

The Mechanism of Government Alternation during the Reign of Charles I. The Establishment of an Organised Alternation between the National Liberal Party (NLP) and the Conservative Party (CP) (1895-1914)

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Abstract

The reign of Charles I favoured the indigenous process of formation of a two-party system of government, which, although following the British model, had its own particularities that were specific to the local Romanian political realm. The last part of Charles I's reign can be defined through this establishment of the two-party system of government between the years 1895-1914, discernible in the organised alternation of government during this specific period of time. Gradually, this mechanism of government alternation became habitual – a kind of custom of the Romanian politics of the age. Thus, during the period 1895-1914, the establishment of the Romanian two-party system of government was actualised through the implementation of an organised alternation of government between the National Liberal Party (NLP) and the Conservative Party (CP).

Keywords: king Charles I, government alternation, National Liberal Party (NLP), Conservative Party (CP), political stability.

I. Introduction

The present article illustrates a specific aspect of the Romanian political environment during the reign of Charles I. Within this framework, we intend to analyse the implementation of an organised alternation of government of the National Liberal Party (NLP) and

the Conservative Party (CP) between the years 1895 and 1914 as well as the role played by Charles I in establishing a constant two-party system of government in Romania. Here we also need to mention the fact that we have already discussed this topic in a preliminary version that appeared in 2008 (Dogaru, 2008, pp. 3-17).

I.1. The mechanism of government alternation

One can notice a series of specific phrases that, along different years, defined the mechanism of government alternation between liberals and conservatives during the period 1895-1914. The contemporary political actors or the historians of the age and of the later periods used phrases like: "party alternation" (Take Ionescu); "party rotation" (Nicolae Filipescu); "rotating mechanism" (N. Iorga, Constantin Argetoianu); "alternating parties" (I. G. Duca); "government rotating mechanism" (Mattei Dogan, Ioan Scurtu, Ion Bulei, Sorin Cristescu, Nicolae Isar, Gheorghe Platon, Sorin Liviu Damean etc.).

Looking up the phrase "government rotating mechanism" in *Dicționarul de Istorie a României* (Dictionary of Romanian History), one can notice that the "government rotating mechanism" is defined as a "method of government practiced at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century, in which the National Liberal Party and the Conservative Party took office consecutively /.../ the king using this interchange with great ability in order to establish a certain political balance" (Stoica, Mărculeț, Valentin & Bilcea, 2007, p. 322). One should notice here, nevertheless, that the specialist in political science Mattei Dogan mentions the phrase "government rotating mechanism" for the first time in 1946, in his work *Analiza statistică a „democrației parlamentare” din România* (Statistical Analysis of Romanian 'Parliamentary Democracy'), where it is described as a political mechanism that marks the implementation of the regular alternation of government of the two governing parties between 1895 and 1914. Within this context, we are convinced that, after 1895, king Charles I represented the crucial factor in the implementation and persistence of the

government rotating mechanism, which we are analysing here as an organised alternation between the National Liberal Party and the Conservative Party during the period 1895-1914.

I.1.1. The “bourgeois two-party system”

The political scientist Maurice Duverger, after a thorough analysis of the courses taken by political parties throughout time, demonstrates that: «les partis <<bourgeois>> du XIXe siècle qui survivent toujours sous la forme des partis conservateurs et libéraux /.../ ne cherchent pas à multiplier leur adhérents ni à encadrer de grandes masses populaires, mais plutôt à grouper des personnalités » (Duverger, 1976, p. 43). He also mentions that: « le suffrage censitaire a d’abord engendré un bipartisme <<bourgeois>>, caractérisé par l’opposition des conservateurs et des libéraux » (Duverger, 1976, p. 300). The “bourgeois two-party system”, as M. Duverger called it, operated in Romania as well, but through a few different stages and intersecting a series of aspects related to the dynamics of government, the two historical parties construction process and their relationship with Charles I, who, in the meantime, became the main protagonist in the game of power.

I.1.2 The two-party model used in Romania by Charles I

The two-party system worked well in Great Britain and was gradually taken over by other European states along time. Generally, in the specialised political science literature, a two-party system can be defined as follows: “a two-party system is duopolistic in that it is dominated by two ‘major’ parties that have a roughly equal prospect of winning government power” (Heywood, 2007, p. 284).

The two-party model was indeed applied in Romania by Charles I and the political elite. In the Romanian realm, nevertheless, this system was gradually articulated through several stages that comprised of the government alternation of the two political groups and, later, governing political parties: the National Liberal Party (1875) and the Conservative Party (1880). During that age, the role played by Charles I turned out to be essential in the operation of the

two-party system - the king “swapping /.../ liberals for conservatives /.../ made Romania experience an alternation of the two major political groups in the configuration of governments, an alternation that resembled that between the Tory and Whig parties, which was characteristic for England” (Drăganu, 1991, pp. 259-260).

I.2 The construction process of the Romanian two-party system

The construction process of the Romanian two-party system went through a series of stages generated not only by the dynamics of government, but also by the construction process of the two historical parties. In this context, the evolution of the two-party system in Romania depended also on the stages of Charles I' reign: 1866-1871; 1871-1895; 1895-1914. The government dynamics was tightly related both to the domestic political situation and to the manifest changes appearing in the foreign politics of the country. During these stages, the alternation to the exercise of power of the liberals and the conservatives operated in different forms, finally leading to the establishment and endurance of the Romanian two-party system.

The alternation of liberal and conservative governments started operating during the first years of Charles I's reign, between 1866 and 1871, when a series of governments formed either of liberal or of conservative groups acceded to power. At that time, no political group was powerful enough to form an enduring government. Charles I, who became prince on 10/22 May 1866 (Damean, 2000, p. 58), in accordance with his prerogatives, formed the governments between 1866 and 1871. This led to both parliamentary and government instability - there were nine governments and six dissolutions of the legislating bodies (Damean, 2000, p. 100). Later, after an episode in which Charles I threatened to step down, the political consensus was built through the construction of a conservative government that created a certain domestic stability (1871-1876). Thus, “1876 was the year in which the first long conservative government, lead by Lascăr Catargiu, ended to make room for the I. C. Brătianu liberal administration. This was an event that marked the “taming” of liberalism in the southern parts of

Romania and its reconciliation with the monarch. But it also marked the official establishment of an alternation of power that took into account the existence of the great liberal and conservative parties” (Stanomir, 2013, p. 50).

Within this context of government dynamics, during the reign of Charles I, there were two long governments that acceded to power: “the great liberal government” (1876-1888) and the Junimea conservative government (1888-1895), both generating tensions related to the long periods of government. During that age, *Timpul* (The Time) was discussing the role of the Conservative Party in stabilizing the alternation of the two parties within different parameters: “We, the conservatives, were the ones that inaugurated the beneficial system /.../ the natural rotation of party leadership within the State should be made without violent ruptures, through the intervention of the Crown” (*Timpul*, 25 February/9 March 1899).

When the liberal government lead by D. A. Sturdza was formed, in 1895, the conservative Titu Maiorescu was expressing his conviction that this government cannot be described as a “personal government”, but that “he had to admit it as a constitutionally correct one” (Maiorescu, 2003, p. 65). Maiorescu thus accepted the legitimacy of the government alternation imposed by the king. The “personal government” phrase was used during that age as an instrument of attack against those at power and especially against the two long governments (the liberal government during the period 1876 -1888 and the Junimea conservative government during the period 1888-1895). After the strengthening of the Romanian two-party system, this phrase was gradually dropped from the political discourses of the time. In 1888, *Epoca* (The Epoch) was referring to this modality of attacking the political adversary and was also mentioning it as gradually becoming obsolete: “when the present government [i.e. the Junimea government] came to power, it was accused of being a personal government /.../ but this accusation was then little by little abandoned” (*Epoca*, 28 September (9 October) 1888).

Within such a context that was well defined by Charles I and the political elite, the mechanism of government alternation represented

the last stage of the king's reign (1895-1914), which was characterised by the operation of an organised government alternation (with periods that were not longer than a legislative period) of the two parties – the NLP and the CP. In 1894, having been in opposition for a longer period, the liberals intensified their attacks against the government. The newspaper *Românul* (The Romanian) was launching a series of attacks against their political adversaries: “the peace that seems to dominate the conservative government is an apparent one; it is the stillness of nature right before the storm and the storm will soon break into the <<great party>> when the law of the mines will be introduced” (*Românul*, 17 and 18 December/5 and 6 December 1894). A year later, *Timpul* (The Time), the conservative official newspaper, was referring to the transfer of power in 1895 as follows: “it is in the interest of a regular alternation of power of the two parties /.../ the conservatives willingly submitted the reins of the State to the adverse party” (*Timpul*, 24 December/5 January 1895).

Albeit from a different perspective, the power game was also illustrated by the Austrian-Hungarian diplomatic reports of the time. On 23 September (5 October) 1895, Rudolf Welsersheimb (plenipotentiary minister of Austria-Hungary during the period October 1894-12 October 1895) was explaining the following to Agenor Goluchowski (Austrian-Hungarian diplomat): “the latent crisis that has been marring the government for a few months already seems to come to an end now. The Junimea ministers P. P. Carp, Menelas Ghermani and Al. Marghiloman offered their resignations to H.M. the King and everybody impatiently awaits the high-level decision now /.../ Mr Carp /.../ seems to have firmly decided to impose the long-planned government ousting, given his admitted intention to give way to the liberal opposition”; and also, “but it was very little that Mr P. P. Carp could do to elicit a decision from the king. The Sovereign invoked his constitutional obligations” (*Regele Carol I în rapoartele diplomatice austro-ungare (1877-1914)*, 2013, p. 388).

The political leader D. A. Sturdza, I. C. Brătianu's successor to the leadership of the NLP, was the adept of the organised alternation of liberals and conservatives, while insisting on the importance of political survival above all: "When the conservatives were falling, the King could not let the country itself fall /.../ just out of Platonic love for the conservative party /.../ when the King summoned us, we were prepared, united and disciplined – ready to answer to the Sovereign's appeal" (Sturdza, 1895, p. 43). Along his entire political career, D. A. Sturdza turned out to be a fervent supporter of the king and a personality that militated for political stability, according to Charles I's requirements.

The conservative Alexandru Lahovari, in a discourse delivered during a meeting at the party club, on 21 April 1896, was quite suggestively sketching the peaceful transfer of power in 1895, a year that became a milestone in the establishment of an enduring Romanian two-party system: "Gentlemen, you have already heard the honourable and illustrious presidents of our legislative bodies, that shared with the former government the difficult task /.../ of governing this country for seven years /.../ not for a few political supporters, but for all Romanians, without following private interests and foul calculations. We came to power honestly, we governed honestly and we left honestly and peacefully" (Lahovari, 1905, p. 166). Within this context, the transfer of power in 1895 was seen (to the politicians of both parties) as a natural consequence of the alternation system and, as such, did not provoke many sensational reactions" (Hitchins, 2004, p. 120).

An issue of the *Conservatorul* (The Conservative), in 1901, largely described the power game and, consequently, also the establishment of an enduring two-party system as follows: "The country /.../ suffers when one of the two great parties /.../ starts lacking in vitality /.../ a kind of silent agreement has been established /.../ between the crown, the country and the parties. When a party acceded to power, everybody was convinced that it would be surely able to resist at least an entire legislature and that, if it acted wisely and was lucky, it could resist even two legislatures" (*Conservatorul*,

29 May 1901). This silent agreement between the king and the two parties was established in time due to necessary pragmatic strategies that benefited the political elite as well as the entire society.

The mechanism of government alternation thus operated from October 1895 onwards. Both Charles I and the politicians of the time understood the utility of applying an organised and efficient alternation of power within the Romanian political regime. In this respect, “we are dealing /.../ with a government alternation of two parties that alternate to governmental office in a regulated manner” (Dogan, 1946, pp. 109-110).

The year 1914 represented an important moment both in the domestic and in the foreign politics of Romania. Out of pragmatic reasons, while being in power, the NLP wanted the endorsement of the universal vote and the implementation of an ample reform in agriculture. For that they needed nevertheless to reach an agreement with the other government party, the CP. The accord of the two political forces regarding the electoral and the agrarian reforms was much wanted both by the king and by the political elite.

Voința Națională (The National Will), a liberal newspaper, invited the conservatives rather offensively than warmly to reach a political consensus with the liberals in order to accomplish the two reforms, the agrarian and the electoral, which were necessary at that moment: “progress is immanently historical /.../ those who have opened its way were and will always be blessed, while those who oppose it are and will always be condemned [by history]” (Voința Națională, 23 February 1914).

On the other side, the newspaper Acțiunea [The Action] (a newspaper that belonged to the Conservative-Democratic Party) recognized the fact that the death of Charles I represented the end of the government alternation as it had operated until then. Within this context, Ion I. C. Brătianu’s proposal, addressed to king Charles I in 1914 (but materialised only later, in 1916), to create a national government, which should comprise of both liberal members and of conservative ones, represented the elimination of government alternation between the two governing parties. In 1914, some political

leaders were already considering it necessary for the important political forces to collaborate, out of rational motives. This was an emergency solution that could lead to a “national government instead of a party one” (Acțiunea, 5 October 1914). King Charles I was not in favour of this project though and he did not accept it. Charles maintained his preference for the mechanism of government alternation. This vision of the monarch was based on the establishment of a political agreement within the two-party system. He wanted the two parties to support each other in order to accomplish nationally relevant objectives, but one of the two parties was supposed to remain in power while the other was meant to represent the opposition.

I.2.1 The influence of the monarchy in the Romanian political regime

The influence of the monarchy in the Romanian political regime had an ascending trajectory, which culminated with the 1881 establishment of the Romanian kingdom and the stabilization of the two-party system after 1895. These ascribed Charles I a crucial role in constructing the Romanian political system. At the same time, the relationship between Charles I and the two major parties had a few different stages along his reign, but, both the political elite and Charles I himself gradually understood the necessity of an agreement between them in order to maintain the political stability of the country: “the two parties being thus organised /.../ their government stamina depends entirely on the power of the sovereign” (Conservatorul, 21 October 1901). The monarch was meant to absolutely warrant the balance of power between the two governing parties.

The influence of the king would significantly grow with the stabilization of the two-party system, from 1895 onwards. At that moment, among the political elite, D. A. Sturdza seemed to be the most attached to the monarch’s project. Sturdza “strongly supported the stability of the dynasty through regulating the succession to the throne and was a dedicated adept of kingship, differently from many

of his party colleagues, who had accepted the principle of constitutional monarchy more out of necessity than out of conviction and who remained loyal to a type of romantic republicanism (for instance C. A. Rosetti, Eugeniu Carada etc.)” (Damean, 2012, p. 13).

King Charles I got involved in a direct, but subtle manner in the Romanian political life in order to strengthen the alternation of the two government parties. Constantin Bacalbaşa was generally describing the monarch’s behaviour within the political game as follows: “While keeping /.../ away from the political controversies /.../ apparently having no supporting group and no favourite /.../ he was ordering all kinds of surveys /.../ when the opposition was becoming too anxious and were getting out to the streets assembling large public meetings, the king was sending his messengers to check the public state of mind /.../ according to these reports, he could see whether the public was indeed against the government /.../ and decided to change that given regime” (Bacalbaşa, 1928, p. 249). Likewise, the balanced political attitude of Charles I was acknowledged by the foreigners as well: “Prince Carol /.../ guided his country rather than drove it” (Gordon, 1918, p. 64).

Within the Romanian political regime, the king had a neutral attitude toward the political leaders and he invited to government both the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party: “In order to rightly perform his duty, his life was a continuous sacrifice. He understood that, in case he became more attached to some than to the others, he would have elicited envy and factions and would have repeated the deeds of his predecessors, from which he had to completely distance himself” (Cantacuzino, 2013, p. 162).

Nicolae Iorga made a suggestive analysis of the way in which Charles I gradually managed to impose the two-party system. The king “was trying /.../ to put the parties to work in turns, according to the system he borrowed from Prusia, at some point governed by his father Carol Anton – the two parties were succeeding each other in government without too much fight and without too much scandal” (Iorga, 1999, p. 26).

In a similar manner, Alexandru Tzigara-Samurçaș, a loyal supporter of the Royal House and a good connoisseur of the royal institution, was sketching a portrait of Charles I in a few words: “Charles I was the sovereign by all means, the expression of sovereign power and a personified symbol /.../ he was a man of duty, working without infatuation and taking into account only the interests of the country. He had no personal friends and, consequently, no supporting group or acolytes /.../ after the establishment of the constitutional rule, the king reigned without governing, but he managed to impose his opinions in the councils of ministers that he regularly summoned at the royal palace. He could even change governments when need be” (Tzigara-Samurçaș, 1999, p. 62).

The Romanian two-party system, applied and consolidated by Charles I, was illustrated also by the conservative Constantin Argetoianu, who mentioned the fact that “the elections [i.e. the future general elections in 1914] were very difficult for the conservatives /.../ because the liberals were supposed to win them (as the mechanism of “alternate government” and the plans of king Charles I required) and they were keen to do whatever needed to win them” (Argetoianu, 1991, p. 52).

The liberal leader I. G. Duca, a real supporter of monarchy, was also underlining the role played by Charles I in the operation of the two-party system. At the end of the last stage of Charles I’s reign, the liberal leader was showing that, at the end of the year 1913, the liberals were prepared to govern and to counterbalance the conservatives, highly divided by strong inner factions (see the establishment of the Conservative-Democratic Party in 1908): “The [conservative] government was preparing /.../ its exit while we were preparing /.../ our coming to power. Oh, sweet times of the party alternation, so artfully transformed by King Charles in governing dogma” (Duca, 1981, p. 13).

We are convinced that the two-party system became indeed a ‘governing dogma’, a natural political custom, accepted and taken in by both political leaders and the Romanian society of the age at large.

The end of government alternation of the liberals and the conservatives was unfortunately announced by the “death of King Charles”, which “changed the whole domestic political situation /.../ for the opposition leaders, the new reign was a disaster. Marghiloman was one of the leaders /.../ preferred by the old king /.../ Marghiloman’s political game was based on the work of Brătianu, while pampering the sovereign’s passions” (Argetoianu, 1991, p. 98). At that moment, the change of the monarch was requiring a new approach as regards the governing mechanism and, indirectly, was imposing some changes in the organisation of the political regime.

I.3 Conclusion

The stabilization of the two-party demonstrates that both the liberal political leaders and the conservative ones understood the fact that it was only an organised government alternation that could create a stable political climate, for the benefit of both the political decision makers and of the Romanian society at large. After 1895, although there were situations in which the governments resigned due to specific factors such as the constant public unrest, the transfer of power was based on a series of coordinates of normality and was less violent than during the previous period (1866-1895).

The operation of a two-party system lasted until 1914, a moment that should be considered out of two specific perspectives. The domestic evolution of events determined Charles I to accept the idea of introducing the agrarian and electoral reforms, which would generate important modifications within the political regime. At the same time, the death of Charles I, the creator and the warrant of the Romanian two-party system, alongside the international climate of the moment lead to the same evolution of facts. The external perspective refers to the outburst of the First World War, a moment when all the political forces had to be united in support of the national ideal, which was the creation of the Romanian national unitary state. Charles I and the system he imagined became history ...

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