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The Politics of Romania

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Introduction

Romania today stands at a crossroads shaped by a tumultuous history, remarkable transformations, and ongoing challenges. Situated at the crossroads of Central and Southeastern Europe, Romania's political system is the product of distinct historical episodes: centuries of monarchy and foreign domination, decades of communist rule, and more than three decades of post-communist democratization. The country's path from authoritarianism to parliamentary democracy has been neither linear nor easy, but it has resulted in a dynamic and pluralistic political environment.

At the core of Romania's political life lies a semi-presidential republic, guided by the Constitution of 1991 and its subsequent amendments. This foundational document establishes the core principles of sovereignty, rule of law, pluralism, and the separation of powers. The President and the Prime Minister share executive responsibilities, each with distinct roles that both cooperate and occasionally contend within the framework of the state. The legislative authority, with its bicameral structure, and a judiciary intended to uphold independence and constitutional supremacy, complete the tripartite architecture of government.

Since the fall of communism in 1989, Romania's political system has witnessed profound restructuring. Political parties have multiplied and evolved, while electoral systems have been reformed to balance stability and representation. The opening to multi-party democracy has meant both opportunities for political participation and challenges, including shifting alliances, populist upsurges, and the persistent shadow of institutional corruption. At the local level, devolved autonomy empowers communities, yet connection to the central government through prefects and administrative hierarchies ensures national cohesion.

Recent years have brought new complexities to Romanian politics. Shocks like the annulment of the 2024 presidential election results amid allegations of foreign interference and fraud have tested public faith in core institutions. Rising support for nationalist and far-right parties reflects both local and global trends, posing key questions about political direction and the resiliency of Romania's democratic culture. Meanwhile, engagement with international partners—particularly in the European Union and NATO—anchors Romania within the broader project of European integration and security, even as debates over sovereignty and identity continue.

This book explores all the principal features and dynamics of Romania's political system. It examines the roots of contemporary institutions in historical and cultural context, analyzes the structures of governance and representation, and assesses the major challenges facing the country today. Readers will encounter both the formal

rules that shape politics and the informal practices—the alliances, rivalries, and moments of popular mobilization—that animate public life.

Our hope is that this guide will provide a comprehensive and accessible journey through Romania’s political landscape, helping scholars, students, policymakers, and citizens alike to better understand the complexity, dynamism, and importance of politics in modern Romania.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Historical Roots of Romanian Politics

To understand the complex tapestry of modern Romanian politics, one must first delve into the deep layers of its history. Romania's political landscape is not a recent construct, but rather a product of centuries of evolving social structures, external influences, and internal struggles. From ancient times to the eve of the 1989 revolution, the forces that shaped the Romanian lands left an indelible mark on the collective psyche and the institutional framework that would eventually emerge. It's a story that involves Dacian tribes, Roman legions, migrating peoples, powerful empires, and the slow, often arduous, process of nation-building.

The historical narrative begins with the Dacians, the ancient inhabitants of the territory that largely corresponds to modern Romania. Their interactions with the expanding Roman Empire in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD were pivotal. The Roman conquest under Emperor Trajan in 106 AD brought Roman administration, language (the basis of modern Romanian), and culture to the region, transforming it into the province of Dacia. This period of Roman rule, though relatively short-lived compared to the overall history of the region, is considered foundational to Romanian identity, providing a linguistic and cultural anchor that persisted through subsequent centuries of migration and invasion.

Following the withdrawal of Roman legions in the late 3rd century AD, the territory was traversed and, at times, controlled by various migrating groups, including Goths, Huns, Gepids, Avars, and Slavs. These migrations and invasions prevented the formation of a strong, unified political entity for many centuries. Instead, smaller, localized political formations known as *voievodate* and *cnezate* emerged, led by local chieftains or *voievozi*. These entities often paid tribute to or were under the nominal suzerainty of larger regional powers.

The Middle Ages saw the gradual consolidation of three principal Romanian principalities: Wallachia, Moldavia, and Transylvania. Wallachia and Moldavia, situated to the south and east of the Carpathian Mountains respectively, developed as distinct political entities, often engaged in a complex dance of cooperation and conflict with powerful neighbors like the Kingdom of Hungary, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the burgeoning Ottoman Empire. Transylvania, on the other hand, became an autonomous principality under the suzerainty of the Kingdom of Hungary and, later, the Habsburg Monarchy.

The relationship with the Ottoman Empire was particularly significant for Wallachia

and Moldavia. While they retained internal autonomy, they were obliged to pay tribute and provide military support to the Ottomans. This period of Ottoman influence, lasting for several centuries, shaped the political and administrative structures of the principalities, introducing elements of Oriental culture and governance, though the core Romanian identity and language remained largely intact. The rulers of Wallachia and Moldavia, known as *Domnitori*, navigated a precarious path between loyalty to the Ottomans and attempts to assert greater independence, often relying on diplomacy, strategic alliances, and sometimes outright rebellion.

Within these principalities, a social and political hierarchy developed. The landowning boyars (nobility) held considerable power, often challenging or influencing the rule of the *Domnitori*. The relationship between the ruler and the boyars was a constant dynamic, marked by power struggles, alliances, and shifting loyalties. The peasantry, the vast majority of the population, often lived under conditions of serfdom, tied to the land and subject to the authority of the boyars and the ruler.

The 18th and 19th centuries were a period of significant change and increasing national consciousness. The decline of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of other powers, particularly the Habsburg and Russian Empires, brought new pressures and opportunities to the Romanian principalities. This era saw increased exposure to Western European ideas, including those of the Enlightenment and national romanticism. Intellectuals and political figures began to advocate for greater autonomy, modernization, and the eventual unification of the Romanian-speaking lands.

The year 1848 was a pivotal moment across Europe, and the Romanian principalities were no exception. Inspired by revolutionary movements elsewhere, Romanian liberals and nationalists organized uprisings in Wallachia and Moldavia, demanding reforms, constitutional government, and greater national rights. Although these revolutions were ultimately suppressed by Ottoman and Russian forces, they significantly advanced the cause of national unity and sowed the seeds for future political developments.

The mid-19th century witnessed a crucial step towards national unification. In 1859, Alexandru Ioan Cuza was elected as the ruler of both Moldavia and Wallachia, effectively uniting the two principalities under a single ruler. This was a clever political maneuver that bypassed the limitations imposed by the Great Powers. Although Cuza's rule was relatively short, he initiated a series of modernizing reforms, including land reform and educational changes, before being forced to abdicate in 1866. His departure paved the way for the establishment of a foreign dynasty.

In 1866, Prince Charles of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen was invited to become the ruler, taking the name Carol I. His reign marked the beginning of the Hohenzollern dynasty in Romania and coincided with further steps towards full independence. The Russo-

Turkish War of 1877-1878 provided Romania with the opportunity to fight alongside Russia against the Ottoman Empire. Following the war, the Treaty of Berlin in 1878 recognized Romania's full state independence. In 1881, Romania was proclaimed a Kingdom, with Carol I as its first King.

The period between independence and World War I was characterized by the consolidation of the Romanian state, economic development, and the emergence of a more defined political system. A constitutional monarchy was established, with a Parliament and a government. However, political power remained largely concentrated in the hands of a small elite, and the political system was often marked by clientelism and corruption. The major political forces of the time were the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party, which alternated in power.

World War I proved to be another transformative event. Initially neutral, Romania eventually joined the Allied powers in 1916 with the goal of uniting with the Romanian-inhabited territories of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The war was devastating for Romania, but the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires at the end of the conflict created the conditions for the realization of the "Greater Romania" ideal.

In 1918, Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Transylvania voted to unite with the Kingdom of Romania. This act of unification created a much larger and more diverse state, bringing together different regions with distinct historical experiences and social structures. The interwar period (1918-1940) was a time of both progress and significant challenges for Greater Romania. The unified state adopted a new constitution in 1923, which established a parliamentary monarchy.

However, the interwar political landscape was unstable. Numerous political parties emerged, often fragmented and personalistic. Governments were frequently short-lived, and political life was marked by intense rivalries and political crises. Issues such as land reform, minority rights (given the significant non-Romanian populations in the newly acquired territories), and economic development were major points of contention. The rise of extremist movements, including fascist and communist groups, further destabilized the political scene.

The 1930s saw a gradual erosion of democratic norms and an increase in authoritarian tendencies. Economic hardship during the Great Depression contributed to social unrest and political polarization. In 1938, King Carol II established a royal dictatorship, suspending the constitution and banning political parties. This marked the end of parliamentary democracy in Romania for several decades.

World War II brought immense suffering and further political upheaval to Romania. The country initially lost territory to the Soviet Union and Hungary. It then joined the Axis powers in 1941, participating in the invasion of the Soviet Union. However, as the tide of the war turned, a coup d'état in August 1944 overthrew the pro-Axis regime and

brought Romania onto the side of the Allies.

Following the war, Romania fell under the influence of the Soviet Union. The presence of Soviet troops and the political maneuvering of the Romanian Communist Party, backed by Moscow, gradually dismantled the existing political system. The monarchy was abolished in 1947, and the Romanian People's Republic was proclaimed. This marked the beginning of over four decades of communist rule, a period that would profoundly reshape Romanian society and politics, laying the groundwork for the challenges and transformations of the post-1989 era. Understanding this long and often difficult historical journey is essential to grasping the complexities of Romania's contemporary political landscape.

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