

DEMOCRATIZATION AND DE-DEMOCRATIZATION:

Political candor, representation, and anticorruption in the ECE region

Alexandra Alina IANCU

Summary

After the completion of my dissertation, my main contribution to the field of political science resulted from the research on the ambivalent role of *political discretion and informality* in shaping democratic politics in Central and Eastern Europe. The major premise of my studies is that one can understand the political crises of contemporary democracies by identifying the long-term dysfunctionalities in the process of democracy-building (elites' configurations, political representations, and decision-making patterns). I argue that such 'clandestine' pathologies had been initially normalized or hidden through informal practices and consensual politics. However, in recent periods, the previously concealed dysfunctionalities have become more visible due to the articulation of intensive transnational collaborative frameworks related to, for example, the EU conditionality and the rapid development of universal integrity standards.

In my studies, I suggested that the contemporary forms of backsliding could be considered *public expressions* of two competing and interrelated phenomena: (1) the increasing levels of public visibility of abuses of power, coupled with an enhanced form of elite 'candor' in exercising political discretion, and (2) the crisis of political resources in ordinary politics (limitations of political discretion, insufficient party funding, receding recruitment). In other words, I argue that in a context of retreat of 'the political', political actors - facing increasingly restrictive opportunity structures, which directly endanger political survival - *adapted* to the emerging environment by *openly* undertaking various illiberal/authoritarian counter-reforms and by creating alternative legitimacy counter-discourses for such initiatives (e.g., identity politics, antipolitical narratives, etc.). The incongruence between – on the one side, politics of 'candor' implying the intensive scrutiny of the integrity of the political actors' practices and, on the other side – the public values related to the democratic imaginary- constitutes, in my view, the main foundational trait of the so-called contemporary democratic erosion. In contemporary democracies, the transition to the new paradigm of rendering visible the

pathologies of power (and of their political acknowledgment) would not automatically produce political responsibility, but only the transparency of the (dys)functions of contemporary political systems.

In my view, the underlying normative collisions brought by the confrontation of different sets of political expectations (the collision between the normative assumptions related to ‘virtuous’ politics *versus* the basic preconditions of conducting ordinary politics) are not specific to the new or (post-communist) democracies. However, I consider that such processes are more easily to grasp in the case of unsettled political structures/precarious democratic regimes. By using Romania as a pathway case (also in comparison with other neighboring states), my research contributed to a better understanding of the redefinition of the contemporary roles of political informality as well as of the normative conflicts raised by reforms trying to displace such informality. So far, my empirical analyses retraced, either through cross-regional comparisons or via diachronic comparisons within a single unit, three main dimensions of the tortuous relationship between (de)democratization and integrity politics: (a) *the deficient process of elite professionalization in the new democracies*; (b) *the lack of political resources (in terms of political financial resources and personnel) and its impact on party organizational articulation*; (c) *the colliding of value-systems and meaning structures associated with “political integrity” and “political anti-corruption.”* Methodologically, I adopted a pluralist perspective mixing interpretative methods (political discourse analysis, content analysis, historical discourse approach) with more classical research designs (qualitative analyses of semi-structured interviews or quantitative assessments of the elite recruitment patterns).

The first part of the habilitation thesis reviews the major research findings in line with the overarching argument as to the causal mechanisms linking integrity politics to (de-) democratization. Until now, my empirical studies contributed to three interconnected subfields of comparative politics: (a) elite studies; (b) party politics; and (c) the anti-corruption literature.

(a) The contribution of my work to the field of **elite studies** consists mainly of the exploratory research of transitional elites’ processes of integration and professionalization. After completion of my doctoral dissertation, subsequent work showcased the elites’ continuities and changes either from a longitudinal dimension in Romania (starting with the

mid-XIX century until present days) or in a comparative perspective (similar case studies within the ECE region). These arguments advanced the knowledge of elite integration and change, by pointing to the intrinsic role of informality in framing routinized decisional practices regarding political appointments. I suggested that, far from being exceptional (as conventional accounts intimate), Romania replicates patterns of non-functional differentiation between politics and other social and economic spheres present also in other peripheral democracies. The historical overview crossing over different types of political regimes also indicates the potentiality to identify models of elite stabilization/de-stabilization irrespective of the regime type.

(b) My contribution to the **party politics research** focused primarily on the analysis of the role of opportunity structures in shaping the party's organizational development. The main conclusion of the research was that post-communist democratic pathology in terms of integrity politics (party patronage, governmental state capture, and political corruption) are merely side-effects of a lack of political resources (in terms of party financial resources and party/leadership recruitment pools). Several of my publications dealt primarily with the evolution of financial regulations and scrutinized the importance of political resources in structuring democratic practices and party competition in Romania or in neighboring countries. I have also argued - in the case of Romanian democracy - that although increasing financial 'nudges' contributed to party consolidation, starting with the second decade of post-communism, the subventions system had failed to consolidate the party system competition due to the concurrent anti-corruption reforms. The swift displacement of a considerable share of the former post-communist elite entailed political backlash, polarization, and counter-reforms trying to circumvent or obfuscate integrity standards.

(c) By focusing on the politicization of the anticorruption narratives, my research contributed to the literature concerning the shortcomings of the **anticorruption** campaigns by pointing to an alternative avenue of anticorruption failures. This research focused on the value systems and meaning structures that political leaders associate with "political integrity" and "anti-corruption". My studies mapped the various concurrent meanings of integrity politics from a specific cross-temporal perspective (end of the 19th century, the interwar period, and -- through some specific case studies -- post-communism). The conclusions emphasized the political polarization surroundings the integrity-related political narratives at the end of the XIX century/beginning of the XX century or explored some normative collisions surrounding the post-communist anticorruption initiatives. The historical overview of the anticorruption

campaigns showed that the integrity-related narratives had been traditionally disconnected from the actual reforms (in terms of issue salience, scope, and efficiency). The long record of anticorruption initiatives identifies an unalterable pattern of weaponizing anticorruption discourses for (de)legitimation purposes. I have also argued that during the last three decades, the change in the anticorruption paradigm (due to the transformation of anticorruption into a transnational concept) - did not oblivate/alter the embedded political outcomes of the fights against corruption in terms of politicization. Anticorruption narratives, once transformed into a political issue, entailed salient political disputes, difficult to pacify in a democratic manner/with democratic means.

After a short overview of the articulation between my research interests and my teaching experience, the second part of the habilitation thesis briefly reviews some perspectives for future research and academic development. The immediate research agenda builds on and furthers previous analyses on anticorruption analysis from a different perspective. So far, the literature is overflowing with critical assessments of the anticorruption understandings outlined in economic terms or dichotomous categories. Nevertheless, so far - the explanations as to the causality of informality/corrupt practices or – for that matter the political approaches related to the understanding of anticorruption reforms - remain primarily related to the costs and benefits, neo-institutionalist or culturalist approaches. In my future research, I would try to challenge this academic consensus by factoring in my studies elements from the sociology of emotions. I would like to explore to what extent both the political representations on (anti)corruption become infused with emotional appeals and how the political frames alter the meaning structures of the integrity-defined political objectives. My medium-term research goals are to provide a comprehensive comparative analysis of the role of emotions in integrity politics. When and how do certain emotions become predominant in driving anti-corruption processes and how do they condition broader democratic reforms?