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Article

The Political Careers of the PNL Members in the Governments Related to the 2020-2024 Legislature

Abstract: *The aura of power and prestige surrounding the ministerial positions, situated at the apex of the government, is much valued by the parties and political actors (Verzichelli, 2008). The paper explores the political recruitment of Romanian ministers affiliated with the National Liberal Party (PNL) in the governments related to the 2020-2024 electoral cycle. It delves into the processes and factors shaping the recruitment, selection, and careers of ministers within the party, shedding light on the intricate dynamics of political recruitment in the Romanian context. The research examines how elements such as opportunity structure, political ambitions, party positions, and the former local, national, or parliamentary offices held by the political actors (Ștefan, 2016) influence ministerial appointments.*

Since most of the PNL ministers were already members of parliament at their ministerial appointment and about three-quarters had obtained two parliamentary mandates, a previous parliamentary career appears to be one of the beaten paths toward the ministerial chair. Being cabinet members in previous electoral cycles was another possible reason for the party's designation of certain individuals in ministerial positions as more than half of the liberal ministers had prior experience in cabinets. By analysing the career trajectories

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and tenures of PNL ministers, this study contributes to understanding the complexities involved in the political recruitment of executive members within the party that was continuously in government, along the Cițu, Ciucă, and Colacu cabinets, in the 2020–2024 legislature.

Keywords: *governmental elites, pathways to cabinets, political career, political recruitment, Romanian executives.*

1. Introduction

The objective of the research is to identify certain patterns underlying the recruitment and selection processes of the cabinet members affiliated with the National Liberal Party (PNL), and to examine their profiles and careers, thus advancing the knowledge of studies on Romani-

an political elites, from the perspective of the selection and promotion mechanisms within the political party.

The issue of recruitment, selection, and careers of politicians is the subject of extensive studies among worldwide researchers of political elites. Ciprian Iftimoaei's (2015) study *Elite guvernamentale în România post-comunistă* identifies complex selection procedures and criteria, open rather to those who come from the hierarchical top of the parties, from the administrative elite (management officials and high-ranking civil servants) or the government sub-elite (secretaries and undersecretaries of state, directors within the ministries). In addition to professional training, the support of the party or certain interest groups (trade unions, patronage, or relations with the state's international partners such as the EU, NATO, IMF, and WB) are relevant elements in the appointment process within the executive apparatus. Elements such as the *level of commitment to a political career*, the *type of professional background* before a parliamentary career, the *age* at which individuals entered politics, and *political ambition* are indicators of political professionalisation (Squire, 2017).

The bidirectional relationship between political careers and institutional configurations (Schlesinger, 1966), emphasises the interconnected nature of individual ambitions and institutional functionality. The classification (Ştefan, 2016) of political offices into (1) *national offices*, (2) *local offices*, and (3) *parliamentary offices* proposed by Ştefan acknowledges the distinct category of *parliamentary offices*, since politicians elected in the parliament play a double role: of local constituency representatives (a local role) and national decision-makers (a national role).

The principle-agent theory is relevant to the role of ministers in central administration institutions. They serve as „double agents,“ carrying out duties assigned by both political parties and leaders of the state (Andeweg, 2000). This is particularly true for coalition governments, such as the current one, where heads of state are not free to choose ministers at their discretion. The party principle limits the actions of the governing principal and vice versa (Verzichelli, 2018). In coalition governments, such as those studied here, it is not an easy job to be a minister when the agent is the party leader and the principal is the prime minister, most often the head of the other party. A minister subordinated to a prime minister appointed by another party has to listen to instructions given by two “command centres”, and in case of divergent orders, the stability of the minister's position is given both by the ability of the coalition leaders and by the personal ability to manage the tension that has arisen, as shown by Ştefan (2019) in the paper *Presidential Politics and Coalition Bargaining*.

The *opportunity structure* is shaped by the fact that some political offices are more likely to ensure political advancement than others (Black, 1972). Opportunities have a significant role in shaping political actors' aspirations, and this influence is seen in politicians' preferences to embrace different options. The institutional opportunity (Borchert and Stolz, 2011) includes in its components the availability of a political career, the accessibility, and the attractiveness (the three A's that shape the hierarchical structure of political careers in a virtual landscape). The accessibility and the attractiveness of a political career imply choices based on the costs and the benefits involved, while the availability is a fixed component. Ştefan explains that, on the one hand, the objective structure of opportunities involves the salary perspective, the influence that can be gained, or the career perspective, and on the other hand, the subjective structure of opportunities represents the politician's subjective perception of the opportunities presented, some of them wanting executive positions, others the seat of deputy or senator, others a career at the local level so on (Ştefan, 2003).

2. Analysis

2.1. The social background of PNL ministers

In studies about political elites, be they European, American, or from other parts of the world, the concern for their social background has always occupied an important role, therefore the present study cannot omit this component, even if not will devote exhaustive attention to it, preferring to focus on the central role of political parties in the recruitment, selection, and promotion of political personnel in the executive apparatus of the state. An average age of 47 years was observed, with the youngest member of the PNL in government in the person of Sebastian Burduja, the seniority being ensured by Adrian Oroş, a PNL member since 2012, after being a member of a historical party (2003–2012).

Referring to the university studies of the analysed actors, economic and technical training are the two branches that represent the academic background of a large share of liberal ministries. Master's studies were obtained by a few of them in the fields of public administration, economy, or defence studies. The ten ministers who completed doctoral studies showed an increased interest in fields such as economy, medicine, defence studies, engineering, management, and political studies. It is useful to mention the fact that almost a third of the liberal ministers who added to their resume the PhD degree, come from among the technocrats.

The research revealed the fact that before occupying the position of minister, the dominant career of the studied political actors took place in public administration. Another trajectory that led to the occupation of the minister's chair was constituted by relevant activity in the field of university education.

2.2. Initial political recruitment – From social to political roles

The public data on executive members offers relevant information regarding the initial political recruitment of the PNL executive elite. In order to observe any prior involvement in the civil society actions of the governmental elites studied, I took a closer look at their moment of entrance into politics. Several former pro-deans, pro-rectors, researchers, and university professors, together with a few former NGO founders and student union activists entered politics and ended up occupying the position of minister from an initial career in the area of civil society. Yet for a large share of the actors studied, the activism within the party was the defining path for their political course, which led to political professionalization (Borchert and Stolz, 2011), which will be discussed in the dedicated section.

Non-political characteristics of the governmental elites can be observed by looking at various traits such as academic experience and professional background. In the paper *Sistemul politic românesc* (2008), Alexandru Radu and Daniel Buti underline the fact that an indispensable element of a democratic society is the existence of a well-structured and organized civil society. A functional democracy is based on the structural duality of the ruling elite on the one hand, and civil society on the other. Although the political decision-maker is the decisive factor for the direction in which society is headed and shapes the institutional structure of democracy, the role of civil society must be emphasized, as it has the power to influence political decisions so that its scope and the degree of satisfaction of social interests are fulfilled (Radu and Buti, 2008).

Civil society figures identified by Iancu (2011) in the paper *Les Elites Politiques en Roumanie Post-communiste 1990-2008, Les Voies d'Acces au Pouvoir Executif* were labelled as an important resource of political personnel occupying governmental positions, among the bureaucratic and the economic figures. Civil society is an integrative category that brings together activists in associations, and institutes, but also the academic environment, emphasising their presence among the governmental elite through a process of *conversion* of non-political resources into assets for political promotion. Professors at universities, researchers, NGO founders, and employees of foundations, groups, or research centres appear to be preferred candidates for selection from outside the party into executive roles (Iancu, 2011). Their experience thus forms the practice of their co-optation in the political sphere, which is related to the abilities they possess as well as the access provided to them by the activism in social spheres and the technical know-how.

2.3. The central role of political parties in the recruitment and selection of political elites

The political parties play a major role in the recruitment and selection of the political elites, as well as in the development of their political career. The question of whether a long political career is a prerequisite in achieving a cabinet position finds a rapid positive answer, as the politically charged cabinets under analysis leave not much room for outsiders or technocrats. When the need for experts becomes a necessity, the party rapidly adopts the strategy of co-optation in the ranks of the party. On the other hand, the powerful positions occupied in the party hierarchy, the multiple previous or incumbent parliamentary careers within the party, and several previous appointments at the head of ministries noticed among the studied population are the main attributes of the successful candidates who are appointed as a consequence of the contribution to the increase of party influence.

2.4. Co-optation of technocrats in the ranks of the party

Professional and managerial skills are important assets when analysing appointments in the position of minister of the politically unaffiliated persons, the so-called technocrats (Ștefan, 2018). The few cases of outsiders in politics who are nevertheless nominated for the position of minister confirm the adoption of a strategy of co-opting technocrats when professional or managerial expertise is needed. It also displays a pattern of party consolidation within the PNL (2024, April). Along with the nomination comes the co-optation as PNL member of the respective minister, until then an independent official with relevant activity in the managed field (e.g., Ligia Deca). The source of their power consists, from the perspective of the selectors, of the professional know-how possessed. Joining the party is a necessary condition to continue to benefit from the support of the party that propels them.

2.5. Party seniority

A long and relevant career within the party is a tradition in the PNL. Positions as general party president, party vice-president, president of county branch, secretary at the head of the party, and president or vice-president of the party's executive office, represent titles with weight in the subsequent appointment as a minister. Sustained militancy for the party, proven by a long

career within the organisation, and strong regional or central influence are the attributes of those at the top of the party. One of the long-time members of PNL is Nechita-Adrian Oroş, who used to be a member of the old PNTCD political party. He has held various leadership positions within the PNTCD executive since 2003. It appears that climbing the ladder in public office is often a result of climbing the ladder within one's political party.

Among the members with the longest tenure in the party are Marian-Cătălin Predoiu (since 1991) and Adrian-Ioan Veştea (since 1994), while newcomers to the party are Sebastian Burduja, and Ligia Deca.

2.6. Parliamentary career

Scoping the parliamentary and party careers of the appointed ministers in the period 1989-2008, Ştefan's study *Pathways to Cabinet: Selecting ministers in post-communist Romania* (Ştefan, 2009) showed that ministers can be found among parliamentarians and parliamentarians can obtain one day a ministerial portfolio. Almost two-thirds of the ministers from the period studied have been elected in the Romanian Parliament at one point. Ministerial and parliamentary careers intertwine in a significant way. This means that politicians who aspire to a ministerial career also typically aim to be elected to parliament later in their career. Approximately two-thirds of all Romanian ministers have successfully contested parliamentary elections at least once during their careers. This statistic highlights a notable trend where a significant majority of ministers have sought and obtained seats in the parliament at some point in their political trajectories.

Overwhelmingly, in the analysed time sequence and on the selected population that is the subject of this paper, the appointed ministers were chosen from among the MPs elected in the 2020 legislature. Scoping out the parliamentary careers of the appointed PNL ministers in the 2020-2024 legislature, it turned out that 15 out of the 19 PNL-affiliated ministers were members of the Romanian Parliament at the time of their ministerial appointment, while 11 of them already held a representative mandate in the 2020 elections when they gained a new mandate.

2.7. Previous executive experience

More than half of the politicians studied were previously appointed to national offices as ministers or state secretaries in previous legislatures while less than a quarter occupied local offices as mayors, county officials, or local councillors. The information gathered shows that, to a large extent, the political elites promoted by the PNL to lead the ministries are politicians aiming for national public offices, and these functions are intertwined with the positions of elected members in the Romanian Parliament (Ştefan, 2016). In terms of compatibility of executive and parliamentary posts, the European constitutions generally do not prohibit individuals from holding both the positions of government minister and MP simultaneously. However, in Bulgaria, Estonia, and Slovakia, the MPs appointed to the government have their parliamentary mandate suspended while in executive office (Fettelschoss and Nikolenyi, 2008). In contrast, in other countries, including Romania, the two roles are compatible, allowing the legislature to serve as a common pool for ministerial selections.

2.8. Previous appointments in public administration

The research revealed that almost a third of the liberal ministers appointed in the three cabinets formed in the legislative mandate 2020-2024 occupied at one point the position of state secretary (6 out of 19). This information is aligned with the findings of Ștefan's study *Pathways to Cabinet: Selecting Ministers in Post-communist Romania* (Ștefan, 2009), which explored the previous experience of executives in ministries.

2.9. From local offices to executive positions

Few of the liberal cabinet members were using the local offices as launching ramps because as shown above, the previous executive experience in national offices and the parliamentary channel were the main suppliers of ministerial appointments. One example of a former mayor (Adrian Veșteța) then elected as county councillor and president of the county council, finally appointed minister in the Ciolacu government, deserves to be mentioned as one of the few examples of political trajectory emerging from local structures to the executive cabinet, and it is to be expected that his future political path will continue along the county level that consecrated him.

2.10. Discrete, static, or progressive ambition

The analysis of the members of the governments appointed on the PNL branch of the 2020-2024 legislature leaves no room for interpretations regarding discrete ambition (the politician desires an office for its specified term) or static ambition (the politician wishes to pursue a long career out of a particular office). For their vast majority, the careers highlight the type of *progressive ambition* (the officeholder aspires to attain an office more important than the one is holding), manifested by holding leadership positions within the party, winning multiple mandates in parliament, together with previous appointments as ministers in previous legislations (Schlesinger, 1966).

2.11. Completing the closed-circuit institutions' courses

Iftimoaei (2015) noted the graduation of some training and especially „socialization“ institutions such as the National Defence College (CNA) within UNACI, the National Information College (CNI – meanwhile abolished) within ANIMV, the Institute Romanian Diplomatic Institute (IDR) or the National Institute of Administration (INA) as being part of the implicit, unwritten professional criteria for the selection of government elites (Iftimoaei, 2015), alongside the classic political criteria (discipline, loyalty without party organization and doctrine, political experience in the party, position within the party or commitment to the government program).

Completing the courses promoted by The National Defence College (CNA) within the „Carol I“ National Defence University (UNACI) was a necessity for a quarter of the ministries affiliated with PNL, at a point in their political career. Since it is known that it is a *closed-circuit* institution, where the candidates are nominated by the state's power institutions, the access and completion of its courses seem to offer the graduates a platform for socialization and homogenization of the elites.

2.12. Women's representation in cabinets

A short history of the representativeness of women in the executive, published by Iftimoaei (2024), describes zero representativeness in the period he defined as the transition to democracy (1989-1996), then a progressive growth in the period of democratic consolidation (1996-2012). Previously, Ștefan (2009) had observed that, until 2009, the period covered by his study, half of the Romanian governments after 1989 did not have women representation at the ministerial level (Ștefan, 2009). The percentage of 17% share of women in the three governments after 2020 is displayed as follows: in the first government of the 2020-2024 legislature, when the PNL, USR, and UDMR alliance was in power, two women were appointed ministers, Raluca Turcan from the PNL and Ioana Mihăilă (USR). In the second government related to the 2020-2024 electoral cycle, with the lead of the PNL-PSD alliance, Gabriela Firea was the PSD nomination for the chair of the Ministry of Family, Youth and Equal Opportunities, and Ligia Deca, initially independent, supported by the PNL and with strong presidential credentials as a former member of state president's team of advisers on education, was appointed to the position of Minister of Education.

With the change of June 2023, when the head of government was assigned to PSD, according to the agreement made within the PNL-PSD coalition, we found the highest number of women ministers in the studied electoral cycle. Thus, Alina-Stefania Gorghiu was appointed Minister of Justice from the PNL, Ligia Deca (PNL) continued to manage the Ministry of Education, Raluca Turcan (PNL) received this time the portfolio of the Ministry of Culture, and Gabriela Firea (PSD) remained in charge of the Ministry of Family Youth and Equal Opportunities. Following some untimely dismissals, Gabriela Firea was replaced by party colleague Natalia-Elena Intotero, and at the head of the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity, Marius Budai was replaced by PSD colleague Simona Bucura-Oprescu. This picture regarding the distribution of gender in the Romanian cabinets aligns with the previous studies carried out by Ștefan (2009) and Iftimoae (2015) who note on the one hand the underrepresentation of women at the executive level and on the other hand a more pronounced concern for the promotion of women among the left-wing parties (PSD) as opposed to the right-wing parties (PNL).

The data can be correlated to the information that two of the four liberal women ministers were co-opted into the party from apolitical positions. Continuing the parallel with the main left-wing party in Romania, present in the governing coalition, the three PSD-affiliated women belonging to the government teams have gone through a process of political professionalization, with previous parliamentary mandates, power positions within the party, local and national offices, who gradually progressed both in the party hierarchy and the in the hierarchy of public positions held.

3. Conclusion

In summary, the research revealed a high level of commitment to a political career among the politically appointed PNL members of the executive, with a dominant public administration career before politics. Political professionalisation process involved obtaining relevant leadership positions within the party, winning multiple mandates in parliament, and serving as ministers in previous legislations (career ministers). As a method of initial political recruitment, from social to political roles, civic activism was capitalized into a political career. The few technocrats in government were rapidly co-opted by PNL and assigned portfolios.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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