

THE ROMANIAN DEMOCRACY CRISIS – A WARNING SIGNAL FOR US ALL

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The consolidation of democracy is not merely a simple succession of political events or electoral procedures, but rather a profound, often difficult and unpredictable process that permeates all spheres of a state's social, economic, and cultural life [1]. At its core, it involves the construction of a political climate in which citizens genuinely and permanently perceive democratic values as the only legitimate form of social and political coexistence [2]. Recent history, however, shows that the collapse of a totalitarian regime does not automatically lead to a consolidated democracy [3]. On the contrary, as Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan argue in their seminal work on democratic transition and consolidation, the fall of a dictatorship may just as easily be followed by the restoration of another authoritarian system or even by the establishment of a new dictatorship, sometimes more repressive than the previous one [4, 5].

Even in cases where democracy is successfully implemented following the collapse of an authoritarian regime, it does not automatically possess the stability required for long-term maintenance [6]. Democratic institutions, even those elected through fair and proper electoral procedures, can generate negative political effects, social discontent, or polarization, which gradually lead to the undermining of the entire democratic system [7]. For this reason, Linz and Stepan emphasize that the consolidation of democracy is only one of the possible outcomes of the fall of totalitarianism, and by no means an absolute certainty [8, 9].

Before exploring in greater detail how the process of democratic consolidation unfolds, it is essential to understand that there are certain minimal conditions that a democratic regime must meet in order to initiate this process [10]. First and foremost, a functional and legitimate state must exist. Without a state capable of exercising legitimate authority over its territory and citizens, democratization is impossible [11]. Secondly, all the initial stages of the democratic transition must have been successfully completed, with free and competitive elections being the most visible and symbolic milestone. Nevertheless, the mere organization of such elections does not, in itself, guarantee the conclusion of the transition. Frequently, even after fair and democratic elections, the newly elected government faces significant limitations in exercising real power due to the persistence of "authoritarian enclaves" within the institutional system, such as excessive military influence, control over secret services, or the resistance of economic and political elites originating from the former regime [12].

In this context, citizens' personal experience of the electoral process becomes essential for the quality of democracy [13]. Often, voters are strongly influenced by collective identities such as social class, religion, ethnicity, or political affiliation [14]. In the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including Romania during the 1990s, electoral decisions were often the result of external pressures, whether exercised directly by influential local leaders, the Church, or trade unions [15]. The lack of a genuine democratic culture and limited access to information

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transformed elections into a mere formality, with citizens being unable to exercise their right to vote in an informed and truly free manner [6].

Thus, for democracy to become truly consolidated, Linz and Stepan propose that we view the process through the lens of three essential dimensions: behavioral, attitudinal, and constitutional. The behavioral dimension reflects the capacity of institutions and political actors to accept democratic rules as the only legitimate form of political competition. This implies the elimination of any attempt to overturn the democratic order through force or institutional manipulation. Secondly, the attitudinal dimension involves the internalization of democratic values by both citizens and political leaders, such that even in times of severe economic or social crisis, they continue to respect democratic norms [16]. Finally, the constitutional dimension requires the existence of strong, stable, and independent institutions that guarantee the coherent and equal application of the law for all citizens and political actors alike [6, 17].

The recent example of Romania clearly illustrates how fragile and vulnerable a democracy can be, even after decades of seemingly successful democratic transition. In 2024, Romania faced an unprecedented political crisis, culminating in the country's downgrade in the Democracy Index compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), from the status of a "flawed democracy" to that of a "hybrid regime" [18]. This classification, reserved for states that combine formal democratic procedures with authoritarian practices, resulted from an extremely tense context, triggered by the annulment of the presidential elections by the Constitutional Court [19].

The Constitutional Court's ruling, issued in December 2024, was based on solid legal grounds, invoking multiple violations of fundamental democratic principles. The Court highlighted the existence of external interference in the electoral process, a fact later confirmed by official reports from the Supreme Council of National Defense (CSAT) [20]. These interferences consisted of the use of sophisticated digital manipulation mechanisms and extensive disinformation campaigns, aimed at influencing voters' decisions in ways that contravened democratic norms and electoral legislation [21]. Furthermore, subsequent investigations revealed serious breaches of the law regarding campaign financing, with sources of funding identified as unclear or illegal, originating both domestically and from abroad.

However, this deep crisis exposed major structural problems within Romanian democracy, revealing the persistence of authoritarian practices and the state's institutional incapacity to effectively manage critical situations. The protests and social tensions triggered by the annulment of the elections highlighted the polarization of society and the fragility of the existing democratic culture [22]. Beyond the immediate political issues, the case of Romania in 2024 demonstrates clearly that the mere existence of formal institutions and democratic electoral processes is not sufficient to ensure the effective consolidation of a democratic regime.

Authentic democratic consolidation requires a deeply rooted and well-developed democratic culture among the citizenry [23]. Numerous scholars highlight that economic development can play an important role in supporting democracy; however, as political scientist Robert Dahl argues, economic growth alone cannot guarantee the existence of an authentic and sustainable democratic culture [24]. The clearest example in this regard is China—a country with an impressive economy but completely devoid of democratic foundations [25]. Thus, a genuine democratic culture entails sustained civic education, active citizen engagement, strong democratic institutions, and strict adherence to the rule of law, alongside political transparency and accountability [26].

Following the issues discussed above, it must be emphasized that Romania's democratic regression is not an isolated case within the regional context of Central and Eastern

Europe, but rather part of a broader trend of democratic deterioration present in several countries in this part of the continent. For this reason, the Romanian crisis must be understood and analyzed within a wider regional framework, where institutional fragility and authoritarian backsliding are becoming increasingly alarming.

A telling example is Poland, where judicial reforms implemented in recent years have sparked serious controversies both domestically and internationally. Measures adopted by the government—considered by many as abusive interventions in the judiciary—have led to infringement procedures initiated by the European Commission. These reforms, labeled as direct threats to judicial independence and the rule of law, have created a tense atmosphere in the relationship between Warsaw and Brussels, highlighting the risk of steps backward towards authoritarian political practices in a country once regarded as a success story in post-communist democratization [27].

At the same time, Hungary represents another significant example of democratic regression in the region. Legislative changes implemented over the past decade have drastically diminished press freedom and increased governmental control over media institutions, as well as over other independent bodies, such as universities and non-governmental organizations [27]. These developments have led numerous international organizations to classify Hungary as a “hybrid regime,” where democratic formalism coexists with clear authoritarian practices. In this context, the Romanian case of 2024 gains even greater relevance, highlighting shared vulnerabilities among several Central and Eastern European states.

Bulgaria, for its part, contributes to the regional picture of democratic instability. Repeated political crises and the inability to form stable and legitimate governments have led to successive early elections and a profound erosion of public trust in political and democratic institutions. Despite the formal existence of democratic institutions, these political instabilities have resulted in declining public confidence in the electoral process and in elected representatives [28].

In conclusion, the recent events in Romania and across the region demonstrate that democracy is never definitively guaranteed. It requires continuous protection, constant vigilance, and a profound commitment from all actors within society. In the absence of these essential conditions, the democracies of Central and Eastern Europe risk gradually transforming into hybrid systems, progressively losing legitimacy and real support from their own citizens, and becoming vulnerable to serious deviations that may compromise the very essence of fundamental democratic values.

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