

MARTOR



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Politics

Zoe Petre



When, at the beginning of the summer in 1992, the University Solidarity appointed Emil Constantinescu recently elected Rector of Bucharest University- as candidate of CDR¹ for the presidential elections, a group of colleagues and I decided to support him and his campaign the best way we could. We were sure then, thing confirmed today by facts, that Emil Constantinescu, of all the candidates that the opposition had available at the moment, wasn't only the most likely to win over Ion Iliescu, but also a good president for the democratic Romania that we desired. That he was going to have the same priorities that we also thought important and fair, that he will not hesitate when faced with essential matters, that he will do his job no matter the risks, that he will break the terrible chain of national and international complicities which had compromised the huge chance Romania had gained once with the December 1989 Revolution.

Both the 1992 campaign and that in 1996 had, in their own way, been adventures. I will further on describe how in 1992 a handful of intellectuals without previous experience but with the utmost determination to learn fast, managed- guided by the candidate himself- to rise the score

from 2% at the beginning of the campaign, to the challenger situation of the second round, facing the experienced Ion Iliescu and up to the final result of 38%. That is more than 4,5 million votes, approximately two million more than the very political formation.

Perhaps I will speak some other time about how the 1996 campaign was perceived from the place were I was, how I had the feeling that the more CDR's chances were growing, the more aggressive the main opponent was becoming (in 1992, during any meeting with Ion Iliescu we used to be surrounded by bodyguards with machine guns and pistols kept at sight, but in 1996 both these guys and individuals like Dan Iosif had their knives in our necks), how we had to fight the poles, the 'poisoned phone calls', TVR, Antena 1 (where, during the first debate, they filmed our candidate's socks for half an hour).

Anyway, towards the end of the campaign, there was a sort of sense of victory in the air, to which we deliberately turned the blind eye in order not to be disappointed. At the end of the last debate hosted by TVR, before the second round, even the most sceptical of all of us, Emil Constantinescu himself, had a moment of certainty and he gave me the huge pleasure of look-

¹ The Romanian Democratic Convention.

ing for me through the shadowy studio, in order to rejoice together.

On 17th November, at 9 in the evening, I was at the campaign office, typing on the computer-driven by a confusing combination of conscientiousness and superstition – the outline of the speech the candidate was supposed to have delivered if defeated. I was more or less on the first half when Dorin Marian entered the door with a livid expression on his face, leant on the wall and said: ‘We won’. Automatically, I saved the ‘NO’ speech and came back to the ‘YES’ draft. I very well knew that it was pointless, that nobody would read it, that the winner Emil Constantinescu was to speak from his heart and not from some papers (which actually happened), but I was determined to stick to the ferocious discipline of the campaign which demanded never to allow your candidate to be off guard.

Afterwards, our presence as President Constantinescu’s councillors seemed so natural to all of us, the majority from the close staff, so that by the end of November 1996 we had no idea that somebody might have asked himself why the team included us and not others. Now, that I think of it, it is possible, for the parties present within CDR to have been bemused by the organization of the presidential team without their direct participation. I was quickly provided with the proof that, first of all, a woman’s presence in a position of authority wasn’t easily accepted. I remember- I think I mentioned it before- how General Vasile Ionel quickly turned pale when he wrongly assumed that I could have been his successor for the job of national security councillor: he was anyway disappointed by the fact that a university person, outside the system had become the president of Romania, but a lady in his position was out of question! He was at least spared from this situation.

In spite of the general victory feeling, times were tough, Emil Constantinescu was not any president, but the first democratic president of Romania, faced with an institutional system which had been hostile to him a minute before

and he needed to be surrounded not only by abstract expertise, but also by people he could trust. During the four years while I was a councillor, it was more than once that I had the feeling that I was stepping on a thin layer of ice behind the president, a layer full of wild beasts swarming underneath. You need friends and not clerks for this type of crossing. This is how, for four years I had the privilege to be associated to a state politics which makes me proud, as historian, dignitary and as human being.

Not only once after year 2000 had I been vehemently contradicted when making this statement. This is why I keep on repeating it on every occasion, because, beyond any other consideration, Emil Constantinescu’s staff was the one which managed to move the East NATO and European Union borders from Tisa to Prut, thus generating a new development for the history of Romania. In a nutshell: Romania came to a standstill between 1990-1996 because its governing politics had been naturally and deliberately placed – both on an economic, politic and ideological level – closer to the former Soviet republics than to ‘the Vişegrad countries’. The CDR government and president Constantinescu personally managed to defeat the inner and external forces which had prefigured a second Ialta, thus planning to place Romania within the new geography of the unite and democratic Europe. If somebody believes that this irreversible turning point could have been achieved without the will, courage and determination of a man who, without any hesitation, had risked his political career, his success, popularity and even the affection of those who had voted him and the minimal trust of those who hadn’t, in order to place the citizens of his country in the area of the long-lasting progress, that someone is terribly wrong. I used to be a committed witness of that constant and determined battle and I see it as the utmost privilege of the position I had been assigned to.

In all ex-communist countries, the beginning of the ‘90s had been, with local variations, a rad-

ical turning point in all respects and that of building a new political class was by no means an exception. Everywhere, the collapse of the communist regimes had immediately brought some persons in the limelight - sometimes personalities - who didn't have the minimal political experience, either in the traditional sense of the already-established democracies, where it takes years for a political person to be formed, where he hierarchically passes from the stage of parliamentary expert or communal councillor to that of MP or minister and where the political elite needs time to gradually sediment (either for the common well of the respective government or not), or in the sense of the hierarchies which, during the communist regime, built the party and the state nomenclature on their own criteria, from the 'clean file' to the skilled inner negotiations and flunkeyism.

In Romania, this phenomenon of renewal of the political class had its particularities and failures, starting from shyly and sporadically in the years preceding the Revolution, and up to 1996 when it managed to get a significant dimension. Yet, as Romania - different from Poland or Czechoslovakia - had no real dissident movement, but only a few isolated protesting figures, the heterogeneous, uneven and motley character of the newcomers was really glaring: from venerable survivors of the communist jails to young ambitious and with very little scruples wolves, from one or two authentic dissidents to patched university people. Each of us faced this high level projection the best way he could. Some of us hold their temper, others lost it in an instance. Different logics of the various parties they represented brought variations to this panoptic manifestation. Faced with a party like PDSR¹ (then, PSD now), built on the old recipes of influence and on a well-worn routine, to which a new solidarity generated by the post-December complicity was added, with a common

culture which ranged from the recognition of the inner hierarchies to the Ceaușescu-like tenacious idealization of the national history, the new political body promoted due to the 1996 vote, started the race with a huge handicap.

By comparison, in Cotroceni we had the advantage of the fact that the presidential team was already used to the situation and decided to stick together. *A blessing in disguise*, a well concealed blessing had also been constituted by the fact that the people around Ion Iliescu had tried to cause us problems by using the old tactics of 'the burnt land': while, publicly, an entire ritual of *passation des pouvoirs* was elegantly displayed, the chief of the Presidential Administration (the same general in the previous passage) was causing the resignation of the majority of the clerks. In the afternoon when the new president was to come to Cotroceni, the palace was almost deserted, with two or three 'classical' secretaries, some of those meant to bring coffee to the boss and who were crying in the scattered offices. The photocopier was on, but for paper clips I had to ask somebody to rush to the campaign office (I had to quickly send the speech the president had offered during the ceremony of investiture to the newspapers and to the embassies)

At least the furniture was there, not like in the government office where, on 11th December, during the installation, Ciorbea's team couldn't find at least the curtains or the hygienic paper holders. At the moment, we thought that we were faced with the work of a few angry peddling clerks. The recent situation that Tăriceanu's government team has been faced with, enlightened us a little bit more.

We had to quickly invent a new institution. Romania's presidency had been based, even from the days of the CFSN, on the former CC² and, by the time we got there it was, on top of it all, also quasi-militarised, with bullet-proof doors and TABs³ in the courtyard. The cars left imme-

1 The Party of the Social Democracy in Romania.

2 The Central Committee - important political organization during the communist regime.

3 Self-proof auto tank.

diately, but we had a tough time in dealing with the bullet-proof material situation which was eventually solved in a week or two. It took us a bit longer to demilitarise the access to Cotroceni, but with the enthusiastic help offered by Nora Cofas, the new manager of the Museum, we also managed to solve that situation as well. Unfortunately, in 2000, Iliescu's newly installed team put into practice the old rules again. During his first visit, Vladimir Tismăneanu asked me, in a very amused tone, about the armed soldiers who used to wander down the corridors of the palace during Iliescu's time.

The less visible and more substantial part was the organization chart. Like any other institution, the Presidency also had one, but I was more or less stupefied to see that it had a strange asymmetry, running counter any principle of institutional management: beautifully drawn, more than 80% of the partitions representing the departments and all the connections with the exterior, from parliament to banks, were directly connected to the partition standing for the presidential councillor for national security. The rest was rather decorative drawing.

Another weird thing: the typists were almost all gone, but a few state councillors and councilors were still present. One of the guys who was still trying to preserve his place, a former PDSR MP, told me sneering: 'The only way I can leave this place is if Severin appoints me ambassador' (he finally left, but he kept on suing us till around 2002). Afterwards, probably wanting to compliment me, he added: 'I thought you were going to come accompanied by all the drug addicts and all shaggy guys from Universităţii Square, yet I see that the secretaries are quite neat.'

What was really extraordinary was the meeting I had with Dan Iosif. He entered the door and instantaneously declared his love for me for having won over his death enemy, Iosif Boda, during a broadcast TV show, afterwards throwing a quote from Kant and another from Nietzsche and openly stating his willingness to work

with me. The truth was that after knowing that he was a presidential councillor, I was stupefied to find out that he was only a clerk with a high school diploma in his pocket (bureaucracy can have its bright side because since he didn't have college studies, he couldn't have been placed on a higher position) hence he considered that it was his very right to preserve his job. Luckily, after briefly exposing my reasons not to indulge him, he didn't insist, quickly joining the cabinet of his eternal protector, senator Ion Iliescu. After he left, the office-bottle-warehouse where he used to unfold his revolutionary activity had to be, as they say now, severely disinfected.

Apparently, the contact that the current Presidential staff had with the new team wasn't completely smooth, either. During one or two months, till they got used to us, the eternal refrain was: 'How polite they are!' I completely managed to understand this exclamation in 2000, while leaving, when one of the cleaning ladies, told one of my colleagues, while crying: 'Now, Mister councillor Pascu will start calling me you wench and he will keep on cursing me from dusk till dawn!' Mister state councillor Pascu used to be head of the technical department of the Presidency up to 1996 and had been fully involved in the Costea business, the one with the electoral posters; now he was coming back on the same position.

Another component of the same type of problems was the relationship with the bureaucracy in the ministries. I personally had much more to do with the Ministry of External Affairs. I had great communication and collaboration with the successive ministers and secretaries with whom I maintained a cordial and even friendly relationship after Pleşu was appointed head of the ministry, with many of the ambassadors, especially with the young ones and with some high officials, mainly with Mihnea Constantinescu and Cristian Diaconescu, characterized by outstanding competence and efficacy. But both the ministry and the diplomatic group were dominated by a bureaucracy almost completely swamped

not only by routine but also by the mythology of its own perfection dating far back from the glorious days of the '60s-'70s (actually of the '68, the year when Czechoslovakia was invaded, till '78, the year when Păcăpă went astray). This bureaucracy was still preserved- with diplomacy, of course but also with incredible perseverance- rooted in the stereotypes of a routine called 'experience' and 'competence'. With a stupefying haughtiness for those who didn't know it, it had even tried, when Adrian Severin was still a minister, to promote a normative act which would have stated it that the only institution allowed to conceive, project and guide the Romanian external affairs would have been the Ministry of External Affairs: not the Parliament, not the president-not, practically people's will- but the technicians of diplomatic relationships. I could barely stop them from doing it.

I generated a small revolution whose proportions I was going to realize only later when, the second day after the elections, the moment we had to arrange the participation of the new president at the extremely important OSCE summit from Lisbon I asked for the information in the file to be delivered to me also on a disk, calmly letting them know that there were elements to add to the MAE analyses and that, my president was not to deliver the dry discourse the ministry had prepared for the predecessor as official speech. I had the chance to later on find out that Iliescu was actually orderly reading those dry and full of clichés texts, that he actually trusted the information which was usually taken out of a dusty computer, without being at least updated, so that my demands of rethinking- not to mention those of reformulating- the files had been perceived as an insult.

The thing is that we had to put the basis of a relatively autonomous diplomatic service within the Presidency, which - making the proof of their remarkable professionalism, all the more as it consisted of five young university people, specialists in international affairs but without any kind of previous bureaucratic or diplomatic ex-

perience- realized hundreds of analyses, of sketches of officials conversations, of theses of the interventions the president had at the highest levels. Every December, for four years, we used to fight the high MAE¹ officials for days, trying to explain to them that president Constantinescu was **not** sending Christmas telegrams to Saddam Husein or Ghaddafi. I shall later on explain how the 'system' had its revenge for all that. I will furthermore add only one detail: in spite of our appeals, all the projects of diplomatic correspondence we used to receive from MAE invariably started with the well-known formula 'I shall take the delightful opportunity', expression which to us, those in the Presidency, together with the President, seemed- I keep on thinking it was a rightful judgement- horrible. This stylistic incongruence remained a sort of epitome of the four years of delicate confrontations.

Benefiting from a Weberian education, I am fully aware of the fact that there is no administration without bureaucrats. Yet, in our country, regardless of the place or time, bureaucracy cumulates the inevitable flaws of the job, showing an inertial passivity which is sometimes shocking. One can add to this the feeling- sustained by the most varied sources, from the big PDSR bosses to the tabloids- that the authority alternation in 1996 was a little accident on their way, which was anyway temporary and insignificant and that things were quickly going to go back to their place. I know at least one ministry where every more or less significant strike made the officials drink champagne celebrating the fact that 'tomorrow the government is going to be overthrown' and where the 1999 miner riot aroused whispered enthusiastic comments. At the respective moment, even TVR set some megaphones in its yard, ready to again receive the big redeeming crowd, so that we shouldn't be surprised to see the ministry directors waiting every morning for the usurpers to fall...

I, as well as the others, also had my share of discussions on the miner riots and there are still

things to add. Yet, since I am subjectively writing for 'Martor' magazine, I will add something else. One of the most important domains of activity of the Romanian Presidency as envisaged by the Constantinescu administration was the one focusing on culture. I used to have an excellent relationship with the Ministry of Culture- as compared to many other ministries- especially due to the direct relationship I had with Ion Caramitru, who was imaginative and friendly and with the state secretaries, Maria Berza, an old friend of mine, whose competence and intelligence nobody places under doubt, Ion Onisei, efficient and serious and Hunyor Kelemen a very promising young politician. That is why, during the spring of 1998 I invited Irina Nicolau, with whom I used to share an old complicity- of the cigarettes pondered on in front of the Academy

Library, of the too rare but all the more precious post-December chats, of her wonderful books and articles in '22' or 'Dilema' magazines-to ask her to join our team. Then she told me that she was very ill - almost nobody had any idea about the terrible truth- and that she was not after new responsibilities. She told me she was sorry, because she was very fond of all of us, and that she was aware of what we had to fight against. 'Don't lose your nerve' she said 'no matter how hard it is, do something essential and do it right' and she gave me a brass little ring, one of those delicate or extraordinary gifts she was capable of making. That bright memory has been living in my mind as a sort of lucky-charm up to the present day.

Translated by Raluca Vîjüiac

