and Vadim Tudor were chosen not so much for what they were as for what they were not, which may explain their rapid rise in popularity in the last few weeks before the election. The durability of such a protest vote, however, is difficult to gauge. As the largest opposition party, the PRM could be ideally positioned to take advantage of any mistakes made by the PDSR government. On the other hand, the novelty of Vadim Tudor's brand of extremist politics may wear off in the next four years, in which case he and his party could experience the "Zhirinovskiy syndrome" and be relegated back to the fringes of the Romanian political scene.

### **The Dejected Electorate**

The failure of the political elite to address Romania's economic and moral crisis was the main reason for the troubling outcome of the recent elections. The question arises, however, whether the election results are primarily a warning signal for the political elite or reflect a more fundamental rejection of democracy and economic reform by the Romanian electorate. Survey evidence suggests that, for the time being,

**TABLE 3—VOTER PREFERENCES IN NOVEMBER 2000  
(PERCENTAGES)**

	VADIM TUDOR VOTERS	VADIM TUDOR SYMPATHIZERS	ILIESCU VOTERS	CENTER-RIGHT VOTERS <sup>1</sup>	OVERALL POPULATION
PERCENT OF TOTAL RESPONDENTS	14.3	23.4	46.2	26.8	100
WOULD LIKE GYPSY NEIGHBORS	21	29	28	29	28
WOULD LIKE HUNGARIAN NEIGHBORS	54	64	58	81	66
WOULD LIKE JEWISH NEIGHBORS	59	66	57	82	65
BELIEVE JOINING NATO WOULD BENEFIT THE COUNTRY	65	65	54	78	62
BELIEVE JOINING EU WOULD BENEFIT THE COUNTRY	70	73	60	86	68
AGREE THAT IT IS GOOD TO HAVE A MARKET ECONOMY	81	81	71	90	76
AGREE THAT IT WOULD BE GOOD IF THERE WERE ONLY ONE POLITICAL PARTY	43	39	45	20	36
THINK THE COUNTRY IS MOVING IN THE WRONG DIRECTION	77	69	72	56	66

<sup>1</sup> This includes votes for both Isarescu and Stolojan, due to the similarity of their platforms and electoral bases. *Source:* The figures are based on the author's analysis of the raw data of the Public Opinion Barometer survey commissioned by the Soros Foundation in Romania from the survey research firm CURS. The survey covered a representative sample (N = 2000) of the Romanian population and was executed between 31 October and 6 November 2000.

the vote for Vadim Tudor and the PRM does not represent a clearly anti-democratic constituency. Nevertheless, the current preferences of Romanian voters reveal some potential future threats to democratic stability.

The overall mood of the Romanian electorate, as reflected by a survey taken in early November 2000, presents a complex picture (see Table 3 above). On the one hand, joining the EU and NATO was viewed favorably by 68 percent and 62 percent of Romanians, respectively; 76 percent supported a market economy; and, when asked about their ideology, only 3 percent described themselves as communists and 5 percent as nationalists. These figures suggest a remarkable resilience of pro-Western and pro-capitalist views—somewhat surprising given that almost 80 percent of Romanians judged their living standards to be at or below the minimum level necessary for survival. While the Western model is not challenged by any serious alternative, the data nonetheless suggest that the basic tenets of liberal democracy are by no means universally accepted. For example, 36 percent of respondents agreed that it would be good if there were only one political party (and only 49 percent disagreed); 72 percent of respondents said they would not want to have Gypsies as neighbors;<sup>13</sup> and roughly one-third did not want Hungarians<sup>14</sup> or Jews as neighbors. While the lack of a solid prodemocracy majority can be traced to historical factors—such as the flawed interwar democracy and President Iliescu's calls for a one-party democracy in 1990—a more compelling explanation lies in the disappointing performance of democratic institutions over the last few years: By November 2000, over 75 percent of Romanians had little or no trust in the justice system and 86 percent distrusted political parties.<sup>15</sup> After all, despite its alleged lack of a democratic political culture, the level of satisfaction with democracy in Romania immediately following

the 1996 elections was higher than in all the other former communist countries except Poland.<sup>16</sup>

A different way of assessing the current and future state of Romanian democracy is to compare the constituencies of the main political parties and candidates in the 2000 elections. Table 3 compares the attitudes of four groups of voters, based on their stated voting intentions in the November 2000 survey: Iliescu voters (46.2 percent); center-right voters (26.6 percent); Vadim Tudor voters (14.3 percent); and Vadim Tudor sympathizers (23.5 percent). The fourth group, consisting of respondents who did not express the intention to vote for Vadim Tudor but had a good or very good opinion of him, was included in order to account for the 14 percent vote-share increase for Vadim Tudor in the three weeks between the survey and the elections.

Even a brief comparison of these four groups offers a number of interesting insights. As expected, voters for the two center-right candidates were on average more tolerant toward ethnic minorities (with the exception of Gypsies) and more supportive of capitalism, multiparty democracy, and Western integration than the rest of the population. Not surprisingly, these respondents were on average younger, better educated, and better off than the overall population, which may explain their somewhat more positive assessment of the country's evolution—though a resounding 56 percent still thought that the country was moving in the wrong direction.

The more interesting question, however, concerns the profile of the large group of disaffected voters who chose to throw their weight behind either the PDSR or the PRM and their respective leaders. As expected, Vadim Tudor voters were more likely to profess to be nationalists (31 percent, compared to 5 percent for the overall population), but Vadim Tudor sympathizers were actually less likely than average to be nationalists. Vadim Tudor voters were also more likely to be xenophobic or racist, but a majority of them were still willing to accept Hungarian (54 percent) or Jewish neighbors (59 percent). Vadim Tudor sympathizers scored very close to the national average on this question and were actually more tolerant than Iliescu supporters, suggesting that at least part of the vote for Vadim Tudor and the PRM should not be considered simply as a vote for nationalism and extremism. Moreover, both Vadim Tudor voters and sympathizers were actually *above* the national average in terms of their support for NATO and EU integration, as well as their acceptance of market-economy principles. Even regarding support for one-party rule, Vadim Tudor voters, while slightly worse than the average, were actually more progressive than Iliescu's constituency. Except for being more tolerant of Hungarians and Gypsies (but not of Jews) than Vadim Tudor voters, Iliescu backers were more consistently opposed to the principles of democracy, capitalism, and Western integration than any other major group in the country.

Thus the survey data reveal a rather puzzling situation in which an extremist candidate (Vadim Tudor) was actually backed by a more progressive electorate than was a candidate (Iliescu) who by November 2000 had more or less consolidated a reputation as “a democrat, a moderate, and pro-European.”<sup>17</sup> These findings confirm that Vadim Tudor’s popularity does not reflect a polarization and radicalization of the Romanian electorate but rather shows the general dissatisfaction with the political elite responsible for poor government over the past ten years. Thus 77 percent of Vadim Tudor voters and 69 percent of Vadim Tudor sympathizers thought that the country was moving in the wrong direction, whereas only 31 percent and 23 percent, respectively, subscribed to the xenophobic rhetoric of his party.<sup>18</sup>

### **Implications for the Future**

This analysis provides reasons for both hope and concern. On the positive side, the lack of a fit between Vadim Tudor’s message and his electorate suggests a high likelihood that the 2000 elections could be an isolated spike in the PRM’s electoral fortunes. The results of the presidential runoff are a first indication in this respect. Moreover, a reorganized and united center-right could well regain the confidence of many of its 1996 voters who drifted into Vadim Tudor’s camp in 2000.

At the same time, however, there remains the nagging question of what will happen with the PDSR electorate in the next elections. Barring a very successful four years in government, the PDSR will very likely lose some of its current popularity among the losers of the Romanian transition. Moreover, given that the constitution prohibits Iliescu from running for the presidency again in 2004, the next few years may bring a struggle for succession among the party’s leaders, with unpredictable repercussions on the party’s electoral following. If the reformist wing of Prime Minister Năstase prevails, it could lead to a defection of the party’s more reactionary voters, whose preferences are currently closest to the PRM electoral message.

The fate of Romanian democracy will hinge on the ability of the mainstream political class to reverse the erosion of the credibility of the country’s democratic institutions. If by 1996 it appeared that democracy was more or less the only game in town, the political spectacle of the last four years has undermined not just the credibility of the main democratic protagonists (especially on the center-right) but also that of the system as a whole. Even though the country is nominally quite democratic (and has actually received a “Free” rating from Freedom House for the last four years), the benefits of democracy have not materialized for most Romanians. Not only were they highly dissatisfied with their political leaders, but only 11 percent believed that they could influence political decision making in a meaningful way. Popular disaffection is also visible

in declining voter turnout: In 1996, turnout was 76 percent in both election rounds, but in 2000 it dropped to 56 percent in the first round and barely over 50 percent in the presidential runoff.

The longer-term consequences of such a “hollowing-out” of democracy (to use Larry Diamond’s term) are difficult to predict. For the time being, procedural democracy is likely to survive in Romania for two important reasons. First, given the high popular support for Western integration and the explicit democratic conditionality imposed by both the EU and NATO on applicant countries, both the political elites and the electorate face strong incentives to play by the rules, even if many may only believe in them half-heartedly. Even Vadim Tudor, citing the cases of Austria, Serbia, and Iraq, decided that for now it would be politically unwise to deviate from the Western canon and, as a consequence, moderated his political message in the months preceding the elections.<sup>19</sup> If such democratic conditionality is to remain credible and effective, however, the rewards of compliance must be tangible to both politicians and voters. In this respect, the progress of NATO and EU expansion in the next few years will have a major impact on democratic stability in Romania and other countries of the region.

The second reason for guarded optimism is that there are currently no credible ideological alternatives to Western liberalism. Despite the rise of communist nostalgia, few voters in Eastern Europe would actually support a return to communism. Similarly, the far right, despite making inroads in many parts of Europe, has little to offer in terms of a coherent ideology. Finally, none of the authoritarian or semiauthoritarian experiments in the region (including Belarus, Serbia, Slovakia, and Croatia) have yielded a sufficiently attractive political or economic outcome to encourage imitation.

Nevertheless, the Romanian elections of 2000, with their unexpected boost for extremist politics, serve as a warning signal for the possibly dire consequences of the hollowing-out of democracy. While the danger may have been more acute in Romania, the frequent alternations in power and the appeal of untried political parties (such as the Young Democrats in Hungary) in other former communist countries suggest that the same mechanisms are at work. Rather than becoming the only game in town, democracy risks being reduced to lip-service paid to the dominant ideology of the day—in ways that resemble compliance with Moscow in earlier periods. Unless politicians on both sides of the former Iron Curtain manage to find solutions for the impoverishment and political marginalization of large sections of postcommunist Eastern Europe, the long-term outcome could well be a reversal of the “third wave” of democratization.

## NOTES

1. In July, just before he decided to enter the presidential race, Isarescu’s popularity reached 66 percent, higher than any other politician at the moment. See IMAS survey, July 2000.

2. According to an IMAS opinion poll on 12–15 November 2000, available at [www.imas.ro](http://www.imas.ro).

3. See, for example, “Former Chief of Romania Retakes Office over Rightist,” *New York Times*, 11 December 2000.

4. Data from the 2000 CD-ROM edition of *International Financial Statistics*.

5. These figures include the vote share of the smaller liberal factions that ran separately in both 1996 and 2000 and failed to cross the threshold for parliamentary representation.

6. Ironically, in a display of political myopia, the CDR did not even consider the possibility of missing the electoral threshold and had supported raising it.

7. See Michael Shafir, “Romania’s Road to ‘Normalcy,’” *Journal of Democracy* 8 (April 1997): 144–58.

8. *România Mare* (Bucharest), 29 August 1998, cited in *Evenimentul Zilei* (Bucharest).

9. See the exhaustive list published in *Monitorul* (Bucharest), 5 December 2000.

10. According to an IMAS poll from September 2000 (available at [www.imas.ro](http://www.imas.ro)), Vadim Tudor was expected to win 10 percent of the vote, compared to 15 percent for Isarescu, 19 percent for Stolojan, and 43 percent for Iliescu.

11. Cited in *Expres* (Bucharest), 21 January 1999, available at [www.expres.ro/archive/1999/ianuarie/21/investigatii/6-5.html](http://www.expres.ro/archive/1999/ianuarie/21/investigatii/6-5.html).

12. Of course, in doing so, the PRM chose to ignore the fact that it had supported and even taken part in the PDSR-led government until 1996.

13. While this percentage is indeed very high, I doubt that it would be much lower in most countries of Eastern or even Western Europe.

14. Remarkably, in Transylvania, where the overwhelming majority of Hungarians live, only 15 percent of respondents objected to Hungarian neighbors, compared to 33 percent for the country as a whole.

15. See the Soros public-opinion barometer (available at [www.sfos.ro](http://www.sfos.ro)) and the IMAS survey on 12–15 November 2000.

16. See Central and Eastern Eurobarometer 7 and 8, from November 1996 and November 1997, respectively. Unfortunately, no comparable crossnational data are available for 1999–2000.

17. See “Haider, But More So: Romania’s Unlovely Presidential Aspirant,” *Guardian* (London), 29 November 2000.

18. These figures were obtained by identifying respondents who would not want Hungarians, Jews, or Gypsies as neighbors.

19. See Michael Shafir, “Radical Continuity in Romania: The Greater Romania Party (B),” *East European Perspectives*, 13 September 2000, available at [www.rferl.org/leepreport](http://www.rferl.org/leepreport).