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From local clientelism to populism – the case of Radu Mazăre

ABSTRACT

The fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe imposed not only a transition towards a new regime, but also the reconstruction of the democratic institutions. That meant, as Peter Mair puts it, that the firsts to come to power had the great advantage of shaping the administration and government agencies for their own benefit. This consequently led to establishing clientelistic networks and party patronage by spoiling offices. At the same time, the new post-communist democracies had to transform themselves, from a totalitarian regime with a unique party which controlled merely every aspect of politics and society, into pluralistic societies with multiparty systems. That also meant that the political actors had to win their positions through an open and democratic electoral process, thus having to create electoral linkages in order to secure their sits. Many local political figures in post-communist Romania interpreted this new situation by buying the votes and by establishing clientelistic linkages, based on offering various goods, favors or social security benefits in the exchange of the vote and of the electoral support. These practices led to the emergence of powerful local political elites, with increased popular support and significant influence in the party structure due to their electoral linkages, the so-called *local barons*. This paper seeks to explore the connection between such local electoral clientelistic networks and the populist approach employed by the respective local political elites.

Key words: populism, clientelism, local political elites, electoral linkages, accountability

INTRODUCTION

The nature of the Romanian post-communist state was shaped by the formation of the National Salvation Front (Romanian: Frontul Salvării Naționale, FSN), a provisional body that was established to ensure the first steps towards transition

to democracy, which inherited the former PCR local structure. Albeit its initial commitment to dissolve after providing the interim government, the Front transformed itself into a political party which dominates the Romanian party system ever since.[1] This gave the FSN a unique role, not only in administrative and governance aspects, but also in structuring the new institutions, as well legislation, for its own benefit. This situation, specific to the countries at the beginning of their democratic transition as Peter Mair underlines, meant also unlimited and unrestricted access to state resources and offices [Mair 1997: 172]. Consequently, the FSN developed strong local electoral linkages, managing to use the inherited former PCR structure for their own electoral benefit. This meant not only unlimited access to offices and state resources, but also a primacy in 'converting' the former PCR members to the FSN, thus offering the potential of developing large membership. This organizational feature, together with the new democratic framework that imposed a reconsideration of how party(ies) relates to citizens led to establishing primarily clientelistic linkages. This situation can be explained by several factors, that we are going to further develop in a following section. It is therefore important to see how the linkages between the party(ies) and the citizens changed in the context of democratization and transition from a single party to a multi-party system and, moreover, what were the factors that influenced these changes. In this paper, we firstly explore the conceptual debate regarding clientelism, focusing afterwards on the cases of certain local political figures that managed to secure their sits for more than three consecutive mandates and withal have a significant influence in both local and central politics. Furthermore, we analyze the populist stance employed by these political figures. Finally, we attempt to provide the main features identified in the cases of *local barons*.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this paper, we will employ the concept of clientelism as developed by Kitschelt and Wilkinson. According to their view, clientelism is 'a particular mode of exchange between electoral constituencies as principals and politicians as agents in democratic systems' [Kitschelt, Wilkinson 2007: 7]. Before starting any discussion on local electoral clientelism, we should underline the distinction existing between clientelism and patronage. Although these two concepts are rarely employed with different meanings, we use here the term of clientelism to refer to those particular exchange relations used as an electoral resource, that is, to gain votes and electoral support. Therefore, our use here differs from that of patronage, which refers to ex-

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[1] It dissolved in April 1992, after splitting between Ion Iliescu camp and that of Petre Roman, leading to the formation of two of the most important political parties: PSD and PD. PSD managed to be either on the first, or on the second place in all the post 1992 elections (it was only once on the second place (1996 – when it faced a large center-right coalition; in 2008, it scored the biggest electoral score, but after redistribution it had fewer seats than PDL).

change relations used as organizational resource (i.e., in controlling the process of policy making) [Kopecký, Mair, Spirova 2012: 3–10].

Electoral clientelism, as described by Kitschelt and Wilkinson, focuses on the relation between citizens and parties or political figures, emphasizing the impact of exchanging various goods or benefits for vote. This consequently led to the establishment of a clientelistic-type accountability, based on a relation of transaction between the citizen and the political actor, the first offering his vote in exchange of direct payments or access to jobs, services or various goods [Kitschelt, Wilkinson 2007: 2]. Nonetheless, this is not the only model for voter-party linkages, Kitschelt identifies two other main types [Kitschelt 2000: 849]. On the one hand, there are the programmatic linkages, based primarily on the development of problem-solving programs addressing the main issues existing within the society. This type of linkages demands more time and does not provide certain and direct incentives for voters, as clientelistic linkages. Another model for voter-party relation is that of charismatic linkages. In this case, the option of a certain citizen for a specific political figure is determined primarily by the personal charisma of the politician.

The dominant party-voter linkage model selected after 1989 was the clientelistic model, which eventually led to the rise of some very influential local political elites, the so-called 'local barons'. We focus here on the cases of these political figures, using the case of Constanţa mayor, Radu Mazăre, as illustrative for our research. Nonetheless, we underline the fact that the term used here, *local barons*, it is a term used by the press to describe these more and more influential local political elites.

CASE STUDY

It is relevant for our study to underline some specific features of the Romanian post-communist parties that had an imprint on the way the linkage with the voters was established. First of all, as we have mentioned earlier, the Romanian party-system was dominated in the first post-communist years by the FSN and its PCR-inherited organizational structure, which developed mostly clientelistic linkages. This consequently pushed the other parties that formed the opposition (represented mainly by the so-called historical parties: national-liberals, PNL, and national-peasants, PNŢ-CD) which developed programmatic linkages[2] to embrace in some cases the clientelistic alternative.

These strong local political elites adopted a populist rhetoric, presenting themselves as defenders of the local interests against the central politicians, as well as benefactors of the impoverished. One such example is the case of mayor of the port-city of Constanţa, Radu Mazăre. Since 2000, [Kitschelt 2000: 849] (the year

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[2]   Their programmes were based on the call for further democratization, returning to monarchy and privatization of the state companies.

Mazăre was elected), eight times a year, the municipality distributes food packages to elderly people with pensions lower than 900 lei (cca. 200 euros), all the costs of this action being covered by the local budget. On the official website of the institution, the action is presented as the consequence of the personal interest of Mazăre in helping those in need, this being 'a major concern' of the mayor. We can observe in this case both a populist rhetoric and the use of state resources for gaining popular support. In a similar approach, other mayors, usually from small cities, use the European Program of Food Aid to the Most Deprived Persons, which basically consists in offering various food items for the vulnerable sectors of the society provided by the EU, as personal 'gifts' offered on the behalf of the mayor.[3]

We can identify specific populist elements in the discourse employed by Mazăre, one of them being the differentiations between politics and administration. Thus, he presents himself not as a politician, but rather as a good administrator who has team player qualities, making his decisions not by consulting with specialists, but by talking directly to people.[4] Maybe the most representative example of populism and clientelism in the case of Mazăre is the construction of a social buildings complex. Presented as a result of the direct care of the mayor, the project offers shelter for some hundred disadvantaged social categories, who, in return, showed their support when their 'benefactor' was investigated by the anti-corruption department,[5] claiming that the mayor 'helped them and offered a place to stay'. When he was eventually released from temporarily detention, the people living in the social neighborhood greeted him, while he declared that 'will continue the project to show that something good for the unfortunate people can be done in this country, although the authorities want to stop the project'.[6] In a similar vein, he built several clubs for the pensioners, which brings him strong support from this social category side, as he mentions himself.[7] More interestingly, working on 'charity' projects was how he started his first campaign for the mayorship of Constanţa, in 2000, when he founded a children playground in one of the city's neighborhoods, using his own funds.[8] When campaigning in the respective area, he was greeted with cheers by the thankful crowd.

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[3] http://www.primaria-constanta.ro/machete/Macheta2.aspx?machetaID=2&paginaID=271&detaliuID=659&lang=ro (access 06.06.2014).

[4] http://www.agerpres.ro/politica/2013/05/28/interviu-radu-mazare-stiu-sa-fac-echipa-sunt-un-bun-administrator-un-tip-natural-ma-consult-cu-apropiatii-11-02-01 (access 06.06.2014).

[5] http://www1.digi24.ro/Stiri/Digi24/Actualitate/Stiri/Manifestatie+de+sustinere+pentru+Radu+Mazare+Locuitorii+cartieru (access 06.06.2014).

[6] http://www.digi24.ro/Stiri/Digi24/Actualitate/Stiri/Radu+Mazare+intampinat+in+campusul+Henri+Coanda+cu+aplauze+si+cu (access 06.06.2014).

[7] http://www.gandul.info/interviurile-gandul/imagini-inedite-cu-radu-mazare-playboy-ul-milionar-tata-imi-spunea-ca-n-am-decat-doua-optiuni-fie-ma-fac-comunist-fie-marinar-12439484 (access 06.062014).

[8] *Ibidem.*

The *local barons* are behaving as patrons. Portraying in benefactors of the society, they embrace populism as a way to secure their positions and further enhance their influence. This can be seen also as a protection measure from the power of the party.[9] Moreover, by adopting this approach, they develop a strong position within the community. The populist stance that we have observed earlier also increases the popularity of the central party at the local level, while transforming the *barons* in brokers that transfer their own electoral capital to central politics in national elections, while using their influence as a bargain tool for further obtaining favors (be it legislative, offices, goods or other facilities) for their own clients or for their own benefit, from the central structures of the party.

Although there is an increased importance of charismatic linkages, due to the populist rhetoric employed, we cannot discuss about a shift from clientelism to charisma when it comes to attracting votes in the case of *local barons*, but more about a diversification of the linkages. Moreover, the programmatic side of the linkages is quasi-absent, as the respective local political elites do not have clear political programs, but just general electoral promises. Yet, there is no single linkage model, but rather parallel models used at the same time. Consequently, although the *local barons* employ primarily clientelistic linkages, and, in the latter years, tend to develop also strong charismatic linkages, they also have (quasi) programmatic elements used in parallel.

We identify several explanations for the initial preference for developing clientelistic voter-party, citizen-elite, linkages. Firstly, the major post-communist party monopolized the access to state resources, as well the local organizational structure of the former PCR, thus having both the financial, institutional and organizational resources for both exchange goods and benefits, as well the means to fulfill these exchanges. This consequently constrained the small and resourceless opposition parties, which had a strong programmatic appeal (calling for further democratization, return to monarchy, privatization of the state companies) to develop in some cases similar clientelistic relations. Secondly, the success of the clientelistic approach adopted by the local political elites can be also explained by the attitudes existing in the Romanian society towards state and politics in general, and politicians in particular. Thus, we identify two sets of explanations for adopting clientelistic linkages – one rationalist, explaining the parties and local political elites behavior, and another one culturalist, explaining the citizens' behavior. The local political elites used the access granted by the party to state resources and public offices in order to exchange time

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[9] This is similar in the case of the Romanian Orthodox Church. Some priests became very popular and use this asset to maintain their positions when clerical superiors decide their removal or movement to another church/perish. The Romanian media presents numerous cases. See, for instance, the case of Saint Mina perish, Constanța, and the conflict between the Archdiocese, on the one hand, and parishioners and priest N. Picu, on the other: http://adevarul.ro/locale/constanta/exclusiv-tulburare-mare-sfantul-mina-preotul-nicolae-picu-indepartat-biserica-1_51223c4400f5182b8576378f/index.html (access 06.06.2014).

for votes, as a cost-efficient method to secure their positions. Citizens, on the other hand, exploited the opportunity of having direct and immediate benefits from their right to vote, in contrast to uncertain and time-consuming programmatic benefits.

This situation is specific for the transition from a totalitarian communist regime to democracy. We have to take into consideration the fact that the Romanian communist state built a patrimonial structure when relating to society, the single party being the broker between the society and state. Thus, for significant segments of the post-communist Romanian society, it came naturally to have specific patrimonial and clientelistic demands from authorities in general, and politicians in particular. This situation was also boosted by the attitude adopted by the new party in power between 1990 and 1996, crucial years for the process of democratic transition that shaped the legislative framework, as well as the institutional outlook, but, moreover, the way political parties approached policy-making process and the linkages with the citizens.[10]

CONCLUSIONS

We identify several features of the Romanian *local barons*. First of all, although there were some cases prior to 2000, the influential, local political elites start to appear usually after 2000, and consist mainly of mayors of the county capitals and presidents of the County Boards.[11] Secondly, they are backed by a strong party, which is also protecting them when legal issues concerning their activities appear or when enhancing their access to state assets or resources by adopting favorable legislation.[12] Thirdly, they have a strong position locally, being influential in local politics, and, at the same time, controlling the activity of the party at the local level. This also implies an increased popular support, the *local barons* having most of the times secured their seats for two, three or even four times in a row.[13] This position gives them a unique broker position, making the transition (and controlling the relationship) between the local vote machine and the national candidates nominated by the central party. This consequently increases the influence of the respective local political elites. Last but not least, the *local barons* employ a populist rhetoric, portraying themselves as

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[10] Thomas Gallagher refers to the 1990–1996 government policy as a policy of society dependency on state. See Thomas Gallagher, *Furtul unei natiuni. Romania de la communism incoace*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 2004, pp. 23–26.

[11] Regarding the presidents of the County Boards, it should be mentioned that before 2008 they were appointed, while after the 2008 reform their seat was gained by universal vote.

[12] One such an example of central party adopting policies favorable to local politicians is the decentralization attempt of the Constanța harbor, which may be transferred from central administration to local, hence increasing the mayor's position. See http://www.gandul.info/politica/ponta-ar-vrea-sa-ii-dea-lui-mazare-portul-constanta-10695156 (access 06.06.2014).

[13] The case of Mazăre is again quite telling. He managed to win the last two elections (2012 and 2008) in the first round, with over 60% of the total votes. See http://roaep.ro/alegeri (access 06.06.2014).

workers for the benefit of the community, facing the shortcomings of the political system in their struggle to improve the standard of living.

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