

*Uncaptive Minds*

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## **Seminar Papers**

Civic Institutions, Citizens' Participation:

The Case of Romania

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*Presented at the IDEE Seminar*

**25 Years After 1989:**

**Time for Reflection on Unfinished Business**

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## **IDEE Seminar Papers**

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## **The Author**

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## Theme 6

### **Civic Institutions, Citizens' Participation**

#### **25 Years of Civic Activism: Achievements and Failures The Case of Romania**

*by* **Smaranda Enache**

I have been involved in almost all the important events in Romania in the last twenty-five years in various roles: as a civic leader, a political actor, a diplomat, a citizen, and an observer. My non-governmental organization, Liga Pro Europa, was a member of the Centers for Pluralism network, a unique initiative of IDEE in Washington, D.C. I hope that at some point people will recognize how unique it was. Thanks to IDEE and to our partners in the region, I had the opportunity to meet outstanding and influential political and civic personalities of all the post-communist countries, from Central Europe to Central-Asia, and to become acquainted with similarities and differences among our transitions. Due to IDEE's programs, some of us also had the opportunity to become familiar with the situation in current communist countries such as Cuba.

Drawing the balance of the last twenty-five years is a challenging task. It is difficult to formulate a diagnosis of a historical period when one is directly involved in the events. My approach is obviously subjective; it is more a testimony than an academic analysis.

It is also difficult to diagnose a historical period when it has not yet concluded. On the contrary, there are new and somehow unexpected and highly disturbing events adding constantly to this era. As we meet, Russia continues its military occupation of Crimea and blatantly supports secessionist movements in eastern Ukraine; it threatens the integrity of the Republic of Moldova; and it maintains the so-called frozen conflicts round the Black Sea area, such as Abkhazia, Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. Elsewhere, China continues to massively violate human rights; North Korea threatens the world with the use of nuclear weapons; and in Iraq and Syria, ISIS employs barbarian methods to impose a new Caliphate.

Closer to home, in both Western and Eastern Europe, we experience a new wave of extremism, nationalism, and anti-Semitism. And we see even democratically elected leaders, such as Prime Minister Victor Orbán in Hungary, praise the virtues of illiberal democracies, while Romania's Prime Minister, Victor Ponta, lists the merits of the Chinese Communist Party. During the Ukrainian crisis, both these leaders have barely criticized Russia for its unprecedented violation of international law and human rights. Overall, in the region, unprecedented levels of systemic corruption are undermining the principles of a free and sustainable economy.

None of these developments are new. Liberal democracy has not achieved universality nor have the values of the 1948 UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights been fully accepted. We can remember that it was during the bipolar period of the Cold War that a new theory emerged arguing that democratic principles were relative and should be implemented only in accordance with the "local culture" or political pragmatism. In fact, this approach was—and is—meant to deny the universality of human rights and freedoms and to "adapt" democracy to the interests of local political-religious and cultural elites of the non-democratic half of the world.

We thus convene here as actors and beneficiaries of a 25-year-period of transition from communism in the understanding that in this new historical environment our experience is of paramount importance. To continue the civic transformation of the post-totalitarian regimes, to guarantee the survival of pluralist democracies in the future, to overcome the variety of blatant challenges to liberal values, we need to reflect on the failures of the last twenty-five years in the region and to resume our unfinished business.

Turning to Romania, the first failure has been the regression in the public's support of and trust in democracy and freedom. You all know that Romania had one of the most repressive, Stalinist communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe and also that its last leader, over twenty-five years, Nicolae Ceaușescu, added to it a strong nationalist element. The repression of freedoms and human rights was complete and before 1989 Romania did not have any genuine civil society. All organizations and associations that existed were created by the Communist Party.

The December 1989 Revolution was a popular, spontaneous, and anti-communist uprising. It started in the city of Timișoara with the arrest of a young Protestant pastor, László Tőkés. It spread quickly to all cities of Romania. Hundreds of thousands of citizens demonstrated throughout the country against communism and for democracy and freedom. People paid a high price for their freedom: more than 1,000 civilians were killed in attempts to repress this uprising. As this was happening, Ceaușescu tried to escape and was captured. Second-rank communist leaders and Securitate officials ordered his and his wife's execution on Christmas Day.

In December 1989, therefore, there were two distinct events happening: there was a genuine revolution, having certain results, and there was a *coup d'état* implemented by second-ranking communist party and Securitate leaders aiming at a counter-revolution and producing other results.

Twenty-five years later, opinion polls taken in September 2014 showed a dramatic weakening of support for democracy. Nicolae Ceaușescu is ranked highest among past Romanian presidents. An astonishing 60 percent of the population considers the country to be going in the wrong direction. Sixty-eight percent of Romanians think that there was more social justice before 1989. Sixty-five percent declare that their living standard was higher before 1989. Public trust in the Church and the Army is higher than in any democratically elected institutions, such as the parliament or the local administration.

One explanation for such public attitudes is the progressive weakening of the post-communist civil society that was built after December 1989. In the 1990s, Romania had around 3,000 active NGOs and hundreds of independent local radio stations and newspapers. Today, the number of active NGOs is less than 1,000 and independent local media has collapsed entirely. The most powerful private TV stations came under the ownership and control of former Securitate agents turned business moguls.

### **The First Phase: Civic Mobilization and Trust in Democracy**

The most active civic groups emerged during and immediately after the December 1989 Revolution. These groups were organized by former

political prisoners and dissidents as well as by groups of individuals who opposed the communist regime in a variety of less public ways and hoped for a fast and effective transition from totalitarianism to democracy.

The most important civil society groups in this first phase were genuinely self-organized without any external support. Their priority was the dismantling of the communist regime, preventing former communists from regaining power, getting rid of repressive institutions, and reestablishing Romania in the community of free nations according to its pre-communist traditions. These groups had a clear ideological agenda with strategic goals and quickly found partners and developed relationships with democratic governments, institutions and NGOs in the Transatlantic Alliance.

The first generation of civic groups, however, acted in a highly hostile environment. State power had been confiscated by the second-rank communists together with the secret services. These forces replaced the Communist Party with the National Salvation Front, a political movement aimed at keeping power and manipulating and dominating Romanian politics and society. The NSF controlled the mass media, state resources, and the key institutions of government, including security and military services. Various methods were used to restore control of the communists and to divide the society, including harassing the leaders of the newly reestablished historical parties and destroying the offices of the Peasant Party, mobilizing popular militias to repress peaceful student demonstrations, using former Securitate agents to foment inter-ethnic conflicts in Transylvania between the Romanian majority and the Hungarian minority (as happened in my home town of Tîrgu Mureş), exercising control over media, among other methods. The violent repression of anti-communist protests culminated in the suppression of the Bucharest University Square student protest in June 1990.

These political forces also maintained Romania in a grey geo-strategic position: neither East nor West. In August 1991, Romania's President, Ion Iliescu, a former high ranking communist leader, signed a cooperation pact with the USSR, which, in its agony, was pressing Romania to be neutral and not to accede in any military pacts hostile to the USSR, meaning NATO. For the democratic forces, the pact was a clear indication that Ion Iliescu planned to keep Romania in the sphere of influence of the USSR against the clear aspirations of the Romanian nation.

The strong tendency towards communist restoration was opposed by a very strong and focused civil society, which had substantial support from a large part of the population as well as from the West. Civic groups such as the Timișoara Society, the Association of Former Political

Prisoners, the Students' League, the Civic Alliance, the Group for Social Dialogue, Liga Pro Europa, the Association for Interethnic Dialogue, and the Anti-Totalitarian Front of Cluj all cooperated with the leaders of the historical democratic parties—the Christian Democratic Peasant Party, the National Liberal Party, and the Social-Democratic Party—to adopt common strategies to resist the repressive and manipulative actions of the post-communist government led by Ion Iliescu.

For the 1996 elections, the civic groups succeeded in convincing the political parties to form a broad anti-communist alliance, the Democratic Convention of Romania, and put forward a unified opposition candidate, Emil Constantinescu, the highly respected rector of Bucharest University, for president. The Democratic Convention won both the parliamentary and presidential elections. After more than 50 years of dictatorship and a full six years after the December 1989 Revolution, Romania had its first non-communist government.

This first phase was a period of faith in democracy, optimism, trust in a better future, generosity, civic solidarity in the society at large, and unity in achieving goals, I remember these romantic times. We had organizational capacity throughout Romania, close cooperation with independent media, and our citizens were mobilized to vote for democratic change. I remember going from one village to another, sometimes clandestinely in order to avoid attention of the authorities, to identify local democratic leaders who could mobilize the voters and unify anti-communist forces.

Western support was crucial for the very existence of the civic groups. Small grants, distributed to a variety of credible and legitimate civic groups and independent media, allowed them to obtain equipment and publish materials on a large scale for disseminating ideas and values all over the country. Western support also meant trainings, seminars, and workshops to help civic groups and civic leaders enhance their organizational capabilities, develop human resources, multiply results, network, and disseminate good practices. IDEE in Washington, D.C. made a unique contribution to the development and consolidation of civic groups in Romania and in the other post-communist and post-Soviet countries not only by providing crucial support but also by setting up the largest civic network in the region, the Centers for Pluralism. The meetings and publications of the CFP were a unique resource for prominent civic leaders, democratic politicians, and independent journalists in Romania to cooperate with partners in the region and among themselves, to identify common needs and solutions, to mobilize for solidarity in cases of repression, and to organize for free and fair elections.

## **The Failures of the First Non-Communist Government**

The November 1996 elections were a historic victory of Romania's civic movement over the post-communist forces. Indeed, this victory convinced the Western democracies that despite its Balkan roots, its totalitarian past, and its dominant Orthodox culture, Romania deserved the same chances for democracy as the other Central European and Baltic nations.

Civic groups, in close cooperation with Western partners as well as the democratic political parties, succeeded in neutralizing the offensives of the former communist structures against change, implementing deep reforms, and in achieving the strategic and historic goal of Romania's integration in Euro-Atlantic institutions. In 1999, Romania started negotiations for the accession to the European Union and NATO.

The 1996 victory, however, changed civil society in several ways. For one, many leaders of the civic organizations entered the government; I myself accepted a post as ambassador. It may or may not have been a mistake to do so, but what is also true in this period is that civil society groups started to repress their natural inclination to criticize the government's mistakes. We did not want to undermine the non-communist government in which we were participating in a very fragile political situation. So, we gave it uncritical support. Western donors were also encouraging civic groups to concentrate on sectoral or local issues, while the national groups divided among those favoring strong anti-communist policies like lustration and those encouraging a form of national reconciliation and a policy of forgetting the past. All of these factors eroded civil society's effectiveness and credibility.

Unfortunately, during the period of 1996 to 2000, neither the new administration of President Emil Constantinescu nor the parliament succeeded in gaining control over the economy and both eventually lost the trust of citizens, who were suffering economically.

In fact, the first six years of transition and post-Communist rule (1990–96) had been sufficient for the second-rank party activists, state company managers, communist bank directors, kolkhoz chairmen, secret service officers, and all the other privileged persons and groups of the former regime to gain ownership over the country's resources, to control the economy, and to persuade the Western democracies that they were Romania's only reliable economic partners. They used this control as a weapon to dictate economic outcomes. Price increases, high unemployment rates, miners' strikes, and economic instability created disillusion, frustration, and doubt within society that the democratic parties were the best political option.



The political scene had also diversified. Already by 1992, Petre Roman, Ion Iliescu's first Prime Minister, left Iliescu's National Salvation Front to form a new Democratic Party with a social democratic orientation. To achieve a firm parliamentary majority the Democratic Convention was obliged to accept this new party in the new non-communist government. In doing so, however, there were permanent tensions within the government coalition. The Democratic Party, with its leadership roots in the communist system, opposed and blocked all initiatives concerning restitution of property, the adoption of lustration laws, and other key actions. President Emil Constantinescu's administration and the Christian Democratic Peasant Party, the largest in the coalition, were politically weakened.

### **Post-Communism Returns and the Effects on Civil Society**

After four years of a non-communist government and presidency, Romania experienced the total collapse of the democratic forces and along with them the prospect for building a non-communist multiparty system. In the November 2000 elections, Ion Iliescu, still leader of the Party of Social Democracy of Romania (PDSR), won presidential elections and acceded to an unconstitutional third term. In parliamentary elections, the Christian Democratic Peasant Party did not pass the electoral threshold for membership in parliament while the PDSR won a large plurality to lead a new government. A year later, the historical non-communist Social Democratic Party was swallowed by the larger PDSR to form a united Social Democratic Party (SDP). The National Liberal Party (PNL) was hijacked by a new leadership of former communists and merged with the Democratic Party of Petre Roman. Thus, the original parts of the National Salvation Front effectively succeeded in defeating the main anti-communist party, the Peasant Party, and co-opting the leadership of the other parties.

In 2000, these "reform" communists came to power with a new agenda. Over time, the PDSR leaders had realized that they could not stop the course of history and accepted the Cold War victory of the West over the Soviet system. With this acceptance, they decided "to convert" to democracy and to neutralize, step by step, the fragile democratic political parties and thereby take over the system. Although the former communists experienced a large setback in 1996, by the end of 2000, they achieved a total victory over the anti-communist forces of Romania. They controlled all key political offices and institutions, the economy, foreign trade, and the secret services. Iliescu's prime minister was Adrian Năstase, a former communist who was married to the daughter of one of Ceaușescu's most prominent ministers. During the Ceaușescu regime, he had been rewarded with foreign assignments and fellowships in international institutions. Using the recipe of "conversion," Năstase and Iliescu stressed Romania's

Euro-Atlantic integration in their external policies but internally reinforced Romania's unwritten rules of fear and pressure against civil society. Taking advantage of the Western decision to quickly integrate the former communist countries, the Iliescu-Năstase tandem convinced the Western countries that Romania was starting to be a functional democracy with respect for human rights and the rule of law. It was hardly the case.

Already weakened by internal division and having compromised its mission, civil society's position suffered further with the return to power of the former communists. For one, the "conversion" recipe forced a change of strategy. Paradoxically, one of the main strategic goals of Romanian civic groups—integration with Euro-Atlantic institutions—now coincided with that of the former communists. Although Romanian civic groups considered the "conversion" to democracy by the former communists to be false and resumed a critical stance towards the government by denouncing human rights abuses and high levels of corruption, these groups and their leaders continued to advocate for Romania's quick acceptance into the EU and NATO out of fear that Romania's orientation might return to the earlier "grey zone," where Russian interests would prevail.

The civic groups hoped that once Romania was admitted to Euro-Atlantic institutions, the government would be pressured to continue and deepen its reforms. But this proved mistaken and, step by step, the influence of pro-democratic civic groups was further diminished as Western governments preferred to engage in dialogue with the Romanian government. The transition negotiations that previously included civil society groups now became strictly bi-lateral and Western governments willfully overlooked the failings of their new partner. For the West, it became important to promote the new Romanian government as a reliable ally and, in turn, to placate the Romanian government by cutting funding and ultimately abandoning anti-communist civil society groups.

For the Iliescu-Năstase tandem, an active pro-democratic civil society was a significant threat to its new hold on power. The post-communist administration had no inhibitions in undermining democratic civic groups, creating new NGOs (so-called GONGOs) and promoting them abroad, and distributing resources on the basis of party or government loyalty. Criticism by genuine civil society groups was stigmatized as anti-state and anti-patriotic. Western governments started to fund GONGOs as legitimate and civilized partners for Euro-Atlantic integration.

Soon, the free local publications ceased to print and grass-roots associations lost their headquarters and access to local financing. Strong commercial televisions, most of them owned by rich businessmen whose fortunes were built from their communist pasts, controlled the public agen-

da. Civil society entered a new-old situation: some groups became highly dependent on political elites while others entered a fight for survival.

### **The New Division**

As the 2004 parliamentary and presidential elections approached, a new division arose among democratic forces. In order to prevent Adrian Năstase, the PDSR candidate, from succeeding Iliescu as president, some of the most prominent anti-communist intellectuals, human rights activists, and pro-democracy politicians adopted a “pragmatic” strategy to support the main opponents of the PDSR, the “Justice and Truth” Alliance, called DA for short (meaning “Yes” in Romanian), which was made up of the National Liberal Party and the Democratic Party. They backed DA and its victorious presidential candidate, Traian Băsescu, with astonishing devotion despite the fact that both DA parties now were highly infiltrated by former Securitate and military officers and dominated by post-communist businessmen.

Traian Băsescu was a versatile politician with deep roots in Ceaușescu’s communist system and information services. He was a former minister during the early Iliescu regime in the 1990s who had gone with Petre Roman and the Democratic Party after the split of the National Salvation Front. The unconditional support he received from the main intellectual groups associated with the former Democratic Convention seriously damaged the credibility and legitimacy of Romania’s civil society, which was perceived now as a political instrument for Băsescu.

For the ten years of Băsescu’s presidency, Romania’s civic movement was in great jeopardy. Not only had it lost its earlier influence and credibility, it had strayed from its initial strategic goal of establishing a functional and authentic pluralist democracy. Due to the subordination of many talented individuals to political party interests, the civic movement lost many outstanding voices, its capacity for criticism, and its authenticity.

At the urging of a number of civic groups, President Băsescu did initiate the action of the Romanian Parliament to condemn the communist regime as criminal. But he and the parliament rejected the adoption of any legal consequences resulting from such a condemnation. There was no real lustration and a serious limitation was placed on the restitution of confiscated properties. The reparations for persons and groups who suffered communist repressions proved ridiculously modest when compared to the substantial pensions of their former perpetrators.

President Băsescu’s authoritarian administration moved the ideal of achieving a pluralist democracy with respect for human rights farther away than ever. Fundamental rights and freedoms of Romanian citizens came

under constant pressure from state institutions, with very little free media to speak of. Professional advancement was again achieved mainly through party affiliation and loyalty. A high level of corruption undermined the very basis for a free economy. And the dominant Orthodox Church and the public education system both undertook to inculcate values of nationalism, religious intolerance, and antipathy to liberal democracy. During this period, Romania had one of the highest percentages of complaints addressed to the Strasbourg-based European Human Rights Court, mostly involving the violation of property rights, access to a fair trial, and the right to freedom and security. Active Watch, a human rights NGO, reported growing political pressure on the media, as well as cases of internal censorship at state-owned TV and radio companies and direct attacks by political leaders against journalists. Having no inhibitions, former Securitate officials turned media tycoons used their private television stations to undermine trust in democratic institutions, courts, and democratic civic NGOs.

A fair analysis of Bănescu's ten years would also note some positive achievements: a consolidation of Romania's position as a loyal strategic partner in the Transatlantic Alliance; increased access to public information and Securitate files (except for cases related to priests of the Orthodox Church); and greater autonomy of the judicial system that resulted in the conviction and punishment of high officials for corruption and administrative abuses (these included the former Prime Minister Adrian Năstase, the media mogul Dan Voiculescu, and a number of members of Parliament, ministers, prefects, County Council presidents, and mayors).

### **Where Did Civil Society Go?**

Civil society's massive regression began with the disappointing experience of the failure of the first non-communist administration. It led some civic leaders to adopt a pragmatic position of supporting "repenting" former communists compared to Ion Iliescu's more regressive party. They believed these insincerely converted former communists would adopt genuine democratic behavior and values. This belief turned out to be mistaken.

Another mistake of many civic groups was that they oriented themselves towards political elites and lost their connections with society. Their focus and energy went to influencing high ranking politicians and not maintaining contact with citizens. As a result, they lost their function as being a voice for the people; they lost their representational legitimacy.

But another explanation for civil society's regression was the basic need to survive in conditions of progressively decreasing resources for pro-democracy civic groups. From their beginning, these groups had to find foreign donors to support their activity. National ministries and local

governments in Romania were not and are not willing to finance outspoken groups. Until Romania's accession to the European Union in January 2007, civic groups had access to decent financing from Western governments, institutions, and foundations. After the EU accession (and even before), the majority of these donors left Romania and local civic groups had to reorient toward the EU's highly rigid financing mechanisms.

Theoretically, the funds available for civil society in EU member states are huge and cover all sectors of civic interest. But the priorities and the procedures for such funding are formulated without consulting civil society in any given country and are set by Brussels, usually for short-term, single-year, and faddish themes and goals. Another limitation lies in the general obligation for the applicants to add 20 percent of their own funding as a contribution. Often, beneficiaries have to cover up to 50 percent of the costs in advance and are reimbursed only after six months (in the best case). In addition, because of the large amounts of public money involved, transparency and anti-corruption mechanisms have created an extraordinary level of bureaucratic rules and limitations.

The financing philosophy and procedures of the European Union have produced harmful consequences. GONGOs and business-oriented NGOs are the ones generally with the capacity to deal with such bureaucratic requirements and thus attract and receive EU funds. Those more pro-democratic civic NGOs that implement EU-financed projects spend most of their energy in administration and lose the very reason and goals of their initiatives. The EU Commission exercises severe control over the content of the projects. In effect, genuine civic initiatives are discouraged.

There are free and independent civic groups that continue to be active and to fulfill their mission. I am proud to represent here Liga Pro Europa, one of Romania's most respected civic associations. Founded by twenty-one Transylvanian intellectuals opposing the communist dictatorship, Liga Pro Europa played an important regional role in the transition process from communism to pluralist democracy. We were very active in combating nationalist manipulations used by the former communist secret service to keep their influence. Liga Pro Europa carried out projects supporting the restitution of properties confiscated by the communist regime and providing moral and material reparations to political prisoners and other victims. We participated in all civic movements aimed at preventing the communists' return to power and disclosed their scenarios for promoting divisions within our fragile democracy. Liga Pro Europa has also been a strong civic mediator in the historical reconciliation of Romanian and Hungarian communities and in combating all forms of ethnic, linguistic and religious discrimination. At the core of our activities has been education for democracy and respect for human rights and the rule of law.

In its twenty-five years of activity, Liga Pro Europa has trained hundreds of young civic leaders and published dozens of booklets disseminating ideas of civic courage and commitment. Summer camps, civic advocacy campaigns, local grass roots activities, as well as national and international seminars and conferences made a consistent contribution to the empowerment of civil society in Romania. As part of the Centers for Pluralism network, Liga Pro Europa participated in fact finding missions, election monitoring, human rights protests, and advocacy campaigns. It also contributed to and benefited from the permanent exchange of experience, mutual support, solidarity and protection of civic groups and individuals from the post-communist and post-Soviet countries.

Similarly to other civic groups in Romania and the region, however, Liga Pro Europa faces today serious challenges due to the fragility of financing and lack of resources. Paradoxically, just as tensions in the region are rising due to attempts of the Russian Federation to destabilize the new democracies and when there is a growing rejection of liberal values in our countries, the very existence of the most important pro-democracy civic groups in the region is in doubt.

The new generation of civic leaders is mostly pragmatic and is ignorant of or uninterested in history and is generally submissive to the priorities of funders and governments. Civil society in the region needs a window of opportunity for transferring the values of civic activism from the old to the new generations. The unfinished business from 1989 requires new strategies of civic empowerment and the recognition of the fact that funds cannot replace commitment and ideas.

We in the region all run the risk of having democracies without democrats in our countries. It is a very dangerous prospect. It is the antechamber of arbitrary government and authoritarianism.

### **A Positive Postscript, January 2015**

Since giving this paper at the seminar in Warsaw, there have been more positive developments. Happily, civil society has a great capacity of regeneration. The more severe the pressure, the stronger, perhaps, is the reaction. The seeds of twenty-five years of civic and democratic values have begun to germinate. A new generation of civic leaders is emerging with less iconic profiles than the heroes of the dissident times or initial transition period but with much larger outreach to the younger generation. Using social media, this new civil society contributed to a large extent to the unprecedented victory of an outsider in the presidential elections of November 16, 2014.

For the first time, Romania's elected president is a non-ethnic Romanian. Klaus Werner Iohannis is a Lutheran belonging to the small community of Transylvanian Saxons, a clear contrast to the Orthodox majority. Also, until recently, he was absent from national politics; his popularity is due less to a political orientation or ideology than to the good and proper management of Sibiu, a medium size Transylvanian city. Under Iohannis's leadership as the elected mayor of Sibiu for 12 years, the city achieved a remarkable economic development and became a European cultural capital and tourist attraction.

But the victory of Iohannis over the socialist Prime Minister Victor Ponta, who had strong support of the SDP-led coalition and nearly unlimited resources, was not due simply to his personal merits. The real reason of his victory was the huge public indignation of Romanians living abroad who were prevented from voting in the first round. Prime Minister Ponta, fearing the vote of hundreds of thousands of mostly younger Romanian voters working abroad in consolidated democracies, instructed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Romanian Embassies to limit the number of voting stations abroad to prevent a large diaspora vote. Many Romanians were unable to vote after queueing long hours in front of the embassies and consular offices. They started to protest using slogans of the anti-communist students' protests from Bucharest University Square in June 1990.

Romanian and foreign analysts were surprised by this civic mobilization, a result of public outrage and indignation at this blatant violation of the fundamental constitutional right to vote. It seemed to contradict dominant nationalist and religious fundamentalist trends until now. In my view, however, this "voting revolution" proved that Romanian civic groups have succeeded in changing public mentalities and empowering our fellow citizens to stand up for their rights.

A wave of optimism now animates Romania. The last opinion polls show astonishing shifts in public perception. Suddenly, the majority of Romanians expressed their trust in the country's direction and in its public institutions. The percentage expressing trust in the elected President is the highest in polling history. Civil society seems to be reaching out to citizens, as it did in the early nineties. It is too early to draw conclusions about the new civil society. Its mobilizing efficiency is impressive, but its agenda and values are less strategic and clear. The task in the next years is to combine the skills of the new generation of civic leaders with a renewed sense of social responsibility, democratic solidarity and historical memory.