

# NEXT LEFT

## Country Case Studies



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SOCIAL DEMOCRACY  
IN ROMANIA  
THE IMPROBABLE LEFT\*

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SOCIAL DEMOCRACY  
IN ROMANIA  
THE IMPROBABLE LEFT\*

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\* Disclaimer: This paper was written during the first trimester of 2023, when the author had only an academic affiliation. Therefore, the positions and arguments expressed here only reflect the academic research and analytical opinions of the author and should not be in any way be interpreted as reflecting official positions of the Romanian authorities.

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## Few words from the Editors

The Next Left Country Case studies is a new publication series from the FEPS and Karl-Renner-Institute Research Programme, which is soon entering into its 15<sup>th</sup> year of existence. This particular collection is designed to provide readers with a set of answers to reoccurring questions such as: how are the other (sister) parties doing? What are the best examples that could be shared from their respective practices? Is their current situation a result of a long-term process or just an electoral blip? These and many other queries are covered in the volumes that are intentionally kept short and remain focused on social democratic parties and the specificities of the respective national contexts in which they operate. Although they are crafted with a mission to zoom in, they also provide an incredibly valuable material that can enable comparative studies – being in that sense an innovative assemblage that feeds in an obvious void not only within the world of think tanks, but also when it comes to contemporary academic writings.

This volume is devoted to the Romanian Social Democratic Party (PSD), which has been depicted with the greatest attention to nuance and to the requirements of academic excellence by Ruxandra Ivan. As an author, she constructed her portrait – showing all the shines and shades – when it comes to this party's origins and traditions, the environment in which it has been operating, and the ways it has been organized and mobilizing. Following this meticulous examination, Ivan also provides the reader with a set of conclusions – which though



formulated in regard to the specific context, carry a universal set of reflections on the state of social democracy.

The (hi)story that is told within the 8 Chapters begins with the transformations that changed Europe in the 1990s. For Romania, in particular, the roughness of the revolution meant that a path to democracy and modernization was much more turbulent than for any other state in the region. While there were some common features, such as initial relish with liberalization and resentment towards the stakeholders on the left as potential carriers of the past, it was hard for PSD to get established and consolidate. This makes the record of 19 out of 33 years since then in power impressive – even if, as the study shows, there have been both periods marked with achievements and with downfalls (the second of which was strongest marked by the corruption scandals). PSD did win the greatest number of votes in eight out of nine national elections since 2021 is in a government in a stable coalition and its prospects ahead of 2024 are reasons for cautious optimism.

These statistics are an important departure point. But this exceptional study looks behind the numbers and newspaper headlines, closely analysing the political and organizational evolution of the PSD. This party has gone a long way, at the beginning of which its programmatic consistency and ideological profile were doubted in both nationally and internationally. Still, adhering to the SI and PES, it grew to become one of the boldest proponents of European integration, seeing its representative Victor Negrescu elected the PES Vice President and being possibly the best existing example in Europe, when it comes to giving space for PES activism to flourish. But while this is the case, PSD struggles with matching the ambitious European agenda with the discourse regarding sovereignty and a strong national state. As a predominantly catch-all party that is based in an Eastern European



country, it is challenged to strike a balance between the internationalist agenda and the programme that responds to the expectations of the electorate. The latter has desired to join and belong to the European communities, but in parallel have been tried by i.e. the fact that Romania has not yet been accepted in Schengen and that it is questioned about the state and standards of the country's democracy. To that end, many citizens have grown even more anxious in the midst of the ongoing war in Ukraine. Those are among the factors that may partially explain why PSD also echoes in its narrative references to national power politics.

The list of ideological and strategic dilemmas doesn't end there. In the initial years of transition, the political stage was clearly dominated by the ideas of liberalization and flexibilization. Opening the country's market and competing, even if that would mean a race to the bottom, was a philosophy practiced across the region – which among the others, had a destructive influence on domestic production models and eroded the working class. Romanian situation was possibly comparably harder and by the financial crash of 2008, the state joined the so-called "REBL" club. Against this background, PSD came forward being the only party boldly opposing austerity and this incentivized growing support. But while these, alongside other economic and financial policies vastly consolidated party's progressive profile, other parts of the agenda would do quite the opposite – and here the support for privatization and what researchers consider to be a "conservative" approach to social policies are among the key examples.

Finally, the study offers also an insight into the party's electoral base and organization. Despite the fact that the context of the 1990s was very different in Romania than it would be elsewhere in the West, still PSD got into the same developmental trajectory as the other PES sister parties. It went through professionalization and aspired to be a catch-all mass party, which then even quicker was exposed to the predicament

that the literature labels as a crisis of traditional politics. It seems that PSD managed to go through it, showcasing incredible resilience. Unlike many other parties from the region, it retained its dominant position for example among town and rural voters, re-emerging strong – even if, unlike elsewhere, it couldn't count on typical for the left alliances. In the case of Romania, trade unions were weak, and intellectuals were not inclined to line up behind PSD. On the other hand, there were many socially conservative voters, who identified themselves with the party's socio-economic stands, but expected it to be more traditional on other fronts. To that end, PSD tries to permanently broaden its electoral base – via youth and senior organisations, as also women. But when it comes to the latter, there still is a dissonance between the quota that the party set and only 15% of the governing bodies members being women. As elsewhere, clearly, feminization is among the tasks – especially since PSD history is a testimony to the statement that leadership matters a great deal.

Brussels / Vienna, 1<sup>st</sup> September 2023

## 1

## The left in Romania: A painful legacy

The demise of the communist regime in Romania at the end of 1989 seemed to leave no place for leftist ideologies or policy-making. The post-revolutionary public discourse was imbued with liberal ideas – from the one that idealised the shock therapy of the privatisation process during the 1990s to the rejection of “socially assisted” people and more recently the condemnation of the “fat state” – in the context of the economic crisis that started after 2008; to all these was added the public image that associated corruption with a lineage that led directly from the Communist Party to today’s social democracy. As a result of the spread of this public discourse, the Romanian party system is visibly unbalanced towards the right of the political spectrum, with several right-wing parties and only one left-wing party represented in parliament. However, despite this propensity, the success of the extreme right was very limited until recently, in contrast with other Central European cases.

In this ideological atmosphere, where right-wing values and ideas have occupied the centre stage of politics, it seemed like social democracy had no chance to ever reach the top of the political spectrum and gain votes. However, it proved incredibly resilient in the post-communist era. Social democratic parties governed, alone or in coalitions, for 19 out of

33 years, despite a strong rhetoric directed against their ideology and political representatives. They won the greatest number of votes in eight out of nine national electoral rounds. They have been in government since 2021 in a stable coalition, and the opinion polls show them in first place for the electorate's preferences, which allows the forecast that they will continue to govern after the 2024 elections.

The purpose of this study is to understand the trajectory and contemporary state of social democracy in Romania. To achieve this, we first analyse the recent historical trajectory of social democratic parties and the transformation of the party system throughout the last three decades (Chapter 2), but we also need to have a detailed picture of what *left* means in today's Romanian politics, and therefore, we map the contemporary political landscape (Chapter 3). Throughout this study, we show that, on one hand, despite a loud public rhetoric condemning "leftist ideology" under the pretext of its connection to communism, there is strong support for policies that are traditionally social democratic (such as public education, public health or social security) in the deeper social strata. On the other hand, the landscape of contemporary party politics shows an imbalance between the big, strong Social Democratic Party (PSD), and a plethora of small parties without real chances to pass the electoral threshold. The paradox, however, is linked to the type of values promoted by these different parties and to the divide that separates conservatives and progressives on the left. Chapter 4 puts Romanian social democratic parties – especially the PSD – into context by showing their relationships with other relevant organisations, such as trade unions, civil society and intellectuals, but also with their European counterparts and their place in the Party of European Socialists (PES).

In Chapter 5, we analyse the ideology of the PSD and, for comparison, that of the small, new, leftist parties, to grasp the differences

in approach and to identify possibilities for political change. One of the issues put forward by this analysis focuses on the gap between the discourse of the PSD, which is truthful to the economic left-wing ideology, but is also rather conservative on the social dimension, and the progressive (woke) social discourse of the smaller leftist parties, which might be precisely one of the issues that keeps them from appealing to a quite conservative Romanian electorate.

The political programs and policies implemented by the PSD during the last decade are the focus of Chapter 6, which also shows the major policy initiatives supported by the PSD while participating in government, with an emphasis on the strange alliance with the right-wing National Liberal Party (PNL). Controversial policy issues, as well as criticisms towards social democratic policies, are also tackled.

Finally, Chapter 7 is dedicated to the party organisation, which might be one of the elements that explain the electoral successes of the PSD throughout the last decades. After examining the grassroots party organisation, its territorial spread and functioning, as well as the characteristics of the electoral basis of the PSD and the profile of its voters, we turn our focus towards the process of elite selection in the party at local, national and EU levels, trying to understand the ways in which party candidates for different elected posts and appointed functions are selected. Finally, we examine the leadership of the party, trying to understand its dynamics, including from a generational point of view.

The conclusions emphasise the elements that could further insert Romanian social democracy into the wider European current context, insisting on the progressive elements of the PSD doctrine and political action, but also trying to suggest next-left avenues and windows of opportunities for progressive political change and ways to address the difficulties social democracy still has to overcome.



## 2

## The transformation of the left, 1990-2022

In 1989, Romania was a dictatorship led by a single party superposed over the state and a centralised planned economy. The transition to democracy, pluripartism and the free market were the political processes that marked the first post-communist decade, and one of the most salient elements of these processes was the creation of the party system. Unlike other Central and Eastern European (CEE) states, which benefitted from negotiated transitions with a certain continuity between the trade unions or the political groups that contested the communist regime and the parties created after 1989, Romanian political parties were created from scratch. The major parties had two main sources of legitimacy: they were either “historical” parties, claiming their lineage from the interwar political scene (PNL, National Peasant Christian Democratic Party (PNTCD) or the historic Romanian Social Democrat Party (PSDR)); or “revolutionary” parties (the National Salvation Front (FSN) and the parties that resulted from its scission). This was the most relevant cleavage of the party system during the 1990s, which was also very fragmented, quite unstable with frequent scissions and mergers, and rather ambiguous from an ideological point of view.

The next decade saw an ideological clarification of the major parties, which was also facilitated by their association with European



federations of parties. Changes to the electoral laws contributed to the stabilisation of the party system, but also led to the consolidation of the major parties, making it very difficult for new parties to emerge and gain seats in parliament. The economic crisis started in 2008 and introduced the austerity/anti-austerity divide as an important political landmark that separated left and right and subsequently led to a greater relevance of the PSD, which voiced concern over the austerity measures. However, repeated corruption scandals after 2012 eroded the party, which could only form very unstable governments during the last decade, despite quite important electoral success.

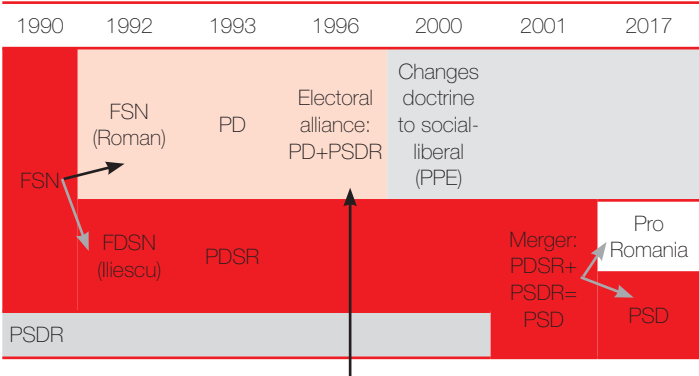
Social democracy in Romania is exclusively represented today by the PSD, which is also the biggest parliamentary party, with 108 deputies (out of a total of 329) and 47 senators (out of 136). There is a direct lineage between this party and the FSN, the party that emerged after the Romanian Revolution, as a result of the transformation of the group that took power in December 1989 from a state organ into a political force, in February 1990, and which decisively won the 1990 election (Table 1), with 67% of the votes for parliament and almost 90% for the president. Unlike other CEE states, which did not have a bloody revolution but negotiated their way into the transition, there is no direct continuity between the Communist Party and any of the political forces that emerged after 1989 (Ionescu, 2009; Radu, 2022). Another party created in 1990 took on the social democratic doctrine and adhered to the Socialist International (SI): the PSDR, which presented itself as a historical successor of the same 19th century and interwar party. It joined the ranks of the other “historical parties” – the PNL and the PNTCD – in opposition to the FSN. However, it had very limited electoral success. It participated in government as a minor party between 1996 and 2000, along with the historical parties, but then turned to the successor of the FSN and later merged with it, forming the PSD (in 2001).

As it preferred to position itself as an emanation of the revolution, the FSN did not adopt the social democratic label from the beginning; when it first defined its ideological orientation in 1991, it only mentioned centre-left orientation and inspiration from modern social democratic European values. The party split as early as 1992, when President Ion Iliescu and his followers quit the FSN after losing internal elections (in favour of former Prime Minister Petre Roman) and created the Democratic National Salvation Front (FDSN). This party actually kept the identity of the former FSN, although not its name. The ulterior trajectory of the two parties is quite interesting: what remained of the FSN changed its name to the Democratic Party (PD) in 1993, participated in the 1996 elections in an alliance with the PSDR, won 12.93% of the votes and was associated in the government until 2000. Later, it shifted to a right-wing ideological orientation and was led by Traian Băsescu, who was to become the president of Romania for the period 2004-2014. The party adhered to the popular doctrine and became part of the EPP? political family, and it was later absorbed into the PNL.

The FDSN, on the other hand, after winning the 1992 elections, consolidated its social democratic orientation and changed its name to the Romanian Social Democratic Party in (PDSR) in 1993. It suffered a heavy defeat in the 1996 elections and went through a period of reformation, aimed at refreshing the leadership of the party, invalidating accusations of neocommunism, tackling scandals of corruption and proving its engagement with democratic values and pro-Western orientation. It made a strong comeback in 2000, when it won the parliamentary and presidential elections. It merged with the historical PSDR in 2001 to form the PSD, which has kept its name and identity until today. The last split of the PSD took place in 2017, when the former prime minister and former president of the party, Victor Ponta, left to form the Pro Romania Party, which is social-liberal and has an

observer status in the PES, but did not pass the electoral threshold at the national elections in 2020.

**Table 1. The evolution of parliamentary social democratic parties in Romania, 1990-2023.**



Therefore, we are in a strange situation today in which the two parties forming the government, PSD and PNL, inherited important parts from the initial party of the revolution, the FSN, but today have opposing political ideologies. How can we solve this puzzle? The sketchy picture of the evolution of social democratic forces in Romania we described above does indeed help us form a chronology, but it does not explain the ideological dynamics of the Romanian political landscape. One of its most important features was (as in the case of several CEE states) the absence of the traditional, most salient, cleavage in Western politics: the owners-workers split; the one that actually defines the right-left divide (Seiler, 2002; Waele, 2002). Secondly, all parties formed in Romania in 1990 were new parties, suddenly created, which lacked ideological consistency, and often

formed around charismatic leaders. Several decades of democratic practice were necessary before the institutionalisation of these parties and stabilisation of their political doctrines, including for the PSD. Thirdly, the entire social and cultural atmosphere of the 1990s was marked by an anti-communist attitude, which took the form of an anti-ideology (Barbu, 1999). All the parties that appeared after 1989 had a manifest anti-communist discourse (ibid.) which led to a situation in which all references to a leftist doctrine could be interpreted as “communism” and sanctioned politically. This is why, during the 1990s, most parties were shy to use the label “socialism” and even “social democracy”. The issue is particularly delicate for the FSN/FDSN/PDSR/PSD, as it was seldom (often?) accused of “neocommunism” (that is, of an attempt to surreptitiously revive communist ideas and practices), as well as its most important leader during the 1990s, and former president of Romania, Ion Iliescu. This is why, during the 1990s, the party insisted more on its revolutionary legitimacy than on its social democratic political ideology, and the main cleavage on the Romanian party landscape separated the “revolutionary parties” from the “historical parties”.

However, similarly to their counterparts in Central and Eastern Europe, Romanian parties are marked by a paradox: on one hand, they are newly created (in 1990) and very dissimilar to Western parties; on the other hand, they have a deep propensity to conformity and “normalcy”, which makes them seek Western references (Seiler, 2002). Therefore, it is not through historical continuity that social democracy re-emerged in Romania in the 1990s, nor through genuine ideological coherence of party leaders, but rather as a result of the desire to fit in, to emulate Western ideologies and parties, and to find its place in a European political family.

The beginning of the 2000s corresponded to an important transformation of the PDSR, which took place after the defeat in the

1996 elections. At the time, the party was embroiled in corruption scandals and was in the grasp of the so-called “local barons” – local politicians who managed to almost create a feudal structure throughout Romania. Ion Iliescu, with his slogan “poor, but honest”, led the party to reformation and to victory in the 2000 elections. The fusion with PSDR in 2001 added historical social democratic pedigree to the party record, while acceptance into the SI and PES established its European respectability and legitimacy. The PSD was born as a modern social democratic party, although the public positions of some of its members do not necessarily reflect ideas from the social democratic doctrine, as we show in Chapter 6. In 2004, although the PSD had the highest percentage of votes (in an alliance with a minor party) – 36.64% – it could not form a government because of the constitution of a post-electoral coalition between right-wing parties; the same happened in 2008. The PSD only came back to power in 2012, in a coalition with centre-right parties. The government has been very fragmented and unstable since then, with frequent reshufflings and changes of coalitions. The PSD governed between 2012 and 2015, with four different governments (and the same prime minister, Victor Ponta) and between 2017 and 2019, with three different governments led by three different prime ministers (during this last period, however, the party was overshadowed by Liviu Dragnea, the head of the party who could not be prime minister because of his criminal record linked to fraud in the 2012 presidential impeachment referendum). Liviu Dragnea was imprisoned in 2019 for corruption and this later motivated reform from inside the party, which tried to rejuvenate itself and clean itself of the image of corruption that plagued the PSD during preceding years. This period, starting in 2020, was also marked by greater sensitivity of the party to European issues, by an intensification of contacts with European counterparts and by efforts to further clarify the social democratic doctrine.

**Table 2. The results for social democrats in national elections, 1990-2023.**

	1990	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020
FSN ->PSD	66.31%	FDSN: 27.72% (1st party)	PDSR: 21.52% (2nd party)	36.61% (1st party)	36.64% (1st party)	PSD: 33.1% (1st party)	PNL+ PC+ PSD: 58.63%	PSD: 45% (1st party)	PSD: 28.9% (1st party)
PD		PD+PSDR 10.19% (3rd party)	PD+PSDR 12.93% (3rd party)	7.03% (3rd party)	Changes doctrine				
PSDR	0.53%	Alliance with PD	Alliance with PD						
Pro Romania									Did not pass the electoral threshold

Source: Chamber of Deputies.

Table 2 shows a paradox: despite numerous occasions in which the PSD was the first party in the popular vote and in number of seats in parliament, it could not form a government. This happened because the Romanian constitution offers the president the prerogative to ask whomever they deem fit to form a government. As the president has been, since 2004, from a right-wing party, they have seldom preferred to appoint someone from outside their own party, which managed to form a post-electoral, government coalition (this was the case in 2004 and 2008). To be sure to obtain the prime minister portfolio, in 2012, the PSD formed a pre-electoral alliance with the PNL and the Conservative Party, winning the elections with 58.63% of the votes, and thus, forcing President Băsescu to appoint the social democrat Victor Ponta as prime minister. However, the political landscape was

very tense during the last decade. Between 2012 and 2015, there were no less than four different governments (all led by Victor Ponta), while between 2017 and 2019 there were three different governments led by three different prime ministers, who were not also heads of the party.

Another factor was necessary for the electoral success of the PSD. Although it came first in the overwhelming majority of parliamentary elections, it only succeeded in installing one president: Ion Iliescu, in 1990-1996 and 2000-2004. Electoral defeats in the presidential elections of 1996, 2004, 2009, 2014 and 2019 had a great impact on the party. Romania is a semi-presidential regime, in which the political practice saw a consolidation of the presidential power, especially since 2004, when the presidential elections were dissociated from parliament and the mandate of the president was prolonged to five years. This also led to very difficult and unstable co-habitation periods, during which the PSD had to accommodate very ideologically different coalition partners.

## 3

## **Concentration and fragmentation: The contemporary landscape of social democracy in Romania**

One of the relevant elements for understanding the consolidation of the PSD as the only representative of social democracy in Romania is the structure of the party system, which is, in turn, largely influenced by the electoral rules. If the first two electoral cycles after 1989 were marked by an abundance of new parties (around 200 in 1995, cf. Preda, 2015), as well as parties represented in parliament (19 parties between 1990 and 1992 and 13 parties between 1992 and 1996), the number of parties decreased with the introduction of stricter electoral rules, such as the necessity of having 10,000 founding members (and later, even 25,000) or the rise of the electoral threshold (established at 5% for parties and 10% for alliances in 2000). Very fragmented during its first decade, with a lot of splits and mergers, the party landscape became much more stable in the 2000s. This stability is also manifest for the PSD itself, which maintained a stable identity after 2001. But the most constraining effect of the electoral rules is the difficulty for the emergence of new parties. This is the reason why the Romanian political regime was labelled with the term forged by Mauro Calise, “partitocracy” (Barbu, 1999), that is, a form of government in which all



the resources, personnel and government policies are the monopoly of the parties (Calise, 1994). Stability of the political landscape translated into monopolisation of the party system by the parliamentary parties. The year 2015 brought a reversal of the strict policy of party creation, which could now be formed with only three members. The number of parties exploded again, but it had already become structurally difficult for new, unknown parties to gain access to the means of political propaganda that would have brought them votes. However, in the general European context of the emergence of new, anti-system parties, two new parties managed to pass the electoral threshold and be represented in parliament: “Save Romania” Union (USR) in 2016 and the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) in 2020. Both are right-wing parties, with the AUR tilting towards the extreme right. On the left side of the political spectrum, no new party managed to present itself as a serious competitor. Therefore, the contemporary political scene in Romania is characterised by the presence of five important parties represented in parliament. Alongside the PSD, which is the biggest in terms of mandate, there is the PNL (affiliated to EPP), the USR (affiliated to Renew Europe), the AUR (which seeks an affiliation to the European Conservatives and Reformists) and the Democratic Union of Magyars in Romania (affiliated to EPP). The last four parties are all on the right of the political spectrum; therefore, the PSD covers the whole of the left and, in principle, benefits from the votes of the entire left-wing electorate (if the right-left divide were relevant in Romanian politics).

During the last few years, there were several attempts to create new left-wing parties. The scission of Pro Romania from the PSD in 2017 is an example. The party is led by former PSD Prime Minister Victor Ponta, who had to resign from his function after a fire in a Bucharest club that led to the death of 64 people and was followed by massive protests on the streets of Bucharest. Pro Romania gained affiliation

to (to be specific, became an Observer Member) PES and obtained two seats in the 2019 European parliamentary elections, but failed to pass the electoral threshold at the national elections in 2020 and has become quite irrelevant in terms of public presence.

The Democracy and Solidarity Party (Demos) is another attempt to create a left-wing, social democratic party from below. It was created in 2018, after three years of existence as a civic platform. In a way, Demos can also be considered a “revolutionary party”, because its nucleus of leaders emerged during the 2012 protests against exploitation in the Roşia Montana mine, the biggest mass demonstrations since the revolution (USR has the same origin). Although it does not present itself as a social democratic party, the doctrine and positions of Demos are the closest to modern, progressive social democracy on the Romanian political stage. However, in the particular Romanian context, in which the entire political spectrum is unbalanced towards the right, they are considered closer to extreme left, mostly because of their positions on socio-cultural values (support for LGBTQ+ rights, anti-clericalism, strong environmentalism), but also because they criticise the neoliberal economic model. Demos tried to gather the number of signatures required to be able to present itself in the 2019 European elections, as well as in the 2020 national elections, but failed. It could not take part in any elections, and therefore, remains very irrelevant in Romanian politics, despite its efforts to offer a progressive alternative to the more conservative PSD.

The failure of Demos led to even further fragmentation of the emerging progressive left. Some of its former members created new parties, such as Activ or Acum (Now). Along with other older parties, such as the Green Party or the Romanian Socialist Party, they are quite active on social media, but much less so in real politics, and lack an electoral basis in the territory.

## ←NEXT LEFT→

Therefore, the contemporary political scene, on the left, presents a paradoxical structure. It is constituted by the massive presence of the PSD, and a plethora of small parties without parliamentary representation or the chance to pass the electoral threshold in the near future. At the same time, as we show in Chapter 5, the label “progressive” may seem much more appropriate for the small, new parties than for the more traditional and conservative PSD.

Being the only parliamentary party on the left side of the political spectrum, the PSD has the advantage of catching all the votes of the electorate that lean towards leftist values. However, this is also a handicap when it comes to coalition formation because the PSD is always forced to enter a coalition with right-wing parties, and therefore, alter its policies to reach a compromise.



## 4

## **Making its way among peers: European politics, social partners and road companions**

It took little to be considered a social democrat in the 1990s. According to a study by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (Crook et al., 2002) three criteria needed to be met by CEE parties that wanted to be affiliated to SI and, subsequently, to the PES: respect for democracy and human rights; support for the social market economy; and attachment to the values of peace and non-violent resolution of conflicts. Despite the laxness of these criteria, the PDSR was not considered able to fulfil them in the 1990s. Unofficially, the electoral weight of the parties was also considered as an argument for membership. Thus, when the historical PSDR, which had been associated with the SI since the early 1990s, was very respectable, but obtained weak results in elections; the SI oriented itself towards more strongly social democratic parties, such as PD, which became a member in 1999 (Coman, 2005:102). As for the PDSR, it applied for membership as early as 1993, but despite its electoral weight and declared social democratic orientation, its reputation, as well as competition with the then SI member PD, prevented it from becoming a member until 2003, after its merger with the PSDR. Since 2005, it has remained the only Romanian party affiliated to the PES and

SI, after the PD left these federations and changed its doctrine to a liberal conservative one that allowed it to join the EPP. Pro Romania also applied for membership and has an associate status.

Insertion into European federations of parties led to Romanian parties focusing more attention on EU politics and policies, as well as to socialisation and networking by their leaders with their European counterparts. This opened the way for the participation of Romanian political leaders in the formulation of policies at the European level and offered them more legitimacy in domestic politics. It also led to a more coherent ideological orientation for Romanian parties, which were constantly monitored by European federations. Social democratic foundations, such as Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Fondation Jean Jaures, Olof Palme Foundation, the European Forum for Solidarity and Democracy and FEPS, constantly organised seminars and fora of discussions on issues such as social protection, trade unions, social solidarity and other specific issues from the social democratic policy arsenal, which led to more awareness by Romanian politicians for these topics that slowly gained ground in the domestic political debate. Nowadays, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung remains one of the most active and influential Western political foundations in Romania, replacing the Christian democratic Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, which was by far the most influential during the 1990s and early 2000s.

In the current legislature of the European Parliament, the Romanian social democrats compose the fourth largest national delegation (Table 3), with ten members (after Spain with 21 and Italy and Germany with 16 each). It is the largest delegation in Central and Eastern Europe, since the other social democratic parties in the region performed quite poorly. The decline of social democratic parties during the last decade is visible throughout Europe and discussed in the political science literature (Ladrech 2020; Elliot 2021; Newell 2022). In

2017, social democrats were heavily defeated in French and Dutch elections; in 2018, the SPD had the lowest score since the end of the Weimar Republic; the Polish United Left didn't even pass the electoral threshold in 2015, but manage to recover to 12.5% in 2019. In this context, Romanian social democracy stands out as a success story. In the European Parliament, of the ten Romanian MEPs, eight are PSD members and two are Pro Romania members. However, the weight of the delegation is not necessarily translated into political influence. For example, of the 14 vice-presidents of the European Parliament, five belong to the S&D group, all of them coming from Western European countries (Germany, Austria, Luxembourg, Italy, Portugal). Of the seven S&D chairs of Parliamentary Committees, none is from Romania, and only one comes from a CEE state (Robert Biedroń from Poland is the chair of the Women's Rights and Gender Equality Committee). Romanian social democrat Rovana Plumb is one of the ten members of the Bureau of the S&D political group, and Victor Negrescu is the vice-president of PES.

**Table 3. The results for Romanian social democrats in European elections.**

	2007	2009	2014	2019
Percentage of votes	PSD: 23.11%	PSD+PC: 31.7%	PSD+PC+UDMR (coalition): 37.6%	PSD: 22.5%
Number of seats for PES	10	11	16	10 (8 PSD + 2 Pro Romania)
Number of seats for EPP, for comparison	18	14	15	14

Of course, the first explanation that comes to mind when confronted with the imbalance between the electoral weight and the appointment to relevant functions in the S&D political group is the stereotype that links CEE countries to backwardness and corruption. Part of this reluctance might be understandable if we think of the case of Adrian Severin, the Romanian S&D MEP, who was involved in the 2011 *cash-for-influence* scandal, in which he, along with two other MEPs, accepted bribes in exchange for amendments to European legislation. But other serious scandals have tainted Western members of the group as well. The reluctance of the S&D political group to ensure a balanced representation of its CEE members might have adverse effects in the future, further stimulating the sovereigntist stance inside the PSD itself.

In turn, the PSD sometimes shows a lot less astuteness in European politics than at the domestic level. For example, in 2019, it lost a position in the European Commission because it was not able to nominate a candidate that would be acceptable to European fora. While von der Leyen was composing her team, the PSD government proposed Rovana Plumb, who was rejected by the Committee of Legal Affairs of the EP on issues of conflict of interest (her financial declarations contained discrepancies in private donations). This happened on 26 September 2019; before the PSD had time to nominate and pass its second candidate, the Romanian government was ousted, following a vote of no confidence in parliament on 10 October, and the commissioner post went to the next liberal government and the EPP.

In Western European politics, some of the traditional allies of social democrats are trade unions and leftist intellectuals. These alliances are lacking in Romania for several reasons. The trade unions are much less powerful social actors than their Western counterparts, having



also much less political identity. After the working class had been largely destroyed by the capitalist reforms being put into practice, including by social democratic governments themselves, through large-scale privatisations of public assets in the 1990s and 2000s, trade unions only became irrelevant, but they were also captured by leaders that were politically affiliated (in an informal manner) rather than true representatives of the workers. Therefore, paradoxically, trade union leaders depend more on the political parties than the other way around. Of course, political parties – and mostly the PSD, with its social democratic identity card – keep up the appearance of social dialogue, but workers' rights and trade unionism have been in decline throughout the last 30 years. Trade unions do not represent a force in politics, and they do not act and vote in an organised manner.

As for the intellectuals – that is, engaged scholars who debate political ideas in the public sphere – their position in Romanian politics has always been a special one. The entire Romanian cultural history is marked by the intertwining between the political and cultural spheres, with an intense circulation of elites from one to the other. During communism, Romania was one of the few CEE countries with no organised intellectual dissidence, since adherence and support for the regime could guarantee public visibility and personal welfare. However, after 1989, most intellectuals suddenly became fiercely anti-communist (Matei, 2004; Barbu, 2004; Gavrilesco, 2006; Gheorghiu, 2007). They enrolled first on the side of the “historical” parties, and, when these faded away during the 2000s, they were recaptured by President Traian Basescu (PD, part of the EPP) thanks to his policy of condemnation of the communist regime. Support for neoliberal economic policies of massive privatisations; the meritocracy discourse that condemned the poor for being lazy; criticism towards any policy that could be perceived



as left wing – such as social security – these were all ideas promoted by the people who made up what was considered the intellectual elite during the last 30 years.

The few left-wing or social democratic intellectuals were (and are) not actually close to the PSD. A double ambiguity is at play here. On one hand, most of these are not actually considered “public intellectuals”, as they are rather marginal and don’t occupy important positions in academia or other public functions. The publishing houses that are rather left-wing oriented (Tact, Idea Design&Print, Hecate, Fractalia, Pagini Libere) are not part of the academic circuits and are quite deficient in terms of market distribution. Therefore, the influence of left-wing intellectuals on the Romanian public, as well as in academia, is quite limited. Hence, there is no direct incentive for a political party to have them on board, since they do not bring many votes. The PSD has never made any attempt to win over Romanian intellectuals to their side, except maybe in the last few years, when a certain interest was visible, but not necessarily for social democratic theorists, rather for either technical intellectuals (such as the physician Alexandru Rafila, a prominent professor of medicine, who was co-opted during the pandemic) or for quite nationalist ones (such as Ioan Aurel Pop, historian and president of the Romanian Academy).

On the other hand, left-wing intellectuals themselves are not keen to support PSD. Firstly, because they are critical towards PSD (Poenu 2017), holding it responsible for policies that led to: the destruction of the working class, the shock therapy of privatisations etc.; there is also more criticism of the lack of social policies by all Romanian governments, including the PSD (Caradaică and Stoiciu, 2018)). Secondly, because of the numerous corruption scandals in which prominent politicians were involved. And thirdly, because

very often they cannot accept the conservative social positions of the PSD (some of these are detailed in Chapter 5) and its shade of nationalism, which is often in contradiction to socialist internationalism. These ideological nuances that have led many to question the «social democratic» orientation of the PSD are the focus of Chapter 5.



## 5

## **Progressive left and conservative left: Social democratic ideology in Romania**

The contemporary ideological trajectory of social democracy in Romania might be understood from a perspective that combines political and cultural history, an understanding of the social and cultural values of contemporary Romanian society, as well as a perspective on the general evolution of social democratic ideology in Western Europe. These three contextual elements are analysed to clarify the ideological position of social democracy in Romania.

The first Social Democratic Workers' Party was founded in Romania in 1893, in the context of the Liberals and the Conservatives being the two major parties that rotated into government. It was therefore a minor party, with unstable membership and inconsistent messaging. Romania was an agrarian country, and the class consciousness of the thin workers' class was far from being awoken. In 1917, the party changed its name to the Socialist Party, and in 1921 it was affiliated with the Comintern. Factionism, internal struggles and Bolshevik groups destabilised the party during the 1920s, while the Communist

Party was outlawed; it reverted to the initial social democrat designation in 1927, but its limited electoral success only allowed it to govern as part of coalitions with liberals, agrarians and communists immediately after the war. In 1948, a year after the communists forced King Mihai I to abdicate and proclaimed the republic, they pushed for a merger with the social democrats, thereby creating the Romanian Workers' Party – which was actually the Communist Party that led the country from 1948 to 1989. The communist regime was particularly repressive in Romania. Many of the former members of the social democratic party were imprisoned as traitors during purges in the 1950s. The few Marxist, socialist and social democratic thinkers writing in Romania before 1948, although sometimes very consistent with their ideology and doctrine, were never claimed as intellectuals, nor as ideologues of the left, but rather considered as “exotic plants” of the post-communist cultural and political landscape (Cistelean and State: 2015). Although a diffuse leftist spirit existed in the form of avant-garde movements and centre-left newspapers had the highest circulation at the beginning of the 20th century (Dohotaru, 2019), this heritage was not capitalized by the post-communist left.

This is a very brief historical account of social democracy that is meant to emphasise the low relevance of this ideology throughout the last 130 years, as well as the perpetual lack of a strong popular basis that might constitute its target audience. The fall of communism did not contribute, in sociological terms, to the emergence or consolidation of an electoral basis for social democratic ideas, but this aspect is further analysed in Chapter 7. Let's keep in mind, for the moment, the limited reach of social democratic ideas in Romanian society, from a historical perspective.

An understanding of the values to which Romanian society adheres is also important in order to assess their compatibility with social

democratic ideas. Romania is an orthodox country. Until recently, the church and the army scored highest in opinion polls measuring trust in various institutions. As recently as 2019, trust in the army was at 80% and in the church at 69%, while the lowest scores were registered for the government (19%), parliament (18%) and political parties (12%) (Voicu, Rusu and Tufiş, 2020). More generally, the level of trust in fellow citizens has constantly been very low during the last 30 years, with figures of between 75% and 90% of Romanians declaring that one should be cautious of other people and not trust them at first (ibid.). This attitude is not very promising for encouraging solidarity, one of the basic values of social democracy. Another important aspect that might explain why European legitimation is very important for Romanian parties is that the level of trust in international institutions, such as the EU, NATO or even the UN, is generally much higher than it is for domestic institutions.

The political culture is traditional, with a strong element of ethnic nationalism that has its roots in the inter-war period. The nationalist nature of Romanian communism after 1970 contributed to «the blurring of the left-right categories in a way that is still noticeable» (Gallagher, 2001). Of course, the blurring of this distinction has multiple causes, and this is only an element of it, but one that is significant for understanding the peculiarities of the Romanian case. Nationalism is accompanied by a tendency to prefer strong leaders, with the patriarchal image of the «father of the nation», a preference that falls short of authoritarianism, and which has been translated in practice by a slow, but steady, consolidation of the presidential institution in the state architecture.

Although the PSD has had quite a few strong leaders throughout its existence (meaning that they were able to control and hold together the different factions and interests of the party), Ion Iliescu was the only one who also managed to win presidential elections, finishing

his last term in 2004. Not being able to hold the presidential chair afterwards, the party could not capitalise on the image of its leaders. Quite the contrary, it was heavily affected by corruption scandals and accusations surrounding its leading figures.

The third element of context necessary to understand the evolution of social democratic ideology in Romania concerns its insertion into the larger European landscape. It has become common knowledge that European social democracy itself has been affected, since the late 1970s, by a slow shift to the right and a dilution of some of its basic values, such as the importance of the welfare state and social protection, the regulatory role of the state in the economy, social justice and redistribution, and the social market economy. The crisis of social democracy and the declining performance of social democratic parties in elections were intertwined with other characteristics of Western political landscapes, such as the erosion of the traditional electorate of the left – the working class; the decline of industry and competition of other new parties from the left, such as the Greens (Ladrech, 2020). Therefore, social democratic political positions have become ever more moderate and have moved to the right (Lemke and Marks, 1992), with the result that the entire political spectrum has moved to the right. During the 1990s, the ideology of the «third way» further led to a neoliberal version of social democracy. While political science authors differ on whether the declining electoral success of social democracy is a cause or a result of their moderation of the leftist discourse, they seem to agree that the dilution of the discourse on economic issues has been accompanied by an increase of messages concerning socio-cultural issues. This also allowed for right-wing populists to recover some elements of the economic discourse of the left to address the concerns of precarious social groups (Berman and Snegovaya, 2019; Elliott, 2021). This is a process through which

Western social democracy has become less left wing on the economic divide, but more progressive on the socio-cultural divide.

Navigating through a historical landscape – which not only hasn't been favourable for social democracy, but even marginalised social democratic values, such as equality and solidarity, as being too «communist» – a socio-cultural landscape marked by ethnic nationalism and traditionalism, and a European landscape in which social democracy itself has gone through numerous crises in recent times, Romanian social democracy has had to find its own ideological path that could, on one hand, insert it into the European circuit and, on the other hand, appeal to the local electorate. This path combined elements of leftist discourse, such as a critique of austerity, on the economic cleavage with a rather traditionalist position on the socio-cultural cleavage. This explains the electoral success of the party, which had to address an electorate that presented the socio-economic characteristics mentioned above. For example, in 2018, the PSD initially supported the organisation of a referendum to decide on adding the definition of a family as being «the union between a man and a woman» into the constitution. This would have actually meant that there would be no possibility whatsoever for the legal recognition of same sex couples. However, when the PSD realised that the issue was of no major interest to the population, they kept a safe distance. The referendum was invalidated because only 21% of citizens voted (the threshold for validation was 30%).

Several prominent members of the PSD, such as Titus Corlăţean, former Minister of Foreign Affairs and of Justice; Alexandru Rafila, the Minister of Health; or Liviu Dragnea, former head of the party and former president of the Chamber of Deputies, constantly participate in National Prayer Breakfasts, which are interparliamentary gatherings of informal groups of Christian conservatives all around the world,



promoting religious, conservative values and forming a network of influence over global politics.

The ideological orientation of the party was also largely influenced by its leaders. Ion Iliescu, for example, was a convinced atheist, holding leftist developmental views that were rather similar to the international socialist and social democratic debates of the 1980s and 1990s; he presented these views in some of his books, such as *Revolution and Reform* or *The Destiny of a Leftist*. Despite his convictions, however, his political action, especially during the 1990s led to the destruction of the working class, “created a local comprador bourgeoisie, pushed the country into a colonial relationship with the European capital [...], and transformed the former communist working class into [a] cheap, precarious and migrant labour force” (Poenaru, 2017:59).

At the opposite end of the spectrum in terms of convictions, Liviu Dragnea, former local baron and head of the party between 2015 and 2019, was very religious, much less internationalist and had a sovereigntist discourse in relation to the EU. Under his leadership, the PSD turned to social conservatism and nationalism, and conducted “provincial politics, characterised by local connivances, clans, families, very hierarchical [...], conservative and racist” (ibid., 2017: 134). After Dragnea’s conviction for corruption and a period of unstable leadership in 2019, the party began a slow reform, which translated into more openness to European ideas and networks, more tolerance to progressive ideas and a mimetic adoption of European social democratic discourse. On its internet site ([www.psd.ro](http://www.psd.ro)), the “country project” of the party refers to the need to build an equitable society with a strong social dimension, social justice and the reduction of poverty, and the “imperfection of the markets” (the expression itself can be considered, in Romanian politics, a very daring leftist assertion). In this context, the PSD proposes “a partnership between

[the] capital and citizens” to create sustainable development. It also insists on the necessity to protect the national capital over the foreign one. Other declared elements of this project are a strong state, which would ensure access to education and health services for everybody, environmental protection, digitalisation and fighting inequalities through social protection. As it is visible from these statements, the official ideological discourse of the party is, at this moment, rather diluted and remains quiet on socio-cultural issues. Throughout its short history, the PSD has never been an ideological party, but rather a catch-all party, avoiding issues that were very controversial or that could firmly place it in an ideological camp. Therefore, it also displays a catch-all ideological discourse. Among the values that the party upholds, we find democracy, equality, solidarity, justice, respect for the environment, human rights, social dialogue, collaboration with civil society, decent wages, sustainable economic development, social protection, education and health system for all, and economic entrepreneurship as a modern form of social progress. This list of values, as stated on the party’s internet site, is quite eclectic and it mixes left and right-wing concepts; proof that the PSD is still undergoing a process of ideological clarification. Despite this, the statute of the PSD defines the party as “modern and progressive, a national party with European vocation, member of the Party of European Socialists [PES] and of the Socialist International [SI], the successor of the Romanian social democrat tradition” (art. 8).

The situation is very different when it comes to the small party Demos, which has much more ideological clarity and sends very precise messages on its positions. On the economic divide, it supports more social justice and better conditions for workers (one of their slogans is *Romania – the country of cheap labour*, trying to focus attention on the issues related to the rights of employees; they also encourage trade

unionism and have made an interactive map of strikes in Romania: <https://taramunciiieftine.ro/>). On the socio-cultural divide, they promote progressive positions, such as strong support for minorities of all types, gender parity and LGBTQ+ rights. From an ideological point of view, they appear closer to other European social democratic parties than the PSD. However, as we emphasised in Chapter 4, they have never managed to attract signatures in support of their election lists or substantial funding, and therefore are irrelevant as a political force.

Therefore, in terms of ideology, the PSD of the last decade could be considered a conservative leftist party, coherent by consistant. However, since political declarations sometimes differ in practice from political action, we need to confront them with the concrete measures taken by the PSD while it was in government. In terms of an overall vision on the future of Romanian society, the PSD did not display – except probably in the 1990s – a coherent by consistant programme. Its policies were rather meant to adjust to existing realities, manage crises and govern in a pragmatic manner. Most of the policies of both right and left after 1989 combined neoliberal reforms with measures meant to alleviate the social effects of these reforms.

## 6

## Putting ideas into practice: Social democracy in government

The PSD (or its predecessor parties) governed alone in 1990-1996 and 2000-2004, and in coalition with right-wing parties in 2012-2105 (2015), 2017-2019 and 2021-to date. Undoubtedly, alliances with right-wing parties imposed a negotiated moderation over the type of policies that could be implemented. This chapter analyses some of the measures taken by social democratic governments with respect to three main dimensions: foreign policy; economic policies; and socio-cultural policies.

Despite being accused of neocommunism and sometimes Russian sympathies, it was mostly during social democratic governments that the most important steps towards the West were made. In 1994, it was President Ion Iliescu who stirred the consensus of all parliamentary parties for Romania's application to EU accession. In 2002, Romania was invited to become a NATO member under a PSD government. Most of the EU accession chapters were also negotiated during the period 2000-2004. The first Romanian presidency of the EU Council took place in the first half of 2019, under a social democratic government.

In what concerns foreign policy, Romanian social democracy has always been pro-Western and pro-European in its actions – “pragmatic

euro-enthusiasts", as one analyst put it (Coman, 2005:75). However, these were the times when there was a broad consensus in public opinion in favour of NATO and EU accession, and the PSD was always very sensitive to the preferences of the electorate. While Romania was one of the most euro-enthusiastic countries in Central and Eastern Europe before its accession, it seems that this trend has been reversing during the last years. A comparative CEE quantitative study showed that Romania had, in March 2022, the greatest score of preference in the region for the country "being part of the East": 24%. Support for the Western geopolitical orientation decreased sharply from 43% in 2021 to 27% in 2022, and Romania is the only CEE country where this trend is visible. At the same time, it had the lowest approval for democracy (65%) and the greatest propensity to prefer an authoritarian leader (60%). It is also the only country in the region where satisfaction with democracy decreased from 30% in 2020 to 23% in 2022, accompanied by the highest percentage of people who agree that "who holds the power in the government does not matter, nothing will change" (66%) – which shows the feeling of powerlessness that has come over society (GLOBSEC, 2022). Until recently, Romania benefitted from a wide consensus of citizens in favour of a pro-Western geopolitical orientation, which was reflected in governmental policies on both the left and right. Most of the parties, including the PSD, made efforts to fit into European political families and to adopt their values. These trends might, however, reverse as a result of several factors. One of them is linked to a certain *fatigue* with the difficult economic situation that many perceive to result from EU accession. The destruction of local industry and agriculture and a strong penetration of foreign capital, especially banks; the energy industry and resource exploitation are other elements that might influence citizens' positions on the Europeanist-sovereignist divide. The rejection in late 2022 of Romania's accession to Schengen

without a convincing explanation was also perceived as an injustice inflicted upon the Romanian people. Finally, Romania has become especially vulnerable to Russian propaganda and fake news, in the context of declining levels of education and literacy. All these factors might have contributed to the trends outlined by the Globsec study quoted above, which show that the consistent pro-Western attitude of the Romanian public opinion during the last 30 years should not be taken for granted. While the public discourse of the most prominent PSD leaders continues to support the Western orientation, the lower echelons of the party sometimes voice concerns over the excessively submissive attitude of the country towards the USA and the EU – which are still perceived in Romania as a unitary geopolitical block.

What about traditional policy domains on the socio-economic axis? Unlike Western social democrats, whose political purpose is to reform capitalism to achieve more social justice and a strong regulatory environment for economic activity, Romanian social democrats have had to manage the transition from a planned economy to the free market. They – together with the right-wing parties that were in government during the last 30 years – managed to transform the Romanian economy into a neoliberal and dependent capitalism, with low productivity, fiscal evasion, a weak system of tax collection and a labour market that favours capital and disadvantages workers – a country of cheap labour (Ban, 2014; Ban, 2019). The Romanian transition was, however, slightly different from that of other CEE countries, inasmuch as the shock therapy of privatisation was not applied from the outset. As long as the social democrats remained in power, until 1996, the Romanian transition privileged national capital over foreign capital, and this limited the dependency of the economy on foreign capital, despite strong pressures from outside. The political and economic elites who governed during the first six years of the transition were

poorly connected to foreign neoliberal networks (Ban, 2019: 109). The economic perspective of the social democrats in government was labelled by Cornel Ban as “neodevelopmentalist” – that is, an approach that tries to build on the achievements of a communist economy (such as the complete lack of external debt in 1989 and strong industrial development) to make the transition to a controlled market economy. This strategy focused on support from local entrepreneurs and national capital, and it remained a feature of social democratic policies throughout the last three decades. The pace of privatisation of state assets was slow and limited, and when social democrats lost the elections in 1996, most of the national economy was still controlled by the state (ibid.: 139) With the change in government, the right-wing parties imposed “shock therapy” privatisation, which directed the Romanian economy towards adopting an extreme neoliberal orientation that continued until today and transformed the country into an economy dependent on foreign capital. While the labour taxation system remained progressive until 2004, when the last purely social democratic government ended its mandate, a fixed taxation quota for income was implemented by the PD government at that time and it remains in force until today. This taxation system favours the highest incomes and contributes to the widening of socio-economic inequality. During the last few years, the PSD has tried several times to bring the idea of progressive taxation into the public discussion, but it has met with strong opposition from interest groups and other political forces. The complete lack of progress in this discussion, as well as hesitation by the PSD at making it a major agenda item are surprising, given that a recent study showed that 73% of citizens would prefer a progressive taxation system (Badescu, Gog, and Tufiş, 2022: 29). This shows that the silent majority has less power to influence policies than more vocal minorities which are the representatives of targeted business interests.



During the great economic crisis that started in 2008, the PSD was the only anti-austerity party, but it did so from opposition, and therefore, without an actual impact on policy. While it was in power, however, it constantly promoted wage increases, more than any other political party. An important turn towards right-wing policies was visible during the 2016-2020 legislature, when the PSD supported measures of fiscal relaxation for certain categories of professionals, such as the IT field, and encouraged the development of local capital and entrepreneurs supported by the state. A small success of the PSD was to initiate and pass a law in 2019 which stipulated fines for employers that did not pay overtime. The party is also a supporter of introducing a solidarity tax on companies.

Therefore, concerning economic issues, the PSD has indeed been, during the last 30 years, the only party supporting left-wing measures, even if sometimes these policies were leftist only if compared to the more radical neoliberal ideas of their competitors.

Meanwhile, social policies have not kept pace with the transformation of the economy. Despite their rejection of the neoliberal economic paradigm, the social democrats in the 1990s did not complement it with investments in education or health, and the level of social support for the disadvantaged categories decreased with every year. The state of the education and health system has worsened constantly, and especially during the austerity PDL government (2009-2012), when many hospitals and schools, particularly those in the countryside, have been closed. Romania has the lowest budgetary allocations in the EU for these two fields. In education, for example, the budgetary allocation oscillated between 3 and 4% of GDP during the last 15 years, despite a law in force since 2011 stating that it should receive at least 6% of GDP. The budget for health has been around 5% of GDP, while the EU average is 10%. The more recent policies of the PSD fail to address



the endemic problems of the education and health systems, which are tarred by a tendency to privatise state resources. For example, public funding can also be directed to private healthcare units at the request of the patient, as well as to private schools, according to the principle “money follows the pupil”. The PSD did not manifest opposition to the adoption of these policies; on the contrary, it has rather internalised the idea that public money should be used to finance private enterprises. The “vouchers system” is gaining more and more ground in Romania, where the state offers social vouchers, vouchers for energy, food, holidays and household appliances. An initiative by Gabriela Firea, former PSD Minister of the Family, is directed to offering nursery vouchers to young parents that they could use to access private nurseries and kindergartens (the subject is particularly sensitive in Romania, where most nurseries and kindergartens are private). There are several problems with this system. Firstly, vouchers feed the layer of intermediaries (the Romanian market is dominated by three French companies, the profits of which were between 20% and 50% in 2021, (cf. Biriş, 2023)); secondly, it uses public money to finance private enterprises; and, last but not least, it addresses endemic problems with short-term solutions, instead on focusing, for example, on building public nurseries, the reduction of poverty through development or capping energy prices.

Several other gaps between declared values and effective policies can be identified in the political action of the PSD. For example, despite the fact that the party has an internal gender quota of 30% for leadership functions, it is not respected – in 2021, there were only 15% women in the governing structures of the party. But this isn't peculiar for Romanian parties: the PSD remains the party with the largest percentage of women in parliament (24.2%, cf. Băluță and Tufiş, 2022), and the party appointed the first female prime minister in Romanian history in 2019,

Viorica Dăncilă. But, while the party struggles to live up to its principles, at least in official enterprises, it has been criticised for an embedded traditionalist perception of women when, recently, the president of the party had a very soft reaction to a scandal of sexual harassment by PSD minister Marius Budăi.

Last, but not least, the poorest PSD record – and one it has been famous for during different periods of its existence – is in the field of corruption. Several of its members and leaders have been involved in corruption scandals and some of them were convicted. The most famous cases are the former president of the party and prime minister, Adrian Năstase, and the former president of the party and speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, Liviu Dragnea. In 2017, the government fell as a result of massive street protests against an attempt by the PSD-ALDE government to modify justice laws, a change that would cripple the anti-corruption legal framework and, it was said, would protect Liviu Dragnea from being brought to justice. This event was actually an important starting point for the reformation of the PSD, since it also started an opposition movement against the until-then-undisputed leader Dragnea. The Grindeanu government fell as a result of a motion of no confidence started by the PSD itself: it was the only time during the last 30 years that a government was overthrown by a motion of no confidence started by its own party. The years that followed saw the decline of Dragnea's power and a transformation of the party. Corruption inside the party also seemed to decline after 2017 – or at least there were no other major scandals.



## 7

## How to organise a successful party

While ideological clarity or effectiveness of policy initiatives do not constitute strong arguments to explain the PSD's electoral success, one important explanation might lie in the organisation of the party, which benefits today from the strongest territorial implantation, the most complex network of local and sectoral organisations, and the largest number of members. Thus, the highest echelons of the party maintain a strong link with the grassroots and the party has developed the mechanisms through which it can collect inputs from the territory to design a policy agenda that is quite close to the preoccupations, interests and preferences of its members.

In this chapter, we analyse the membership and organisation of the PSD, while keeping in mind that the formal structure is doubled by a quite baroque informal structure that lacks transparency and is more difficult to disentangle. Political science authors converge on the fact that the PSD was, at the beginning of the 1990s, “the main beneficiary of the formal and informal networks of the Romanian communist party” (Ban, 2019: 110), and that it benefitted “from a mass party bureaucratized organisation and an unparalleled ability to reach territorial units” (Iancu and Soare 2016: 168). This is one reason why it has managed to keep an important number of members throughout

its existence, but it also explains the decisive importance of informal practices that were, during communism, the only way to keep the rhetoric and appearance of a functional society, while everybody knew how to deal with the ins and outs of the system in an unofficial manner. Informality was also favoured by the permanent changes to the legal framework concerning elections: "The fluid regulatory frameworks and the continuous and sometimes contradictory reforms almost invariably favoured a flourishing web of rent-seeking practices" (Ionașcu, 2013).

Thus, one needs to keep in mind that the visible assets of the PSD – and this is also the case for other Romanian parties – such as its large membership and structured organisation, are doubled by an entire network of informal connections (family, private, professional, of interest) that link its members. Unfortunately, so far, this network remains understudied.

There is no official data in Romania about the membership of the parties, and therefore, we should be cautious about estimates made by the parties themselves. The membership is very volatile and parties don't keep organised records (despite the fact that, for example, art. 17-19 of the statute of the PSD stipulates the existence of local and centralised registrars of members). Although the number of members has a symbolic function of showing the strength of the party, and a larger number of members might ensure more democratic internal elections, scholars have argued that, during recent decades, parties are no longer interested in having a large membership (Iancu and Soare, 2020). However, the PSD has always had a strategy of relying on its membership size for legitimation. It is apparently by far the party with the greatest number of members, self-reported at 547,850 paying members and 811,000 persons who held a membership card in 2017 (ibid.: 327); these are the most recent available public estimates. According to internal PSD sources, the membership in 2023 is around

200,000, but this is a very rough estimate. The declining interest of the PSD to attract new members is also visible from the fact that, unlike several years ago, the official website of the party does not open with an invitation to become a member (as of March 2023).

The sociological profile of members, as self-assessed by the party in 2011, is the following: mostly male (59%); rather elderly; with low to medium levels of education (*ibid.*). The PSD is among the very few Romanian parties that explicitly regulate the possibility for EU citizens residing in Romania to become party members (art. 13). The quality of member is obtained upon request and a decision of the bureau of the local party structure. Among the obligations of members, strong emphasis is placed on respecting party discipline and the non-disclosure of confidential information. Usually, voting discipline is not enforced in parliament, except for essential issues; however, the PSD is one of the most disciplined parties in Romania from this perspective. Messages sent through social media or TV appearances of members are very unitary, without discrepancies of positions.

According to its statute, modified in 2020 to better correspond to efforts to reform the party, the PSD has several “internal” and “external” “structures”. The first are the Youth Organization, the Women’s Organization, the Retirees’ Organization, the League of the Local Elected, the Diaspora Organization and the Republic of Moldova Organization. This internal organisation shows the preoccupation of the party to address different social groups. However, some of these organisations only display a formal structure, without having substantial activity or an impact on policy formulation. An example would be the Women’s Organization – although it has an extensive presence in the party statutes, its achievements in promoting women on candidate lists or in pushing gender issues on the policy agenda are quite meagre (Băluță and Tufiş, 2021).

As for the “external” structures, these are the PES and PES Activists. The latter started as a grassroots initiative inside the party, created in 2007, with the purpose of promoting knowledge about the EU functioning and policies, and of stimulating debates related to European issues, amongst party members. They managed, over time, to raise awareness about EU topics, to convince leaders of the importance of keeping a strong link with the PES, but also – through its MEPs – to raise the profile of the Romanian party in Brussels and sometimes even clean up its image in Europe after corruption scandals or unfortunate policy options. Unlike the party in its entirety, PES Activists are more progressive on socio-cultural values (which is a result of both the age of members and their involvement in contemporary European debates). According to internal sources, the number of members of PES activists reaches around 10,000, and the organisation is quite active both on social media and in grassroots politics in the territory. The statute stipulates the right of PES Activists to have representatives in all the management structures of the party.

Other PSD structures that appear in the statute are the National Department for Human Resources, with a special branch for Management of the Political Career; the Commission for Ethics, Integrity and Arbitration; and the Commission for Internal Financial Control. A certain preoccupation for diversifying the representation of interests and for covering the largest possible spectrum of policy areas is visible in the party organisation. Firstly, it has internal departments for the study of different policy areas and policy formulation. Secondly, it can constitute “leagues, associations, clubs and other organisms” (art. 138) to better promote the party messages in society. Thirdly, it maintains close ties with the syndicates – according to the statute, at least. And finally, it hosts several professional fora: the National Forum of Workers; the National Forum of Farmers; the National Forum



of the Greens; and the National Forum of Science, Art and Culture Specialists. Not all these organisational units are, however, very visible outside of the party, which maintains a strong unity of discourse and political action.

There is great volatility in terms of party allegiance at the local levels. This is mostly due to the way in which budgetary funds are allocated from the “centre” – the government – to the local level: usually, the administrative units that are led by mayors from the government party receive a lot more funds than those of the opposition. That is why political migration of mayors was quite frequent in the past, since their interest in having budgetary allocations was usually stronger than their ideological convictions. One of the most prominent figures at the top of the PSD, former president of the party, Liviu Dragnea, was himself a political migrant: he joined the PSD in 2001, after being a member of the PD since the mid-1990s. The phenomenon of political migration of local elites was limited by law in 2014, which stipulated that, if local elected officials changed political affiliation, they would lose their mandate. But mayors still continue to change allegiance during electoral periods, if their prospects show that another party would win general elections. Most often, by changing party, mayors continue to rely on the same electorate, which – especially in rural areas – doesn't vote for the party or for the ideology, but for the person.

The best electoral results obtained by the PSD are traditionally in the least economically developed regions and in rural areas (Giugă, 2018). The explanation is not entirely ideological, though. It does not lie in the fact that economically deprived groups would be more inclined to vote for social democratic programs. It is rather linked to the tight control exercised by the party structures over the electorate, and to practices such as clientelism, electoral bribes (given, most often, in food) or electoral tourism (buses with voters that illegally vote in several



constituencies) – practices that were common to political parties in Romania at the turn of the millennium (Mareş, Muntean, and Petrova, 2017). The former president of the PSD was condemned in 2016 for electoral fraud in the 2012 referendum. Therefore, although with time such practices have withered away, they remained linked, in the popular imagination, to the image of the PSD, and this is a narrative well maintained by its political adversaries.

Clientelism is, to a large extent, linked, in turn, to another peculiarity of Romanian local politics: the formation, during the second half of the 1990s, of a class of so-called “local barons”. From the perspective of the structure of the party, we can say that throughout its existence, the PSD has oscillated between the model of a party of “local barons”, during periods when local leaders exerted more influence, and the model of the “entourage party” (Radu, 2022), during periods when strong leaders and their close circle controlled the party. In both cases, the peculiar feature is the lack of institutionalisation of the party structure, which is dependent upon particular political personalities. The former president of the party, Liviu Dragnea, is representative of this model. He started as a local baron in the 2000s, after having migrated from the PD to the PSD, and consolidated his power with the support of other loyal local barons that later became his *entourage*. He became secretary general of the party in 2009, executive president in 2013 and then president in 2015. His power basis relied on his economic assets in his home county, Teleorman, but also on the skilful manipulation of party factions and members against each other. He was portrayed in Western media as an illiberal, populist politician. He is responsible for the important conservative turn in the party discourse, as well as for promoting people to important positions in central politics who showed no other qualities than excessive loyalty to himself. His conviction for corruption in 2019 opened the way for the most important reform of



the party during the last decade: it slowly began to displace Dragnea's loyal people from party positions; to return to more social democratic European values; and to insert in their political discourse more daring left-wing themes, such as the solidarity tax for companies. Notably, the party has become more balanced from the point of view of the poles of power that constitute it, and the power does not reside in a single centre anymore.

Finally, we need to mention the process of professionalisation of politics that has taken place since the 2000, but this is not *Politik als Beruf*. A lot of the PSD party elites (and this is the case for all parties in Romania) do not have professional experience in jobs and professions that are independent from politics. The first and second echelons of the party usually rotate in posts like members of administrative councils of state agencies, state secretaries (there are now around 200), counsellors of ministers and state secretaries, etc. This is why it is in their best interest to always serve the party, which will repay them with such a function. The PSD is probably the Romanian party that takes best care of its members, but also the party with the highest internal loyalty of its members, displaying a monolithic solidarity that is part of the ethos of the party, and which certainly contributes to higher electoral scores.



## 8

## **Conclusions and perspectives: How social democratic is Romanian social democracy?**

Several partial conclusions can be drawn from the investigation of social democratic ideology and political action in Romania. Firstly, the fact that there is only one parliamentary party that can aspire to the label of “social democrat”, namely, the PSD. The other small parties, some of them with a more accurate social democratic profile, do not stand a chance of being elected for public functions, never mind being able to raise the necessary number of signatures to present themselves in elections. The most important cause of this phenomenon is not necessarily the lack of correspondence between social democratic values and Romanian society, but rather the organisational incapacity of small parties to attract funding to spread their ideas.

Therefore, the PSD is likely to remain, during the next electoral cycles, the only representative of the (centre) left on the Romanian political stage. It is a party which proved its ability to gain votes and to form alliances. In terms of territorial organisation, the PSD has always been and remains the party with the best anchoring, especially in small towns and rural areas – which constitute its main electoral basin. It

had also managed to engage a network of enthusiastic activists who contribute to the party's popularity and electoral success.

Secondly, at the ideological level, the PSD has managed to concoct a successful mix of European social democratic ideas with a very local Eastern European scent of peculiar nationalist orientation. Protection of national capital and a certain, yet timid, sovereigntist stance of discourse are important electoral assets for the party. However, at least concerning economic measures, it still remains the most left-wing parliamentary party, because it mentions its preoccupation for social justice, reduction of poverty, solidarity and decent wages. On the contrary, concerning the socio-cultural dimension, it falls rather short of progressive narrative of other European social democratic parties. As we showed above, it is rather conservative and will probably remain so in the near future, as the conservative discourse gains more and more ground in Eastern Europe. In its electoral strategy, the PSD tends to accommodate the theory that in the CEE region you can be conservative and still vote for a centre-left party, since the axes of conservatism-progressivism are not identical to the axes of left-right. This method of procedure is also one of the features of the PSD that keeps away a part of the electorate that has strong leftist views, mostly from the younger generation, so a shift of discourse towards more progressive cultural values would be likely to appeal to this segment of voters. That said, the party displays a certain sensibility to European influence, which can be exerted through its further inclusion in the European and international circuits. This is why its ties with the PES and SI, as well as the presence of international guests at main events (such as a recent anniversary of the party), are essential for keeping the party close to progressive values.

Thirdly, the ideological discourse of the PSD is more social democratic than its political action. This can be explained, on one

hand, by the fact that most parties display a gap between rhetoric and concrete policies, and on the other hand, by the fact that it has often governed in alliances with right-wing parties, and therefore, had to moderate its positions and negotiate compromises.

The PSD thus remains a prisoner of the political paradox hinted at earlier: a large proportion of Romanian society declares itself as being on the right-wing political spectrum, but in practice prefers policies from the left (Bădescu, Gog, and Tufiş, 2022: 45). The party is therefore shy to openly embrace policy proposals from the left-wing spectrum. Their alliances with right-wing parties does not discourage their traditional electorate, but, on the contrary, it sometimes adds respectability to a party that has been marked in the past by corruption scandals.

Fourthly, the PSD remains the most effective political party in terms of governance. Many important foreign policy achievements have been pushed forward during their period in government. Throughout the last 30 years, it had a crucial role in slowing down the brutal policies of privatisation, shock therapy and austerity promoted by the right-wing parties. It also managed to introduce social policies that helped alleviate the shocks of transition for the most vulnerable categories. One of the main ideas frequently promoted by the PSD in public discourse during the last years is “no one should be left behind”.

One of the greatest difficulties for the PSD during the last decade was that it never managed to win presidential elections and, despite its high electoral scores, to govern alone to be able to put into practice social democratic policies. The year 2024 will be crucial from this point of view, as Romania will hold no less than four types of elections: local; national; European; and presidential. One year ahead, the PSD remains first in the electorate's preferences, but candidates for the presidential elections have not yet been announced. The greatest danger for the PSD and Romanian democracy in general is the rise

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of the AUR, the extreme-right populist party, which is now at around 15-20% in the opinion polls. The AUR benefits from the dissatisfaction of the electorate with the precarious economic conditions; with the current disastrous state of the education and health systems; and with the abuses of foreign enterprises in the fields of energy, banking and natural resource exploitation. In this context, the PSD might opt for an easy way, which consists of appropriating some of the main themes of AUR discourse, such as nationalism, sovereigntism and an emphasis on traditional and religious values. This could bring votes in the short term, but it would erode the still fragile state of Romanian democracy, in the long term. But the PSD could also choose the hard but ethical way of relying precisely on a discourse that addresses the preoccupation of society on concrete solutions, such as the solidarity tax for corporations, the progressive taxation system, capping prices for essential goods and investments in education and health. It could build a stronger social democratic ethos in Romanian society by raising the general level of education and by formulating long-term policy solutions in line with a socially just project for the future. Last, but not least, at the organisational level, it could offer the younger generation more space to express their progressive views and more avenues for promotion in their political career.



## Glossary

. . AUR	Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (Alliance for the Union of Romanians)
. . CEE	Central and Eastern European
Demos	Democracy and Solidarity Party
. . EPP	European People's Party
. . FSN	Front of National Salvation (National Salvation Front)
. FDSN	Democratic (National Salvation Front) Front of National Salvation
. PDSR	Party of Social Democracy in Romania (Social Democratic Party )
. . PES	Party of European Socialists
. . PNL	National Liberal Party
PNTCD	National Peasant Christian Democrat Party (Christian Democratic National Peasants' Party)
. PSDR	Romanian Social Democrat(ic) Party (historical)
. . . PD	Democrat Party (Democratic Party)
. . . . SI	Socialist International
. . USR	"Save Romania" Union





## List of presidents of the PSD and predecessor parties

1990-1993 Ion Iliescu

1993-1997 Oliviu Gherman

1997-2000 Ion Iliescu

2000-2005 Adrian Năstase

2005-2010 Mircea Geoană

2010-2015 Victor Ponta

2015-2019 Liviu Dragnea

2019 Viorica Dăncilă

2019-present Marcel Ciolacu



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