‘Righting it Up’: an Interplay-based Model for Analyzing Extreme Right Dynamics in Romania

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Abstract
The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, it aims to offer a model for the analysis of right-wing extremism in Central and Eastern Europe (and elsewhere), which focuses – at its core – on the interplay between political agents, structural and cultural conditionings. Employing Archer’s (1995, 1996, 2000) morphogenetic approach, it shows that the success of right-wing extremism depends on whether the agent-structure-culture interplay results in structural and/or cultural elaboration (morphogenesis) or reproduction (morphostasis). Second, the paper employs this framework in an analysis of contemporary Romania. Here, it argues that the decline of extreme right parties against the background of continuous support for and presence of right-wing extremism within Romanian society is a consequence of how logical contradictions within and between the structural and the cultural systems have been negotiated by political actors.

Key words: Romania, extreme right, culture, structure, agency, morphogenetic approach

Introduction
The growth in popularity of the extreme right in Europe in recent years is a phenomenon that has been highlighted with concern by critics. Understanding its increasing success requires a detailed investigation that looks into causes, explores trajectories of development, and identifies specific features and arenas of interaction where right-wing extremism constitutes a potent participatory force. Explorations of the extreme right in Europe operate largely on the basis of a two-pronged approach that focuses on developments in Western Europe and in Central and Eastern Europe, and considers them as separate cases. This approach is based on the fact that the fall of the Iron Curtain gave way to an accelerated range of processes in the former communist states, summed up under the umbrella term democratization, in contrast to their respective individual post-authoritarian backgrounds. The specificity of the context and of the nature of the processes prompted the need to treat the development of right-wing extremism in former communist states differently from that of the established democracies of Western Europe.

The current electoral success of extremist parties at national level and their increased presence in the European Parliament may point to a convergence of extreme right politics in Western and Central and Eastern Europe. Such a levelling of the field – if true – would do away with the need for differentiated approaches. The present study argues to the contrary. It claims that maintaining the dichotomy is still useful; nevertheless, the way in which Central and Eastern Europe is considered requires revisiting. This is largely because the transformations following the collapse of the communist regimes in the area have been analyzed using a paradigm that rests on the notion of transition to democracy (using West European capitalist liberal democracy as the reference point). This model appears problematic as it is based on at least three assumptions. First, the term transition assumes (explicitly or implicitly) that the process of transformation takes place in a necessary one-directional (and linear) fashion. Second, it assumes that the reference point is a fixed and unified one, minimizing the relevance of the transformative nature of Western European democracies themselves. Finally, and linked to the previous points, it assumes that Western European democracies (and more broadly capitalist liberal-democracy) can function as a model to be followed; in the meantime, increasingly loud and critical voices point to inherent and fundamental flaws in the system (the recent Occupy movement is one such example).

It is beyond the scope and limits of this study to engage fully with these wider points. However, they can serve as a background for the specific purpose of this study, which is to
investigate current right-wing radicalism in Romania. Thus, the points above bring into focus the need to pay close attention to the specific circumstances of the case under investigation in order to capture more accurately the nuances, processes, and relationships that inform and articulate the presence of extremism and intolerance in Romanian politics and society at large.

The purpose of this paper is thus two-fold. On the one hand, it is concerned with understanding and explaining the processes that are responsible for a ‘righting up’ of Romanian politics. That is, it focuses on how mainstream politics has gradually appropriated and then expressed extreme right views and ideas, causing the extreme right parties to become progressively less relevant for electoral competition. On the other hand, it aims to offer a way to ‘right’ (which is to adjust) the way we broadly approach and understand processes and transformations related to the extreme right in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond. In other words, it provides an analytical model that accounts for the different levels at which the interplay between political actors, structural conditions, and cultural conditions take place.

Conceptual Discussion
Research on various aspects concerning the radical right has tended to concentrate in more detail on two aspects. First, at the theoretical level, debates about the nature of the phenomenon under investigation have produced a ‘battle’ of definitions. This has caused disagreement concerning the appropriate labels to be attached to “right”, including “extreme” and its counterpart ‘radical’, ‘populist’, and ‘far’. The result is a plethora of combinations, of which ‘extreme right’ and ‘radical right’ appear to have aquired a quasi-monopoly, with contenders such as ‘populist’, ‘far right’, ‘radical populist’, ‘far-right populist’, ‘populist right-wing’ also being used (see Mudde 2000, 2007; also Minkenberg 2002a; Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Betz 1994; Ignazi 2002 and 2003; Eatwell 2004; Hainsworth 2008). The issues surrounding definition have an impact on what is being included or excluded as features of extreme right and, in particular, on its relationship with the democratic process (Ignazi 2003; Hainsworth 2008). This begs the question: is a comprehensive definition – one that would account in a detailed way for the diversity of extreme right phenomena, groups and ideological underpinnings – possible and/or ultimately necessary? A minimum threshold approach (or maximal definition, in Mudde’s terms) is employed in this study in order to establish the basis for the discussion. Diversity can then be explored using other tools that account for specificity and that can be selected more appropriately, based on the cases examined and supported by empirical observations. Thus, the lowest common denominator that characterizes the varieties of right-wing extremism points to the extreme version of nationalism articulated in populist and anti-pluralistic terms, that insists upon criteria of group inclusion and exclusion, and that reacts in a strong negative fashion to social change (see Minkenberg, 2001, 2002a and 2002b; also Mudde 2007).

Second, in terms of the object of investigation, research on the extreme right has primarily concentrated on electoral politics. Agendas, success, and failure, as well as causes and effects are thus explained by how radical right parties fare in terms of participation in elections and results, and on how mainstream parties position themselves in relation to their extremist competitors (Ignazi 2003; Hainsworth 2000, 2008; Mudde 2007; Ramet 1999). A party-based approach is useful as it identifies the actors that are relevant for the electoral process and it enables an understanding of broad aspects of the political landscape. However, this approach only captures a paradigmatic (and inherently reified) picture of extreme right actors and of
their positioning within a society at a particular time. Electoral success captures only temporal ‘snapshots’ of reality. Time-scaled assessments of electoral success yield a more advanced determination but are still limited, as they do not account for the interplay between various actors and structures in a sufficiently nuanced manner.

What is needed instead is a process-based approach which identifies and differentiates between ‘types’ of extreme right actors and explores the ‘patterns’ and ‘features’ of such actors, but in fact goes further by looking at how these actors ‘interact’ within social environments (Minkenberg 2002b). The focus in this study is therefore placed on the causal properties of relations between structure and agents, and between culture and agents, as they emerge from Archer’s morphogenetic approach. Structural circumstances and cultural conditioning present social agents with enablements and constraints. Agents in turn act within and upon these contexts, with the dialectical interplay leading to the reproduction and reinforcement of the existing cultural and structural circumstances (morphostasis) or to the elaboration of new structural and cultural circumstances (morphogenesis)1 (Archer 1995, 1996; also Carter 2000; Porpora 2013). Importantly, the interplay between structural and cultural factors and agents may contain within it logical contradictions2 that ultimately have to be negotiated and solved by agents (Archer 1995; also Carter 2000).

In other words, an analysis of either the relevant actors or institutional structures cannot provide a thorough understanding of the extreme right in Romania on its own. The investigation of the interplay between them, however, could potentially tease out more meaningful considerations of the state of affairs. Put simply this study aims to highlight the fact that – despite significant growth and power of extreme right parties within the first two decades since the collapse of communism – there is now a very low presence of such political actors in Romania with low electoral success. In addition, the presence of other extreme right social organizations (outside electoral politics) is very limited in both size and effectiveness, while subcultural milieus (i.e., neo-Nazis or skinheads) are almost nonexistent. Despite all this, there is a high level of support for and manifestation of right-wing extremism and intolerance within Romanian society (see Cinpoes 2013a and 2013b). This study proposes, albeit as a sketch, an analysis of the extreme right in Romania that looks at the relations between structural and cultural conditionings and agent engagement at four different levels of depth: (a) the interplay at the level of electoral competition; (b) the interplay at the level of engagement between political parties; (c) the level of intra-party dynamics and the ‘mainstreaming’ of the extreme right through ‘political cruising’; and (d) the level of intra-party dynamics, the ‘mainstreaming’ of the extreme right through ‘casual intolerance’3 and public reinforcement of extremism (Table 12.1).
Table 1. The four levels of depth model for analyzing structure, culture and agent interplay

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of depth</th>
<th>Structural and cultural conditions</th>
<th>Electoral politics</th>
<th>Inter-party dynamics</th>
<th>Intra-party dynamics: political cruising</th>
<th>Intra-party dynamics: casual intolerance and public opinion</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1989 - 1995: move from one-party state to multi-party competition</td>
<td>- Cultural morphostasis (Reproduction of a culture of right-wing extremism)</td>
<td>Political agents interplay: growth of ER parties</td>
<td>Political agents interplay: open collaboration and competition with ER parties</td>
<td>Political agents interplay: incorporation of ER party members via political cruising</td>
<td>Political agents interplay: use and reinforcement of extremist language and ideas by the political mainstream (casual intolerance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995 – 2008: political competition after the signing of the EU accession treaty</td>
<td>- Structural morphogenesis (Elaboration of new structures of right-wing extremism)</td>
<td>Political agents interplay: consolidation of ER parties (winners and losers)</td>
<td>Political agents interplay: formal opposition to and containment of ER parties BUT Collaboration at local level (“simulated change”)</td>
<td>Political agents interplay: incorporation of ER party members via political cruising</td>
<td>Political agents interplay: use and reinforcement of extremist language and ideas by the political mainstream (casual intolerance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 – ongoing: political competition after electoral system change and after EU accession</td>
<td>- Cultural morphostasis (Reproduction of a culture of right-wing extremism)</td>
<td>Logical coherence: culture and structure alignment</td>
<td>Logical contradictions: culture and structure dealignment</td>
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The aim is thus to provide an explanation for the widespread presence of intolerance and exclusion in Romanian society, and to achieve a better understanding of the nature of Romanian right-wing extremism and the challenges offered to the formation of strategies to counter these tendencies.
Who Are the Extreme Right Actors in Romania?
Beginning immediately after the events of 1989, Romania has witnessed a swift re-emergence of nationalist extremism. The electoral success of such groups has been marked by three milestones: (1) In 1992 the Party for Romanian National Unity (PUNR) and the Greater Romania Party (PRM) became the first extreme right groups in Central and Eastern Europe to enter government (as coalition partners) to be followed in 1993 by the Slovak National Party (Mudde 2005: 165); (2) Corneliu Vadim Tudor, the leader of the PRM, entered the second round of the presidential elections in 2000 (anticipating a similar feat by Jean-Marie Le Pen in France two years later), while the party reached the apex of its success in the parliamentary elections of the same year, becoming the largest party in the opposition; and (3) the PRM made possible the formation of the first (very short-lived) extreme right caucus in the European Parliament – the Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty group – in January 2007 (ironically, it was also the PRM that caused its dissolution, when its MEPs withdrew from the group following inflammatory comments made toward Romanians by Alessandra Mussolini) (Cinpoeş 2010: 174–176). With such a ‘pedigree’, it is surprising that extreme right parties in Romania are not faring as well: they have not had any representation in parliament since 2008 and there are no serious signs that this situation will change anytime soon.

That being said, three extreme right political parties still operate in Romania: the Greater Romania Party, the New Generation Party – Christian Democratic (PNG-CD), and the ‘Everything for the Country’ Party (TPŢ). They are worth discussing briefly because of their previous success (PRM), the way in which they have shaped party politics (PNG-CD), and because of the nature of their discourse and their historical legacy claims (TPŢ) (Cinpoeş 2013a: 171–172). The PRM was founded in June 1991, centered around the eponymous weekly publication edited by Corneliu Vadim Tudor and Eugen Barbu, two former sycophants of the Ceauşescu regime. Since its appearance on the political scene, the party followed a growing popularity trajectory. Its ideology is characterized by a virulent form of nationalism, revanchism, authoritarianism, and discriminatory views directed against any minorities (Cinpoeş 2010, 2013a). It built on growing popularity and electoral success up to 2000, when it became the second largest party (surpassed only by the governing party – the Social Democrat Party, PSD)4. After its surprising success in the 2000 elections, the PRM took a nosedive: it still managed to secure parliamentary representation in 2004, but failed to do so in the other parliamentary elections (in 2008 and 2012). Moreover, in 2012, the PRM received a derisible vote of less than 1.5 percent – the worst result since its formation. Currently the party is going through some seismic movement. Tudor’s almost uncontested leadership of the party has been seriously put to the test.5 One case-scenario could see Tudor clinging to power and driving the party into the ground conclusively. On the other hand, if another coup is successful and Tudor is driven out, the situation might merit observation. Despite the party membership having been depleted by defections, it still retains an organizational structure at the local level that means grassroots members can be shaken up and rallied to the cause. In the context of the general dissatisfaction of the electorate with the mainstream parties, a re-born PRM could have the potential to lure back some of their previous supporters. Nevertheless, as it stands, the party scored a mere three percent in recent opinion polls.6

The PNG-CD (formerly the New Generation Party – a dormant party founded by the former mayor of Bucharest, Viorel Lis) has shifted toward the extreme right since 2004 – when taken over by George Becali, owner of the football club Steaua Bucharest. Becali is known to have appropriated the symbols and slogans of the interwar fascist Iron Guard, which contribute largely to the ideological mixture of mythologized nationalism, conservative Christian
Orthodox beliefs, crass populism and intolerance. Its electoral performance has been modest: in both the 2004 and 2008 elections it has been unable to exceed 2.5 percent (Cinpoes 2013a: 177-178). However, its relevance lies in the fact that its appearance on the political scene in Romania has generated competition for the PRM, which until then had monopolized the extreme right discourse. In the most recent parliamentary elections, held in 2012, the party did not compete, largely due to the last minute decision of the leader to join the National Liberal Party (PNL). Abandoned by their leader right before the 2012 elections, and with Becali currently in jail, there is little hope of survival for the PNG-CD. In the CSCI October opinion poll, the party did not even register on the radar in terms of public voting intentions (CSCI 2013). Despite its current deplorable state and its stunted performance in general, the party bears some relevance in terms of its contribution to the processes that facilitated the embedding of right-wing extremism in the mainstream political scene, as well as in the cultural system in Romania, as it will be shown later.

Finally, the TPŢ has achieved negligible electoral success, despite having been in existence since 1993. In many respects, this group falls more appropriately into the category of social movement because of the nature of its mode of operation. Its relevance lies in the type of right-wing extremism it represents. The TPŢ is one of the groups that make direct claims to be the heirs of the interwar Iron Guard. As such, their ideological grounding is built on a fundamentalist version of Orthodox Christianity, mythologized folk traditions and history, as well as racial purity. Outside the narrow framework of party competition, the TPŢ functions largely as a grassroots type organization, socially active through the organization of small-scale ritualized ceremonies and cultural events that aim to achieve maximum visibility (Cinpoes 2013a: 180-181). The party’s right to use the name ‘Everything for the Country’ (the name under which the Iron Guard re-established itself after it was dissolved in 1933) has been challenged in the courts and remains a matter as yet unresolved. More importantly, though, a recent legislative amendment initiated by Crin Antonescu and several other members of the PNL threatens more directly the existence of the TPŢ. The proposal aims – among other things – to extend the prohibition on organizations and symbols with a fascist, racist, or xenophobic character to include deeds of the same nature and also to extend this prohibition so that it specifically covers deeds, organizations and symbols with a legionary character (Andrei 2013). Whether or not this materializes, the presence of the TPŢ in the public sphere demonstrates that the ideas of the Iron Guard still have legitimacy and mileage for segments of Romanian society.

Among those extreme right social actors that operate outside the framework of electoral politics, one that requires attention is the New Right (ND) movement. In terms of its claims of legacy of the Iron Guard, its ideological character, and even in terms of the characteristics of its members (largely young, educated people), the ND is very similar to the TPŢ. As in the case of the TPŢ party, the relevance of the ND lies in the dissemination and legitimization of the Iron Guard’s ideology through public activities (marches, work camps and commemorative events and quasi-pilgrimages) and through a strong presence in online media. In addition, the ND has strong links to other similar organizations in Europe. It is one of the founding members of the European National Front, a group that includes the National Democratic Party from Germany, the New Force from Italy, the Falange from Spain, the National Revival of Poland, and Golden Dawn from Greece (see Țurcanu 2010: 21).

Other extreme right actors do exist in Romania in the form of cultural associations with small membership and parochial relevance, or as online-based groups and communities that disseminate extremist messages and ideas (Cinpoes 2013a: 172; Andreescu 2004: 172). In
addition, the Romanian Orthodox Church has consistently displayed exclusionary, authoritarian tendencies fused with an ethnically-based understanding of the nation (Cinpoes 2013a: 183-184; Andreescu 2004: 178).

The nature and consequences of interplay: a four-level analysis
At a cursory level, an electoral politics based longitudinal look at the fate of extreme right groups in Romania can highlight some important milestones. Between 1990 and 1992, the extreme right experienced a stage of sudden growth. In the context of ethnic tension and violence, two key players, the PUNR and the PRM, emerged in a process of finding their feet and adjusting to the post-communist dynamics. Between 1992 and 1996, the co-opting of the two extreme right parties into a coalition government reflected a process of ‘acclimatization’ of Romanian society to right-wing extremism. The period 1996 to 2000 then became a fight for supremacy, out of which the PRM would ultimately emerge triumphant. The PRM garnered the support of the entire segment of the electorate that had previously been split between the two parties, and the PUNR were forced into the political wilderness. What followed in the period 2000 and 2004 was characterized by an apparently coordinated attempt by mainstream political parties to keep the PRM at bay⁹, which signalled the beginning of its decline. What is more, between 2004 and 2008 competition in the extreme right field from the PNG-CD accelerated the downward trajectory of the PRM. Finally, since 2008 an absence of parliamentary representation by extreme right parties has been established as the norm, without any immediate reason to think this situation to change. Such a macro-level approach has the disadvantage of producing distortions in the understanding of extreme right dynamics in Romania. At prima facie, it appears that Romania seems immune to the wave of support for right-wing extremism growing elsewhere in Europe. Zooming in on the interplay between various actors and structures within this macro-framework however reveals a process of transmutation of the extreme right, which will be analyzed at several inter-related levels in the remainder of this paper.

The first level of interplay: electoral politics
The first level identifies specific structural and cultural conditions that characterize political developments in post-1989 Romania, and outlines the input they have in shaping right-wing extremism and social interplay more broadly. Scholars looking at post-communist developments in Central and Eastern Europe have emphasized the role played by both interwar (i.e fascist) nationalism and the nationalist character of state socialism, as well as the absence of democratic experience and practice in influencing the character of right-wing extremism (Minkenberg 2002a: 356, 361; also Bustikova and Kitschelt 2009: 460). The case of Romania is particularly relevant in this respect because of the combination of a particularly extreme version of nationalism during the interwar period (which in itself is not unique to this country), a communist regime that embraced and incorporated nationalism, a particularly controlling and repressive communist regime that stifled any significant opposition and shaped its violent collapse, and the lack of democratic experience (Livezeanu 1995: 22; also Boia 2001: 81; Gallagher 1998: 44; Deletant 1999: 57; Cinpoes 2010). All these aspects are often summed up under the umbrella concept of ‘legacies’, a concept that incorporates cultural, structural, and institutional aspects that feature at the outset of post-communism (Bustikova and Kitschelt 2009; also Pop-Eleches 2007; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2012). The problem with the concept of legacies is two-fold. First, it confers on these issues only a passive role: they are merely an assortment of items at the agent’s disposal, and the agent can
select from such a toolbox whichever item they deem necessary (granted the choice is limited to what is available in the toolbox, which presumably explains the persistence of right-wing extremist ideas and tendencies). However, these structural and cultural conditions have independent causal powers and they need to be treated in a way that reflects this. Second, lumping together structural and cultural aspects creates the impression that they can be conflated or, at the very least, that they have internal and inter-relational coherence. A way out of this problem would be to abandon the term ‘legacy’, to differentiate between structure and culture, and to explore agential engagement with each of them separately in order to capture the results produced by the tensions and incoherencies in these relationships.¹⁰

The picture of the aftermath of the collapse of communism in Romania is that of a cultural system where extreme nationalist themes, symbols, and ideas occupied a prominent position. This is the result of a continuous process of cultural reproduction in different times, by different groups, in different circumstances, and – despite different structural conditions – of the same nationalist themes, mythologized histories, and symbols, including arguments concerning ethnic origin, historical continuity, linguistic continuity, heroic leadership, as well as concepts of ‘self’ and ‘otherness’ (see Cinpoes 2010). In contrast, this cultural context existed against the background of a radical and sudden transformation of the structures of powers associated with the move away from the one-party state and its political, economic, and social features. The vacuum of power enabled agents who were better positioned (i.e., had been closer to the communist structures of power), and who were willing to reinforce and exploit rather than challenge cultural conditionings, to operate more successfully within the new structures (which implied, among other things, a competition for power, a multi-party system, free elections, etc.). For this reason, it is not surprising that right-wing extremism flourished in this environment. It flourished both through the emergence of social organizations such as ‘Vatra Românească’ (Romanian Hearth) and of political parties such as the PUNR and the PRM. Additionally, nationalism was the tool of choice for the National Salvation Front (FSN) – the political group that emerged as the main beneficiary of the general confusion that ensued during the months following December 1989 – in its drive to consolidate power. The FSN played the violent xenophobia card to silence competition from the reformed historical parties – the PNL and the Christian Democrat National Peasants’ Party (PNŢCD) – accusing them of serving foreign interests, and appealing publicly to the miners for protection (see Shafir 1993: 157; also Gallagher 2005: 80). By the time of the 1992 elections, the participation of the former FSN, which split into the Democratic National Salvation Front (FDSN) (Iliescu’s faction, currently known as the PSD¹¹) and the remaining FSN (Petre Roman’s faction, currently the Liberal Democrat Party, PDL), in elections as bona fide political parties was settled. The volatility and fragmentation of the party system (which is more generally valid for the whole post-communist region) made it necessary for the FDSN to co-opt the PUNR and the PRM into a coalition government. In other words, the structural and cultural conditionings that permitted the flourishing of extreme right political actors also facilitated their collaboration.

The 1996 elections represent a slight turning point: interaction by a powerful external agency, supported by internal actors and by some aspects of the cultural system (which were co-existing with the culture of right-wing extremism in a state of logical contradiction) led to the elaboration of new social and political structures that affected the way in which political agents were able to interact with each other. In 1995, Romania – along with other former communist states in the region – signed the formal application for EU accession. The accession process was widely supported by the Romanian public due to a combination of material interests (the ability to travel and work in Western European countries) and cultural
context (the enthusiasm concerning the symbolic notion of a return to a democratic and free Europe after the long period of communist rule). This enthusiasm for democracy co-existed as mentioned above with extremism and intolerance, despite the inherent logical incongruity involved. These new structures, which emerged from the accession protocol involving rules, conditionality, and the implementation of the aquis communautaire, led to the victory of the Romanian Democratic Convention (CDR), which was perceived emphatically as the more pro-Western European choice. Dissatisfaction with their performance brought the representatives of right-wing extremism to the fore once more, and pitched one against the other: the PRM, on the one hand, and the FDSN heirs, the (then) PDSR, on the other. Due to the new (EU accession-related) structural context, the PDSR was hindered in its ability to revert to its former partnership with the extreme right. In fact, what appears to have happened more broadly is the creation of a cordon sanitaire aimed at containing the success of the PRM. This led to a gradual disappearance of the PRM (and of other extreme right groups) from electoral competition.

Another important structural change that facilitated the decline of radical right extremist groups was the move, in 2008, from an electoral system based on proportional representation, which had been used since 1990, to a mixed majoritarian system. The main loser from this transformation – whether an intended consequence envisioned by those who devised the new electoral system or not – was the PRM, who failed to secure any seats in Parliament.

The second level of interplay: inter-party politics

This first, macro-level analysis of the interplay between structural and cultural conditionings on the one hand, and agents on the other, highlights and explains developments in Romanian politics, specifically the growth in support and the subsequent decline of extreme right parties. Other apparent conclusions that could be drawn focus on the fact that the structural elaboration that led to the demise of the PRM and its kind signifies the purging of right-wing extremism from Romanian politics, and that the process of containment by other political actors also contributed to this development. These claims are deceptive and require further probing by focusing on a second level of engagement by political agents. This level focuses largely on interaction between political parties in the context of the elaboration of new structures (as identified above).

In this light, containment as an explanation for the decline of the extreme right from 2000 on offers a sweeping picture that obscures important details. What can be noticed instead is that structural changes commencing with Romania’s formal application to join the EU in 1995 have deepened the logical contradictions emerging from the way political agents situate themselves in relation to the structural system and the cultural system respectively.

What is visible at the national level is a formal compliance with rules, principles, ideas, and regulations derived from the framework of the aquis communautaire, which organize (and thus limit) the behavior of individuals and groups. The legislative provisions that protect individuals against discrimination in Romania are comparable with those in all other EU states, and in some areas they go beyond the requirements of the European directives (see CLR 2008; also FRA 2010, 2013). More relevant, however, is the fact that the alignment of the legislative framework with the EU requirements was the result of international pressure and occurred in the absence of proper public consultation. Furthermore, in terms of implementation, critics have noted barriers to accessing different procedures due to “lack of
access to legal aid, lack of pro bono assistance, lack of familiarity with the Directives, and/or national anti discrimination (sic!) provisions on the part of lawyers and judges” (CLR 2008: 30, 36). In short, this type of engagement demonstrated the ability of the political elites in Romania to ‘talk the talk’ without ‘walking the walk’ very convincingly, in a manner that prompted critics such as Tom Gallagher (2009) to describe this process as “simulated change”. Party interaction at the national level has formally followed similar principles aligned to the new structural framework: that is, of disassociation from and containment of extreme right groups (mainly the PRM). Incidentally, this containment was largely discursive and has not extended to the PNG-CD, partly because of its limited relevance as a political competitor, but also because it did not appear to have an image as tainted as the PRM.

Away from the center of public scrutiny, however, the picture looks quite different: the PRM has been co-opted into partnership at local level by the mainstream parties so long as it suited their own strategies and enabled them to acquire dominance over their opponents. In several instances the PRM entered protocols of collaboration with mainstream parties, including the PDL, the PSD and the PNL. In 2009 for example, the PDL collaborated formally with the PRM in order to secure a majority in the Bucharest General Council, and a year later jumped ship to make a partnership with the PSD there. In 2010, the PNL forged an alliance with the PRM for the local elections in Hunedoara, while the PSD partnered with the PRM in Gorj County. In 2011, the PSD also established a collaboration protocol with the PRM in Ilfov County. These actions suggest that old affinities and partnerships between the mainstream and extreme right parties have not gone away, despite public attempts by the former to distance themselves from the latter. Extremist views have continued to significantly dominate and inform the interplay between agents and the cultural context.

The third level of interplay: intra-party dynamics and political cruising

The third level of depth in the analysis of the extreme right in Romania further reinforces the contradictory manner in which actors engage with the structural context on the one hand, and with the cultural one on the other. Additionally, it reveals the dynamics of party interaction at the level of individuals. The phenomenon of ‘political cruising’ – the large scale migration of individuals from one party to another – is symptomatic of Romanian politics and illustrates the insidious nature of the incorporation and assimilation of the extreme right by the mainstream (Cinpoes 2013b). In turn, this explains the tension between the role of structure and that of culture. Concretely, two trends can be observed: On the one hand, the structural conditions expanded upon since 1995 on the basis of the EU accession process go unchallenged, because of the simulated compliance with the process by political agents, as well as their simulated adaptation to it. These structures account for the superficial containment of extreme right parties and for their exit from electoral competition. On the other hand, the culture of extremism and intolerance continues to be reproduced and reinforced, due to the large numbers of members of radical right parties who have joined the ranks of mainstream political parties.

During the period of expansion and consolidation that took place for the PRM between 1996 and 2000, its domination over extreme right discourse at the expense of the PUNR had been concretely aided by the division within the PUNR. As discussed earlier on, Gheorghe Funar and his followers joined the PRM. The remaining faction of the PUNR struggled for survival until 2006, when it was absorbed into the PC (which is currently part of governing Social Liberal Union – USL). This phenomenon, of incorporating the extreme right into the
mainstream via political cruising, has been particularly visible from 2000 on (coinciding with the decline of the PRM). At the parliamentary level, fourteen deputies and one senator who were part of the PRM group in the legislature from 2000 to 2004 appear as MPs representing different parties in the 2004 to 2008 legislature (five for the PC, three for the PSD, two for the PDL, and one deputy and one senator for the PNL). In the 2008 to 2012 term, the PDL attracted a further five deputies from the PRM, while the PSD-PC alliance gained two deputies and a senator from the PRM, compared to the period 2004 to 2008. On the eve of the 2012 parliamentary elections, the Alliance for a Clean Romania (ARC) identified 150 candidates who had been involved in political cruising, twelve of which had been members of extremist parties (nine from the PRM, two from the PNG-CD, and one from the PUNR) (see Cinpoesă 2013b, data aggregated from Parlamentul României n.d. (a), n.d. (b); and ARC 2012).

Significantly, the migration towards mainstream parties has included prominent figures from extreme right groups. Moreover, some of these individuals have acquired and consolidated positions of significance within their new political ‘homes’. This is the case with Anghel Stanciu, former vice-president and founding member of the PRM, who is now in the PSD and has been instrumental in the creation of the mixed majoritarian electoral system currently operating in Romania. Valeriu Tabăra – leader of the PUNR between 1997 and 2001 – is now in the PDL and held the portfolio of the Ministry of Agriculture between 2010 and 2012. Lia Olguta Vasilescu – former leader of the National Youth Organization of the PRM, and a protégée of Tudor – has joined the PSD and is now the Mayor of Craiova. George Becali, the leader of the PNG-CD ran as a PNL candidate in the 2012 elections and obtained a seat (he later resigned from the party and, due to his imprisonment, lost his seat in parliament). Another former vice-president of the PRM who joined the PSD is Lucian Bolcaș. He has been the subject of controversy at the end of 2013, when he was nominated by the PSD for the position of judge in the Romanian Constitutional Court. Following public accusations of holding intolerant and anti-Semitic views, he withdrew his candidacy for the post (Neagu 2013; Ciobanu 2013).

Thus, the incorporation of the extreme right in the political mainstream via ‘political cruising’ reveals a further level of nuance to the dissonance in the way agents engage with the structural context and with the cultural context. The outcome is a simulated delimitation from extremism and a decline of extreme right parties, on the one hand, and a reinforcement and reproduction of right-wing extremism and a culture of intolerance.

The fourth level of interplay: intra-party dynamics, casual intolerance and public opinion
The final level of depth is concerned with the analysis of two things: the interplay between public rhetoric – that is, by mainstream politicians and the media – and public opinion. The widespread presence of ‘casual intolerance’ in public discourse – the day-to-day use of deliberate or unintended discriminatory and intolerant speech practices that reproduce and reinforce prejudices17 – reflects a state of cultural morphostasis, whereby radical right, intolerant and exclusionary ideas and attitudes are reproduced and reinforced. The absorption of extreme right politicians into the ranks of mainstream parties is, therefore, not arbitrary and is indicative of a deep-seated convergence of ideas and rhetoric between the extreme right and the mainstream. In other words, this inclusion happened precisely because the views
and beliefs of these individuals have found resonance with similar views and beliefs held by mainstream politicians.

Cases in which members of mainstream political parties have had discriminatory, exclusionary and intolerant public interventions are numerous. They are also diverse in terms of who the culprits are and whom they are targeting. Some of them, such as the case of the 2007 incident when President Traian Băsescu called a female journalist a ‘filthy gypsy’, have been much publicized and been subject to an investigation by the National Council for Combating Discrimination, which issued President Băsescu with a warning (RomaniCriss 2007). George Becali has become a regular ‘client’ of the Council, having been fined by the institution several times for sexist, xenophobic, and homophobic statements. Other notable actions and public interventions have included the case of Cătălin Cherecheș, the Mayor of Baia Mare, who was criticized for building a wall in 2011 that virtually segregated a Roma community living in a social block of flats from the rest of the street; racist comments made by two former foreign ministers, Adrian Cioroianu and Teodor Baconschi; and the denial of the Romanian Holocaust by PSD senator Dan Sova (Cinpoes 2013a and 2013b).

The casual use of intolerant language by politicians is largely reflected in the media, especially in the case of what I call “negatively charged stereotypes used neutrally” (Cinpoes 2013b). Research on the negative treatment of specific groups in the Romanian media has shown that the Roma community and LGBT minorities are the preferred targets (Ganea and Martin 2006: 44, 46). In addition to the direct contribution made to the dissemination of a culture of casual intolerance, the media has had an indirect impact as well. Significant airtime and column inches devoted to controversial personalities known to belong to right-wing extremist groups, or to similarly questionable activities, results in an implicit legitimization of these acts. George Becali’s offensive and intolerant outbursts normally generate high ratings, which makes television channels in Romania more than willing to accommodate his whims. It seems that Becali still receives a great deal of attention from the media even after his imprisonment: his movements, activities, and declarations from inside the jail are being reported in minute detail. As for activities of an extreme right nature, the national TV channel TVR3 was dragged into a public scandal in December 2013 after broadcasting an anti-Semitic Christmas carol (Pantazi 2013).

It is important to point out that the pervasiveness of these ideas among the media and the political class is matched by similar cultural repertoire in the populace at large which shows no signs of change. Indeed, the views of private citizens may be even more extreme as there is no pressure for self-censorship and restraint, which can act as a taming factor on public figures such as politicians. This is in contrast to the shifts in the structural contexts of extremism.

In more concrete terms, the simple fact that extreme right parties have declined since 2008 does not indicate that the segments of the electorate that voted for these parties in the past have automatically altered their extremist views. It means rather that these radical right views are catered for elsewhere, through the incorporation of the extreme right via political cruising and casual intolerance. Opinion survey results covering the period between 2003 and 2012 demonstrate the endurance of intolerant and exclusionary views among the general public. Public opinion concerning minorities has remained largely unchanged (with some worrying tendencies toward an increase in intolerance in the more recent surveys), and the most marginalized categories of people continue to be the Roma and sexual minorities (see
Cinpoes 2013b). One of the most recent surveys on attitudes concerning discrimination (carried out between October and November 2013) reveals a continuity of views among the population. The survey shows, predictably enough, that the level of exclusion applied toward different categories decreases proportionally with the closeness of the relationship to the respondent (i.e. a family member of an excluded group will enjoy a lower level of acceptance than a friend, a friend less than a work colleague, a work colleague less than a neighbor, and so on). In this context, it is relevant that a higher proportion of people would not accept (compared to those who would) a person infected with HIV/AIDS, a Roma, an immigrant, or a person of a different color as their relative, friend or work colleague, or an ethnic Hungarian as a relative and as a friend (CNCD and IRES 2013). The categories excluded reflect in particular the endurance of right wing extremism in Romanian culture.

**Conclusions**

The case of the evolution of the extreme right in contemporary Romania presents a good opportunity to highlight the limits of analytical approaches that assess the strength of the extreme right largely on the basis of their success in electoral politics. Such an endeavour could lead to the naive assumption that the decline in popularity experienced by the extreme right parties has coincided with the process of accession to the EU and could, therefore, be considered a successful process of post-communist transformation and full transition to democracy. In contradistinction to this view, this study has highlighted the pitfalls of placing too much emphasis on electoral success and the notion of democratic transformation. Thus, the case of Romania (as well as other cases, more broadly) can be explained by looking at transformative processes emerging from the interplay between agents and the structural system, as well as between agents and the cultural system. This paper provides a multi-layered analysis of this interplay, focusing on four levels of depth and nuance: the level of broad structural and cultural contexts and shifts, the level of simulated compliance in inter-party dynamics, the level of incorporation of the extreme right into the mainstream through ‘political cruising’, and the level of incorporation of the extreme right through ‘casual intolerance’. Looking at these processes, it can be noted that the structure-agency relationship led to the decline of extreme right actors through the elaboration of new structures (morphogenesis) that are meant to condition, regulate, and ultimately reduce right-wing extremism. On the other hand, the culture-agency relationship has resulted in cultural morphostasis and the reinforcement of a cultural register that accommodates highly discriminatory, intolerant, and exclusionary views. The logical contradiction between the two registers has been negotiated by political actors in Romania by undermining the relevance of the structural context through a simulated conformity to it, while in turn making the embracing of an unbridled culture of right-wing extremism entirely possible.
References


Endnotes

1 The concept of culture is employed in the sense used by Archer, referring to “all intelligibilia, that is, to any item that has the dispositional capacity of being understood by someone”, while the cultural system is “the propositional register of society at any given time” (Archer 1996: xviii).

2 The example of the carnivore who may love animals or that of the motorist concerned about air pollution, used by Carter, are illustrative of such inherent logical contradictions (2000: 86).

3 ‘Political cruising’ is the English approximation of the widely used Romanian phrase traseism politic, which refers to the wide-spread and recurrent phenomenon of party-switching or floor-crossing in Romania. ‘Casual intolerance’ refers to everyday figures of speech, which embed within them intolerant stereotypes that are thus reinforced with frequent use (Cinpoes 2013b).

4 In the 1990s, the ascendance of the PRM took place at the expense of their main competitor on the ultra-nationalist scene, the Party for Romanian National Unity (PUNR). In the 1992 elections, the PRM was still lagging behind the PUNR. In the 1996 elections, the PRM managed to overtake its rival and from then on the fortunes of the PUNR waned and the party eventually disappeared (through absorption into the Conservative Party, PC). The success of the PRM against the PUNR can be explained by two factors. From the beginning, the former managed to establish itself from the beginning as a national party, while the latter only had regional appeal (having focused from its inception on the situation of Romanians in Transylvania). In addition, the exclusion of Gheorghe Funar from the PUNR – who joined the PRM and was followed by a group of supporters – boosted the success of the PRM and sealed the PUNR’s fate (Cinpoes 2010: 90–95).

5 Disaffected with Tudor’s erratic behaviour in the recent years and linking him with the pitiable performance of the party, a strong opposition bloc, led by Gheorghe Funar, appeared to have developed within the party. The group excluded Tudor from the party at their conference in July 2013, but he contested the legality of his exclusion in court. As of November 2013, the court decided in Tudor’s favor. This is clearly not the end of the story because the decision can still be challenged in a higher court; besides, Tudor’s position in the party is, to all intents and purposes, untenable (Vâlcăneanţu 2013; also Vintilă 2013).

6 A poll from June 2013 placed PRM at 3.6 percent in voting intentions, while one from October 2013 gave them three percent (ARP 2013; also CSCI 2013).

7 He succeeded in getting elected to the Lower House. He later resigned from the PNL, following a suspended prison sentence for kidnapping. In May 2013, he lost his seat after he was sentenced to two years in jail in a case concerning illegal land exchanges with the Ministry of Defense.

8 The main difference is that the TPŢ is registered as a party, and has obtained one local council seat in the 2008 elections and two local council seats in the 2012 elections, respectively. Still, the ND made some attempts to register as a political party under the name ‘The Nationalist Party’ in 2011, but the application was rejected.

9 This tendency was visible before the second round of the presidential elections opposing Corneliu Vadim Tudor and Ion Iliescu. After the shock of the parliamentary election results (which propelled the PRM into second place) and of the first round of the presidential ones, even staunch critics of Iliescu argued for closing ranks against Tudor, arguing that his success in elections represented a direct threat to democracy (Cornea 2000).

10 Minkenberg (2009) argues in a relatively similar vein when he makes the distinction between “contextual legacies” and “textual legacies”. Thus the former would correspond to what are conceptualized here as structural and cultural enablements and constraints, while the latter relate to a large extent to agential powers. Nevertheless, what remains crucial is how agents continue to engage with the structural and cultural contexts and what emerges from that interaction (existing structures and culture being reproduced or new ones being elaborated) (see Archer 1995, 2000).

11 The FDSN changed its name to the Party for Social Democracy in Romania (PDSR), which – through a process of absorbing and merging with other parties – formed the PSD in 2001.

12 Importantly, the new structures involve the introduction – among other things – of legislation that prohibits and punishes a wide range of types and manifestations of extremist and discriminatory behaviour.

13 The PSD was the main supporter of this mixed majoritarian system, while President Băsescu favored the French two-round system. Ironically, one of the main architects of the mixed majoritarian system that sealed the fate of the PRM was Anghel Stanciu, one of the founding members and former vice-president of the PRM, now in PSD.

14 For a detailed analysis of the changes to the electoral system and of the outcome of the 2008 elections, see Stan and Vancea 2009.

15 For example, as the 2008 report by the Centre for Legal Studies points out, “the Romanian legislative frame of protection against discrimination goes beyond the two Directives covering an open ended list of grounds of discrimination, manifested in all areas of the social life, not only in employment, social welfare, access to goods and services” (CLR 2008: 32).
For a more detailed discussion of the role of political cruising in the incorporation of right-wing extremism, see Cinpoeş 2013b.

See Cinpoeş 2013b for more details of the practice and about its relevance to the political and media discourse as well as for public opinion in Romania.

To give just one illustrative example in this respect: in November 2012, Becali took part in a discussion on a political talk-show via telephone linkup. An invited journalist – at the receiving end of a vicious tirade of insults by Becali – felt impelled to leave the studio. Neither the chair of the discussion nor the other guest panellists did anything to stop Becali (see Mihu 2012).