

POLITICAL PERSONALIZATION AND PERSONALIZED POLITICS. THE CASE OF ROMANIAN SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY BETWEEN 2015 AND 2019*

Marius Grad**

Abstract: *Democratic systems are linked to political parties' existence and functionality. In the recent decades, scholars agreed that general societal changes modified the role of political parties. Nowadays, these structures have less control over the political communication within a society and voting has become less predictable (Hjarvard, 2008). Also, researchers reconsidered the importance of individual representatives (Karvonen, 2010) compared to parties as unitary actors. Personalization of politics (Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007) represents an important factor in a political party's evolution. It can be an indicator of party decline or of a party adaptation. This research aims to identify and analyze how political personalization and personalized politics worked in the case of Romanian Social Democratic Party (PSD) between 2015 and 2019. To do so, the analysis is focused on Liviu Dragnea and the governments endorsed by PSD in the abovementioned period and the final goal is to explain how PSD was affected by its leadership: was it a party decline or a party adaptation?*

Keywords: Political personalization, personalized politics, Social Democratic Party, party change, leadership.

Political parties are indispensable parts of any democratic systems. The quality of democracy is often determined by the political parties' variety and involvement. Even if the current societal transformations are not fully compatible with party-based democracy, the systems did not change fundamentally in modern history. Although, traditional party politics and activities transformed to face the challenges generated by globalization and the Internet. Nowadays, the link between party transformation and

* This work was supported by the project "Quality, innovative and relevant doctoral and postdoctoral research for the labor market": POCU/380/6/13/124146, project co-financed by the European Social Fund through The Romanian Operational Programme "Human Capital" 2014-2020.

** Assistant lecturer, Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca; e-mail: marius.grad@ubbcluj.ro

„Anuarul Institutului de Istorie «George Barițiu» din Cluj-Napoca. Series Historica”, LIX, 2020, Supliment, 2, *Lucrările conferinței internaționale online „ROMANIA-ITALIA-EUROPA. Evoluții istorice - Dinamici culturale - Relații internaționale”, 16-18 septembrie 2020*, p. 519-527.

democracy evolution is stronger and political parties are searching for new instruments to secure votes and affirm policies.

Moreover, political parties are still responsible for the linkage between citizens and decision makers¹ and are the principal factor that ensure the communication of attitudes and interests between the two. However, technological development and societal transformations have changed the role of political parties². Nowadays, the organizations reconsider the role played by individuals, both as representatives and as leaders. This trend can be identified in practice and in scholar's work and proves that personalization effect plays a strategic role in further developments. This article seeks to fill the gaps in the literature generated by an intensive focus on political parties as unitary actors³ while emphasizing the increased importance of individual politicians in the case of Romanian Social Democratic Party (PSD). This will contribute to better understand how political personalization and personalized politics works.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. The first section summarizes the most common findings and arguments provided in the literature about political personalization and personalized politics. The second section presents the case of PSD between 2015 and 2019 and the governments endorsed by them while holding the parliamentary majority, under the leadership of Liviu Dragnea. Next, the article continues with an analysis of the impact upon PSD and how personalization was materialized in this specific case.

Personalization of Politics and Political Personalization: individuals vs. political entities. A theoretical framework overview

Party change has been extensively analyzed by the scholar in the recent decades⁴. But relatively fresh works show that personalization is a key element that might be identified in all cases, with differences among its magnitude, whenever we talk about politics.

¹ Russell Dalton, David Farrell, Ian McAllister, *Political Parties and Democratic Linkage: How Parties Organize Democracy*, Oxford, OUP Oxford, 2011, *passim*.

² Lance Bennett, Alexandra Segerberg, Curd Knüpfer, *The democratic interface: technology, political organization, and diverging patterns of electoral representation*, „Information, Communication & Society”, vol. 21, nr. 11, 2018.

³ Thomas Meyer, *Dropping the unitary actor assumption: The impact of intra-party delegation on coalition governance*, „Journal of Theoretical Politics”, vol. 24, nr. 4, 2012.

⁴ Martin Wattenberg, *Parties Without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, *passim*; Marco Lisi, *Party change, recent democracies, and Portugal: comparative perspectives*, London, Lexington Books, 2015, *passim*.

The personalization of politics it is not a new concept and it was first introduced by Wattenberg in 1991, in his book *The Rise of Candidate-Centered Politics*⁵. It is defined as a “process in which individual political actors become more prominent at the expense of collective actors and institutions such as political parties, cabinets and parliaments”⁶. On the other hand, political personalization is defined as the process 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”⁷. Even though these general definitions might look similar, there are strong differences between them. The existing literature draws a line between the two concepts and operationalize them in specific ways. For example, in practice, there are cases where the relationship between the leader and the party is easy to be observed: *Forza Italia* and Silvio Berlusconi, *En Marche* and Emanuel Macron, *Servant of the People Party* and Zelensky in Ukraine, most of them in presidential regimes. But personalization can occur in multiple contexts and situations and it cannot be considered specific to one type of democratic regimes. This is why, the recent findings are emphasizing the main distinction between the two concepts: one defines a process and the other one is related to a situation.

Therefore, personalization of politics is a process that takes place over time and is considered to appear when the glory of the mass party ends⁸. On the other hand, personalized politics refers to a specific point where individuals become more important than the political groups⁹. Due to the conceptual uncertainty between personalization of politics and personalized politics researchers define personalized politics as “a situation in which individual political actors are centrally important, prominent and highly visible, and not as a situation in which individual political actors are *more* centrally important, prominent and visible than political parties”¹⁰. Although the existing work extensively cites these general definitions, it is unclear how

⁵ Martin Wattenberg, *The Rise of Candidate-Centered Politics*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2013.

⁶ Lauri Karvonen, *The Personalisation of Politics. A Study of Parliamentary Democracies*, Colchester, ECPR Press, 2010; Gideon Rahat, Tamir Sheafer, *The Personalization(s) of Politics: Israel, 1949–2003*, „Political Communication”, vol. 24, nr. 1, 2007.

⁷ Gideon Rahat, Tamir Sheafer, *The Personalization(s) of Politics: Israel, 1949–2003*, *passim*.

⁸ Lauri Karvonen, *The Personalisation of Politics. A Study of Parliamentary Democracies*, Colchester, ECPR Press, 2010.

⁹ Helene Helboe Pedersen, Gideon Rahat, *Introduction: Political personalization and personalized politics within and beyond the behavioural arena*, „Party Politics”, 2019.

¹⁰ William Cross, Rob Currie-Wood, Scott Pruyssers, *Money Talks: Decentralized Personalism and the Sources of Campaign Funding*, „Political Geography”, vol. 82, 2020.

personalization occurs in practice, how it affects the political parties and how it should be managed, as a connection between theory and reality.

Overall, the current literature identifies two different types of political personalization: centralizing and decentralizing personalization¹¹, while Rahat & Sheaffer differentiate between institutional, media and behavioral personalization¹². Institutional personalization is showed to be related with the selection methods and with democratization of the implied processes. Media personalization is materialized through the increased focused on a specific candidate or a specific individual while the interest for the organizations (political parties, institutions) is decreased. Behavioral personalization was initially related by researchers¹³ to the legislative process, especially when a significant share of legislation is initiated through personal initiatives at the expense of the political party. Generally speaking, all the above represent arenas of personalization and are used in the literature to determine *where* personalization takes place¹⁴.

Complementary, for a better conceptual use of the notions, specific levels of personalization are identified by the literature: central – focused on leaders and decentralized – focused on individual politicians which are not leaders¹⁵. Also, Van Aelst differentiate between two aspects of personalization: individualization and privatization¹⁶. Individualization is materialized through an extensive focus on the ideas, capacities and policies promoted by a politician, while privatization consist in a high concern related to its human nature – hobbies, family life and personal evolution.

Moreover, studies on political personalization discussed the role of political leaders and individual candidates in shaping voter's choice¹⁷ and other focus on how

¹¹ Meital Balmas, Gideon Rahat, Tamir Sheaffer, *Two routes to personalized politics*, „Party Politics”, vol. 20, nr. 1, 2014, pp. 37-51.

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¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ Helene Helboe Pedersen, Gideon Rahat, *Introduction: Political personalization and personalized politics within and beyond the behavioural arena*, „Party Politics”, 2019, on-line first.

¹⁵ Meital Balmas, Tamir Sheaffer, *Charismatic Leaders and Mediated Personalization in the International Arena*, „Communication Research”, vol. 41, nr. 7, 2014, pp. 991–1015.

¹⁶ Peter Van Aelst, Tamir Sheaffer, James Stanyer, *The Personalization of Mediated Political Communication: A Review of Concepts, Operationalizations and Key Findings*, „Journalism”, vol. 13, nr. 2, 2012, pp. 203-220.

¹⁷ Diego Garzia, *Personalization of Politics and Electoral Change*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, passim; Amanda Bittner, *Platform or Personality? The Role of Party Leaders in Elections*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011.

media's attention was shifted to individual politicians rather than political parties¹⁸. Also, personalization and power distribution inside the political parties was investigated from power centralization perspective¹⁹, while power decentralization was proved to generate more independent behavior of individual politicians in relation with their party²⁰. In more recent research the institutional dimension of political personalization was developed²¹ and results show that, in the last two decades, institutional political personalization can be identified as a trending process within the European electoral system, with different levels for each country.

Moreover, the study of personalization was related with study of democracy. Frequently, a strong relation was shown to appear between political personalization and political parties. Due to the intertwined effects of technological innovations in the media and organizational change within their own parties, political individuals or leaders have gained more attention and a significant role with respect to political communication and voters' choice²². Equally important the media personalization of individual politicians detrimental to political parties was caused by the values embedded in television and within any media organization. The visual nature facilitated a trend to focus on personalities rather than on abstract entities²³. In addition, political parties may incur losses or benefits out of personalization. For example, it is shown that "persons have become more prominent in both electoral and executive politics in many countries"²⁴, while "leaders play an important role in the individual vote calculus, and have a discernible effect on the distribution of votes in an election"²⁵.

¹⁸ For more details: Peter Van Aelst, Tamir Sheafer, James Stanyer, *The Personalization of Mediated Political Communication: A Review of Concepts, Operationalizations and Key Findings*; Carsten Reinemann, Jrgen Wilke, *It's the Debates, Stupid! How the Introduction of Televised Debates Changed the Portrayal of Chancellor Candidates in the German Press, 1949-2005*, „Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics”, vol. 12, nr. 4, 2007, pp. 92-111.

¹⁹ Thomas Poguntke, Paul Webb, *The Presidentialization of Politics: A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.

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²¹ Alan Renwick, Jean-Benoit Pilet, *Faces on the Ballot. The Personalization of Electoral Systems in Europe*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 154.

²² Diego Garzia, *The Personalization of Politics in Western Democracies: Causes and Consequences on Leader-Follower Relationships*, „Leadership Quarterly”, vol. 22, nr. 4, 2011, pp. 697–709.

²³ Jay Blumler, Dennis Kavanagh, *The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features*, „Political Communication”, vol. 16, nr. 3, 1999, pp. 209–30.

²⁴ Lauri Karvonen, *The Personalisation of Politics. A Study of Parliamentary Democracies*, Colchester, ECPR Press, 2010, p. 106.

As shown above, political personalization is a multidimensional concept. It can be used mostly in any organizational context and has a prevalence in politics. It may occur in various arenas of political life, either it is about media coverage, institutional design or the behavior of voters and individual politicians. A cross-national comparison shows that a general trend of personalization can be identified in established democracies and there are concerns that will generate negative effects²⁶. One of it is that increased personalization will develop irrational elements that will enhance populist trends, while a personal relation between leaders and those led will loosen the accountability mechanisms²⁷. Also, only few positive effects were supported by scholars. The strongest one advocates the idea that a more personalized political interaction will reduce institutional mistrust and reluctance of people.

Overall, personalization is inherent in the current political context. It is facilitated by the evolution of party systems, extensive media use and new trends in leadership. Its effects can be found at national political level, in political organizations and in institutions.

PSD under Liviu Dragnea – 2015 -2019

The Social Democratic Party is one of the oldest political parties in Romania. It is one of the most resilient and effective political formations due to its institutional structure and background. The leading structure has strong authority and the control over the local branches is developed on the pork barrel politics. Over time, PSD obtained significant results in all elections, dominating the local and parliamentary ones. An important failure was registered in 2014, when its candidate lost the presidential elections. Few months later, after the Colectiv nightclub tragedy, its leader, Victor Ponta, PM in that time, resigns and Liviu Dragnea is elected as party leader. Later on, at local and parliamentary elections of 2016, PSD obtained an important victory and attained more than 47% of the expressed votes.

Under Liviu Dragnea, between 2017 and 2019 PSD supported three cabinets. First one, with Sorin Grindeanu as PM was ousted by its own party in no-confidence vote. The main reproach was that he failed to implement the reforms, especially the

²⁵ Amanda Bittner, *Platform or Personality? The Role of Party Leaders in Elections*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 139.

²⁶ Meital Balmas, Tamir Sheafer, *Charismatic Leaders and Mediated Personalization in the International Arena*, „Communication Research”, vol. 41, nr. 7, 2014, pp. 1009.

²⁷ Thomas Poguntke, Paul Webb, *Presidentialization, Personalization and Populism: The Hollowing out of Party Government*, in William Cross, Richard Katz, Scott Pruyers (eds.), *The Personalization of Democratic Politics and the Challenge for Political Parties*, London, Rowman Littlefield, 2018.

ones related to justice. The dissatisfaction was not related with the ministries headed by Dragnea's political allies. In that time, Grindeanu declared that Dragnea seeks to "concentrate all the power in his hands" confirming the internal cleavages and generating a political crisis within the party²⁸. Second cabinet, headed by Mihai Tudose, ended with his resignation after the political support was withdrawn by the party executives. Actually, Tudose lost the intra party conflict with Dragnea, generated by his resign request to the minister of interior, Carmen Dan, a close partner of party leader²⁹. The third cabinet, led by Viorica Dancila, was toppled by no-confidence vote initiated by the opposition in 2019, after the conviction and arrest of the party leader, Liviu Dragnea.

Moreover, under his strong leadership, Liviu Dragnea, was seen as the head of all the efforts to destabilize the justice. Through intermediaries he tried to lay a foundation for a weak judicial system by decriminalization of crimes such as abuse of power, reduction of penalties for serious criminal offenses, insurmountable obstacles to prosecutors in the fight against crime and corruption. Also, PSD, under his leadership supported a strong politicization of state institutions by appointing incapable party members in key positions, weakened the national political authority and negotiation capacity at European level and failed to carry out investments and economic reforms.

At social level, Liviu Dragnea was perceived as a state of law weakener and due to his attempts to fragilize the anti-corruption legislation, large protests occurred in major cities. The brutal suppression carried by the riot police was seen as a threat to democracy and stability and a proof that he managed to gain control over key institutions. Moreover, the self-serving public lies, half-truths, distortions and double speak, enhanced by media led to public demonization of Liviu Dragnea³⁰. In addition, the extensive use of Eurosceptic and nationalist rhetoric weakened the support for the leader within the party and among voters.

Causes and effects – a party perspective

As shown above, political personalization is determined by a specific context. In PSD, the personalization process, with Liviu Dragnea as central figure, started with his elections in 2015. He was the only candidate running for the position and was

²⁸ DW, *Romanian PM Sorin Grindeanu ousted by own party in no-confidence vote*, available at <https://p.dw.com/p/2f5yZ>, accessed 18 June 2020.

²⁹ DW, *Romanian Prime Minister Mihai Tudose resigns*, available at <https://p.dw.com/p/2qtN9>, accessed 18 June 2020.

³⁰ Bogdan Enache, *Romania's "Sonderweg" to Illiberal Democracy*, „The Market for Ideas”, available at <http://www.themarketforideas.com/romania-sonderweg-to-illiberal-democracy-a335/>, accessed 18 June 2020.

elected by a high majority of the party members through direct vote. Although, he was not able to run for PM, due to previous conviction, the party members endorsed him. With a primary political goal centered on his own person (salvation from a second trial, which would have brought him, in case of conviction, his imprisonment), Liviu Dragnea was forced to govern through intermediaries. None managed to completely follow his objectives – one to save his freedom – leading to instability and lack of predictability. In fact, the three cabinets in a very short period – three years – is a proof of leadership failure and lack of interest for party's interests. Despite the internal rivalries, Dragnea succeeded to dominate the internal opposition, but failed to secure total support from his organization. He took short time advantages out of a misunderstanding by party leaders and strategist of the potential further developments. The strong electoral support was not questioned in the light of public reaction and dissatisfaction, leaving the party incapable to handle the political involvement of a “new” class of political activists.

Also, in addition to personal interests and struggle for total control, other approaches weakened the party cohesion and credibility. In parallel, PSD developed the discourse against the financial sector and multinationals, politically materialized by the famous Ordinance 114. The nationalist and anti-European approach motivated a strong involvement of those who support a pro-Western approach. Also, the meaningless conflicts, especially the international lobbying campaign against one of its own nationals, former anti-corruption chief Laura Codruța Kövesi to prevent her from getting the job of top EU prosecutor, proved that individual ambitions are overruling party interests and objectives.

An internal report published in 2020, shows that PSD is aware of the damaged received under Liviu Dragnea: “public mobilization in favor of "justice" was one based on temporary emotions. But was enough to destabilize the PSD government from its first days at Victoria Palace. I was wrong to see in those manifestations only the expression of refusal to recognize the results of the December 2016 vote. [...] the main message was different: "We want a country like abroad!". In other words, "We want to live, not just survive!". It is the expression of the needs of Romanian middle class, on the rise, which is structured around values specific to

Western societies. For that we did not have a dialogue with these new social groups, we, as a party, were sanctioned”³¹. It proves how the negative effects also had international implications: “The distance, until isolation, of some party leaders from the European social democracy and many of the European policies [...] The place of the necessary dialogue with the European social-democratic family was taken by open hostility and even by allusions regarding the renunciation to the family of the European

³¹ Ionut Vulpescu, *PSD, incotro? 2016-2019. Analiza evolutiei electorale a PSD*, on-line, 2020.

left [...] PSD seems to have no friendly party within the European socialist family or within the Socialist International”³². And finally: “The personalization of politics, understood as a battlefield, in which the other must be destroyed at all costs, ignoring the status and collective governing bodies, voluntarism, arbitrary decisions, extreme de-ideologizing of political discourse, all brought PSD where it is now, fighting for the second place”³³.

Therefore, both personalization of politics and personalized politics can be identified in this case. The strong centralized personalization undermined the organizational objectives and generate a strong wave of reluctance. So, personalization worked as a party decline. As result, the impact over the party was significant. In the elections for European Parliament of 2019, the voters sanctioned the misconduct. The party obtained the lowest score in the last decades.

³² *Ibidem.*

³³ *Ibidem.*

