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The Effects of Economic Crisis and Austerity Measures on Political Culture in Romania

Toma Burean

Political Science Department,

Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj, Romania

burean@fspac.ro

Gabriel Badescu

Political Science Department,

Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj, Romania

Abstract *What are the effects of economic crisis on political attitudes in Romania? This paper analyzes the level of political trust, satisfaction with democracy and generalized trust (social trust) in Romania from 1990-2012. Following research done on Euro barometer data (Armingeon and Guthmann 2012) we asserted that the economic crisis led to a decline of political trust and satisfaction with democracy. Next we hypothesized that the perceptions of individual living conditions will have a positive effect on political attitudes at the expense of perception of the national economy, political factors or sociodemographics. We used surveys from the Romanian Opinion Barometers and Romanian Electoral Data online platform from 1990 until 2012. We find remarkable stability on all political attitudes during the crisis. Satisfaction with democracy, political trust and social trust are low independent of the period of economic crisis. Perceptions of the economy overweigh political factors and sociodemographics during the crisis. Perception of present living conditions and perception of the future of the national economy are variables that impact political trust and satisfaction with democracy.*

INTRODUCTION

Did the economic crisis since 2007 has an impact on political culture of new democracies like Romania? The paper relies on the assumption that political culture matters in sustaining stable democratic institutions, an idea that had great impact since the 1960s and 1970s, following the publication of Almond and Verba's *The Civic Culture* (1963).

We have reliable evidence that the current economic crisis has had a significant effect on political attitudes across a large variety of countries (Friedrichsen and Zahn, 2010). Electoral processes in 30 European countries since 2008 confirm the assertion of the literature on economic voting that incumbents are voted out in elections in times of economic recession. In countries with more than one electoral process since 2008 and an acute economic decline, the voters tended to choose outside of main parties, including radical, "anti-parties" or to abstain (Kriesi 2012). Additionally, Lindvall (2012) found, based on data for 20 democracies in the 1930s and 2000s, that the political right fares relatively well during the first phase of a crisis (up to three years after the start of the crisis) but that in a second phase the left begins to significantly benefit from sharp economic downturns.

Romania is one of the countries that benefited from the IMF loans in exchange of radical austerity measures (Stoiciu 2012). In 2009, wages in the Romanian public sector were decreased by 25% and the VAT tax increased from 19% to 24%, raising suspicions that the IMF was experimenting with this country on the limits of austerity budgeting (Ban, 2012). Since the beginning of the economic crisis Romania witnessed the rise of a populist party (PPDD) led by Dan Diaconescu, the owner of a private TV station. His party won a surprising 13% at the 2012 parliamentary elections and entered the parliament.

At the same time, Romania is generally considered one of the new EU members with slower democratic consolidation. One possible reason can be derived from the EU enlargement process to which it was part. It is true that the comprehensive requirements that aspiring members had to satisfy have resulted in higher popular control over decision-making and political equality, by developing a framework of equal rights, and strengthening institutions of representative, open and accountable government (e.g. Vachudova 2005). However, several authors assert that the political culture of these countries has been negatively influenced by the EU integration process. One such side effect, impacting especially South-Eastern Europe countries like Romania and Bulgaria, resulted from the fact that reforms in these countries depend for their success on a stable policy consensus even if these reforms transform and polarize society (Krastev 2002). The stability of governmental policies has been ensured largely by international community pressure, which was aimed at arresting the extraction project of the elites (Zielonka 2001). Since these elites have learned to cite such external pressures as excuses for their own refusal to take responsibility for the welfare of ordinary citizens, external conditionalities worsen relations between politicians and the public. In Ivan Krastev words, "Governments get elected by making love to the electorate, but they are married to the international donors." (Krastev 2002: 51). As a consequence, it has been more difficult to hold politicians accountable, and political learning has become less effective than in those former communist countries where the international community pressure has been less conspicuous.

This paper evaluates empirically the effect of economic crisis on several components of political culture: institutional and generalized trust, and democratic support. We rely on a series of representative surveys of the Romanian public that allow us to distinguish between short term changes in political attitudes and behaviors and more stable and profound ones, which could have a long lasting effect on the political culture and, as a result, on the quality of democracy in this country.

POLITICAL CULTURE AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION

The studies that looked at political support focused on their relationship with the functioning of democratic systems (Mishler and Rose 1995, Putnam 1993). Trust is considered as essential for the functioning of democracy (Fukuyama 1995, Sztompka, 1997, Ross and Escobar-Lemmon, 2009). Some found that institutional trust is considered to be beneficial to democratic consolidation (Mihaylova, 2004) while generalized trust is a resource for economic growth since it reduces transaction costs (Stulhofer, 2001, Raiser 2001). Trust allows politicians in democracies to take unpopular measures necessary for economic reform especially during crisis (Mishler and Rose, 1995). There is a stream of research that focuses on transitional countries in Eastern Europe that is concerned with studying trust as a dependent variable that is influenced by institutional and cultural legacies (Mihaylova, 2004). They start with the idea that socialism destroyed any form of generalized social trust. Nichols (1996) argues that communist societies such as Russia the spontaneous associations of citizens were replaced by forced associations. In Russia the link between social trust and rejecting democratic alternatives is ambiguous (Rose and Weller, 2001) and minimal at best. The literature that focuses on legacies of socialism claims that the previous system brought distrust and disruption of social ties (Seligman 1992, Mihaylova, 2004). The evidence lies in surveys that reveal the high number of citizens in post-communist countries displaying individualistic attributes (Haerpfer and Rose, 1994).

A lack of confidence in institutions and low levels of social trust characterized many transitional democracies in former communist countries suggesting that this is detrimental to democracy (Mateju, 2002). Communism legitimized a “primitive” type of social capital that is clan and family based and reinforced distrust in official networks (Holland 1998). Others however claim that socialism did not have any effect on the levels of trust in post -communist democracies (Mishler and Rose 1995) and more satisfaction with government performance and prospect of economic

future matter to a greater extent. A few others support the “critical citizen” view claiming the people in post-communist democracies have higher levels of social trust than it seems (Mishler and Rose, 1995 or Kolankiewicz, 1996). Later research on youth political trust in several East European societies shows that at the individual level the legacies of socialism are useful in explaining levels of political trust (Dimitrova-Grajzl and Simon, 2010) at young people. It is expected that in Romania the levels of institutional trust and generalized trust to be low. We treat institutional trust, generalized trust and satisfaction with democracy as dependent variables. The following sections will expand on these three concepts.

SATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY AND INSTITUTIONAL TRUST

Satisfaction with democracy has been shown to be a central part of the broader concept of regime support. Pippa Norris (1999) identified five levels of political support: political community, regime principles, regime performance, regime institutions and regime actors. Satisfaction with how democracy performs in one country fits in the third level of political support. Most often the concept is measured thorough the question: “On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in your country?”.

The concept received a lot of attention in transitology (Waldron-Moore, 1999, Kornberg and Clarke, 1994, Jonas and Ekman 2005, Torkal 2003, Klingemann 2013, Evans and Whitefield 1995). It is considered important for citizens to be satisfied with democracy because it is viewed as a dimension of political support (Almond and Verba 1963, Easton 1965, 1975). It is linked to support of regime principles but not dependent on it. In Eastern Europe there was considerable evidence that citizens offer support for democracy (Evan and Whitefield 1995, McDonough 1995, Mishler and Rose 1995).

Presently data shows that political support most often measured through trust in institutions and satisfaction with democracy remains stable (Norris

2011). There are countries like Portugal or Spain where satisfaction with democracy is at around 36% or Netherlands (80%) and Denmark (96%) where the levels are high. The average level of satisfaction with democracy in Europe is at 66 % (Norris, 2011). Regime support, *diffuse or specific* (Easton, 1965, 1975) operates at five levels. The first is support offered by citizens as a political community (Norris, 1999). The second level refers to support for democracy as a form of government. The third level where satisfaction with democracy is included refers to evaluations of the way democracy performs as a regime. The fourth level refers to support for government and parliament and this is where political trust in institutions is included. The fifth level refers to support for politicians. We focus on the third and the fourth level of support. Although less important than the first and second levels these dimensions tend to vary more than the other levels of support. We attempt to track these variations by comparing the period of economic crisis in Romania with periods of economic growth.

Eastern European countries were rated as high supporters of democracy in the beginning of 90ies (Mishler and Rose, 1997). The support for democracy and its ideals is shared by consolidated democracies in Western Europe (Anderson and Guillory, 1997). However after the fall of communism the decline of satisfaction with democracy was observed (Anderson and Guillory, 1997) in Western Europe.

Low level of support for democracy is considered dangerous to democracies (Lipset, 1959, and Powell, 1986). The poor performance of institutions was often linked to support for the system. Others referred to satisfaction of democracy as a measuring tool of how the regime actually works and not a measurement of the ideal principles of democracies (Linde and Ekman, 2003) thus the danger is not imminent. There is the danger of confusing the second level of support for democratic principles with the third level which refers to performance evaluations.

Institutional trust is a process of evaluation of institutions 'performance and a comparison between what is expected from an institution and what are its outcomes (Easton 1965, Citrin 1974). It is a specific type of trust on contrast to general evaluations of the entire political system (Iyengar 1980). There are two important approaches in studying trust in institutions. Trustworthy institutions are built through the assistance of networks of voluntary associations. These associations have the function of breeding political institutions that are trusted by citizens (Tocqueville 1863, Putnam 1993). The second approach focuses on institutions as producers of trust (Berman 1997, Tarrow 1996, Kumlin and Rothstein 2005) in which the formation of trust is linked to political context. Institutional trust is built upon the performance of institutions. If rules are respected and are predictable then trust in institutions is increased. This approach looks at trust as an outcome of the performance of the political system.

Researchers distinguish between types of institutions that citizen trust. Political trust includes trust in government (Carnes, 2003, Hetherington 1998), political parties, representative assemblies and the president. It excludes trust in police and army (Rothstein and Stolle, 2008) which are considered to be impartial institutions not concerned with the *implementational* side of politics. Political trust is important for democracies because it promotes stability and legitimacy for the system (Gamson, 1968). However declining trends in political trust indicate that democracies can function even with low levels of political trust. Recent critical approaches (Norris 1999, Rosanvallon 2008) view low levels of political trust as a sign that citizens are alert, they pay attention to how institutions function and are dissatisfied with their outcomes. They are "better citizens" in terms of being vigilant supervisors of how democratic institutions function. More recent work (Marien and Hooghe, 2010) relates low level of political trust to an inclination to support illegal behavior concluding that political trust infuses legitimacy of institutions and laws.

The following section reviews three categories of factors that were shown to have an effect on satisfaction with democracy and institutional trust: perceptions of the economy, political factors and socio-demographics.

Personal and national perceptions of the economy. One of the important tenets of how a political regime is evaluated is whether it produces favorable economic outcomes for its citizens. Support for political institutions and satisfaction for democracy are influenced by several determinants at the individual level. One of the most important ones is economic performance (Kotzian, 2010). Good economic performance of a regime ensures political support and legitimacy for that system and electoral support for the incumbents (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000, Criado and Herreros 2007). Institutional performance is very important in consolidated democracies. Confidence in institutions is affected by low economic performance, political scandals (Bowler and Karp, 2004) and wars or economic crisis and elections (Kaase 1988).

Perceptions on the state of national economy are considered influential on support of incumbents and of the regime and other political perceptions (Kiewiet, 1983, Kinder and Kiewiet, 1979, Duch, et al. 2000). It is not clear if economic dissatisfaction leads to regime failure or failure of the incumbents to win elections (Waldon-Moore 1999). There are studies that show that if a country permanently performs well then the regime receive specific support that transforms into diffuse support (Chu et al. 2008). Specific support however is more likely to fluctuate influenced by economic performance, scandals or economic crisis (Kotzian, 2010). There are examples of countries with defected democratic systems in which dissatisfaction lead to a slip into authoritarian rule (Rose and Shin, 2001; Welzel, 2007). *During economic crisis we expect a decrease of the level of democratic satisfaction and political trust during crisis.*

In Eastern European countries citizens' evaluations of the national economy are more important than real economic indicator when

evaluating the performance of governments (Tverdova, 2011). This distortion between objective economic indicators and perceptions of the national economy is systematic (Anderson, 2007, Johnston et al 2005). This is because of citizens' lack of capacity to acquire economic information. Sophisticated voters have more accurate information about the economy and have more accurate perceptions (Tverdova, 2011). Researchers distinguish economic perceptions of the national economy from the perceptions of the individual well-being the former being a stronger predictor of vote choice (Kinder and Kiewiet, 1979, 1981). During economic crisis the perceptions of the economy and real economic indicators may be even more distorted (Mutz 1992). Economic perceptions are considered strong predictors for political trust in several Asian countries (Won, Wang and Hsiao 2011). In Europe Mishler and Rose (2002) observe that the evaluations of political performance have a greater effect. Individual perceptions of the economy are especially important when governments' decisions affect directly the economic situation of individuals (Kramer, 1983). During economic crisis many of the decisions taken by governments affect the personal financial situations of individuals. In Romania the 30% wage cuts, and benefits cuts as well letting go 30% of the public workforce were direct actions never implemented during the transition to democracy. We take the theory of Kramer (1983) on the importance of individual perceptions on pocket voting when governments take decisions that directly affect citizens and use it to explain the importance of individual economic perceptions in explaining political attitudes of citizens during economic crisis. In 2011 several decisions that targeted the crisis had a direct effect of citizens' economic situation. That is why we expect the Kramers' theory would provide a satisfactory explanation for our hypothesis. The context of crisis obligated the Romanian government to impose decisions that were unpopular and with immediate economic consequences for citizens.

Following Kramers' (1983) finding on the prevalence of egocentric perceptions against sociotropic perception of the economy we *assert that*

during economic crisis the personal economic evaluations influence satisfaction with democracy and political trust to a greater extent.

We also hypothesize that during the crisis economic factors take precedence over political factors and sociodemographics in explaining political support.

In our paper we included national and individual perceptions of the economy as explanatory variables. In line with other research (Przeworski 1991, Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000) *we hypothesize that positive national perceptions of the economy positively affect satisfaction with democracy and political trust when the context of crisis is absent.*

Political Factors. Along with perceptions on the economy and personal economic well-being political factors can alter the attitudes citizens have on institutions. For example if a person has voted for the winner it is more likely that the government performance evaluations would be positive (Anderson et al. 2007). The identification with a party and a political ideology are important in evaluating how political institutions and the system works. Credit or blame is accorded to the system with the assistance of party preferences (Enns and Anderson 2009). The explanation for these distortions are offered by cognitive consistency theory (Festinger 1957)

That is why we include political factors such as preference for the governing party as having an effect on political trust. *We expect that during economic crisis citizens party preference for the governing party has a positive effect on political trust and satisfaction with democracy.*

In terms of ideology support for conservatives has a positive effect on political trust. The reformists tend to be more critical towards institutions and the political system in general (Rudolph and Evans, 2005). In Romania the socialist parties stand for more conservative views of the economy (Kitschelt, 1992). Yet unlike in the United States the socialists preserve pre democratic values compared to right wing parties. That is why we expect

an effect of support for the right wing parties to have positive effects on political trust and satisfaction with democracy.

Sociodemographics. *Education* can impact political trust (Nie et al 1996, Schlozman et al 2012). The highly educated are more tolerant and trust institutions. The information about the economy educated citizens process is less likely to be distorted.

Younger citizens in Western Europe are considered more critical than older generations (Dalton, 1988). In Romania they are also more likely to engage in protests (Burean and Badescu, 2013). Yet youth in Eastern Europe might be more enthusiastic about democracy than older generations (Waldron-Moore, 1999). We expect younger citizens to provide more support to democracy than older generations.

We expect women to be less supportive of democratic systems possibly because of the tendency in Eastern Europe of women to accept traditional roles (Waldron-Moore, 1999). Recent research shows that women may be more disaffected with a regime that fails to perform in terms of enforcing equality of opportunities (Burean and Badescu, 2013). Thus we expect women to be less satisfied with democracy than men. Citizens living in urban areas can be more dissatisfied with democracy and support less institutions. First in urban contexts citizens have more access to information about how the system functions. Secondly urban areas are more likely to engage in protests with rural areas being more passive and supportive of institutions. The protests that swept democracies in Western and Eastern Europe and U.S. were organized in urban areas.

In this paper we look at several political attitudes we suspect are influenced by perceptions of the economic crisis. We contend that economic factors will be stronger predictors than political factors or socio-demographics. *More precisely we assert that political trust and satisfaction with democracy are affected especially by individual perceptions on the economy and less by political and socio-demographic factors or partisan*

ideology. This result suggests that personal economic security affects support for political institutions and democracy during economic crisis.

GENERALIZED TRUST

Generalized trust, referred to by scholars as social trust, moral trust (Uslaner 2002), dispositional trust (Kramer, 1999), and trust propensity (Mayer et al., 1995), is analytically distinct from “knowledge-based trust,” which requires information about a person before we trust him or her (Yamagishi and Yamagishi, 1994). Moreover, there is wide acknowledgement that generalized trust matters most for “getting things done” since it spans the broadest reaches of the moral community, and as a result, is more relevant for overcoming collective action dilemmas (Uslaner 2002).

Measuring generalized trust is anything but straightforward. Survey-based studies of generalized trust normally use as their measurement instrument the question, “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?” Besides its conceptualization, the extent to which generalized trust is malleable continues to be debated (Nannestad 2008). Do we trust strangers based on, at least in part, our assessment of the people to whom and contexts to which we are exposed? Experiential theories, which emphasize how individual trust in the generalized other is formed by experiences in the environment, respond affirmatively (Dinesen, 2010; Glanville and Paxton, 2007). Alternatively, cultural theories posit generalized trust as a stable character trait formed early in life by cultural transmission and largely immune to later influences (Uslaner, 2002).

Cross-national and longitudinal data show that East European countries tend to have levels of generalized and institutional trust that are lower than the ones in the West and stable over time. Evidence suggests that legacies of the former regimes (Newton 1999; Uslaner 1999; Völker and Flap 2003)

and effects from the transition itself (Letki and Evans 2005; Muller and Seligson 1994) account for the poor starting position. Figure 1-3 illustrate the level of institutional trust in three political institutions between 1995 and 2012. Several authors found a similar difference between East and West in terms of generalized trust (Sik 2009).

Mishler & Rose (2001) find that institutional trust has only a small impact on generalized trust in postcommunist countries in Eastern Europe, while indicators of institutional performance are related to generalized trust. Letki & Evans (2005) confirm the latter result. Delhey & Newton (2005) find rather strong evidence for the effect of “good government” on levels of generalized trust, using a composite quality-of-government scale based on a rule-of-law index, a government efficiency index, a political stability index, a cumulated freedom score, and a law-and order index. Kumlin and Rothstein (2003) present empirical evidence from Sweden showing that contact with institutions of a universal welfare state tends to increase generalized trust, whereas experience with means-tested social programs tends to lead to lower trust levels. We expect that generalized trust to be altered by the economic crisis when institutional performance may be perceived by citizens as poor.

Research Design, Data and Methods

The main research question at hand is: What are the effects of economic crisis on political attitudes in a new democracy? Our statistical investigations will develop in two stages. The first stage consists of a survey of political support and social trust. In the second stage we show the statistical models that explain the variation of satisfaction with democracy and political trust in two periods in Romania. The first survey was applied in 2007 just before the economic crisis and the year when Romania joined the European Union. The second survey took place in November 2011. It was at the beginning of 2011 when president Basescu announced harsh economic measures that directly affected many citizens. The year was

marked by protests (Burean and Badescu 2013). At the beginning of 2012 larger scale protests emerged the resulted in February in the demise of the Boc government.

By surveying trends we will acquire a comprehensive understanding of the changes of political attitudes of citizens in Romania and follow what attitudes have suffered modifications. We measure political trust by trust in parliament, government, presidency, and parties. The analysis relies on the charts compiled by Claudiu Tufis (2013) which made use of national surveys performed in Romania from 1990 until 2012. Some choose only trust in government as a measurement of political support (Hetherington, 1998). The data we have allows us to include measurement of the political support of institutions that have functions of representation and are contested. We excluded trust in police, church, army since these are institutions that are less accountable (Rothstein and Stolle, 2008) and the source of the trust is different. For measuring satisfaction with democracy we chose the surveys compiled by the Romanian Electoral Data project that includes surveys on Romania from 1990-2011. We could not find surveys in each year from 1990 that contained the question on satisfaction with democracy. The surveys were „face to face” with numbers of respondents ranging from 1100 to 2000 respondents.

For social trust we could not track the changes of attitudes in time. Surveys include different questions at different points in time making comparison of trends impossible.

We selected two surveys in order to compare the statistical models that explain satisfaction with democracy and political trust before the crisis and during the crisis. The models have the following equations:

$$\begin{aligned} & b1x(\text{presentlivingconditions}) + \\ & b2x(\text{presenteconomicstatecomparedtolastyar}) + \\ & b3x(\text{futurepersonaleconomicprojection}) + b4x(\text{past} \end{aligned}$$

$\text{evolutionofnationaleconomy}) + b5x(\text{futureevolutionofnationaleconomy}) +$
 $b6x(\text{turnout}) + b7x(\text{governingpartysupporter}) + b8(\text{left-right}) +$
 $b9x(\text{education}) + b10x(\text{age}) + b11x(\text{residence}) + b12x(\text{sex}) + B =$
 satisfaction with democracy

$b1x(\text{presentlivingconditions}) +$
 $b2x(\text{presenteconomicstatecomparedtolastyar}) +$
 $b3x(\text{futurepersonaleconomicprojection}) + b4x(\text{past}$
 $\text{evolutionofnationaleconomy}) + b5x(\text{futureevolutionofnationaleconomy}) +$
 $b6x(\text{turnout}) + b7x(\text{governingpartysupporter}) + b8(\text{left-right}) +$
 $b9x(\text{education}) + b10x(\text{age}) + b11x(\text{residence}) + b12x(\text{sex}) + B =$ political
 trust

The separation of pre-crisis and crisis period is not uncommon. A study on the effects of the financial crisis on trust in European governments advocated for a separation and regression runs of the periods that would reveal the differences and the mechanisms that explain trust and avoid providing misleading results (Roth et al., 2011). We are aware that we cannot prove that the changes in what affects satisfaction with democracy are pinned to the economic crisis.

Ideally, a panel study, before and after the crisis, can track changes in political attitudes that can be attributed to the financial fall down. Lacking that type of data we resorted to the comparison of political attitudes in Romania in a crisis year to a pre-crisis year. The selection of Romania allows the testing of political attitudes changes in a country with incomplete democratization and affected by the very tough economic measures implemented by the Boc government in 2011. The crisis provides

a test for how citizens would support a new democratic regime when it fails to bring economic success.

The independent variables were divided into three categories: perception of economic development, political experiences and socio-demographics. The perceptions of economic development were divided into perceptions of the national and personal economy since the literature on the effect of economic factors argues that we can discover different effects at different levels of perceptions. We did not include income because in 2011 the survey did not include the question on income. We ran a model in 2007 that included income and did not find any effect. Political factors consist of intended turnout to vote, whether a citizen is a supporter of a governing party, and left-right individual orientation. Socio-demographics that were included are age, residence (urban-rural), sex and education.

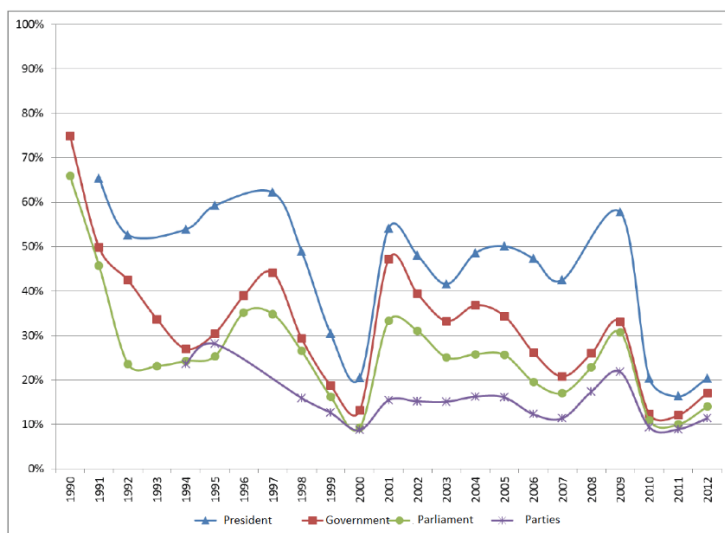
We ran one regression model for explaining the effects of economic factors, political behavior and socio demographics on political trust and satisfaction with democracy before the crisis (fall of 2007) and during the crisis (fall of 2011). Political trust was measured as a composition of trust in parties, parliament, government and president.

FINDINGS

Armington and Guthmann (2012) found in a study that analyses 26 EU countries based on the Eurobarometer surveys (EB) that both satisfaction with democracy and trust in parliament declined in Romania between fall of 2007 and fall of 2011 more than the mean change of all 26 countries (Armington&Guthmann 2012 p.23): the proportion of those satisfied with democracy decreased in Romania with 13.6%, compared to a mean of 6.6%, whereas trust in parliament decreased in Romania with 8.3%, compared to a mean of 7.8%.

However, a series of representative surveys conducted in Romania between 1990 and 2012 describe a different picture. Figure 1 shows that political trust in Romania fluctuated during elections (1990, 1992, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008, presidential elections in 2009, 2012), but otherwise, the trend is fairly stable with no major changes during the economic crisis. The graph also shows that the level of trust in parties, parliament, government and president change in similar ways, and that the least trusted institutions are political parties followed by parliament, government and president

Figure 1 Levels of political trust in Romania 1990-2012

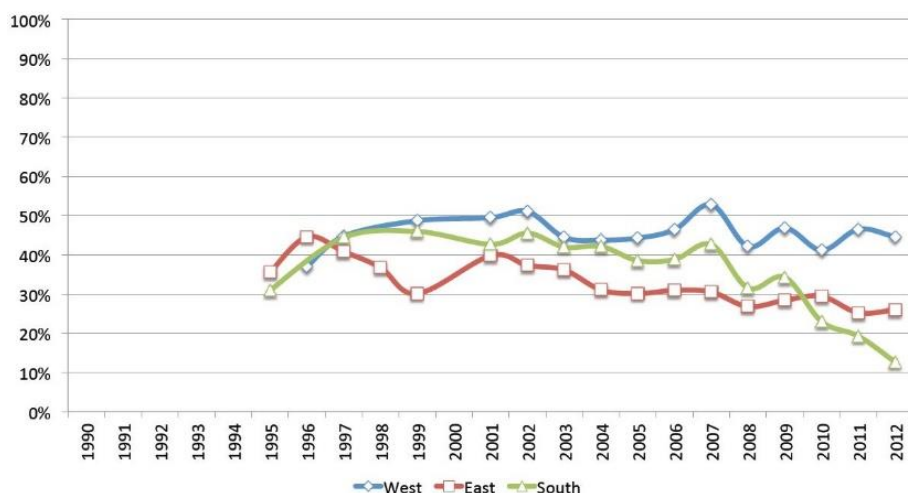


Source: Tufis, Claudiu.2013. „Changes in Institutional Trust in Postcommunist Romania”

[http://www.trust.democracycenter.ro/trust_007.htm]

These results are consistent with previous studies showing that trust in institutions in Romania are at very low levels and are fairly stable (Tufis, 2007). Moreover, as Figure 2, 3 and 4 show, the trend of institutional trust in Romania is similar with that of other European countries: both East and West European countries tend to have had stable levels of institutional trust for the last 15 years, whereas South of Europe has witnessed a significant decline since 2008.

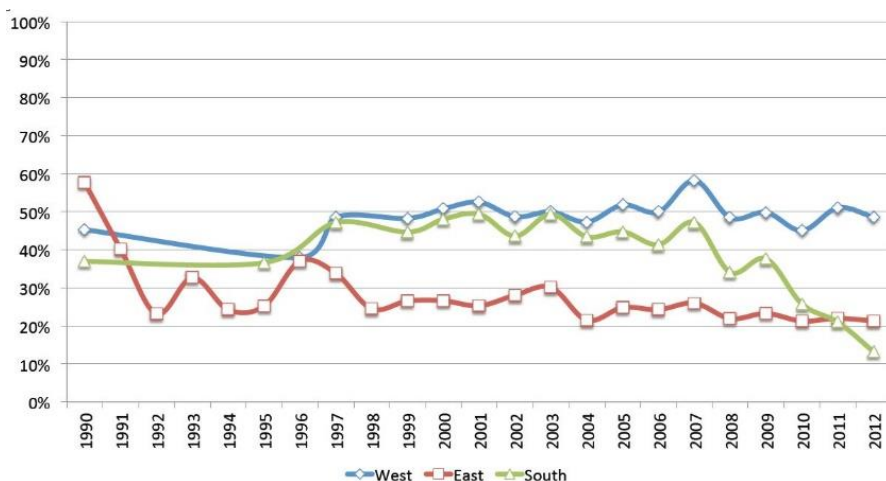
Figure 2 Trust in government comparison of West, East and South of Europe



Source: Tufis, Claudiu.2013. „Changes in Institutional Trust in Postcommunist Romania”

[http://www.trust.democracycenter.ro/trust_007.htm]

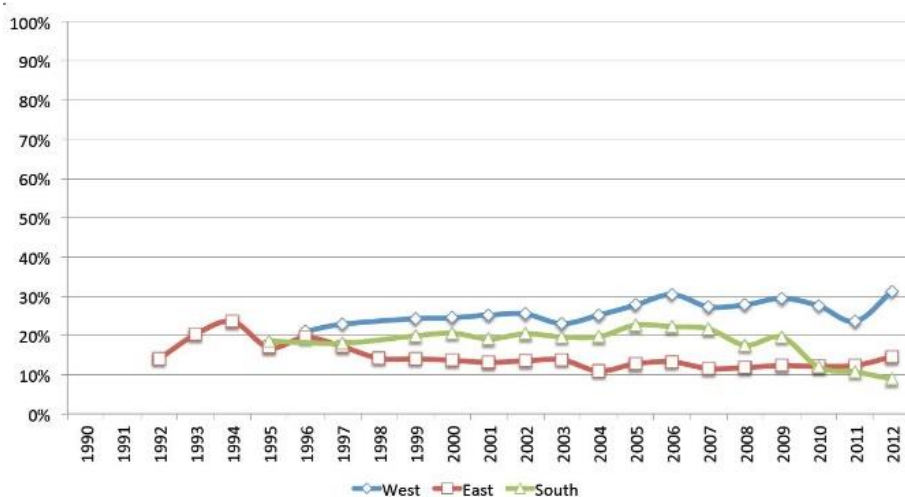
Figure 3 Trust in parliament comparison of West, East and South of Europe



Source: Tufis, Claudiu.2013. „Changes in Institutional Trust in Postcommunist Romania”

[http://www.trust.democracycenter.ro/trust_007.htm]

Figure 4 Trust in political parties comparison of West, East and South of Europe

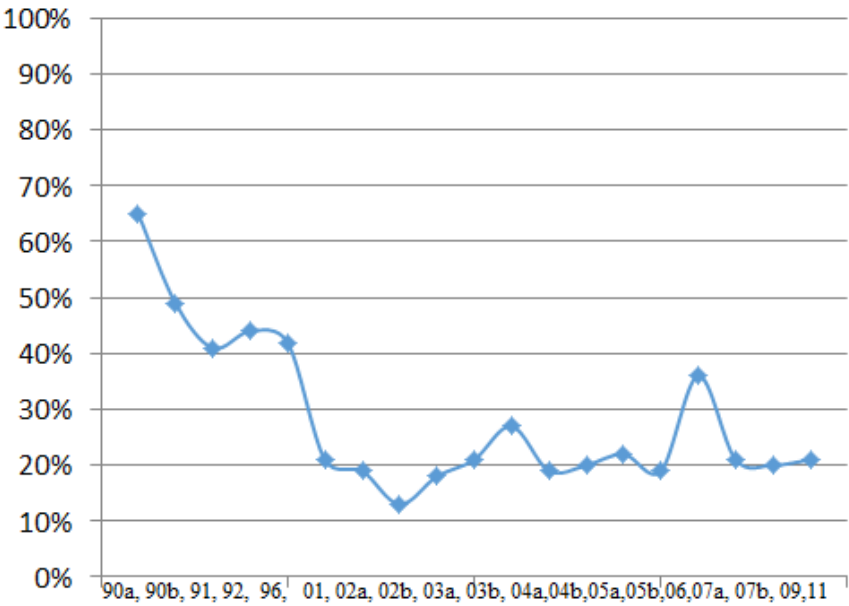


Source: Tufis, Claudiu.2013. „Changes in Institutional Trust in Postcommunist Romania”

[http://www.trustdemocracycenter.ro/trust_007.htm]

A largely similar trend can be found in the case of Romania for the general level of satisfaction with democracy (Figure 5). The trend indicates no decline of satisfaction with democracy from 2007 until 2009. In 2011 the level of satisfaction remains low.

Figure 5 The level of satisfaction with democracy in Romania 1990-2011



Source: Romanian Electoral Data. Authors’ computations.

This trend did not confirm our expectation that during crisis satisfaction of democracy has decreased. After the regime change the satisfaction with democracy recorded high levels. This was followed by a rapid decline. Romanian citizens seemed to be more satisfied with democracy in 1996 when the first peaceful alternation to power occurred. In 2004 there were elections and in 2007 the abrupt change can be explained by Romania joining the European Union. As it is the case for political trust, satisfaction with democracy seems to be unaffected by the low performance of the economy.

A similar result can be found when the effect of economic crisis on generalized trust is evaluated on two different data sets. Firstly, we

compared an aggregated index of generalized trust¹ in a panel survey on Romanian high school children², with the first wave collected in May 2006 and the second in May 2009. We found virtually no change at the aggregate level during the three year period of time. The only determinants that had statistically significant effects on the individual level of trust were ethnic diversity of colleagues and family income dispersion, both with a negative impact. Secondly, we compared the mean level of an aggregated index of generalized trust in a survey conducted in November 2008³ with a similar index in a survey conducted in September 2012⁴, both on representative samples of the Romanian adult population, and found no statistically significant difference.

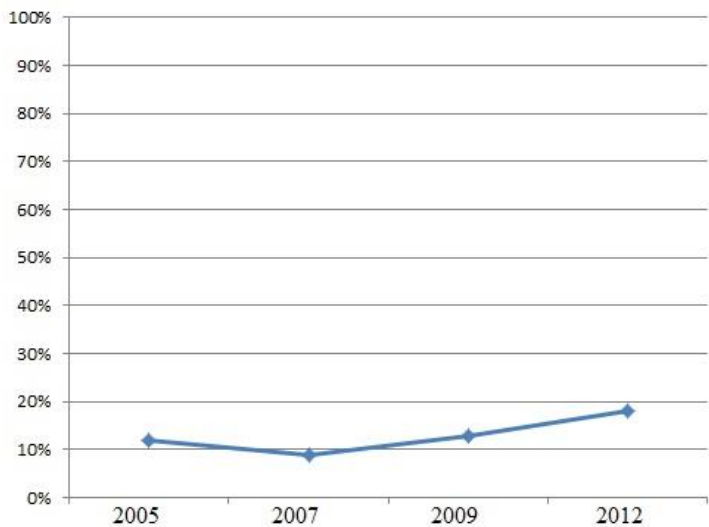
¹ The index is built as a sum of three variables that assess trust in strangers, trust in people of other religions and trust in people of different ethnicity, respectively.

² The survey was conducted by the Center for the Study of Democracy (www.democracycenter.ro).

³ The survey was commissioned by the Romanian Agency for Governmental Strategies to Totem Institute.

⁴ The survey was commissioned by Ce-Re and the Center for Democratic Studies to CURS.

Figure 6. Level of social trust in Romania



Next we turn to statistical modeling to compare the effects of factors identified in other research on satisfaction with democracy and political trust. We hypothesized that egocentric economic perception will have a stronger effect in the period of economic crisis while sociotropic perceptions of the economy will account for the variations in political trust and satisfaction with democracy. The results are presented in table 1.

Table 1 Explanatory model for satisfaction with democracy and political trust in 2007 and 2011

	Satisfaction with democracy		Political trust	
Variables	oct2007(β)(s.e.)	nov2011(β)(s.e.)	oct2007(β) (s.e.)	nov2011(β) (s.e.)
<i>Personal perceptions of living conditions</i>				
Satisfaction with individual living conditions	,149**(,035)	,168**(,048)	,101**(,054)	,081(,056)
Perception of present individual economic condition compared to the previous year	,061*(,033)	,081(,044)	-,015**(,052)	-,029(,053)
Perception of future individual economic condition	,084**(,032)	,015(,043)	,100**(,049)	-,043(,051)
<i>Perception of the national economy</i>				
Perception of Romanian economy in the present compared to	,157**(,039)	,061(,055)	,097**(,060)	-,009(,065)

previous year				
Perception of the future of Romanian economy	,147**(.043)	,195**(.045)	,120**(.066)	,148**(.053)
<i>Political factors</i>				
Turnout	,057*(.049)	,058(.079)	,146**(.076)	,053(.094)
Support for the governing party	-,008(.077)	,020(.114)	-,073**(.118)	,305(.135)
Left-Right	-,005(.001)	-,065(.013)	-,008(.001)	,023(.015)
<i>Socio-demographics</i>				
Education	-,014(.005)	,063(.011)	-,047(.008)	-,035(.013)
Age	-,036(.001)	-,039(.002)	,053*(.002)	,049(.002)
Urban-Rural	,098**(.046)	,068(.067)	,131**(.071)	,062(.079)
Sex	,015(.547)	-,050(.062)	-,009(.068)	-,060(.073)

**<.01 *≤.05

adjR² =,205adj R²=148adj R²=,132adjR²=,130

(Political trust = trust in political parties + trust in government+trust in parliament + trust in president)

For both indicators of political culture (satisfaction with democracy and political trust) we find the national evaluation of the future of the economy

to have significant effects before the crisis and during the crisis. Egocentric evaluations matter before the crisis and mid crisis for satisfaction with democracy. What we found out is that the economic evaluations of the economy are the single statistically significant independent variables that impact both political trust and satisfaction with democracy during crisis. The importance of political and socio-demographic factors faded out in the crisis period. Citizens who turn out to vote are not necessarily more satisfied with democracy or trust institutions more. Place of residence becomes irrelevant in explaining political support together with age and several indicators of egocentric economic perceptions.

Thus we find a partial support for our hypothesis. We expected egocentric economic perceptions to impact political support. We found that national economic perceptions about the future of the economy and satisfaction with living conditions (on satisfaction with democracy) to have an effect on political support. Citizens who have positive evaluations of the future of the national economy and are satisfied with their living conditions are more likely to provide political support. The findings tell us that during economic crisis, the economic factors are more important predictors than political or socio demographic factors.

CONCLUSIONS

Did the economic crisis since 2007 have an impact on political attitudes and behaviors of Romanians? We found reliable evidence that the current crisis has had a sizable effect on political attitudes and, as a result, influenced the electoral outcomes in the 2012 Parliamentary elections in Romania. However, it is less clear if the economic harshness has had a profound and long lasting impact, by changing and adding additional strain to the political culture of this new democracy. We evaluated empirically the effect of crisis on three components of political culture, institutional trust, generalized trust and democratic support, by relying on a series of

representative surveys of the Romanian public, including the results of a panel survey measuring social trust.

The overall result is that none of these attitudes have changed significantly as a result of crisis. It is a rather surprising finding, given both the severity of austerity measures in Romania and the weakness of democratic culture in this country. One possible explanation is that the political culture in Romania, as well as in Bulgaria, had already been negatively influenced during the EU integration process, by the lack of responsiveness and accountability of their elites who invoked external pressures of the international institutions as excuses for their own refusal to take responsibility for the welfare of ordinary citizens. Another possible explanation stems from the fact that Romania and Bulgaria had the least successful economic transitions among the EU post-communist countries, with two severe slumps preceding the 2007 crisis that 'desensitized' their public. Finally, it is also possible that political culture is more resilient than thought and that only a longer crisis than the current one has the potential of making significant changes.

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