



THE 8<sup>TH</sup> EDITION OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE  
EUROPEAN INTEGRATION  
REALITIES AND PERSPECTIVES

**Romania in the Process of Democratic Consolidation.  
The Impact of the Electoral System**

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**Abstract:** After the fall of communism and the transition to a democratic regime and after more than 6 years from accession to European Union, Romania recorded a decline of democratic consolidation process according to the latest reports of Freedom House called „Nations in Transition”. The present paper aims to analyze the relation between the change of the electoral system in Romania and the decreased quality of democratic governance. The data used for this paper were collected from Freedom House reports ( „Nations in Transition”- 2007 -2010) and the methods of investigation are case study and comparative analysis of the data. The paper reveals that, despite the fact that Romania changed the electoral system, the legislators were elected in single-unit constituencies on the basis of a mixed electoral system, no progress has been made in process of democratic consolidation. Moreover, the score of the electoral process caused the degradation of Romania's rating. As a conclusion, the Romania's EU accession and the change of the electoral system are not sufficient premises for completing the process of democratic consolidation in Romania.

**Keywords:** electoral process; democracy; uninominal voting system; Freedom House

## **1. Introduction**

After the fall of communism in Central and East Europe, the concept of democracy came strongly on the political scene, because appears the need to justify democracy as the best form of organizing the political life.

To accomplish this task of defining democracy we'll use Tilly' s work, one of the most prolific theorist of democracy, who says that there are four major types of definitions: constitutional, noun, procedural and process-oriented (Tilly, 2007, p. 21).

In our paper, we will focus on procedural approach. Thus, according to the procedural approach, a regime is qualified as democratic or not after a series of government practices. Most followers of this approach are looking to elections and are interested if the competitive racing performed between as many citizens as possible, produced, as usual, changes in the policies and the governmental staff. This procedure is done only when elections produce significant changes in government.

Among the procedural indicators of democracy are referendum, recount, petitions and polls. Taking into account the criterion of elections, we can define a democracy that fulfills all the above criteria as an electoral democracy (Tilly, 2007, p. 22).

In an attempt to find a country as electoral democracy or not, Freedom House has identified a number of procedural elements:(1) a multiparty system and open competition; (2) universal suffrage for all

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citizens (except citizens of certain countries that criticize the right to vote because they have serious criminal history); (3) regular general elections, held under maximum security without massive fraud that lead to unrepresentative results for the population; (4) public access for political parties to voters through media campaigns and open electoral campaigns (Tilly, 2007, p. 22).

## **2. Some Characteristics of a Functional Democracy**

The largest theoretical confrontations occur when democracy must be quantified, or in other words, to measure the performance of democracy as a political system. Political theory approaches abound on the elements that should be considered when it is tried to measure the functionality of a democracy.

For example, Sartori refers to Philippe Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl who believe that in order to measure the effectiveness of a democracy must be taken into account the difference between the concepts, democratic procedures and operating principles (Sartori, 2002, p. 21). At a conceptual level, the most important feature of a functional democracy is the existence of general categories of people who can control and can make governments responsible for their political decisions. So, concepts as leaders, public space, citizens as electors, elections are very specific to democracy as a political system.

In a democracy, leaders must be people who are in specialized positions from which to derive their legitimacy character in relation to the masses of citizens they represent at the political levels (Schmitter, Lynn Karl, 1991, p. 76).

What distinguishes democracy from other forms of political organization is the way these leaders come to power and how they exercise their mandate given by citizens. So they come to power through free elections and exercise their mandate on the principles of transparency and free competition, can be replaced in the next term if people they represent want it.

Public space is the place where are built and implemented rules and institutions of democracy. What is specific to this public space is the dialogue, plurality of views, tolerance of divergent views and the ability to compromise (Schmitter, Lynn Karl, 1991, p. 77).

Elections are the most clearly political competition to highlight the factions within a democracy. The mere presence of elections is an indication that we stand in a democracy.

The concept of citizenship is central in the analysis made by Schmitter and Lynn Karl because only the presence of this concept makes a political system to be democratic or not (Schmitter, Lynn Karl, 1991, p. 77). Citizenship itself is a product of contemporary democracies because, over time, most political restrictions were imposed to citizenship (by gender, social class, income, religion, race, etc). In contemporary democracies there is no restriction on the rights of a citizen, so this concept is an intrinsic notion of democracy.

The democratic procedures are considered by the two authors as indispensable for the persistence of democracy as a political regime but the mere existence of people who vote (electors) are not sufficient to perpetuate democracy from one election to another. The democratic procedures to which the two make references are the same used by Robert Dahl: elected representatives, free fair and regular elections, freedom of expression, alternative sources of information, freedom of association and the right of eligibility (Dahl, 1989, p. 19).

Other political theories measure the degree of a functional democracy in relation with the existence of a well-structured party system, a system able to perform effectively their democratic functions

(Sartori, 1999, p. 148). The party system stability in a democracy is another element to quantify the degree to which that democracy works.

Any comparison between western democracies and the recent Central Europe and Eastern Europe democracies must take into account the party system variable. Thus, the major difference resulting from such a comparison is that western democracies have highly cohesive party systems to perform their duties and allow democratic rotation of power from one election to another.

In contrast, recent democracies of central and eastern Europe have fragile political systems, consisting of traditional parties (those that existed in the interwar period and were outlawed by the communists) and new parties (which claim to represent interests of certain social groups who need political representation in order to promote their rights and interests). These party systems are characterized by political instability, the inconsistency of decision-making and lack of social legitimacy. For these reasons, some of them disappear from a parliamentary mandate to another or fail to effectively promote their electoral platform so as to meet the threshold and to remain part of the legislation.

Also, another element of a functional democracy is the quality of political parliamentary élites that are the product of electoral system. Thus, the question that arises and we are trying to answer, taking into account the constraints of an article, is whether the change the electoral system in Romania leads to more efficient élites that contribute in improving the quality of democracy and its consolidation.

To sum up, we can say that there is a direct proportional relationship between the functioning of a party system and an electoral system in a democracy and the efficiency of that democracy and of democratic consolidation.

From the multitude of elements that measure the degree of functionality of a democracy we will stop, below, at the electoral process.

### **3. The Relation between the Electoral System and the Democratic Consolidation. The Case of Romania**

For technical reasons, we divided the present study in two parts: in the first part we made a comparative analysis of the perceptions of the political parliamentary élites on the change of the electoral system in Romania and in the second part, based on the reports of Freedom House, “Nations in Transit” (NIT), we analyze the variable “Electoral Process”, for Romania, from 2007 to 2010.

#### **3.1 The Perceptions of the Political Parliamentary Elites on the Change of the Electoral System in Romania and Its Effects on the Democratic Consolidation. A Comparative Approach**

As we have shown, the aim of this paper is to analyze how the change of electoral system influences the functioning and the consolidation of a democracy starting from the fact that, in 2008, Romania went through a process of electoral change.

In terms of social representations, the “uninominal” vote system was invested in the Romanian society, with a central quality: it is a much more direct link established between electors and elected, reducing the distance between them. Its introduction was seen as a panacea to the crisis of social representativeness of the political class. This social perception was based on the belief that individual choice will lead to an increased quality of Romanian Parliament’s elected members and to their

responsibility to voters, and the great stake was that changing the electoral system could generate a better democracy.

The sociological investigation made in the Romanian Parliament, at the Chamber of Deputies, at two different times showed the opposite: vote *per se* does not alter the structure of parliamentary élites, does not produce better élites and thus does not increase the quality of democracy. The purpose of sociological survey was to measure the perceptions of the parliamentary élites upon some certain issues and, especially, on the electoral process, on the „uninominal” vote, and the way it was expected to enhance the quality of democracy and its effects in the consolidating of democracy.

These results are part from a greater research that took place at the Chamber of Deputies in two different chronological and political moments<sup>1</sup>. The first chronological moment was in October 2008 and the second was in November 2009. The political moments are given by the presence of two different types of electoral systems. In the first research, the political élites analyzed belonged to a parliament elected by a proportional representation system (PR) on closed lists, and in the second, the elections took place by „uninominal” system. The methods of investigation are case study and comparative analysis of the data based on the research. This is why in our questionnaires we projected the design of questions able to produce information about what élites believe and what are their perceptions.

X1. After the election from 2008, what do you think about the direction the country is going to? A comparison between élites perceptions (2004 - 2008 and 2008-2012)

	2004- 2008	2008 - 2012	
Good	<u>60</u>	<u>52</u>	↘
Wrong	25	45	↗
I do not know	12	2	↘
I do not answer	3	1	↘
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	

X2. Do you think the uninominal system will have a decisive influence on the direction the country is going to? A comparison between élites perceptions (2004 - 2008 and 2008-2012)

	2004- 2008	2008 - 2012	
Yes	<u>51</u>	48	↘
No	46	<u>52</u>	↗
I do not know	2	0	↘
I do not answer	1	0	↘
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	

<sup>1</sup>Two questionnaires were applied to the population of deputies, belonging to the legislature 2004 -2008 and 2008 - 2012, and two types of groupings were built. The first grouping included 57 deputies and the second one 62. For the two groupings we used a simple, ransom and crossed procedure on layers.

As we can see, X1 and X2 tables show that in both legislatures, the old and the new élites there are two hard cores of members of parliament (46% and 52%) who not considered that changing of the voting system will decisively influence the direction the country goes (Table X2). In other words, although they were chosen based on different systems, perceptions about the impact of electoral system on the direction of development of the country are similar. These results raise a major question: what was the real motivation under which Romania has made the transition from one system to another?

V1. Which of the following statements you agree?

	2004- 2008	2008 - 2012	
The uninominal system promotes better deputies	54%	<u>77%</u>	↗
The uninominal system promotes worse deputies	<u>46%</u>	23%	↘

The answers are logic because every governance considers itself to be better than the previous one. The problem that we identify in this situation is: if the value of the current élites is higher than the other élites, why persists the general opinion that the country is going in the wrong direction? The economic crisis could be responsible for the direction taken by a state, or the political class and its ability in management problems facing Romania?

V2. Which of the following statements you agree?

	2004- 2008	2008 - 2012	
The uninominal system promotes only candidates with a lot of money for the campaign	<u>44%</u>	31%	↘
The uninominal system promotes only candidates with high visibility (well known by the people)	56%	<u>69%</u>	↗

The success formula in order to become member of the Legislative is not the electoral system but a combination between financial resources (intensively used during campaign) and high public visibility.


V3. Which of the following statements you agree?

	2004- 2008	2008 - 2012	
The uninominal system brings advantages for the candidates of the political parties	<u>93%</u>	83%	↘
The uninominal system offers equal opportunities for all	7%	<u>17%</u>	↗

Belonging to a political party is the best way to have access in Parliament, so the idea that the uninominal system promotes independent candidates is infirmed. As a remark, the figures are significant.

V4. Which of the following statements you agree?

	2004- 2008	2008 - 2012	
In the uninominal system the citizens' interests are better represented	60%	<u>66%</u>	↗

In the uninominal system the citizens' interests are represented in the same way like in PR system	<b>40%</b>	34%	
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The members of both the legislatures consider that citizens' interests do not depend on the electoral system.

V5. Which of the following statements you agree?

	Yes	No	Parliamentary élites
In the next Parliament* there will be more transparency	<b>53%</b>	40%	2004- 2008
In the present Parliament* exists more transparency	<b>58%</b>	40%	2008 - 2012
<i>*Its about the legislature 2008 – 2012</i>			

The political transparency is not a chapter that should stay under incidence of the voting system, but a value guaranteed by law and all parliaments of a democratic state (regardless of the electoral procedure on which is constituted) should respect and implement it. The deputies who replied to this question betrayed the political values on which they build their careers.

V6. Which of the following statements you agree?

	Yes	No	Parliamentary élites
In the next Parliament*, members will give the country better laws	<b>46%</b>	44%	2004- 2008
In the present Parliament* members give the country better laws	31%	<b>60%</b>	2008 - 2012
<i>*Its about the legislature 2008 – 2012</i>			

Table V6 reaffirms the idea that the parliamentary élites resulting from the “uninominal” vote are less responsible about mission that has drawn in the Constitution - that of legislative process and of pass laws. Since they believe that they will not legislate better, then, consequently, that other political bodies are responsible for political decisions in Romania. What kind of democracy could be in Romania, if the parliamentarians themselves consider to have a role of consultation and decorative.

V7. Which of the following statements you agree?

	Yes	No	Parliamentary élites
Using the uninominal system, people will have more trust in Parliament	46%	<u>49%</u>	2004- 2008
Using the uninominal system, people has more trust in Parliament	42%	<u>50%</u>	2008 - 2012

Parliamentary political élites perceptions of the degree of trust that citizens have in the institution of Parliament remain unchanged from a legislature to another and from a system of vote to another. Any other element than the system of vote – political behavior, values expressed, laws passed, etc, will affect the confidence of citizens in Parliament

### 3.2 The Freedom House Reports on Romania and the Evaluation of the Electoral Process

To quantify the functionality of the Romanian democracy, taking into account the variable “Electoral Process” we used the annual reviews conducted by Freedom House, entitled “Nations in Transit”.<sup>1</sup> We believe that the variables used in Freedom House's annual surveys (including the electoral process) cover the economic, social, legal and political democracy. “Nations in Transit” is a comparative and multidimensional study about the reforms made by former communist countries from Europe and Eurasia<sup>2</sup>.

This study keeps track of reforms made by 29 states and the data are collected from the first day of January of the year and ending with the last day of December of the same year. Methodology for achieving these studies is: Freedom House has built a grid of analysis that allows experts in each country monitored to fill easily the available information, taking into account seven broad categories. These categories are: electoral process, civil society, independent media, democratic governance, judicial independence, corruption and democracy. Each state which is subject to Freedom House analysis has a number of accredited experts that collect data, analyze them and send them forth as the annual study released by the organization.

Data collection is done through a process of close monitoring of all political, social, economic and legal events that happens during a year in each of these 29 states. Numerical scores is given for each indicator which are numbers from one to seven, one being the best score and seven being the worst and representing the lowest democratic progress being made by a state<sup>3</sup>. Since 2008, Romania adopted a new system of vote; the analysis of Romania's democratization process is made according to data

<sup>1</sup>[http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?search=Nations+in+transitions&submit\\_search=Search&page=287](http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?search=Nations+in+transitions&submit_search=Search&page=287) Accessed 10 February 2011. Freedom House was created in 1941 by several personalities, including Eleanor Roosevelt. Freedom House has offices in Washington D. C. and New York and offices in Bucharest, Budapest, Kiev, Warsaw and Belgrade.

<sup>2</sup> Since 1980, published an annual review of these indicators.

<sup>3</sup> The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s). The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. “Nations in Transit” is an independent study whose methodology has its origins in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its indicators are standards of democratic transatlantic governance.

from Freedom House and will consider the last four reports using the variable “Electoral Process” in a comparative analysis: 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010 (see table no.1).

Freedom House report for 2007 placed Romania among the states politically unstable. Indicators which show that Romania recorded a major decline compared to 2006 are: justice, national government, civil society and independent media.

In 2007, Romania held its first European Parliament elections and two referenda, one for the impeachment of the president and another for the change of the voting system. All ballots were surrounded by important legal battles for influence, but once the rules of the game had been settled by the Constitutional Court, which played a major referee role in 2007, no irregularities were reported on voting days. At the “Electoral Process”, Romania recorded, in 2007, in comparison with 2006, a flat score value of 2.75.

**Table 1. Romania Coverage under Freedom House**

<b>NIT Ratings</b>	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
<b>Democracy Score</b>	<b>3.39</b>	<b>3.29</b>	<b>3.36</b>	<b>3.36</b>	<b>3.46</b>
<b>National Democratic Governance</b>	<b>3.50</b>	<b>3.50</b>	<b>3.75</b>	<b>3.75</b>	<b>4.00</b>
<b>Electoral Process</b>	<b>2.75</b>	<b>2.75</b>	<b>2.75</b>	<b>2.50</b>	<b>2.75</b>
Civil Society	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.50	2.50
Independent Media	4.00	3.75	3.75	3.75	4.00
Local Democratic Governance	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00
Judicial Framework and Independence	4.00	3.75	4.00	4.00	4.00
Corruption	4.25	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00

In the analysis for 2008, Romania has revealed two negative indicators: corruption and judicial independence, gaining note 4.00. In comparison with the others indicators, the only thing better rated is “Electoral Process” at 2.75, the same value like in 2007. Regarding the indicator “Democracy”, Romania has not made any progress compared to 2007, the score being 3.36.

In Romania, a new electoral system was tested in local and legislative elections in 2008. The introduction of single unit constituencies brought about some gerrymandering, but otherwise elections were held without major incidents. Although the results were close, there were no attempts to manipulate the election outcomes, and a new government coalition was formed with relative ease. (NIT, 2010, p. 410) The only category in the 2008 report where Romania has made progress is the “Electoral Process”. According to report in 2008, the situation has improved very little and the electoral process rating improves from 2.75 to 2.50. The new electoral system produced a notable development, and local institutions have spent funds on a discretionary basis (NIT, 2010, p. 411).

Thus, data for 2008 Freedom House report, does not show any improvement of the process of democratic consolidation as a result of changing the electoral system. According to Freedom House, democracy score shows a half- consolidated democracy Romania and the country still ranks tenth in the 29 countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans and Eurasia that were monitored by Freedom House in 2008. Romania is in the same category with Croatia (3.71), Serbia (3.79), Montenegro (3.79), Albania (3.82) and Macedonia (3.86). The best score of the 29 countries, have Slovenia and Estonia, both gaining 1.93, and are classified as top of democracies. Six other countries



have managed to reach into this category: Latvia (2.18), Czech Republic (2.18), Poland (2.25), Hungary (2.29), Lithuania (2.29) and Slovakia (2, 46).

Following analysis of the seven indicators, Freedom House shows that the rating obtained by Romania, in 2009, fell, and the Romanian state has made no progress in any of these points. According to the report for 2010, Romania's rating in terms of "Democratic Governance" has deteriorated from 3.75 to 4.00. "Electoral Process" recorded a rating down from 2.50 to 2.75, because of fraud, manipulation, subjective media coverage and poor election management (NIT, 2010, p. 417). "Along with a record low voter turnout, there was serious evidence of fraud and manipulation in numerous polls. The Permanent Electoral Authority (AEP), a newly created independent institution which overviews the electoral process proved ineffective (NIT, 2010, p. 421).

#### **4. Conclusions**

Democracy cannot be addressed in the absence of real social relations. It is the product of a set of conditions, values and principles without which it can be analyzed and understood, such as: nature of social-political system (in this respect democracy, the most general sense, is a form of political organization, being, directly or indirectly, connected to political power), the material life and spiritual development, the ability of political forces to determine the democratic development of society, the consciousness and political culture.

We consider that the degree of the functionality of the Romanian democracy is closely linked to the political elite, the values and principles that it promotes and how these élites take the political decisions in this country. Thus, until we do not have European political élites by values and standards of governance, professionalized and responsible, Romanian democracy will not exceed the standard of half-consolidated and will continue to record very low grades indicators of democratization. In this respect, the series of reports Freedom House, "Nations in Transit", strengthen the main results provided by our research.

The idea that Romanian democracy is not working, is reiterated by the fact that the party system in Romania is not consolidated, political parties are characterized by political "migration" according to the name of the successful parliamentary elections, promoting the most visible figures in terms of media and financial power, political fluctuation period (a term presented in Parliament, and the next election no longer meet the threshold).

Starting from the idea that political parties are the main source of recruitment of political élites, we conclude that an atomized party system can only produce dysfunctional élites, interested only in political survival and in promoting their own interests. The lack of ideological affiliations and values and the lack of democratic political culture make the Romanian political élites a product of the electoral system, a negative indicator of the functioning of a democracy. Given all these factors, it appears that Romanian democracy has its own functioning coordination and is in a process of change led, on one hand, by the conditions and social values from inside and, on the other hand, by the recommendations and conditions imposed by the European Union.

The analysis that we performed on the functionality of a democracy indicators shows that, despite the electoral changes and conditions imposed by the EU, the Romanian democracy does not end the democratic consolidation process and only works at half of the potential of Western democracy. These conclusions are demonstrated by indicators that Romania experienced setbacks in the last three years: freedom of the press, the degree of activism of civil society, repeated violations of rights and liberties,

electoral fraud and corruption. All these elements make the Romanian democracy to remain at the bottom of the table made for European Union member states.

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