



**Facade democracy: Internal organisation and institutionalisation in
Romanian political parties after 2012**

Thesis summary

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Context and relevance

Romania, like other post-communist European countries, has undergone a series of transformations from authoritarianism to pluralistic electoral democracy, marked, however, by rapid political transitions, the emergence of new types of parties and significant electoral volatility, phenomena that have resulted in incomplete democratic consolidation, fragile institutionalisation of parties and deficiencies in internal accountability.

At the heart of this analytical approach is the historical-institutionalist approach, which emphasises that institutions are not just formal constraints, but also configurations of norms, practices and historical legacies that shape political behaviour (Hall & Taylor, 1996). New institutionalism, as conceptualised by authors such as March and Olsen (1984), Powell and DiMaggio (1991) or Hall and Taylor (1996), provides an analytical framework that goes beyond traditional rationalist approaches, emphasising the role of inherited norms, symbols and structures in shaping the behaviour of political actors. Institutionalisation is not treated as a binary state – 'present' or 'absent' – but as a process influenced by historical legacies, institutional constraints and strategic choices. This perspective allows for debate on hybrid forms of organisation – particularly in the case of populist parties – and the gap between formal conformity and actual practices. In the post-communist context, this framework is particularly relevant: although officially dissolved, authoritarian institutions and their bureaucratic reflexes continue to profoundly influence the emerging democratic architecture. The transition to democracy does not mean a total restart, but rather a negotiation between the legacy of the past and the pressures of the present.

The paper proposes a comparative analysis between the two families of parties, mainstream and anti-system, with a focus on the organisational structure and internal functioning of the parties. By applying Meyer and Rowan's theory of symbolic isomorphism, the research highlights how modern structures are often formally adopted to gain legitimacy, but do not reflect organisational



reality. The aim is to identify the factors that influence the institutionalisation of parties in the post-communist context, including the volatility of the political system and the pressure for reform, contributing to an understanding of the relationship between the formal structure, effective functioning and legitimacy of political parties.

Over the last decade, Romania has seen an increase in dissatisfaction with traditional parties, manifested in the rise of anti-system and populist groups. This wave of protest has been amplified by economic crises, the perception of endemic corruption, and the failure of established parties to provide authentic representation for emerging social groups. The phenomenon is not unique to Central and Eastern Europe, but in Romania it has taken on particular forms, with the emergence and success of parties such as the Save Romania Union (USR) and the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), which claim legitimacy outside the traditional political system and propose a break with the existing political elite.

A comparative analysis of how mainstream parties, such as the National Liberal Party (PNL) and the Social Democratic Party (PSD), and anti-system parties, such as USR and AUR, build their organisational structures and practise internal democracy is essential to understanding the trajectory of the Romanian political system. While established parties may be suspected of formal over-institutionalisation without democratic content, new parties raise questions about sustainability, organisational capacity and the assumption of democratic values. Thus, this research is at the intersection of two major themes in contemporary political science: the institutionalisation of political parties and the effects of populism on the quality of democracy.

The study proposes an analytical framework for assessing internal democracy and the level of institutionalisation, based on the hypothesis that populist parties can negatively affect the system by mimicking democratisation. Studies on populism often focus on discourse, ideology or electoral performance. In contrast, this research brings to the fore the organisational dimension of populism and assesses the extent to which anti-system parties in Romania internalise or instrumentalise the mechanisms of internal democracy. In this way, it contributes to understanding populism as an institutional phenomenon, not just a rhetorical one. The effects of the legislative framework, external influences, and mechanisms of ideological contagion are investigated. The contribution of the research is relevant both theoretically and practically, offering solutions for improving the functioning of parties in a fragile political context.

Research topic and objectives

The study stems from the need to understand the extent to which political parties in Romania – whether mainstream (established) or emerging – effectively contribute to the consolidation of democracy through the way they are organised, select leaders, formulate policies and encourage member participation. The justification for the topic also stems from the observation that, in the specialist literature, the internal democracy of parties in Central and Eastern Europe remains insufficiently explored, especially from a comparative and institutionalist perspective.

This phenomenon is particularly relevant for political parties in Romania, where mimicking internal democracy has become common practice, and statutory formalism is not accompanied by



effective mechanisms for accountability, transparency or participation. At the same time, the emergence of new parties with populist or anti-system rhetoric raises the question of whether these formations represent a real break with old practices or merely an opportunistic adaptation to the new political climate.

The research aims to provide a critical and empirical assessment of the process of institutionalisation of political parties in Romania, particularly post-2015, when the most recent reform of the legislation on the organisation of political parties and elections took place, lifting many of the restrictions that previously hindered the establishment of new political parties, with an emphasis on how they apply or mimic the principles of internal democracy. More specifically, the paper has the following objectives:

To compare the level of institutionalisation between mainstream parties (PNL, PSD) and populist/anti-system parties (USR, AUR), analysing their internal structure, leadership selection, organisational functioning and internal stability.

To assess the degree of internal democracy within the analysed parties, using indicators such as: member participation in decision-making, transparency of the decision-making process, accountability of leaders and compliance with statutory rules.

Determining the impact of populist parties on the Romanian party system through ideological and organisational contagion effects.

Testing the hypothesis that formal institutionalisation is not equivalent to effective democratic functionality.

Proposing an analytical grid that allows for the qualitative and quantitative assessment of the institutionalisation of political parties in emerging democracies.

The analysis therefore examines the relationship between the organisational form of political parties in Romania and the quality of internal democracy, in a context marked by instability, contestation and ideological transformation. The research is based on the conviction that not all parties that present themselves as democratic substantially respect the principles of democracy in their internal functioning. This raises a number of fundamental research questions:

- **What are the structural and functional differences** between mainstream parties (PNL, PSD) and populist/anti-system parties (USR, AUR) in terms of internal organisation and intra-party democracy?
- **To what extent do populist parties adopt**, imitate or challenge the formal practices of internal democracy, and what are the motivations behind these organisational choices?
- **What types of organisational practices** are associated with different levels of institutionalisation, and how do they influence the party's ability to maintain cohesion, loyalty and representativeness?



- **How does the Romanian legislative framework**, including the recommendations of the Venice Commission, **influence** the internal functioning of parties and the relationship between leaders and members?
- **Is there an ideological or organisational contagion effect** exerted by populist parties on traditional parties? If so, how does it manifest itself?

Based on these questions, the research formulates the following **working hypotheses**:

- **Mainstream parties** (PNL and PSD) show a higher degree of formal institutionalisation, but do not guarantee effective democratic practice in terms of participation and accountability.
- **Populist parties** (USR and AUR) partially and instrumentally adopt the norms of internal democracy, using them more to gain external legitimacy than as real instruments of internal governance.
- **The personalisation of power within parties** is inversely proportional to the autonomy of local organisations and the transparency of decision-making.
- **Compliance with international standards** on internal democracy is often symbolic, and the lack of coercive mechanisms leads to inconsistent enforcement.
- **The presence of anti-system parties** has a contagious effect on the entire political spectrum, causing even established parties to adopt anti-democratic practices and rhetoric in order to preserve their electoral capital.

By testing these hypotheses, the paper aims not only to describe how political parties function, but also to critically assess how they contribute – or fail to contribute – to the consolidation of democracy in Romania.

Methodological aspects

To answer the research questions and test the proposed hypotheses, I adopt a comparative cross-sectional design, focusing on the analysis of four political parties in Romania: two mainstream parties (PNL and PSD) and two populist/anti-system parties (USR and AUR). The choice of these parties is not random: they occupy relevant positions in the post-2012 political spectrum, with a real capacity to influence public policies either from the position of the ruling party or from the opposition.

The methodological framework of the research is multi-level and multi-method, anchored in the neo-institutionalist approach, with an emphasis on the organisational and normative dimensions of political parties. The aim is to analyse not only the declared structures of the parties, but also the actual practices that govern their internal life.

The research is based on a methodology of triangulating sources, whereby information is compared and supplemented from several directions. In this regard, the statutes of the parties and their



programmatic documents were analysed, as well as official reports, legislative acts and recommendations formulated at the international level. In addition, we have included a careful examination of the press and public statements, supplemented by the study of electoral data and quantitative indicators reflecting loyalty, fragmentation or the degree of political participation.

The research combined qualitative and quantitative methods. On the one hand, it relies on content analysis of official documents and coding of party statutes; on the other hand, it compares quantitative indicators such as the level of ideological institutionalisation, the frequency of internal changes or the degree of participation in decision-making processes. The entire process was guided by an analytical grid, developed on the literature on intra-party democracy and adapted to the Romanian context. This grid enables a comparative assessment of several key dimensions: the level of internal democracy, the degree of centralisation and personalisation of decisions, organisational stability, and the extent to which compliance with democratic norms is real or merely symbolic.

The comparative design of the "most different systems" type is justified by the ideological, organisational and temporal contrast between the selected parties. The PSD and PNL are traditional parties with consolidated territorial networks and relatively stable doctrinal positions, while the USR and AUR are new, emerging formations with an anti-system profile and organisations in the process of stabilisation. This contrast allows us to observe how structural characteristics influence the degree of institutionalisation and the application of internal democracy.

The research draws on a variety of sources designed to provide a broad and balanced perspective on political parties, combining official documents, national and international legislative frameworks, election results, semi-structured interviews, media analyses, and independent reports from NGOs and think tanks. This triangulated approach allows not only the assessment of the formal framework and compliance with norms, but also to capture the internal logic of organisations, decision-making dynamics and differences between public discourse and actual practice. By integrating these diverse sources, the approach provides a solid empirical basis, contributing to the validation of data and the development of a nuanced understanding of the organisational and ideological realities under investigation.

Structure of the thesis

Starting from the observation that the development of an electoral democracy – in which several political parties compete for power in regular, free and fair elections – is not synonymous with a liberal democracy – where extensive protection of individual and group freedoms, pluralism, and civilian control over institutions of force are ensured (Diamond 1996) , the paper is an effort to observe the process of institutionalisation of political parties in Romania, the consolidation of the ideological dimension as a mechanism for limiting electoral volatility, and the role they play in the democratisation process. Taking note of Samuel P. Huntington's warning(1991) about the imminent risks of "democratic recoil" to which the democracies of the "third wave" of global democratisation were exposed, a trend that also swept through Eastern Europe, I focus on political parties as the object and subject of democratic culture. The leap from totalitarian rule, through a



state party, to liberal democracy required rapid institutional changes in policies and behaviours, the liberalisation of the political order, the empowerment of decision-makers and the establishment of mechanisms for democratic control exercised by citizens over public authorities, among many other transformations imposed by the adoption of the rule of law model.

Chapter I. Introduction clarifies the elements addressed in this summary, namely the general context of the paper, the justification of the topic, the research objectives, the research questions, the theoretical framework, the methodology in brief, and the originality and relevance of the research, while **Chapter II. Research Methodology** details the methodological objectives, epistemological approach, research design, units of analysis, data sources, methods and techniques of analysis, methodological limitations and ethical considerations.

Chapter III. The current state of knowledge and potential contributions to its development provides a broad overview of the main theoretical paradigms on political parties and party systems, from classics such as Duverger, Michels and Weber to contemporary theorists such as Panebianco, Katz & Mair, Mudde and Hopkin. It analyses the historical and structural transformations of parties – from cadre to mass, catch-all, cartel and anti-system – and the impact of these forms on their integrative function, legitimacy and relationship with voters. It highlights the process of institutionalisation, the role of social cleavages, excessive professionalisation and ideological polarisation, all as factors that shape the dynamics of party systems. The research emphasises the crisis of representation and ideological decline in contemporary democracies, proposing a solid analytical framework for understanding the evolution of parties in a post-communist and globalised context. Finally, it argues for the need to redefine the legitimacy of parties and their democratic function in the face of populist challenges and societal transformations.

Chapter IV. The regulatory framework governing the Romanian party system. The institutional impact of the standards and recommendations formulated by the Venice Commission on national legislation analyses how the Romanian legislative framework on political parties aligns – formally and functionally – with the democratic standards promoted by the Venice Commission. The paper highlights the tension between the formal compliance of Romanian parties with these standards and their practical application. Although principles such as member participation, democratic election of leaders and consultation of internal structures are present in party statutes, effective implementation mechanisms are lacking. This gives rise to the concept of 'symbolic compliance', in which democratic norms are mimicked rather than substantially applied.

The analysis also reveals a high degree of centralisation and opacity in the functioning of Romanian parties, despite efforts towards Europeanisation. The recommendations of the Venice Commission, although consulted at key moments, have not been rigorously transposed into legislation or practice. Thus, the internal democratisation of parties remains incomplete, and the accountability of leaders to party members is weak.

The chapter makes an original contribution by using an analytical grid inspired by international standards and proposes directions for legislative and organisational reform. It argues that



strengthening internal democracy can help rebuild trust in parties and consolidate the Romanian democratic regime.

Chapter V. Updated analysis of the ideological institutionalisation of the party system in Romania (2012 - 2020) provides a detailed and contextualised analysis of the process of ideological institutionalisation in the Romanian party system between 2012 and 2020, focusing on the dynamics of ideological families and the emergence of new types of political actors. The paper proposes moving beyond binary frameworks of analysis and adopts an evolutionary perspective on institutionalisation, in line with the theoretical direction inaugurated by Mainwaring and Torcal, in which stability is not a fixed condition but the result of fluctuating and contested processes.

There is a conceptual reconstruction of the ideological system through the introduction of anti-system parties as a distinct category, with theoretical and practical significance. These formations — PP-DD, USR, AUR — are not just transitory anomalies, but the expression of unresolved social cleavages and the erosion of the legitimacy of established parties. At the same time, the conservative bloc is analysed as a case of de-institutionalisation and re-institutionalisation, while the liberal and centrist area proves to be unstable and fragmented.

The analysis uses a mixed framework, combining quantitative data (electoral volatility, fragmentation by ideological families, electoral scores) with a qualitative reading of the political context (alliances, mergers, repositioning). It demonstrates that the stability of the system does not depend solely on the number of parties, but also on the internal coherence of ideological families and their ability to articulate recognisable and competitive political offers.

The analysis highlights the fact that, until 2020, Romania did not have a fully institutionalised party system, but rather one marked by ideological fragility, weak partisan loyalties and fluid electoral competition. The conservative family, although facing a severe crisis of representation and cohesion, managed to reconfigure its political presence through new organisational and ideological formulas. At the same time, anti-system parties cannot be reduced to mere electoral phenomena but must be understood as expressions of contestation of the institutional order and of a social demand for the re-politicisation of a disillusioned electorate. Ideological institutionalisation thus appears as a differentiated process, dependent on internal cohesion, organisational resources and the capacity of each political family to respond to emerging demands. At the same time, the conclusions suggest that political instability does not necessarily imply de-institutionalisation but can coexist with the emergence of new forms of ideological organisation and aggregation.

In conclusion, the chapter makes a significant contribution to understanding the ideological dynamics of the party system in Romania, highlighting the unstable but adaptable nature of political competition in the post-communist context. This paves the way for new directions of research on the role of emerging parties, ideological transformations, and the capacity of democratic systems to absorb and reconfigure internal challenges.

Chapter VI. An integrated view of parties as complex political organisations from the perspective of internal mechanisms for promoting democracy proposes an integrated approach



to political parties, viewing them not only as electoral vehicles, but as complex organisations with internal mechanisms that fundamentally influence the quality of representative democracy. Starting from the observation that the internal democracy of parties is not an automatic reflex of their functioning in a democratic system, the tension between formal compliance with democratic standards and their substantial application is analysed.

Issues such as candidate selection, transparency in decision-making, consultation with members, the role of leaders, and the actual degree of participation in decision-making are discussed. It is argued that political parties often reflect a vertical and centralised model of leadership, in which internal democracy is mimicked, and control mechanisms are often formal rather than functional.

The paper proposes an analytical framework inspired by the recommendations of the Venice Commission and the literature on intra-party democracy to assess the actual level of internal democratisation in Romanian parties. It highlights the asymmetry between statutory norms and actual practices, showing that many parties suffer from what the author calls "symbolic compliance" – an appearance of alignment with European standards, in the absence of effective enforcement mechanisms.

By comparison, mainstream parties (PSD and PNL) exhibit a formalised but highly bureaucratised internal democracy. They have detailed statutes and formal collective bodies, but in practice, decision-making is concentrated around central leaders. Candidate selection procedures are often non-transparent and opaque to members.

In contrast, USR initially attempted a deliberative and participatory approach, promoting internal online voting, open debates and grassroots procedures. However, over time, it faced an accelerated process of centralisation and internal tensions that eroded the democratic culture initially promoted.

AUR, although recently established, has a strongly personalised structure, centred on charismatic leaders, with a poorly defined internal democracy. There are no transparent selection or consultation mechanisms, and decision-making is highly vertical, reflecting an authoritarian-personalist organisation.

From a professionalisation perspective, the PSD and PNL benefit from institutional resources and well-developed local networks, but with tendencies towards organisational conservatism. The USR has relied on competence and expertise but has had difficulty in consolidating a coherent organisational culture. The AUR, on the other hand, stands out for its emotional mobilisation and homogeneous ideological message, but not for its institutional infrastructure.

This comparison highlights the fact that none of the parties analysed offers a complete model of functional internal democracy. If traditional parties mimic compliance with formal standards and new parties suffer from a lack of institutionalisation, the result is a crisis of legitimacy and representativeness that affects the system as a whole. The solution is not to abandon institutional forms, but to revalue internal mechanisms of control, deliberation and participation.



Findings and conclusions

For parties to make a real contribution to strengthening democracy, they must become authentic spaces for deliberation, representation and accountability, not just instruments for accessing power. Deepening internal democracy – through transparency, participation and pluralism – is a necessary condition for restoring the credibility of parties and for the democratic revitalisation of the Romanian political system.

This doctoral research investigated in depth the functioning of Romanian political parties – mainstream and anti-system/populist – from the perspective of internal democracy, the degree of institutionalisation and their role in a pluralistic system. The work was part of an analytical and normative approach that aimed not only to describe but also to explain the mechanisms governing recent transformations in the Romanian political landscape.

The main theoretical contribution consists in articulating a conceptual framework that combines the neo-institutionalist perspective with organisational theories and the analysis of populist parties, treated not as temporary deviations, but as potentially central actors in Romanian politics. The methodological innovation is represented by a comparative analysis grid applied to the most relevant parties in Romania between 2014 and 2024, which highlighted significant asymmetries between statutory forms and actual practices.

An important distinction proposed is that between populist and anti-system parties, conceptualised as a distinct ideological family with a profound impact on the party system. At the same time, the paper brings to the fore the concept of "symbolic conformity", whereby parties mimic internal democracy without real enforcement and control mechanisms.

At the normative level, the research suggests that in unconsolidated democracies such as Romania, anti-system parties are not only not marginalised, but become key actors, reconfiguring the ideological centre of gravity and distorting democratic competition.

The limitations of the research relate to its reduced applicability outside the Romanian case, its limited temporal dimension and its predominant access to secondary sources. Nevertheless, the paper opens important directions for future research, advocating for the re-professionalisation of politics and the consolidation of internal democracy.