INTRODUCTION

Many, perhaps most Romanians who will not readily agree about politics manage to find common ground by acknowledging that it is cycles of foreign domination which have prevented their country fulfilling its true potential. Foreign explanations for underperformance in the economic sphere and in developing effective political institutions enjoy widespread popularity. It is hard to deny that Romania has indeed suffered from being in a part of the world which has seen frequent collisions between great powers, local states, and indeed rival social systems. The human and material losses suffered by the country in both the world wars of the twentieth century were immense. But while not ignoring the disadvantage Romania has faced through its sensitive geopolitical location, this book will argue that the long-term problems which have distorted and cramped its development have primarily internal origins.

Romania has never acquired an élite which combines defence of its own position with a genuine and sustained effort to improve the condition and prospects of the population. Romanians have been viewed as subjects rather than citizens by successive regimes of contrasting political hues. There is no doubt that the legacy of vertical dependence and exploitation inherited from foreign rule, particularly in the provinces of Wallachia and Moldavia, cast a long shadow over the independent Romanian state. But these provinces, which made up the core of self-governing Romania from 1859 to 1918, have now been free from direct foreign control for longer than they were under the rule of the avaricious Phanariots, sent by the Ottoman Empire to administer them from the early eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries.

Romanians often refer to examples of low political standards in high places as ones inspired by the phanariot tradition. But elite strategies based on exploitative relations towards the wider society have acquired a momentum of their own, particularly during the
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twentieth century. The ability of the privileged few to divert public resources for private use, or to make calamitous decisions to gratify a will to power (as under the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu in the 1970s and 1980s), grew steadily in what had been an era of political emancipation and improving political standards in most other parts of Europe. Elites which are strangers to the concept of the public good have been able to stay in charge by promoting social fragmentation and relations of dependence. Nationalism has been consistently employed as a survival strategy by elites, often weighed down by records of misrule, to divert popular indignation towards a foreign target.

In terms of exploitation, incompetence and misuse of national resources, the communist regime (1946–89) was the worst that Romania has experienced. But there is plenty of evidence to suggest that it intensified negative behaviour patterns in politics already in existence as well as licensing new ones.

The extrication from communism now involves profound economic, political, and social adjustments. They are almost as systemic as those which brought the original communist states into being in Romania and its East European neighbours. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that currently fashionable analytical categories, devised for explaining the transition from closed to open political systems in Southern Europe and Latin America, might not be entirely appropriate for post-communist Eastern Europe. In the burgeoning literature on democratisation, it is often assumed that the transition to democracy leads naturally to its consolidation once routines and permanent institutional structures take shape which influence the behaviour of political actors. But perhaps a majority of newly democratising states are unlikely to reach the consolidation stage. This may be due to a variety of factors such as conflict over territory or ethnic allegiance, the absence of well-placed elite figures prepared to act in a consensual manner, or the failure of socio-economic conditions to improve, thus depriving voters of the incentive to strongly identify with a pluralist system.

Most of the weakly-implanted democracies in which the danger of de-democratization is a constant one are to be found in parts of the Third World where states struggle to assert their authority, or even to exist, in the face of daunting economic handicaps and
sometimes challenges to their territorial integrity. The multidimensionality of the challenges faced by some ex-communist countries also raises doubts about their ability to remain on a steady path of democratisation. Where the previous authoritarian experience left few political resources which could be used to fashion a democratic successor regime, where the previous democratic role models were absent or uninspiring, or where the manner of the communist state’s disappearance was violent or otherwise divisive, daunting handicaps were likely to impede efforts at democratization. Of the East European states which fell under communist rule in the 1940s Romania is one where these blocking conditions were most in evidence fifty years later. The communist regime had been a fully totalitarian one which flattened civil society and regulated the lives of its citizens down to the minutest detail. No previous democratic government had been inspiring enough to act as a reference point for opponents of communism. When, uniquely in East-Central Europe, the dictatorship collapsed in 1989 amid serious violence, dissension about the sequence of events and the emergence of second-ranking communists to shape the transition, polarised the country for much of the 1990s.

The formal break-up of the Romanian communist system appears to have benefited a restricted group of citizens. Some were leading players in the former regime adept at thriving in new times; a much larger group were strategically-placed activists at different levels in the former state apparatus, ready to benefit from the connections they enjoyed with the new power-holders.

Leszek Balcerowicz, a key player in the Polish democratic transition, has argued that at the start of the 1990s, democratising states in Eastern Europe experienced a short and exhilarating period of ‘extraordinary politics’. It was one in which ‘[B]oth leaders and citizens feel a stronger-than-normal tendency to think and act in terms of the common good’. If Romania witnessed such a period of idealism uniting the dictatorship’s successors with the population, it was an extremely short-lived one that could be measured in days or several weeks at the end of 1989. The form of government which gradually emerged was not one over which the people were able to exercise some control or one which sought to operate in the popular interest. Instead the post-communist system responded primarily to
the needs of a large élite, regrouping after the collapse of the authoritarian system which had originally brought it into being.

There is plenty of evidence that at first Ion Iliescu, the second-ranking communist official who became Romania’s ruler after the execution of Nicolae Ceauşescu in December 1989, was looking for ways to pursue a semi-authoritarian course. Full-fledged liberal democracy appeared too risky and problematic. A façade democracy, with nationalism replacing national communism as an active source of legitimacy, fitted in with the country’s previous governing traditions. But Iliescu and the post-communists lacked the energy or vision to try to re-position Romania on an indigenous path. The catastrophic policy failures of the Ceauşescu era meant that Western assistance was crucial in order to refloat the battered economy. Also there was growing awareness within the new ruling élite that the conditions international institutions laid down in return for aid, especially the transition to a market economy, could be turned to the advantage of the new economic powerholders and their political allies. Rather than arrange a compromise with forces on the centre-right that were slowly regrouping after 1989, Iliescu and his political vehicle, the National Salvation Front, devised new political and administrative institutions (or more often revamped old ones) to consolidate their authority. Not until 1996, when Iliescu and his followers lost both the parliamentary and presidential elections, would forces committed to substantial economic and political liberalisation be strong enough to dislodge the post-communist élite.

In 1996, many commentators referred not just to a change of government but to a change of regime. The mistakes and abuses of the Iliescu regime, and the growing sophistication of sections of the electorate, meant that it was viewed far more sceptically in the mid-1990s than at its birth when there was widespread unfamiliarity and nervousness with the idea of competing parties. Moreover, the international context had changed with the Atlantic democracies being far more willing to bring pressure on illiberal democracies and support apparently genuine reformers in South-East Europe. But it soon became clear that in Romania avowed reformers were in office but not in power. They inherited, and were dependent upon, a state machine attuned to the needs of the post-communists in charge from 1990–6. It proved difficult to motivate or compel the administrative
machine to carry out reforms. In diplomatic language, the British Department of International Development (DFID), in a 2001 report on Romania, described ‘serious deficiencies ... in the ability of the administration to formulate, co-ordinate and implement essential policies for economic development’. Parallel structures had been created under Ceauşescu, and in many cases refined under his successor, which meant that there were blocking mechanisms in the judiciary and the security services which thwarted unwelcome change. The 1991 Constitution created a parliament with two chambers whose powers were virtually identical, a recipe for legislative gridlock. These were formidable handicaps; since negotiations with the European Union (EU) to fulfil the terms of eventual membership had begun in 1999, Romania was required to alter its political system, establish the rule of law, rebuild its economy on a new basis, and adopt a vast array of new administrative procedures if accession was to be achieved in or after 2007.

Only a government with clear awareness of what needed to be done, united about the steps to be taken, and showing no fear of upsetting vested interests could have made a significant impact on the broad reform front. Instead Romania was ruled from 1996 to 2000 by a four-party coalition where there was greater mutual suspicion and eventually mutual antagonism than solidarity in seeking to dismantle the legacy of Iliescu and, before him, Ceauşescu. The confrontational rhetoric between pre- and post-1996 powerholders hid the extent to which some parts of the coalition were prepared to accommodate themselves with part of the web of economic and security interests linked to the previous administration. The new government was quickly blown off course, unable to define priorities or agree a programme of action. Key reforming laws were emasculated as much because of internal coalition dissension as the continuing strength of post-communists within the administration.

It is not clear if the outcome would have been significantly different if there had been one united reform party in office, as in Bulgaria from 1997 to 2001. The Peasant Party (PNTCD) and the Liberals (PNL)—the parties most committed to root-and-branch reform—showed an unhealthy appetite for the spoils system. President Emil Constantinescu played a mediating role but at key moments his judgment was questionable and his withdrawal from the electoral
contest in 2000 was as serious a blow to reform hopes as any directed by the parties through their infighting. Despite these setbacks, Constantinescu argued that a democratic consolidation was happening. One of its preconditions is that ‘a strong majority of public opinion holds the belief that democratic procedures and institutions are the most appropriate way to govern collective life in a society’, but during the reformist government’s increasingly troubled period in office polls showed mounting nostalgia for single-party and authoritarian forms of rule; an attempt in 1999 to remove the government by means of a mass rebellion of coal miners only narrowly failed. In 2000 fresh elections saw a collapse in the vote of the previously successful electoral alliance, the Romanian Democratic Convention (CDR); its architect and mainstay, the PNTCD disappeared from parliament and soon broke up. Iliescu returned to the Presidency and the Party of Romanian Social Democracy to government. But the Greater Romania Party (PRM), a fully authoritarian force advocating drastic measures against national and ethnic minorities as well as the independent media, had been catapulted into second place.

While élite behaviour patterns, can be criticised, the lack of public pressure for reform also contributed to the contemporary crisis of governance faced by Romania. The country’s ability to acquire increasing amounts of national sovereignty, and to recover that sovereignty when it was undermined by Soviet domination after 1945, means that Romanian rulers are drawn from the domestic population and are not imposed from outside. Inevitably, certain mores of society are bound to be reflected in the approach to politics and government shown by the post-1989 political class. The lack of violence as a problem-solving strategy in society is reflected in the political arena. But it has to be acknowledged that less savoury characteristics of the ruling élite may also have their origins in the collective behaviour of Romanian society. Certainly, the inability of groups promoting reform from below to carve out a strong position is due less to obstruction by the state and more to the incapacity of a fragmented and mutually distrustful society to end its own victimisation at the hands of an amoral state.

This book pays close attention to the failure of reform in the second half of the 1990s; it emphasises the scale of the challenge, the
strength of vested interests opposed to reform, and the limited vi-
vision of those in executive positions. It argues that reformers could
have achieved more: by communicating with the population, over-
coming their own fragmentation, and mobilising the backing of in-
ternational institutions to spearhead change at home. But the scale
of the challenge was perhaps beyond even higher-grade and experi-
enced politicians, and more united parties. This, it is argued, is due
to the continuing damage which the communist system was able to
inflict on attempts, in the 1990s, to create a radically different Ro-
mania shaped by the values and norms of economic and political
pluralism. Accordingly, particular attention is paid to the way that
communism socialised two generations of Romanians. Under it de-
cisions were made for ideological reasons that in more pragmatic
communist states were influenced by other criteria: private owner-
ship of the means of production was totally curtailed; the removal of
bourgeois values and the purging social groups that stood for them
was constantly pursued; and finally the creation of a numerically
dominant industrial proletariat producing heavy industrial goods
which Romania was not really equipped to manufacture on a large
scale surpassed normal development goals.

Under communism, civil society was pulled up by the roots. It is
widely believed that democratic prospects are enhanced if a range of
social organizations broadly committed to expanding citizenship
rights are in existence before the transition.6 But in totalitarian Ro-
mania this was impossible. Instead most citizens grew accustomed to
being centrally directed by the state. Fear of the state and reluctance
to dispute its authority, at least openly, meant that after 1989 there
was still a strong reluctance to form or join interest groups, and asso-
ciation autonomy in Romania was stunted. Moreover, the effects
of damaging policies of social engineering pursued under commu-
nism left a daunting legacy for a successor regime. Overpopulation
on the land was solved at the expense of creating a huge class of
worker-peasants located mainly in heavy industrial plants, much of
which soon had no future because of the lack of markets for their
products.

An already strong dependence on the state was accentuated by the
communist era. A leviathan state was created which sought to regu-
late and control nearly all branches of human activity. But it lacked
capacity and was increasingly brittle, as shown in the way it collapsed in 1989; Ceaușescu’s ideological fervour had destabilised the system. Iliescu and the PDSR (the name of his party from 1993 to 2001) instead revived an older theme in Romanian history since the achievement of formal independence in 1881: capturing the state as an end in itself. In the early 1990s the PDSR had been unsure of how to respond to post-Cold War challenges; it lacked a coherent programme other than to preserve as much as possible of the old order under a cautiously Western-leaning framework. But it showed an appetite to occupy the state at all levels: PDSR-elected representatives and their allies in the newly-created business sector sought to enrich themselves through various forms of mutual support. There was a deep-seated feeling that state property really had no owner. So there were no in-built restraints on the plundering of state assets by well-placed private individuals.

States with which the Romanian government likes to compare the country—Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia—also witnessed such theft of public resources but on nothing like the scale seen in Romania. This book acknowledges a tradition of diverting public resources for private use which can be traced back at least to the eighteenth century and the era of the phanariots, and was never eliminated even during the supposedly egalitarian communist era; communist politics often proved a screen behind which personal interests were promoted and wealth diverted for private use, most notably under the Ceaușescus. Much of the population had grown accustomed to such behaviour from the successive élites which ruled over them; except in the province of Transylvania, where the form of governance was historically based on higher standards, there were no counter-traditions which could be drawn upon by citizens keen to limit the power rulers could exercise over them. While the communist system managed to eliminate democratic practices and those groups upholding them, it preserved or refashioned other values beneficial for an authoritarian project, one that ultimately shaded into unrestrained personal rule in the last twenty years of the communist era. Collective values which downgraded the individual and made him or her subject to group authority had been instilled by the Orthodox Church before 1945. Nationalism, after an interlude of Soviet-sponsored internationalism, was rehabilitated and
tailored to suit communist needs; the traditional viewpoint that freedom consisted essentially of freedom from foreign rule and not the right of the individual to dissent from the government or majority opinion, proved extremely useful for a communist system seeking to move beyond Marxism-Leninism to shore up its legitimacy. A new generation of intellectuals promoting implacable forms of nationalism was groomed by the state, and sometimes pre-1945 chauvinists were able to revive their careers by preaching the catechism of Romanian nationalism.

It was of a piece with the particular ruthlessness of the Romanian communist regime that it was able to extract resources from the Romanian past to bolster its rule. Thus longer-term explanations for Romania's lack of success with representative institutions require attention. One important factor uniting the elitist democracy of the monarchical era (1881–1938), the communist regime and its successor has been the consistent need for the state to shore up its authority by maintaining a society dependent on it despite its own poor performance. During the communist era the authorities relied on terror and the threat of coercion to impose their will, but under earlier political systems there was always an effort to promote low expectations and a sense of deference in the population at large. Nationalism was consistently used by all three political systems to divert sections of the population from critically assessing the performance of those ruling over them. An earlier work by the present author argued that the pre-1945 Romanian state was deficient in many of the ways that states normally sought to establish and preserve their integrity and authority: 'As well as an inadequate system of transport and communications, România Mare [Greater Romania] proved incapable of providing adequate defence, civil order, a reliable system of justice, a reasonably equitable taxation system, and a framework for industry and commercial activity. The national interest was reduced to safeguarding territorial gains and realising the historic Romanian mission.' When Ceauşescu's audacious policy to transform Romania into one of the world's industrial powerhouses crumbled in the 1980s, he fell back on nationalism and in particular the alleged threats posed by its historic rivals, Hungary and Russia, in order to demand obedience and further sacrifices. Whenever the internal shortcomings of the state, or examples of low standards in high
places, became impossible to conceal in the 1990s, threats to territorial integrity—usually from Hungary or the large Hungarian minority in Romania—would be promptly discovered and revealed to a populace by now thoroughly imbued with the main tenets of Romanian nationalism.

Historically, the case can be made that Romanians were prepared to endure worse behaviour from their rulers than their neighbours in other Balkan states. A large number of people related to the state on the basis of dependence. A sense of citizenship has always been weak and, in the context of low-intensity citizenship, democracy has always been feeble. The essence of democracy—participation and a sense of inclusion by citizens—is still largely absent in Romania.10

The younger generation, who played the leading role in the brief struggle against tyranny at the end of 1989, have largely absently themselves from politics. The continuation of a traditional and authoritarian higher-level education system may be helping to create a younger generation which shares the narrow outlook of the current elite in the bureaucracy, the legal profession and the political world. The need to preserve a relationship of dependence between society and a poorly performing state has always been an elite priority, and evidence for this is not difficult to assemble. The PDSR managed to get away with creating a new private class subsided by public money because of a submissive population. In a gesture comparable to that of colonists giving natives trinkets or alcohol and then divesting them of land and mineral wealth, the PDSR offered concessions to the population, such as share vouchers in companies earmarked for privatisation or the ability to buy their apartments for low prices, while pursuing policies which left them without any long-term material security.

The architect of Romania’s exit from communism, Ion Iliescu, has played a key role in legitimising the creation of a new oligarchy, or at least substantially reducing opposition to its methods of wealth-creation. In the eyes of much of the electorate, particularly those living in the countryside and small towns who represent the backbone of PDSR support, he is seen as a morally upright leader against whom no accusations of corruption can be plausibly made. The rectitude of his public behaviour makes accusations that he has smoothed the rise of a large number of dishonest figures in the
PDSR hard to establish. Iliescu’s image as ‘a genuine man of the people’ who can be trusted to look after the interests of ordinary Romanians has been acquired partly thanks to the personalisation of politics. Romanians cannot easily locate themselves on the normal ideological spectrum. When asked to declare, in a 1994 poll, whether they belonged to the right, centre or left of politics, 38% of respondents in the capital replied that they did not know where to place themselves according to these political categories. The desire to make a political choice based on the personality of the competitors rather than what they stood for, appears to be ingrained. Antipathy towards Iliescu lay at the root of many of the protests in the early 1990s by those who felt that the revolution had been stolen; still, to many more living in small towns, rural areas and cities that depended on a single state-run industry and wishing for a benevolent autocrat, he was a reassuring figure. One of the faults of his successor Constantinescu was a perceived inability, when problems needed to be solved, to impose his personality decisively. The importance of the personality factor in politics stems from the weakness of parties and the failure to distinguish between competing programmes. It means that a system based on respect for procedures and democratic institutions can easily be undermined or thrown aside by a populist style of politics in which an individual offers ‘salvation’ on the basis of his own personal qualities; perhaps it is not a coincidence that the name on which the men who overthrew and executed Ceaușescu could agree for the successor movement to the Romanian Communist Party was the National Salvation Front.

The restoration of social and economic inequality and the refinement of relationships of social dependence coincides with external efforts to strengthen democracy in Romania and promote good governance. Many international agencies and institutions of global governance are trying to promote reforms which might result in a sustainable political and economic future for Romania. There has hardly been another period in Romanian history when external forces have intervened in its affairs in such a non-exploitative way. It is also possible to argue that aspects of International Monetary Fund policy towards Romania have left the country worse off, but in general the aid programmes of the World Bank, the EU and, in many instances, the IMF are designed to strengthen the capacity of the
Romanian state and its ability to play a full role in transnational organizations like the EU and Nato. Numerous programmes have sought to promote a public service-oriented bureaucracy, shelter vulnerable groups such as Roma, unemployed workers and subsistence-level peasants from the downside of the economic and social transition and, above all, promote a robust democracy.

Romania, ruled for most of the twentieth century by contrasting regimes united in their desire to promote an autonomous and firmly national form of political development, is now influenced by powerful external forces with their own specific agenda. The core Atlantic democracies and the transnational organizations they influence are promoting democracy in line with competitive market economies. Political and economic pluralism are seen as two of the most crucial mainstays of the globalization process. The external forces seeking to promote the integration of Romania into an international system of politics and economics assume that the structures and procedures of core Western democracies are the most appropriate ones for a country like Romania. Integrating Romania into ‘mainstream Europe’ by means of EU membership is probably the key undertaking. The EU mission in Bucharest is probably the most important international presence in Romania, perhaps even outstripping the US embassy in importance. Huge amounts of non-reimbursable aid are being channelled to Romania in the first decade of the twenty-first century to prepare for its membership of a body striving to create a new European federation of states.

Britain’s Department of International Development (DFID) baldly declared in 2001 that ‘EU accession is the key driver of reform’. If reform is taken to mean creating a law-based state, entrenched human rights, inclusive citizenship and high standards of behaviour among elected representatives, public officials, and the new business élite, there is much truth in that. Without the inducements and security offered by the EU, what incentives would the Romanian élite have to strengthen democracy and governance generally? How secure would the existing democratic safeguards be? Romania’s experience indicates that external engagement is important for strengthening a fragile democracy in a country where there are no shortage of reluctant democrats in positions of influence. External pressure alone will not work without social groups prepared
to act as domestic advocates and sustainers of a reforming strategy promoted from abroad. There is no sign that such domestic constituencies are in positions of influence, and sometimes it is possible even to doubt their existence.

A modernisation strategy that is profoundly alien to the values of the national élite is likely to fail if nearly all the pressure is coming from outside. The international officials promoting alien concepts like public service, self-limiting rule, transparency and consultation are essentially transitory, and many of them may not even be aware of the long tradition whereby institutional forms acquired from the democratic heartlands of the West quickly become hollow façades behind which authoritarian and unjust practices continue to flourish. The EU is unlikely to remain a long-term advocate of Romania’s integration if the short- and medium-term results of its engagement are disappointing. The ties binding the country to Western Europe are simply too slender. Similarly, NATO’s readiness to invite Romania to open talks to join might not be an inspired decision if efforts at civil and military reform remain sluggish.

It came as a relief to many when, in 2000, the PDSR agreed to implement the terms negotiated by its predecessor allowing the EU, along with the IMF and World Bank a major say in shaping the country’s medium-term economic strategy up to 2006. However, the relief might have been tempered with caution if there had been greater awareness of longer-term trends in Romanian history. Influential Romanians who see the possession of power as an end in itself have prided themselves on their ability to outwit powerful outsiders who have wished to impose ‘alien ways’ on them, from the Ottomans to the Soviet commissars. Perhaps only a diminution of Romanian sovereignty to allow external agencies drawn from countries with good public services to rebuild each government department and agency from the bottom up would enable the EU to impose its particular set of values on the administrative machine in Bucharest. But Brussels has little appetite for such in-depth involvement with a candidate country’s institutions. It is not unduly cynical to suggest that the primary incentive to cooperate with the EU is the unprecedented amount of funds for structural reform that would be disbursed in the coming years, but if the funds make only a slight amount of difference to the Romanian state’s performance and the
values underpinning it, there is little to keep the EU engaged. And its rulers, still drawn from the post-communist élite, may have even less reason to accept recommendations for maintaining a democratic momentum. It is likely that where external intervention fails to mobilise a supportive domestic constituency, it will fail altogether. Only if institutions of global governance were to decide to impose a semi-protectorate (which has only happened in contemporary Eastern Europe following prolonged local unrest) could they hope to effect a transformation with a democratic process lacking a strong inner momentum.

While one may be sceptical about Romania’s ability to strengthen its engagement with democracy, some important progress has nevertheless occurred during the years since the end of communism. Authoritarian tendencies have been checked at different times. In 1990 popular mobilisation in favour of democratisation, however thinly spread, probably limited the scope of post-communists to create a de facto one-party state merely paying lip-service to pluralist arrangements. A lively print media with a strong investigative side holds the government to account more effectively than opposition parties. There is a growing familiarity with complexity and tolerance of dissimilarity; conspiracy theories to explain a wide range of events no longer have the hold on the public imagination they appeared to have in the early 1990s. Peaceful transfers of power occurred in 1996 and 2000, and the results were not disputed in any significant quarter. Above all, perhaps, the ability of anti-minority forces to manipulate the politics of ethnicity appears to have declined substantially. The moderate behaviour of the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR), even when faced with severe provocation, gave ultra-nationalists less excuse to depict the voice of the Hungarian minority as the enemy within. Public reaction was muted when the UDMR joined the government in 1996 and when it signed a pact of cooperation with the PSDR in 2000.

Time may even show that the 1996–2000 government left some positive legacies in different areas of reform, even though its record was ultimately one of failure, and that not all its successors were interested in promoting dependence or otherwise behaving in an oligarchical manner. But the preference for simulated change, or stop-go reform, remains strong. This means that Romania is likely to
retain standards of government which will leave it ill-equipped to grasp the opportunities presented by EU expansion eastwards. Countries which quickly adopted a radical and comprehensive economic reform programme in the early stages of the transition, and then systematically implemented far-reaching institutional changes, are clearly those with the best chance of breaking free of the legacy of the past, an admittedly difficult feat. Romania was hampered by the strength of vested interests from the former times, which found the rules of politically and economically pluralist societies alien or incomprehensible. The preference for agreeing to recommendations from international bodies hoping to assist Romania, while being in no hurry to carry them out if they disrupted élite behaviour patterns, was evident in the 1990s and is likely to remain a predominant one.

The possibility of Iliescu’s party seeking to resurrect a project allowing for a single party to exercise a monopoly of control within a pluralist context should not be discounted. What used to be known as the Mexican-style solution (until the defeat of the ruling party there in 2000) consisted of ‘an entrenched dominant party with corporatist tendencies ruling over a partly democratic society in which there is limited, tolerated opposition and a weak independent sector but little real democratic culture’. This scenario may be a more probable one in Romania than the consolidation of democracy. It might be more fruitful to compare it with countries like Mexico and Brazil where tight-knit oligarchies with a deplorable record of misrule have sought to muffle popular discontent by encouraging relationships of dependence and promoting aspects of political culture which encourage passivity and resignation. A good example occurred on 14 July 2002 when the PSD mayor of the Moldavian city of Bacau threw a birthday party, providing enough food and refreshments for tens of thousands of guests. It was a scene straight out of a novel by Gabriel Garcia Marquez in which the Latin American oligarch briefly allows the peons on his estate a tantalising share of the good life. The President condemned the mayor for behaving like ‘a medieval lord…who called the poor on his birthday to give them a few crumbs’, but unless he was blind, Iliescu would have known that similar riches were being accumulated by other PSD officeholders all over Romania.

Instead of comparing Romania with Poland or Slovakia, comparisons with other ex-communist countries where ruling élites have
enriched themselves from public funds while closing off outlets for effective protest and renewal might help to deepen understanding of the Romanian trajectory; Angola springs to mind as do some of the ex-communist states in Asia. Descriptions of Luanda with the élite cruising along dilapidated roads in the latest BMW and Mercedes cars evoke some uneasy parallels with Bucharest. But even if the competitive elements of Romanian democracy assert themselves, its ability to consolidate itself will be undermined as long as the economic situation remains so depressing. The 1930s demonstrated the difficulty in Europe of sustaining a pluralist political system against a background of sharply falling living standards. A 1994 United Nations report argued that the enormous spread and depth of economic decline among the former communist countries of Eastern Europe since 1989 had exceeded in magnitude the catastrophe that engulfed the capitalist economies in the 1930s. By 2000, 92% of Romania’s 6 million pensioners were living below subsistence level. Its health indices are among the poorest in Europe with only 3.9% of GDP being allocated to health care services in 1999 (the average for EU member states is 8.5%).

The experience of Latin America and indeed of Romania in earlier phases of its history shows that only at rare moments does the populace have the willpower or energy to impose its demands on the political agenda when it is such a struggle to survive simply from day to day. Accordingly, it may not be in the interests of a kleptocratic élite to sponsor improvements in living standards if one outcome is that the population will act more resolutely to ensure better forms of governance. One of the most serious obstacles in the way of better governance in Romania is the very lack of public pressure for reform. People are not united on the basis of mutual trust but only when forced by necessity. This has been frequently said of southern Italy but it is true also of Romania. Both regions suffered foreign domination and exploitative rulers for long periods, and the resulting intense social mistrust stunted civic traditions. Robert Putnam has explored the failure of the civic community in southern Italy; by contrast he found in Northern Italy ‘norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement’. These had their counterparts in Romania, among the Saxons in particular, and in cities like Timișoara. But this reservoir of social capital was much depleted by the
end of communism, when most of the Saxons were on the point of leaving for Germany. Communist leaders drawn mainly from the south had already gone to great lengths to dismantle the civic bonds to be found in Transylvania and, in the eyes of some commentators, to balkanise it by changing its demography and deepening social dependence on the state.23

This book argues that the PDSR-led regime is the latest in a long line whose primary objective has been to reinforce vertical relations of domination and personal dependence and discourage social solidarity.24 The fact that such a process goes hand in hand with an attempt to create pluralist institutions suggests that in many ways the democratising experiment lacks substance. In the following chapters we seek to explain why cynicism and alienation have been the preferred postures of Romanians towards politics irrespective of the political systems the country has known in its 150 years of independent existence. We see how a lack of civic engagement and vertical relations of dependence have made political misrule the norm and not the exception, on how, having been the most regimented of the states in the Soviet bloc before 1989, Romania is on the way to becoming one of the most unequal states in Europe. A new oligarchy, ironically with roots in the communist era, has grown up which possesses few social obligations or commitment to the wider common good. It has important political leverage acquired through its closeness to the party which has controlled Romania’s post-communist evolution for all but the period 1996–2000; it has also benefited from the survival of institutions such as the various intelligence bodies and other networks of power which have only been partly reformed since 1989. Small, well-placed groups in the security apparatus and the foreign trade sector were able to acquire sizeable wealth even in the midst of Ceauşescu’s equalizing communist dictatorship, and they have reinforced their power in alliance with politicians and other entrepreneurs by diverting public wealth for private use. Domestic forces committed to building a strong and transparent democracy in which such abuses of power have no place, do exist, but they are weak and there is no sign that they will grow in strength and confidence in the years ahead. International engagement with Romania to create institutions that serve the public good that will enable the country to be part of the Euro-Atlantic integration process has had only a limited impact on the quality of governance.