Building Legitimacy: The Role of Political Myths in the Presidential Campaigns of the Early 90s in Romania

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Abstract

After the collapse of the communist regime in Eastern Europe, political parties were faced with the necessity of building political legitimacy. This research aims to find out how political myths were instrumentalized by political leaders during the presidential campaigns in order to gain popular support. In the first part, the article focuses on defining "myth" as a legitimizing political instrument. In the second part four political myths used in the early 1990s in Romania are being analyzed: the myth of the interwar period, the myth of original democracy, the myth of political reform and the providential man. The method used is political discourse and party platform analysis. The results suggest that, during the early 90s, different political groups tried to build their legitimacy using political myths instead of rational politics, which ended up in their failure to address the real issues of a changing society.

Keywords

Democratic Transition; Legitimacy; Political Myths; Post-communism; Romanian Elections

Introduction

Myths have always been part of man's understanding of the world he lives in, including economics, religion, culture or politics. Humans have tried to explain nature, climate disasters, fate, the meaning of life and the unknown using mythology. As knowledge progressed, many would have thought that myths would likely disappear once humans will scientifically explain nature. But what if myths have never disappeared, but only took on other forms? And moreover, given that every human is a *zoon politikon* integrated into a political community, is it possible for myths to become instruments for political use?

The article aims to introduce the concept of "political myth" in the field of political sciences as an analytical concept for electoral campaign discourses and as a political tool for building legitimacy in the early 90s in Eastern Europe, with emphasis on the Romanian case. Consequently, another purpose of this article is to demonstrate that political myths were recovered and used by certain political parties in Romania in the 1990s in order to gain legitimacy and implicitly change the relationship of power in their favor. Therefore, taking into consideration that the main function of the use of myths was legitimation, this article will focus its analysis on the myths used in electoral periods. The reason behind this is that election campaigns tend "to maximize the instrumentalization of mythical narratives in order to attract massive support from voters" (Ionașcu 2012, 233). The political campaigns the present study addresses took place in 1990, 1992 and 1996. The aim is to determine whether the newly founded political parties used political myths during the first post-communist elections in the 90s to gain credibility in order to prevail over political opponents.

This article contributes to the existing research by pointing out that certain myths are dependent not only on a specific political context, but also on the historical memory of different groups with symbolic power in society, such as the former political prisoners or old liberal political figures. Moreover, it shows that political groups in the 90s determined the content of memory in order to interpret the past in a legitimizing manner. Emphasizing the Romanian case, the study tries to identify the presence of myths in the political discourses or programs of the leftist National Salvation Front (FSN) on one side, and the National Liberal Party (PNL), Romanian Social

⁶ Although the focus of the article is primarily on the political myths created by political authority, scholars share the idea that leaders are not the only creators of symbolic representation. In fact, myth-makers (political elites) and myth-believers (voters) share a common political and cultural background which enables them to assign common meaning to a certain historical event. Emilio Gentile claims that "leaders are not alone in the process of artificial production of myths and rituals in order to control the masses", arguing that "the *fideist* interpretation accepts that myths and rituals can be spontaneous expressions of the masses, produced by their need of faith and beliefs, myths they will transmit by devotion to a leader or to an ideology that promises them well-being and salvation" (Gentile 2006, 7-8).

Democrat Party (PDSR) and Christian Democratic National Peasant's Party (PNTCD), confederated in 1991 in the center-right Democratic Convention (CD/CDR), on the other side.

As for the article structure, the research displays a theoretical framework around the concepts of "myth" and "social imaginary", followed by an analysis of the transition from myth to political myth in the context of the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe in the last decade of the 20th century. The second part deals with four political myths used in the first election campaigns of the post-communist Romanian democracy: the myth of the interwar democracy, the myth of original democracy, the myth of political reform and the providential man. These myths are important not only for properly understanding the socio-political framework of post-communist Romania, but they also apply to the former states of the ex-Soviet space due to their similar pattern of use in the public discourse. The case study concerning Romania is relevant for this type of study because it was part of the same political system with other states in Central and Eastern Europe, therefore their transition to democracy was influenced or even determined by their communist legacy. The focus on the Romanian case is based on the particular brutal nature of the communist regime in the last decade of the 20th century, in opposition to the liberalization of the regime in neighbor states such as Hungary, Poland or Czechoslovakia. In Romania, there was no possibility for a political opposition to emerge during the rule of communist leader Nicolae Ceausescu. As a consequence, citizens were lacking political socialization and electoral tradition when the regime collapsed. In the absence of a political authority which would ensure a peaceful transition to democracy, political parties used myths as instruments for filling the legitimacy void.

Literature Review

The sources can be divided in two different categories: primary sources and secondary sources. The first category includes the discourses of party leaders, televised presidential debates, political platforms, memoirs and newspapers. The second one consists of secondary sources, which are analyses done by scientists, historians, sociologists and anthropologists of international renown. The theoretical foundation of the political myth has been laid by Ernst Cassier, Henry Tudor, Chiara Bottici, Christopher Flood, Peter Ricketson and Vladimir Tismăneanu. Although multiple Romanian researchers (Vladimir Tismăneanu, Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, George Voicu, Cristian Bocancea, Cristina Tanasoiu and Lucian Boia) applied the concept of political myths in their works, two of them contributed in a more significant way: Daniel Şandru in *Hypostases of Ideology in Political Theory* (2014) and Alexandra Ionaşcu's *Fight for Legitimacy. Political Myths in Electoral Campaigns* (2012). The element of novelty Şandru introduced in his research was the "processual character of the imaginary" (Şandru 2014, 72), referring to political myths as changing structures depending on the political context instead of being permanent categories. However, Ionaşcu

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(2012) argued that political myths tend to slowly dissolve along with the process of professionalization of politics and democratic consolidation that occurred in the late 90s. The reference to "professionalization of politics" conveys the process of placing experts in strategic key positions, such as economics, contrary to arbitrary and politically motivated appointments which were lacking expertise in that specific field.

Methodology

The methods used in this research come from political science, history and anthropology since all these offer a different perspective on political myths. As for this particular research, the method used is political discourse, presidential speeches and party platform analysis as means for gaining legitimacy. This method allows a better understanding of the relation between written and spoken language and the political context of the 90s, especially during the presidential and parliamentary elections from 1990, 1992 and 1996. It also helps to establish how political myths delivered by politicians responded to the general need for reformation. During the elections, politicians used symbols to idealize the party they were endorsing in order to mobilize the voters. The politicians were also members of the society they lived in and thus, they shared the same socialization and consciousness with the voters. Having common understandings, norms and needs, their ability to consciously (or even unconsciously) mobilize voters with alike minded habitus was very high.

On one hand, this method identifies how political language can produce meaning for its audience if the symbols used are still alive in the collective memory of a nation. Discourse analysis emphasizes the contextual meaning of language and how political groups use language to achieve specific effects, such as political legitimation as a compensation for the authority void left by the disappearance of the Communist Party. On the other hand, this method has its limitations. Although discourse analysis has recently gone through a quantitative turn, the analysis is limited to the most popular discourses due to space shortage. Another weakness is that discourse and speech analysis only focus on what the politicians say or write and tend to neglect if they later acted in accordance with their political claims. There is usually a significant difference between political discourse and reality – such as fake promises, imaginary claims or unrealistic expectations – and this method lacks the instruments of establishing if political claims were on the same line with their later implementation in society.

Defining Myth and Social Imaginary

The Enlightenment assumption that myths would be replaced by scientific rationality has not come to pass (Ricketson 2001, 3). Science and reason have not replaced myth. Instead, myths and ideologies became more sophisticated and complex when secular political systems emerged in

the 19th century, which is why scholars argued that political myths are a constituent part of modernity (Tismăneanu 1998, 10). Myths are created through the collective memory and tradition of a community which "constructs an image of the past and gives that past both normative values and authenticity" (Ricketson 2001, 11).

In order to better understand the relation between myths and ideologies it is required to offer a brief explanation for each of them. Ideology and myths are elements of imaginary (Şandru 2014, 73). The "social imaginary" is defined as a socio-political construct that establishes symbolic mechanisms through which it seeks to ensure balance in community either by appealing to force or by political legitimacy⁷ (Şandru 2014, 74). In short, the "social imaginary" is a constituent part of every modern society and contributes to the projection of social reality using symbolic structures. The social imaginary is the broader image in which ideology manifests itself as the prerogative of the political authority.

Ideology is considered to be the core concept of social imaginary. Its function is to offer meaning and significance using mythical constructions in a legitimizing manner for the political authority (Şandru 2014, 75). It also possesses the power to establish symbolic relationships between individuals and groups. For example, nationalism is an ideology that offers different groups of people a sense of solidarity with a broader "imagined community" – the nation – which is represented by particular symbols, attitudes, community behaviors, beliefs, values, traditions, language and a common history (Anderson 2006, 6-7). As a result, ideology uses the symbolic abstraction of shared experiences of the community to convey a broader sense of solidarity. Therefore, ideology prevails and myth follows as its legitimizing tool.

While being already stated that myth is the legitimizing tool of ideology emanating from authority, this part will elaborate on what exactly is a myth. Myths are narrative structures that possess a "strong capacity for integration and simplification, showing a tendency to reduce the diversity and the complexity of the phenomena at a specific axis of interpretation" (Tanasoiu 2005, 113). Henri Tudor argues that "a myth is, by definition, a story, that is a narrative of events in dramatic form" (Tudor 1972, 16) considered to be the true representation of historical events: "A living myth is invariably intended as a *vera narratio*, a plain account of what actually happened" (Tudor 1972, 123). Bruce Lincoln emphasized that the narrative told by a myth must "possess both credibility and authority" and thus a strong narrative's claims "are made not only to the status

⁷ Charles Taylor defined the "social imaginary" as factual and normative: "By social imaginary, [...] I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are not normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations". Taylor also emphasizes that ordinary people "imagine their social surroundings in images, stories, and legends", which create common understandings that makes "possible common practices and widely shared senses of legitimacy" (Taylor 2004, 23).

of truth, but what is more, to the status of paradigmatic truth" (Lincoln 1989, 24). The most important part of this idea is that "truth narratives" frame the historical understanding of past events and are able "to inspire collective loyalties, affinities, passions, and actions" (Tismăneanu 1998, 15), gathering and mobilizing people around its collective meaning.

Myths play a major role in every society. Myths connect society with its symbolic structures (Şandru 2014, 76). The power of myths is to institute certain realities, passed on in turn by certain social groups - rural, urban, media, political class, intellectual elite, military, students and others. Myths have a normative and empirical character, contributing to the establishment of a relationship between individuals and groups, of which the most visible is the political power relation. Myths can be both progressive (Sorel 1975) and regressive (Cassirer 2008) and they should not be "taken as expressing an absolute truth, because there is always the possibility that they contain and inadequate form of knowledge" (Bottici 2007, 176).

Defining Political Myth

What exactly is the difference between a myth and a political myth? Multiple scholars sought to define political myths and shed light on the difference between myths and political myths. According to Christopher Flood (2002, 44), "political myth is an ideologically marked narrative that claims to provide a true assessment of a set of past, present, or predicted (future) political events and is accepted as valid, in essence, by a social group". Chiara Bottici (2007, 180) argues that a certain myth becomes a political myth when the story it tells "comes to make significance of the specifically political conditions for a certain social group or society". By political conditions she meant the conditions "concerning the struggle for the distribution of power and resources which can, as a last resort, have recourse to physical force" (Bottici 2007, 180). In short, the political myths serve as a shared narrative that answers a need for significance and provides legitimacy to a certain political group in its struggle for political control.

In this regard, the understanding of political myths was also operationalized by Henri Tudor (1972, 124) who argued that political myths were believed to be true not because the historical evidence is compelling but because they "make sense of men's present experience". Moreover, it is not the political content of the myth that makes it political, but the fact that it gives meaning to a group in direct reference to its conditions of existence. In fact, the myth offers significance to a political condition of a certain group in society, such as a political party or a civic association. Another interpretation of the political myth was provided by Ricketson, who described it as "a ritualized presentation of the collective memories and traditions of a society in terms of a political present" (Ricketson 2001, 2). In "mythical time" the past becomes an essential component of present social realities, being part of "the struggle for memory against forgetting"

(Ricketson 2001, 2) which is in fact an institutionalized battle over the way the past is represented in the present.

Daniel Şandru (2014) offers a more elaborate definition on the meaning of political myth. He argues that "political myths are narrative structures of the imaginary, which gives meaning to the projections that groups and individuals manifest in society, allowing the interpretation of social reality in accordance with the values they share in a given context" (Şandru 2014, 52). The structural complexity of modern society requires a symbolic mediation of the relationships that groups and individuals maintain with their own political experiences (Şandru 2014, 77). This idea implies that symbols like national unity, strong leadership, freedom and others are the bearers of social values shared in a society in certain periods of time. For example, Şandru (2014) argues that "tolerance" and "pluralism" are two of the most integrated social values in today's international political order. These values manifest through political statements, speeches, articles, discourses, political campaigns and so on. They became intrinsic to the common understanding of democracy.

As for these definitions, political myths are means in the struggle for power, shared narratives of communities and symbolic mediators between groups and political experiences. They are resilient. They will adapt and readapt along with changes in society, taking into account the political division, economic context, cultural and social background and even historical memory. A political myth comes from authorities and promotes practical purposes – including legitimacy – and it is successful only when it is believed to be a true story of the past. Finally, when assumed that political myth is a prescriptive narrative, its value does not depend on the degree of its historical accuracy but on the extent to which its story is believed and its goal is achieved. The goal was to legitimize the political actors in early 90s by establishing descent from prestigious groups in the past (or present) – revolutionaries, political prisoners, persecuted intellectual figures or political dissidents. In short, the myth is both a tool and a space where the performative act of power takes place.

Political Myths in Post-communist Romania

This section defines the political context in which the power engaged in mythmaking processes. The context can be described as what Pierre Bourdieu called the *habitus* "a system of durable dispositions structured to function as long-lasting principles which generate practices and perceptions in accordance with certain living conditions which created them and the habitus itself" (Bourdieu 1990, 54).⁸ Applying this definition to power relations in society, one can argue that

⁸ This is a synthesized definition. In Pierre Bourdieu's (1990, 54) words: "The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is as principles which generate and organize practices

each individual has its own *habitus* and his own mythology⁹. These are used in order to gain power in society by maintaining or shifting the existing relations of power. Power relations are based on a particular symbolic order. As Bourdieu (1987, 13) suggests, the symbolic power is manifested through the performative power of the official discourse of authorities. The "given context" or the *habitus* of the aftermath of the 1989 revolution was an authority void which was to be filled by emerging political parties. This historical fracture induced "a cultural trauma" of political uncertainty and social anxiety (Sztompka 2000, 452). As so, myths became the main providers of a sense of coherence and continuity in the chaos of the democratic reconstruction.

The article started from the premise that the fundamental attributions of political myths are the call for action and the reinforcement of identities and meanings. When referring to contemporary Romania, post-1990 analyses attested the existence of political myths, confirming that "the life of any community is organized around mythical constellations" (Boia 2001, 30). It is self-evident that the ideological framework of the post-communist Romanian society originates in previous socio-historical contexts, those being the pre-communist interwar period (1918-1945) and mainly the communist regime (1945-1989). In this regard, Romanian scholars¹⁰ argued that in the first years of the post-revolutionary Romania there was a state identity crisis caused by the lack of legitimacy which induced civic and political confusion. This favored the emergence of political abuses. Such violent episodes were the "mineriade" from 1990, 1991 and 1999, when miners from the Jiu Valley were called upon by authorities to disperse opposition protesters.

Moreover, the people who overthrew communism in 1989 were the same ones who were adapting, working and surviving inside the system a year before. Their dissatisfaction was related more to economic needs rather than to a pro-democratic civic stance. In terms of political education, the majority of the population was lacking the practice of free elections and had no civic and pluralist tradition. The communist regime has tried to repress every dissident voice using the Securitate secret police; therefore, it successfully created the typology of a "submissive citizen" (Verdery 2003, 44) with no political education. In this changing social and political landscape, the shock waves of the 1989 Revolution produced effects not only at the level of economy, culture and politics, but also in the social imaginary. Voters had little knowledge in terms of political representation and thus they became exposed to populism.

In the early 1990s, the new post-communist states, characterized by social atomization and fragmentation, witnessed the dissolution of traditional identities and thus the emergence of

and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them".

⁹ Mythology defined as the sum of all political myths a political or social group use to legitimize itself in the public sphere.

¹⁰ Mentioned in the literature review.

political abuses (Ionașcu 2012, 232). Political parties have used myths both as referential discourse and as a way to persuade the electorate. As a referential discourse, political parties followed their interwar legacy as it was the only one identity which would radically oppose the communist dictatorship. As a way of persuading the electorate, voting campaigns maximize the use and instrumentalization of myths both as elements of legitimacy and as narratives in order to attract massive support from the electorate (Ionașcu 2012, 233). In this particular context, the political parties used symbolic structures to simplify the ideas delivered to the voters and gain authority and legitimacy on the basis of one stable understanding of the past.

In the following section the research will address four political myths identified in the political discourse of the authorities and party leaders in the early 90s.

The Myth of the Interwar Democracy

The first political myth is the interwar period as a founding moment of the post-communist democracy. Political scientist Cristian Bocancea identified three types of political messages after the 1989 revolution: a mobilizing and triumphant discourse of the ruling power (FSN), a contesting message from the opposition (PNL, PNTCD) and a moralizing message of both groups depending on their political stance (Bocancea 2002, 114). On this background, the revolution itself was claimed by each of these political groups in order to gain legitimacy: the representatives of the authority (FSN) claimed to be natural emanation of the revolution, while the representatives of the opposition claimed that the revolution has been stolen by former communists and ex-nomenklatura members which seized power in an abusive manner. After that, the mythical element emerged when the "historical parties" - National Liberal Party (PNL), Christian Democratic National Peasants' Party (PNŢ-CD) and Romanian Social Democrat Party (PSDR) – tended to legitimize themselves by calling for the re-establishment of a historical link between the "confiscated present" and the interwar past. This imaginary bridge links the interwar period between 1918-1945 with the revolutionary Romania of 1989 as a natural continuity. In fact, the interwar legacy was the only identity available for the "historical parties" to grasp on. They used their own habitus to enable an existing, but silenced, memory of the repressed politicians in the past.

The interwar period was imagined as the Romanian golden age of democracy *par excellence* and it became a political narrative due to its usage in the discourses and programs produced by the representatives of "historical parties" and other intellectual and dissident groups. For example, the Liberals claimed their historical heritage by stating that "PNL continues the tradition of its founders of the country" (Ionașcu 2012, 243) highlighting that "the interwar period was a prolific one for Romania and for the liberals, who promoted the agrarian reform, the unitary administrative organization, a new electoral legislation and measures to restore the economy" (available at pnl.ro).

The Christian-Democrats, gathered around the emblematic figure of Corneliu Coposu, stated: "We were never disbanded. We continued to consider ourselves an existing political party and we clandestinely campaigned as a party, which does not recognize an abusive abolition made by the Soviet army" (Coposu 1996, 147). Back in 1990, Coposu was 76 years old. He experienced the dissolution of Iuliu Maniu's National Peasant Party in 1947 and later spent 17 years in detention during the communist regime. After the 1989 Revolution, Coposu became a *lieux de memoire* (Nora 1989, 12) as a symbol of an anti-communist oppressed dissident.

The myth of the interwar democracy can be understood using what Vladimir Tismaneanu calls "the mechanism of historical compensation". In his word, "when conventional identifications fall apart and old belief systems become vacuous, there is a normal tendency for symbolic compensation" (Tismăneanu 1998, 35). This compensation is an idealistic projection of a past period rather than a realistic approach to it. Constructing an ideal past is of great importance in order to understand the psychological attraction of a political myth that offers a compensatory sense of common identity and meaning at the opposite end of a chaotic present. The "interwar democracy" had a special place in the social imaginary mainly because it was perceived as a prosperous period. It was associated with a prominent cultural elite, a functional democracy, an expanded territory of Greater Romania and a serving monarchy, which were all removed when the communists seized political power with the help of the Soviet army. If one takes a realistic approach to the historical reality, the unrealistic compensation unveils itself with all its shortcomings. The interwar period was not homogenous nor perfect. In fact, it had a lot of negative sides including the intellectual support for fascist and communist movements, false electoral procedure (the king appointing the prime minister before the elections), economic setback, high rate of unemployment, political crimes and the establishment of authoritarianism under the rule of king Carol II in 1938 (Schmitt 2016).

The Myth of Original Democracy

Another myth is the *original democracy* narrative. If "historical parties" sought legitimacy in the early 90's by appealing to the tradition of their interwar origins, the National Salvation Front founded on 6th February 1990 and led by the ex-minister of the Communist Youth Ion Iliescu and other former communist cadres adopted a different strategy. The Front had no past political background nor a historical legacy. Iliescu portrayed the Front as "a political movement of broad social support that seeks the reorganization and profound renewal of Romanian society" (CFSN proclamation to the nation 1990) without any connection to past legacies. The rhetoric of political renewal aims to mark a radical break with the communist past and also redirect the voters' attention

¹¹ The 'historical parties' are considered to be the liberals, Christian democrats and social democrats.

from the opposition claims of interwar continuity: "The Front seeks a total and irrevocable rupture with the communist system and its ideology" (CFSN proclamation 1990).

The *original democracy* idea was mentioned by the first post-communist Romanian president, Ion Iliescu in early 1990 in the broader context of the first presidential campaign from May 1990. The National Liberal Party (PNL) and the National Christian Democratic National Peasant's Party (PNTCD), the main opposition parties at that time, threw Radu Câmpeanu and Ion Raţiu in the presidential race against the National Salvation Front's neo-communist leader, Ion Iliescu. Both Câmpeanu and Raţiu had returned to Romania only after the Revolution, focusing their campaign discourse on Romania's move towards a Western-type democracy. They managed to attract the sympathy of right-wing intellectuals, but the rural majority was genuinely terrified by the prospect of a president "with a bow tie and Western speech" as Câmpeanu and Raţiu were both "lacking internal credibility" (Gallagher 2004, 112). The FSN's propaganda apparatus had spread the idea that Romania do not need a Western democracy model, as Ion Iliescu and his team would build an "original democracy". The slogans like "We don't sell our country!" and the rumors according to which the opposition wanted to "offer the country on a plate" to the western powers, to close the factories and leave the Romanians without jobs had spread panic among rural voters (Ionașcu 2012, 264). The results of the first free scrutiny in post-communist Romania resulted in a crushing victory in favor of the Front. Ion Iliescu won 85,07% of the votes, while Radu Câmpeanu and Ion Raţiu only received 15% percentages together (available at: roaep.ro)

The myth of original democracy can be described as a tool of gaining legitimacy for the new organization of the state as well as an excuse for "original" political methods to seize and consolidate the power of a monopolistic and paternalist party. In fact, the sole purpose of this myth is to maintain the *status-quo* of power and to discredit the opposition parties. The original democracy was based on Front's idea of a "general consensus" among Romanians under the rule of Ion Iliescu, meaning that no opposition parties and no political conflicts should interfere in the exercise of power (Bocancea 2002, 111). The political discourse of the neo-communists was fuelled by a nationalist and paternalist message which was in fact a continuation of Ceausescu's discourse: the sacred national unity, the danger related to the loss of Transylvania in favor of the Hungarian minority and also the danger coming from within – opposition parties, students, NGOs and intellectuals. After winning the May 1990 elections, Ion Iliescu called the miners from the Jiu Valley to free the University Square in Bucharest from the so-called "hooligans" (as Iliescu described them) who were peacefully protesting the abuses of the National Front. On June 14 and 15, thousands of miners arrived in the capital and attacked the headquarters of opposition parties, civic organizations offices, publishing houses, Roma neighborhoods, and anti-FSN protesters

(Gallagher 2004, 115). The "original democracy", a form of arbitrary authoritarian political behavior hidden under a democratic facet, was consolidating.

The Myth of Political Reform

The *political reform* myth might be the most persistent one in the Romanian public sphere. It is not restricted to the 90s only as it can even be found today in various political programs, public speeches and TV debates. This myth is part of the mythical constellation of the "saviour" (the reforms are portrayed as the only solution to solve social, economic and political problems) and the "unity" (the political authority pushed the rhetoric of radical reformation to unite the nation around a party modernization project) (Şandru 2014, 93). Although the state of democracy should not only be measured by the creation of political apparatus and institutions, but also by the consciousness of the society, the ideology reform was the clearest solution when such a drastic change occurred.

Back in 1989, it was self-evident that the fall of communism required a radical reconstruction of the state in order to establish a functional democratic regime. The political reform is related to institutional modernization and how political and intellectual elites understand to implement modernizing reforms. Shortly after the revolution, two visions on how democratization and modernization should take place emerged: a more conservative and skeptical approach from neo-communist National Salvation Front's leader Ion Iliescu and a liberal and procapitalist reformist perspective from the opposition. The main directions of the reformist policies between 1990–1996 included the establishment of a "parliamentary democracy and the rule of law; a functional and modern market economy; social protection for disadvantaged categories; the relation with the cohabiting nationalities; Romania's integration in both the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization" (Cioabă and Nică 2004, 309).

In the 1990s, parties used the *catch-all* technique to fill the void of legitimacy by promising major reforms in a relatively short time. Ionaşcu argued that political actors compete in electoral promises to gain a favorable public image, which is part of the so-called "show politics" (Ionaşcu 2012, 263). In 1995, the new Democratic Convention leader Emil Constantinescu presented the "Contract with Romania", a political document containing daring reforms which were to be adopted in the case of winning the 1996 elections. It stated that, withing 200 days from taking power, the party promised property titles for everyone, state-donations of properties to young workers, priests, teachers and doctors, pensions rightly recalculated, tax cuts, tougher penalties for crimes, administrative reform, infrastructure development and many more. Few of these promises were fulfilled, most being still unresolved to this day.

However, while populist promises were flourishing in the early 90s, electoral programs tended to become more professional as the Romanian democratic system was consolidating during the last years of the twentieth century. After 2000, political platforms got rid of mythical promises and unrealistic reforms. This transformation was brought by the professionalization of politics and by introducing specific objectives in the economic sector, where there was little room for political manipulation (Ionașcu 2012, 262). Such objectives were the integration into the European Union, the independence of the judiciary and fight against corruption.

However, despite political professionalization, the rhetoric of political reform was never abandoned during presidential campaigns. For example, the third president of post-communist Romania, Traian Băsescu, heavily relied on the urgence of reforming the state during the 2004 electoral campaign which ended up in his favor. He later won another round of elections in 2008. At first, the reason behind his reform rhetoric was the need to stop corruption and to resolve the slow economic growth of Romania. Later on, during his second presidency, Basescu faced the effects of the 2007-2008 financial crisis and thus urged the necessity of reforming the state. He said that "the state looks like a very fat person who climbed on the back of a very slim and thin person" (available at mediafax.ro). At that particular moment, the state was unable to sustain budget expenditures under the pressure of the economic crisis, and president Băsescu claimed that the state reform involves an institutional reform, a constitutional reform, an educational reform and the reorganization of the health system (Şandru 2014, 94). Even late in transition, the myth of political reform was used in every televised debate or discourse, suggesting that the democratic transition was never accomplished.

The Myth of the Providential Man

The last mythical-political structure is that of the *providential man*, portrayed as the "savior of the nation" and the person from whom everyone expects to miraculously resolve the post-communist crises and shortcomings. The providential man is a manifestation of the "personalization of politics", where parties tend to completely identify with their leaders – Ion Iliescu for FSN, Corneliu Coposu for PNTCD or Traian Basescu for PDL. Şandru (2014, 95) emphasized that Romania has always had a "voivodal political culture" which can be identified by referring to a leader endowed with exceptional or even superhuman qualities, whether he is a ruler, monarch, marshal, secretary general of the communist party or president of the republic. While everything was going through a radical change, voters would identify themselves with politicians they were used to. Politicians who came back from the West only after 1989 were not considered as those who had similar habitus with the majority. They were strangers, their rhetoric was different, their clothing was more refined, therefore it was hard to trust and vote them. The general

impression was that the majority had difficulties identifying themselves with an unfamiliar figure. Instead, they chose the representatives they knew, which were associated with same habitus and social conditions, and that was a secure choice in an insecure environment. As mentioned before, the workers mocked Ion Raţiu's dress code, as he always appeared on the TV with a bowtie.

It is important to highlight that this particular political inclination towards a strong leader is not exclusively endorsed by the majority but also by the intellectual elites. Thus, the relationship between political authority and intellectuals during the 1990s was based on a libido dominandi¹², where the public intellectuals created and projected the image of the providential man in the person of the political leader they supported at that time (Şandru 2014, 96). This process of mythical construction is not unusual. Throughout the last century of Romanian history, the intellectuals projected the image of the saviour on some at least controversial figures who were considered providential in their particular social and political context such as the fascist leader Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, marshal Ion Antonescu, the authoritarian king Carol II and the communist dictator Nicolae Ceasescu. The intellectuals were a legitimizing factor of power in the service of authority, which is why political leaders sought to draw them on their side to strengthen their political image. In 1990s and 2000s each of the three presidents who came to power sought to identify themselves with the mythical image of the providential man: Ion Iliescu presented himself as the "guarantor of national consensus" in 1990 and 1992 and "defender of democracy" in 2000 (Gallagher 2004, 111); Emil Constantinescu created the imagine of the "pro-Western reformist" in 1992 and 1996, while Traian Basescu portrayed himself as the "guarantor of the Constitution", player-president and fighter against corruption in 2004 and 2009.

Conclusions

In conclusion, every society represents and communicates its past through mythical symbols. Political myths can also become powerful sources of legitimation for political elites, that "mask unresolved legitimacy issues" (Ricketson 2001, 10) and manipulate support for often false legitimacy claims. The political myths were the creation of various political and intellectual groups and were used in the specific socio-political context of the post-communist Romania in order to obtain a higher status in the struggle for power.

One should be aware that during a political transition the normative values of a society tend to dissolve and readjust. This results in an authority void and thus allow different political groups to build their legitimacy using political myths instead of rational politics. Myths offered a simulated form of legitimacy that could never be more than compensatory, leading to its failure.

¹² Translated as "the desire to dominate" or "lust for domination".

This is the reason why the constant revaluation of historical narratives and the changing referential symbols during the transition made the myths used in early 90s obsolete. After 2000, the electoral programs tended to get more politically practical and gave up the explicit mythical elements that substantiated the partisan vision regarding the collective identity. The newer political programs replaced political myths with a technocratic perspective.

Moreover, political myths will never disappear as they will most likely always be replaced by other mythical structures when new political, economic or social projects will enter the public debate. Just as other scholars concluded, the post-communist political and intellectual world "will remain a battlefield between different, often incompatible myths" (Tismăneanu 1998, 15). The most cautious verdict is that political myths will always be present, but in different forms and shapes and serving various political, economic, social, and cultural purposes. In today's society, the rise of nationalist, extremist and populist political parties brought back various mythical structures to legitimize political radicalism which, if not rationally deconstructed, can have detrimental consequences on the political system, on human rights and on democracy itself. It is the duty of academia, civic organizations, and every responsible citizen to prevent the misuse of political myths for any other purposes than knowledge. A promising direction for future research on political myths can be the focus on the transformative nature of the myth, concerning its ability to take on new forms which are always adapted to the struggles of today's world.

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