

From TV to Parliament: The Successful Birth and Progressive Death of a Personal Party

The Case of the People's Party Dan Diaconescu

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Abstract

The paper deals with the single case study of Romanian People's Party Dan Diaconescu. Using the concepts of a personal party and a business-firm-party, the authors analyze the emergence, electoral success and decline of this party. Main attention is paid to the personality of the leader as well as to organizational features of the party. Empirical evidence from the PPDD shows that personal/business-firm parties have major difficulties in outliving periods of electoral decline, particularly in cases where the party is fully dependent on the leaders' private resources. As such, this single case analysis contributes to the general literature on new parties by gaining an in-depth understanding of the importance of the early stages of party development in predicting a party's development over time.

Keywords: business-firm-party; People's Party Dan Diaconescu; political entrepreneur; party organization; personalization of politics

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1. Introduction

There is a general consensus in the field of comparative politics that the Central and Eastern European party systems are structurally unstable (Haughton, Deegan-Krause 2015; Powell, Tucker 2014). They are characterized by a large number of entries and exits, which has the effect of generating episodic appearances in the political space. New parties have emerged,

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even in once stable systems such as the Czech Republic or Hungary, and have gained seats in Parliament (Kopeček 2016; Havlík 2015; Haughton, Deegan-Krause 2015; Hanley, Sikk 2014; Hanley 2012; Haughton et al. 2011). In this context, Romania has particular features that make it a relevant case for analysis (Haughton, Deegan-Krause 2015). First of all, note that populism had a history of stability for two decades, with the political space divided among the same actors. In addition, after 1992, for twenty years no new parties gained seats in the legislature, although numerous exits occurred. However, the November 2012 Romanian elections allowed a newly-formed party to enter parliament. Founded in 2011, the People's Party – Dan Diaconescu (Partidul Poporului – Dan Diaconescu, PPDD) has rapidly progressed from obscurity to being the third largest party in the legislature, gaining approximately 15% of the votes. In this respect, the PPDD is a relevant case due to its ability to overcome institutional obstacles such as the legal registration procedures, electoral system, or public funding (Gherghina, Jigla 2012; Gherghina, Chiru 2013) and to mobilize a large share of the electorate when competing against major mainstream parties and other populist parties. It is initially unclear how a political party formed only one year before elections could achieve these results. Our paper looks at this empirical puzzle from the perspective of the party and argues that the PPDD maximized its electoral support through a combination of features belonging to the categories of personal (McDonnell 2013; Calise 2000) and business-firm parties (Hopkin, Paolucci 1999). The party opted for a 'shortcut' strategy that involved a strong leader, controlled elite, weak organization, and mobilization through leaders' resources.

The PPDD's rise matches the tradition of personalized politics in post-communist Romania. Starting with the regime change in 1989, the transition to democracy was inaugurated under the sign of a revolutionary-based conception of political leadership molded on Ion Iliescu's symbolic closeness to the masses, informally transformed into a necessary condition for the emergence and electoral success of party leaders. The adoption of a semi-presidential form of government has further emphasized the relevance of personal leadership by concentrating the electoral campaign on the features (and resources) of the candidates. In direct consequence, beyond the constitutional codification, Romanian presidents have become more and more empowered at the expense of Parliament, the government and parties, a process which has generated institutional clashes and political deadlocks such as those of 2007 or 2012 (Gherghina, Soare 2016). In parallel, fluid electoral behaviors and the media's focus on party leaders have further enhanced the space of political maneuvering for individual personalities from both within and outside the political establishment. Such personalities have often tended to bypass intermediary institutions (including their own parties) in their appeals to voters.

In this context, the PPDD is a by-effect of the personalized politics in post-communist Romania, not only because the party succeeded, at least temporarily, in overcoming the institutional barriers and competing with long-established parties, but also because the party's life span has been fully dependent on the visibility of the leader-creator of the party. The appeal of this party-creator failed to translate into electoral success after 2012. Indeed, the 2014 European elections testified to the vulnerability of the party in a relatively crowded arena of personal parties (i.e. the Conservative Party (Partidul Conservator, PC) and the Party Popular Movement (Partidul Mișcarea Populară, PMP)). The PPDD scored 3.67%,

below the electoral threshold. Several months later, Dan Diaconescu ran for the Presidency of Romania, obtaining only 4.03% of the votes. Overall, the party founder's judicial issues¹ resembled a death in two stages. In 2013, the party founder's TV chain lost its broadcasting licence, which had been a key determinant of the PPDD's electoral success. After the party's 2014 electoral failure, the 2015 jail sentence handed down to Dan Diaconescu for blackmailing a mayor and a businessman, by threatening to reveal compromising information regarding them as part of the 'Dan Diaconescu Direct' TV show, marked the informal end of the party. Note that a splinter of PPDD, the National Democratic Party (Partidul Național Democrat, PND), had been registered as a party in November 2014 (in parallel with the Presidential elections). Led by former PPDD members of Parliament, the NDP progressively imposed its control over the former PPDD parliamentary group. Five months after Diaconescu's sentencing, the remaining PPDD members merged with the National Union for Romania's Progress (Uniunea Națională pentru Progresul României, UNPR).²

By putting together this synthetic description, we can see that the lifespan of the PPDD was barely five years, covering an emergence phase in 2011–2012, an establishment phase in 2012–2014 and a post-2014 phase of decline. This particularly short life span is highly important considering that there is a consensus in the literature that, 'unlike the human life cycle, the longer a party is around, the less its death is expected' (Bolleyer 2013: 12). Our assumption is that the party's inability to maintain and consolidate its electoral support after the 2012 national breakthrough is strongly dependent on the conditions of party formation as well as on the features of its leader-creator. A personal/business-firm party is primarily a structure for successful electoral mobilization; the absence of 'profit' (i.e. electoral results translated into access to local, national and/or EU offices) equates to a major downturn in the leader's capacity to maintain cohesion within the party in office and hence further weakens the party's infrastructure in both the central office and on the ground. Empirical evidence from the PPDD shows that personal/business-firm parties have major difficulties in outliving periods of electoral decline, particularly in cases where the party is fully dependent on the leaders' private resources. As such, in our understanding, this single case analysis contributes to the general literature on new parties by gaining an in-depth understanding of the importance of the early stages of party development in predicting a party's development over time.

With a focus on the 2011–2012 phase of party emergence, we use a qualitative approach with data from public discourses, party documents, and media reports. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The first section provides a brief overview of the literature and insights regarding the conceptual background. The next section highlights the rationale for the case selection. The third section discusses the formation and development of the PPDD with an emphasis on the party's origins and the role of individual initiative in setting it up. The fourth section deals with its ideology and organization. The fifth part analyses the determinants of the PPDD's electoral success and argues that the exclusive exposure of the candidates through the party leader's TV-station had a major effect on electoral outcome. In this context, the two factors contributing to the party's electoral success were its emotional style of campaigning and the party's dependency upon its leader. The final section summarizes the major findings and discusses the implications of our study.

2. The impact of the initiative of political entrepreneurs in contemporary party politics

Intimately linked to democracy, political parties are a multifaceted object of research. According to a classic definition, parties are organized attempts to get access to power (Schattschneider 1942: 283). The benefit from being in power motivates parties just like seeking profit justifies competition among commercial enterprises. Considered primarily responsive to the electorate and the competition (Schlesinger 1968), political parties are not classic voluntary organizations seeking to realize broad objectives. Instead, they behave like a type of 'business firm', mainly oriented towards the satisfaction of the specific interests of the political entrepreneurs (Schlesinger 1984). While an extensive body of literature has analyzed the representative functions of parties, starting with Key (1964) and Kirchheimer (1966), the focus shifted towards the transformation of parties in electoral agencies. Among several dimensions of party change, Kirchheimer underlined members' loss of political weight as well as the strengthening of leaders' organizational power. Implicit in this approach, the professionalization of the party organization was explicitly developed by Panebianco (1988: 264) in relation to the diffusion of the electoral-professional party with its increased appeal to the electorate and the pre-eminence of personalized leadership. Taking this one step further, the concept of cartel-party also laid emphasis on an increased professional and technocratic party 'focused less on differences in policy and more (...) on the provision of spectacle, image and theatre' (Katz, Mair 2009: 755).

2.1. Personal parties

These transformations have altered perceptions of the relationship between citizens and political parties (Karvonen 2010: 1). Within a process of the individualization of social life, according to which people tended to perceive themselves first and foremost as individuals rather than parts of groups (Giddens 1991; Bauman 2001), the salience of social structures based around class, gender or religion as central determinants of party choice and electoral behavior diminished. In addition to the paths of inter and intra-party democracy followed in some countries, there are cases in which contemporary politics has developed in the direction of a personalized arena 'in which the political weight of the individual actor in the political process increases over time, while the centrality of the political group (i.e., political party) declines' (Rahat, Sheaffer 2007: 65). Although not universally accepted by the literature (Karvonen 2010; Heffernan 2013), various phenomena have been associated with this pervasive personalization, both causes and consequences of the salience individual politicians have in shaping relationships between parties and voters/citizens. Along these lines, the thesis of presidentialization suggests that heads of government behave more and more like presidents at the expense of parliamentary and party actors (even in parliamentary systems) (Poguntke, Webb 2005).

Moreover, according to a pervasive process of mediatization of politics (Mazzoleni, Schulz 1999), political institutions in general, and, more specifically, political parties, have

become increasingly dependent on media and the logic through which the media present and transmit information (Altheide, Snow 1979: 10). In this sense, scholars have discussed the adoption of Americanized campaign methods (Swanson, Mancini 1996: 6), located specifically in the major impact television has had on the salience of political leadership (Gunther, Mughan 2000), and have also analyzed the influence of opinion polling and the focused information available about voters and, more in general, the transformed styles and strategies of political communication. In the 21st century, information updated in real time has diminished the distance between the governed and the government, while electoral processes have become increasingly centered on party leaderships. Thus, the contemporary audience in democracies has dealt more with political leaders (as individuals) than parties (as groups) or their platforms (Manin 1997; Karvonen 2010) and 'a symbolic closeness to the masses has become a necessary condition for emergence and electoral success of a political leadership' (Garzia 2011). As such, either as a form of mutualism, tantamount to a shared benefit between parties and their leaders, or as an unbalanced profit, whereby leaders concentrate most of the advantages while the host-parties' structures are exploited and lose their autonomy, the focus on leaders seems to be experienced not only by new parties, but also by traditional ones.

In this context, the concept of personal party has become a regular reference in relation to three main features: (1) the party is the product of a leader rather than he or she the product of a party; (2) party communications are focused on the leader; and (3) the leader dominates the party, especially in terms of decisions regarding candidates, policies and alliances' (McDonnell 2013: 221–222). Panebianco's electoral-professional party was to be considered the model of a genus of 'electoralist parties' among which these parties find their place. The species under this genus share several common features such as having a thin organization, primarily focused on electoral functions, and a high dependence on 'modern' campaign techniques coherent with the relevant role granted to the personal appeal of the party leaders (Gunther, Diamond 2003: 185). The pure electoralist party type concerns the so-called 'personal parties', whose exclusive rationale is to support the leader in winning elections. Although these parties resemble the traditional structures of local notables, they are described as 'organizations constructed or converted by an incumbent or aspiring national leader exclusively to advance his or her national political ambitions' (Gunther, Diamond 2003: 187). The leader becomes the fulcrum around which the party is built and intra-party decisions are not taken but communicated by the incontestable leader. The latter occupies a strategic position in the electoral market and guarantees an electoral advantage for his or her party. According to McDonnell's in-depth analysis of the Italian case, personal parties feature a communication strategy that is centered on the image of the party-founder and a high degree of concentration of (in)formal power in his/her hands. Moreover, the personal party's expected lifespan depends on the political lifespan of the leader-creator. This is in line with the literature on party institutionalization: the more institutionalized the party organization, the less autonomy the founding leaders are supposed to have within the party (Harmel, Svåsand 1993). In other words, parties built from the top down, in which not only the organization is dominated by the leadership, but the party's image and campaign strategies are as well, are not necessarily personal parties. The necessary criterion that allows us to separate the wheat from the chaff (that is, the personal parties from a variety of personalized

parties) is the synchronization between the party's organizational survival and the political lifespan of its founder-leader (McDonnel 2013: 223).

2.2. Business-firm parties

Although it deals with the same topic – new parties centered on their founder-leader – the literature on business-firm parties focuses on somewhat different issues. More specifically, according to the literature, these parties tend to emerge outside the political establishment. The private experience brought by these leaders into politics tends to be extended to their political capacities: a successful entrepreneur equals a successful politician able to influence the public debate and efficiently amend the political agenda. Other relevant features that complete the corpus of parties built on a business firm framework are (1) reduced party bureaucracies, (2) the externalization of technical tasks, *in primis* in the communication area, by intensively involving communication experts and survey institutes that deal with voters mainly as 'consumers', and (3) limited grassroots membership (Hopkin, Paolucci 1999: 333).

Business-like parties echo an entrepreneurial spirit adapted to politics with their focus on a rational-efficient way of doing politics that is in line with the professional-electoral dimension of the management of political competition. This rational organization does not clash with the allegiance to the party-founder, considering that there is only one center of power – the leader – clearly and unanimously accepted within the party; any kind of dissent is forbidden. The party organization tends to display full servility to the leader; potential discontent might determine the loss of all the material (or symbolic) advantages guaranteed by the leader. Last but not least, similarly to an economic market, voters are treated as 'consumers' to be seduced by a perfectly-tailored product. Hence, the rhetoric employed is crafted by appeals to impulses and emotions. Complementary to these differences in the origin and behavior of the leader, there are important similarities between the types presented.

As is the case with personal parties, the leader of a business-firm party has multiple roles: sponsor, (in)formal leader, candidate, coalition maker, strategy designer etc. This extensive role in the party lifespan is reinforced by the smart use of media, in particular in the leader's political launch, by providing not only an increased visibility but also a legitimacy for the political project in the eyes of the citizenry. In our understanding, these parties are essentially personalized parties whose organizational future can be extended beyond the career of the founder-leader.³

Overall, building upon the types of symbiotic interactions identified in biology, with regard to business-firm model of parties, we can potentially identify a form of mutualism based on benefits shared between the leader and the party organization. The organisation lacks some of the essential 'nutrients' for achieving political relevance by itself; these resources are provided by the party-leader. With regard to personal parties, the relation between the leader and the party organization is analogous to a form of parasitism. The leader takes the full benefit from this relation and controls the potential of the party organization to be autonomous; the very survival of the organization depends on the life span of the party founder.

The multiplication of new parties strongly dependent on their leaders has led to a proliferation in literature that aims to provide definitions, descriptions and more or less extensive lists of determinants of their survival/failure.⁴ This literature associates the hierarchical organization and the centralized control exercised by party leadership with these parties' increased ideological flexibility. Not surprisingly, personal and personalized party models are often identified among the populist family (Keman, Krouwel 2006). From an ideological perspective, most of these parties comply with the minimal definition of populism (Mudde 2004). Their political worldview divides society into the pure and homogenous people and the corrupt élites and manifests their hostility to representative politics and traditional intermediary organizations by arguing that 'politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people' (Mudde 2004: 543). In summary, while populism refers to their ideological flexibility, the personal and business-firm features refer mainly to their organization and electoral dimension (with a focus on communication strategies).

3. The case selection: party politics and private initiative entrepreneurs in post-communist Romania

The empirical evidence chronicles a connection between media, business and politics in post-communist Romania and focusses on the case of the Conservative Party (Partidul Conservator, PC), a pivotal actor in almost all coalition governments from 2000 until 2014. The party was founded in 1991, but failed to gain political relevance before the 2000 elections, when it formed an electoral coalition with the social democrats. As in the case of other similar experiences identified across the region (i.e. the Czech party ANO), the party founder's leap from the economy to politics was facilitated/supported by the media-based private capital of its founder-leader, Dan Voiculescu.⁵ However, in this case, the party is less the reflection of the leader (and his specific worldview) and more a strategic extension of the leader's interests in Romanian party politics. All in all, out of the 11 Romanian cabinets between 2000 and 2015, the PC has been involved in six (Năstase Cabinet 2000–2004, Tăriceanu 1 cabinet 2004–2007, Ponta I–IV cabinets 2012–2015).

How can the focus on the PPDD be explained? In our view, three intertwined arguments justify the focus on the PPDD.

There is, first, an issue of opportunity, considering that there has been relatively little previous research on the PPDD (e.g. Cinpoeş 2013; 2015; Nicolescu, Basiul 2013; Gherghina, Mişcoiu 2014).

There is also an issue of intrinsic relevance. Without considering the most recent legislative elections⁶, the PPDD is the only Romanian party that successfully overcame the institutional barriers of one of the most restrictive models of party law in the EU (Casal Bértoa, Biezen 2014). Moreover, the impressive breakthrough into the national parliament was in the context of a complex Mixed Member Proportional system rather than the current, more permissive, proportional system.

Finally, but importantly, there is an issue of theoretical relevance. This analysis allows us to disentangle the peculiar organizational features of the PPDD, considering that the party pursued neither the formation of a membership organization (i.e. it had difficulties

in fielding candidates in all constituencies) nor the development of a compelling manifesto. Instead, it emerged on the basis of the leader's private business – a TV station (OTV) that had a double task. In direct connection with the organizational dimension, there is the peculiarity of the PPDD's ideological profile and its intimate connection with the OTV, the private channel of communication that helped Dan Diaconescu to connect with the electors and convey his communicative qualities. This dependence on TV was such that we might even speak of a TV-party raised to parliamentary status not by the novelty of its program or the strength of the organization, but by the party founder-leader's personal audience and masterful use of TV for publicity and electoral gain. As will be seen in the succeeding sections, the organizational features delineated in the formation phase have been significantly important in both the evolution of the party and its decline.

This case study shows that both the party's outstanding electoral success and its abrupt and rapid decline can be traced back to the same two factors. First, there is the individual entrepreneur with limited interest in forming a durable organization, an aspect considered of major relevance for parties' electoral performance (Bollevy 2013; Tavits 2013; Gherghina 2014). The second factor is the decisive importance of the founder-leader's private business in explaining both the support in the party's electoral breakthrough and its post-2012 evolution. Considering the above, the following sections illustrate how the PPDD displays features associated with personal and business-firm parties in its party organization and communication (both content and style).

4. The PPDD's formation: the importance of the individual initiative

The European experience over the last half-century indicates that the emergence of populist parties usually takes place around a strong charismatic leader and is associated with political, economic or social difficulties (Tarchi 2015). The formation of the PPDD follows this pattern. Founded in 2011 as a reflection of Dan Diaconescu's growing political ambitions⁷, the party gained visibility from the highly mediated judicial problems of its leader. Diaconescu was imprisoned and released in the absence of substantial evidence. Based on this episode, his entire discourse was framed around the conspiracy of the state against an ordinary Romanian citizen who was not guilty of any crime. In general, the PPDD appears to be the by-product of its founder's private wealth and of an intimate connection with the world of media. As a consequence, the party was staffed by people under professional contract to the party leader. For example, Diaconescu's private lawyer became the leader of the parliamentary group in the Chamber of Deputies, while the host of an OTV show became the leader of the parliamentary group in the Senate.

In addition to the existence of a strong leader, the PPDD was formed as a voice against the economic and political instability in the country. The financial crisis had a deep and lasting effect in Romania. The coalition government between December 2009 and February 2012 launched austerity measures that greatly affected the population. The measures revealed structural weaknesses that had already placed Romania as the second poorest coun-

try among the EU Member States. The existence of new economic hardships was combined with the older problems of a widespread perception of corruption, general disenchantment with democracy, and low levels of trust in the domestic political institutions.⁸ Formed in a shaky environment, the PPDD continued to benefit from the political instability that emerged when the party of the president, the Democratic Liberal Party (Partidul Democrat-Liberal, PDL), left the government coalition after two votes of no confidence in three months. The co-habitation between a social democrat Prime Minister and a PDL-endorsed President led to severe institutional clashes (Gherghina, Soare 2016) that allowed the PPDD to use a populist discourse oriented against the entire political elite in the typical form of ‘us vs. them’.

By emphasising his lack of previous political engagement, even before the organization of the party, Diaconescu portrayed himself as the voice of the genuine representation of post-communist challenges. He assumed a role comparable to the figure of the ancient *tribunus plebes*, claiming the right to intervene in order to fight the unjust acts of the establishment, together with their dominant ideas (i.e. the austerity measures). The same arguments were used in order to attack the so-called conspiracy on the part of the establishment that blocked his party’s legal registration process between 2010 and 2011. The first attempt at registration dates back to 2010; the registration file referred to the name ‘People’s Party’. Various challenges were formulated against the initial positive ruling on the registration issued by the Court of Bucharest in November 2010. A new registration procedure was launched in April 2011, twenty days after the Court Appeal ruled in favour of the previously formulated challenge. The new filing mentioned a different party name: ‘People’s Party Dan Diaconescu.’⁹ In July 2011, the party’s request was denied on the basis that a private name and surname were mentioned in the party’s name. Two months later, on the 19th September 2011, the party finally registered.

From the very beginning, the PPDD made use of the party-founder’s resources and visibility. This fusion between the party and its leader-founder affected both the choice of a hierarchical organizational dimension and the amateur style of organizational management.

5. Organisational features: between improvisation and legal requirements

The organizational structure between the party’s formation in September 2011 and the December 2012 legislative elections included the party’s central office in Bucharest as well as the party in the field. On the ground, the party developed swiftly and, less than half a year after its formation, the PPDD had territorial organizations in almost all the Romanian counties (i.e. territorial administrative division of the country) and in many cities and towns. The party registered in 2011 with a network comprising 27 county-level organizations. One year later, the Party had county-based organizations in 35 out of the 42 Romanian counties. The territorial organization aided the party in the 2012 electoral year, although, the leader remained in charge of the recruitment of candidates. In the June 2012 elections, the party fielded candidates in many constituencies and managed to come third

at the national level with almost 9% of the votes. While the territorial organizations covered the country broadly, the actual number of members remained problematic. According to the PPDD's official statement, membership reached 1,000,000 a few days after the January 2012 congress.¹⁰ This contrasts sharply with the figures presented in the official registry of political parties, where the membership of the PPDD was 31,929 in September 2011 and 66,071 in 2013 (Registrul Partidelor). The statements of the territorial branches support the official figures more than they do the numbers declared by the party. For example, two months before the January 2012 congress, the PPDD organization in the Gorj county – the constituency where Diaconescu ran against the prime-minister in the legislative elections – declared that it had 3,000 members (PPDD 2013). This is illustrative, since Gorj was one of the constituencies in which support for the PPDD was highest.

At the central level, following the suggestions of its founder, in January 2012 the party congress decided on the structure and composition of the central office. D. Diaconescu did not want to be president of his party and supported another candidate, Simona Man, whom he introduced as the niece of Alexandru Averescu, a famous Romanian general who founded the People's Party in 1920 (formerly known as the People's League) and thus Diaconescu tried to legitimize his party through an appeal to historical roots. The 'first-vice-president' was considered to be the second position in the party, but the role was occupied for only one year and three months because, in May 2013, the person in the role was dismissed from the party after negotiations with the social democrats; currently, the PPDD has no first-vice-president. According to the 2012 statute (Chapter VIII), the National Permanent Bureau (NPB) represents the executive body. With an extensive composition¹¹, the NPB directs the party from one congress to another and it is formed by the president of the party, two first-vice-presidents, the general secretary, 18 vice-presidents, 4 national executive secretaries and the party treasurer. Despite these statutory dispositions, our data pinpoints an extreme concentration of informal power in the hands of the founder-leader. Notwithstanding his lack of an official leading position within the party, Dan Diaconescu himself fulfils the traditional function of informing the citizens and educating them in public affairs. His TV performances guarantee the articulation of social interests by voicing and pursuing the demands and expectations of its voters/viewers. Moreover, Dan Diaconescu-led TV-shows overshadow the party organization in the traditional function of the recruitment of political personnel.

All in all, the PPDD elite was a mixture of Diaconescu's personal network and individuals or small groups who had switched from other political parties (RTV 2012a). The promotion of people belonging to the first category (personal contacts) to key positions in the party has already been discussed. A consistent group of experienced politicians from other parties joined the PPDD in the months leading up to the elections. Many of these were incumbent members of Parliament (MPs) who were sure that their parties would not nominate them again as candidates. Journalists noted that one third of the candidates fielded by the PPDD in the legislative elections – 115 out of 446 – had experience in other political parties (Chiruta, Bogdan 2012). Many of these candidates were elected, so that, out of the 68 PPDD MPs, half had been active in at least one other political party; the switching record was held by one MP who had been a member of five different political parties between 2008 and 2012 (Biro 2012).

All of these features indicate that the party was born overnight due to contextual features, had weak organizational structures, had and continued to have low membership rates, and practically ‘borrowed’ the political elite of the other competitors. In spite of these traits, the party gained a large amount of support, which allowed it to enter the legislature. How was this possible? One explanation that can be offered is that the PPDD had no competitors for its populist discourse. The two political actors with a similar profile were not real threats. The Greater Romania Party (Partidul România Mare, PRM) did not recover from its 2008 failure to gain parliamentary representation, while the leader of the New Generation Party (Partidul Noua Generația, PNG) ran under the label of the liberals (Partidul National Liberal, PNL). However, the explanatory power of this variable is limited since the two parties together gained 5.5% of the votes in the 2008 elections. Consequently, the following section focuses on the PPDD’s ideological features.

6. Personalization matching populism

In direct continuation with the above, Dan Diaconescu sought to legitimate his political involvement by employing the claim that post-communist democracy was at stake, due to a corrupt establishment, and by portraying his intervention as a source of salvation for citizens from this corruption. *Ab origine*, he played the card of him being the ‘incarnations’ of the people’s voice, will and culture. This was the very Leitmotiv of the politically-themed show led by Dan Diaconescu on the OTV network, which was supposed to allow the people to express what they thought but dared not say openly, to expose elite conspiracies and machinations and, last but not least, to provide simple and understandable solutions for the major problems facing Romanians.

On the eve of the 2012 legislative elections, such discourse involved a constant mix of policies that were inconsistent and which remained quite vague. To illustrate these claims, we use several examples from the manifesto prepared for the 2012 legislative elections. In economic terms, the PPDD advocated lower taxation for the population but also called for heavier state involvement (state owned enterprises, market regulation). It promoted a state budget that contained both lower revenue and increased spending. The absence of coherent policies led to major contradictions. Corruption and clientelism were among the favourite themes of the party, in part due to the conditions in which the party had emerged, but no measures were proposed to address these two problems.

In a similar way, the nationalist card was present although it was not always played in a consistent manner. Overall, the PPDD displayed a clear tendency to present itself as a representative of all Romanians – a party that was returning the country to its citizens. Along these lines, emotional appeals were made in the manifesto, for example the mention of key figures from Romanian history and culture. Another strategy was to cultivate a nationalist feeling by introducing a law that would criminalise speaking against the country. Another point of the manifesto referred to the (re)unification with the Republic of Moldova, an older dream of Romanian nationalists. However, in juxtaposition to these clear messages, the PPDD did not support the idea of Romanians in key positions when it came to reforms.

Points 49–51 in the manifesto emphasized the necessity of bringing foreigners to the border control points (Finns), as Ombudsman (American), and as the head of the Internal Revenue Service (Germans).

7. Visual media and electoral success

Our previous arguments indicated that the PPDD emerged to fuel its leader's political ambitions. For one decade, between the OTV's launch in 2001 until the PPDD's formation in 2011, Diaconescu proved to be a successful media entrepreneur. As an experienced journalist, his choice to use a TV station as his main vehicle for visibility and popularity was not accidental but matched his consumer profile and public demands. The staging of provocative collective events or individual performances to get the attention of the media and voters has been a trademark of the Romanian transition to democracy. It began with the 1989 events that 'fitted' the television formats and became an efficient tool for mobilizing voters. Over time, Romanian society has remained highly attached to TV-based information. In spite of relevant credibility issues and increased politicization, more than 80% of the population declares television to be their main information source (FreeEx Report 2011). In addition to this high level of visual media consumption, the demands of the Romanian public are quite straightforward: people have always shown interest in spectacular topics. The OTV matched their expectations and set a one-man show led by the owner – *Dan Diaconescu Live* – to address a broad range of topics ranging from mystery crimes to wide international conspiracy theories. Broadcasted on a daily basis, this show had a variable length, starting late in the evening without having a pre-established end.

7.1. Paving the way to politics

With this strategy, the OTV attracted a significant number of viewers and by 2008 it had become the third most popular channel in Romania (*ziare.com*, 2008). In this period, Diaconescu imposed himself in the eyes of the public as a creative agent representing post-communist challenges. At the same time, he was the promoter of a unique communication style that was based on improvisation and controversy. In addition, the language he used was simple, colloquial and sometimes very close to slang. In light of these traits, the term OTV-isation was coined to refer to the transformation of any type of information into a live show where people 'visibly gesticulate, scream, use a colourful language and make grammar mistakes', people with whom the viewer can easily identify (Gandul 2009). The success story is summarized by Diaconescu himself:

That's the Romanian people. I try to downgrade the level of the discussion as much as possible during TV transmission; otherwise people do not understand. This is what politicians failed to understand and they lost. I remember that one night I said something about "last week-end" (n.a. – week-end used in English in the original). People sent me a bunch

of messages: “Dan, we love you, you are the best, but what did you mean with week-end?” Since then, I have used only the end of the week. (Gandul 2009)

This targeting of a low-profile audience (i.e. poorly educated, mostly those negatively-impacted by the transition) took place at the same time as the promotion of Diaconescu’s personality. The strategic use of self-presentation projected normality within Diaconescu’s private life; this counterbalanced the aggressive style of his TV show. Diaconescu portrayed himself as a mix between the image of a simple person (e.g. Mr. Dan for his collaborators and audience), a genuine Romanian, and a successful businessman. His shows not only conveyed his views on how to interpret the problems confronting Romanians, but also identified the available solutions. In addition, he has always advertised his openness to public demands. In this respect, the most prominent acts in his broadcasts have always involved the viewers. They decided the topics, the rhythm, and duration of the shows. Diaconescu clearly outlined his philosophy: ‘I do the show seven days a week, ten hours a day. How could I stop at midnight, go to bed and lose 4% of the Romanians who watch me? I stay up until 4 AM, when they go to bed. We close with the last customer!’ (Gandul 2009). This approach brought Diaconescu relevant personal benefits, i.e. visibility and private wealth estimated to be €26 million in 2011 (Simina 2011) and transformed the OTV into an attractive arena that hosted important political leaders such as the country’s president, the prime-minister and the mayor of Bucharest.

Following these developments, his official entry into politics was only a matter of time. Diaconescu took advantage of his temporary arrest in 2010 to provide the public with a new conspiracy theory, oriented against him as a critic of the system. Hoping to transform the OTV’s audience into electoral supporters, he emphasised his abilities to identify problems, provide solutions, and implement them. Everything was personal in Diaconescu’s decision to enter politics: from the reasons behind the formation of a party to the quasi-messianic way in which he proclaimed himself the next President of Romania, two years before the 2014 Presidential elections.

7.2. An archaic personal party: between opportunism and improvisation

So far, we have showed how involvement in politics was an addendum to the professional career of Diaconescu. This sub-section illustrates how the media-entrepreneur became a political leader who played the central role in a) establishing his party structures and mobilizing electoral support and b) conveying the programmatic discourse. Starting with the former, the party’s organization was built by transforming parts of the audience into followers and party members (Chiruta, Rachițăm 2012). This was necessary since, until the 2015 amendments, Romanian law required 25,000 members, spread across almost half of the counties, i.e. the territorial-administrative divisions of the country, for a party to be registered (Law 14/2003). However, this bottom-up structure, created as a response to the appeal of the leader, was sufficient only for the initial phase of party formation. An important task for the party was to field candidates for the 2012 local elections and this was the moment

at which the initial audience-centred approach was no longer useful. The quest for suitable candidates – with both popularity and financial resources – led to different recruiting strategies. One of the most popular strategies was to import local politicians from other parties, who brought with them financial and symbolic benefits to the party. The same pattern was followed in recruiting candidates for the legislative elections: the PPDD attracted political elites from other parties who believed they were unlikely to be nominated by their parties for re-election.

This approach was explained officially as being a consequence of institutional obstacles. Newly emerging parties like the PPDD did not have access to public funding for electoral expenditure. Hence, it was an externally-conditioned necessity to recruit parliamentary candidates with different ideological backgrounds from outside the original organization (Ilie 2013). The development of the PPDD's organization was long perceived by the party leader as the main liability. Diaconescu has often complained about how expensive a territorial organisation is and emphasized that the other parties can afford to pay for professional consultancy. The official discourse praised dilettantism, spontaneity and improvisation as cheap solutions adopted by the party of the common people. Although the symmetry between the leader and the common people is the official element of rhetoric, hierarchy had its relevance too. In a 2011 interview, Diaconescu praised the local involvement of 'colleagues' who used their private wealth to 'do something at a local level, to be a smaller Dan Diaconescu' (Tabacu, Teodorescu 2011). The unofficial version is that the financial benefits brought by candidates were not necessary only for the party, but ended up in the leader's pockets. Candidates had to pay a significant amount of money to run under the PPDD label. The undercover journalists who conducted a fake negotiation with Diaconescu revealed that the price to be a candidate was €50,000 (Biro 2012). Similarly, some PPDD local leaders acknowledged that Diaconescu had asked them to recruit candidates who had more than €20,000 in their accounts (RTV 2012b).

With respect to his speeches, the leader provided the necessary programmatic references in keeping with the crude and simplistic style of the OTV infotainment. This was a mixture of anti-corruption slogans and nationalistic values that coexisted with contradictory economic stances (see the previous section on ideological fuzziness). The ideas that nurtured the programmatic identity were derived from the leader's own experiences with what he called the abuses of the system, particularly the judicial system. Diaconescu's experiences were transformed into powerful symbols of the fight against the system, the elites, and the establishment. In an interview, he agreed with the definition of his party as an anti-system one, slightly amending its significance: 'Many analysts say I am an anti-system party. And this is correct. But do not forget that I am the victim of the system' (Tabacu, Teodorescu 2011).

In conveying Diaconescu's messages, his visual media outlet played an essential role. The party was advertised even before its official formation. The fines imposed for illegally conducting its electoral campaign were interpreted as proof of the obstacles invented by a corrupted and inefficient system against honest people and their future representatives. According to this view, the leader, the party and the audience were victims who should express their discontent with a common voice. The latter could best develop in the environment provided by the OTV studios, where the candidates for the 2012 elections echoed a platform familiar to the traditional OTV audience. Contrary to the other TV stations, where

parties and their candidates could not (fully) control the interaction with the journalists, the OTV provided a universally flattering and supportive arena for the PPDD candidates. In addition, on the party's internet website, one of the few available links was to the OTV's live or recorded broadcasts. Consequently, since the leader was the owner of the TV station he could easily control the way he and his candidates were presented to the voters. This exclusive publicity hid the heterogeneity of the party organizations and its lists of candidates. Instead, it enhanced a strong personalization of the PPDD formation and electoral campaign. The latter was mainly about voting for Diaconescu, and his personal qualities and interpretations of politics. The eponymous party label, adopted after the registration procedures between 2010 and 2011, promoted the leader as a value *per se*, as the very incarnation of the people's will. It was exactly this aspect that was emphasised in the 2012 electoral campaign. Significantly, the party's website opened with a leader-centred slogan: 'Romanian, free yourself! Vote Dan Diaconescu's angels!' (PPDD 2013). The messianic position of the party leader was extended to its candidates. Another relevant slogan was: 'Dan Diaconescu makes the people speak!' Once again, the leader was presented as the trustworthy voice of the genuine people; his honesty became the solution for all societal problems.

Diaconescu became not only the main face of the party and the source of its identity, but also a tutor of the party. The latter could not exist without the leader's material and symbolic involvement. The emphasis on the Saviour character of the leader reinforces his legitimacy as being 'beyond the party', granted directly by the people (equated with the OTV viewers). While the spontaneous and dilettante characteristics of the party were publicly defended as proof of the 'non-contamination' by the system/establishment, on the eve of the 2012 elections the extent of the leader's full control over the internal decision-making process was illustrated by the pragmatic compromises over candidate selection and campaign funding that completely ignored the reticence of the grassroots of the party.

In brief, Diaconescu's autonomy within the party's activities and in the electoral arena generated a complex over-personalization intensely promoted by the OTV studios and the PPDD's website. The entire electoral campaign was meant to fit the visual format of the OTV-centred campaign and the content of Diaconescu's speeches for more than a decade. The central elements were the fight against a corrupt system and the defence of the national values and common people. Under these conditions, the PPDD was deprived *ex ante* of its capacity to provide a counterpoint to the personal interpretation provided by the leader; it could not challenge his complete control over the three faces of the party. Consequently, the party was created at the service of the leader: the personal and business-firm dimensions overlapped and the party became fully dependent on the leader's input.

8. Conclusions

Based on the above we may conclude that the case of the PPDD represents a peculiar sub-species of personal party whereby the leader (with his many faces – founder, sponsor, voice and image, manager, interpreter, strategy maker, etc.) exercises a complete and openly exhibited authority over the party. It certainly complies with McDonnell (2013) *condicio sine*

qua non linked to the visceral dependence of the party's expected lifespan to both the political and physiological lifespan of its founder-leader. Another common feature concerns the elevation of the founder-leader's private success to a noble and virtuous endeavour for the 'the (national) community profit', which explains the deliberately-cultivated affinity with a populist argumentation, the criticisms expressed towards the establishment and representative politics and the use of simple, easily understandable (although sometime contradictory) solutions to complex technical issues such as the management of the financial crisis. Further, in this case Dan Diaconescu was portrayed as a sort of spiritual leader: the provider of the correct interpretation of what Romania needed in 2012. In terms of organisational features, the territorial network is relatively under-developed and echoes Gunther and Diamond's (2003) portrayal of a party born to support a media-entrepreneur to advance his national political interests. Still, despite the anti-representative populist rhetoric amply used by the PPDD, there is no explicit evidence in favour of a voluntarily downgraded traditional model of party organisation. Note also that there is a strong resemblance in terms of the intensive focus on the party leader in the campaign strategy, a strategy reinforced by the exclusive use of the OTV platform. There are two main differences that can be observed.

(1) Instead of having a rigorously profit-g geared organisation, a methodical and sophisticated approach to politics as well as a systematic/continuous pursuit of political 'profit', the PPDD is characterised by a rather archaic organisational management, an improvised approach to politics and the intermittent involvement of the leader in the management of the party (mainly the party in office). Whereas the personal party is a transposition of economic profit to politics, the PPDD seems to be a political improvisation, an unfinished diversification of the OTV chain into the political market. A personal party is also about a highly centralised political organisation that gravitates around a common goal, limiting the room of manoeuvre for individual candidates or centres of power. In the case of the PPDD we have instead identified an unstable political party, which tends to be subject to political 'upheavals' arising from those heterogeneous individuals that put into question the contract of allegiance with the leader immediately after their election. The PPDD MPs evidently perceived their individual political future as extending beyond the 'limited' career of the founder-leader Dan Diaconescu: without the TV chain, the party-founder is deprived of his capability to compete and the oath of fealty becomes null and void without a (certain) benefit return.

(2) The putatively typical personal party is primarily about a permanent visible party-leader – a real 'political superman' – systematically acknowledged as such within his/her political organisation and among his/her electoral followers. In the case of the PPDD we identify a sporadic and speculative political involvement of the leader, who practically vanished once his private-TV chain was banned. Note also that, considering the limited resources available as well as the relatively low level of sophistication in the communication management, the PPDD benefited from rather limited professional expertise, which further hampered the systematic organisation of the party into a permanent political business.

All in all, the PPDD's characteristics pinpoint to a *sui generis* type which resembles more a hybrid mixture of modern and archaic. On the one side, there is a 'TV-mediated party', and on the other side there a feudal-like bond between the party and the leader. Political mandates are gifted by the leader-founder in exchange for loyalty. These relationships can easily break down since the party-élite might be tempted to use independent resources (pre-

vious political experiences and contacts) against the leader's authority and thus the party organisation is fragile and vulnerable. The twilight of the founder-leader's private success limits not only the visibility and the credibility of the leader, with a direct impact on her or his potential for electoral mobilisation, but also her or his potential to have control over the organisation and, in particular, elected politicians within the party.

By placing emphasis on the role of individual initiative in designing the party programme and organization, this paper confirms the initial expectations drawn from the literature. More specifically, it confirms the difficulty entrepreneurial rooted parties have in maintaining and consolidating electoral support after their electoral breakthrough. Once the party-founder can no longer guarantee 'profit', either in terms of electoral results or preferential access to local, national and/or EU offices, the party's chances of survival radically diminish.

Footnotes:

1. In 2015, Dan Diaconescu was sentenced to five and a half years in prison. Most notably, the sentence also banned the party-creator from performing activities in the print or audio-visual mass media for a period of five years after the completion of his sentence (Mediafax 2015).
2. Note that the UNPR merged in 2016 with former President Bănescu's party, the PMP.
3. See for example the case of the Spanish Union of the Democratic Centre (UCD) (Hopkin, Paolucci 1999).
4. For an overview see Kopeček 2016.
5. Dan Voiculescu was one of the richest men in Romania. In 2009, his fortune was estimated at 1.5–1.6 billion euros, with a slight decrease in 2010. His fortune abruptly decreased in 2015, being estimated at 180–200 million euros. This cut was directly linked to the judiciary issues that led to him being sentenced to prison in 2014 (Capital 2015).
6. Until the 2015 amendment of the party law, a party needed at least 25,000 members at registration, with no less than 700 persons in at least 18 counties (equivalent to 1/3 of the counties), including the capital city of Bucharest. Since 2015, it has become easier to start a party, as only three members are required for registration. Note also that in the same period, the electoral system has been radically amended and Romania returned to an electoral system based on closed list proportional representation.
7. Dan Diaconescu was the owner of OTV, a successful form of gutter-journalism TV channel. Before coming to OTV, he had appeared extensively in Romanian media, collaborating with major newspapers (i.e. *Curierul Național*, *Jurnalul Național*, *Cotidianul*) and private television (e.g. *Tele7abc*). In 2011, his name was mentioned in the list of Romania's 10 wealthiest people (on the 10th position with €26 million) (Capital 2015). Still, a year later, Diaconescu was no longer mentioned among the top-ten list of richest Romanians.
8. Tufiş (2014) illustrates that the evolution of institutional trust in Romania from 1990 to 2014 marks a significant drop between 2009 and 2012, towards what the scholar identifies as the lowest levels in the post-communist period.
9. Although the party was not yet legally registered, the surveys registered a high level of electoral support for the party announced by Dan Diaconescu. According to a CURS survey between 10th and 28th of March 2011, 8% of Romanians would have voted for Diaconescu's party (the third best result after the social-liberal coalition and the PDL).
10. More details and a video are available at www.politicalocala.ro/adeziunea-cu-numarul-1-000-000-la-partidul-poporului-s-a-inregistrat-la-ploiesti.html.
11. The Bureau is formed by the president of the party, two first-vice-presidents, the general secretary, 18 vice-presidents, 4 national executive secretaries and the party treasurer.

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