

PARTICIPATION CULTURE BETWEEN IDEAL AND REALITY: THE CASE OF ROMANIA

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to answer the question whether the predominance of non-participation culture is a characteristic of the present Romanian society. Considering that Romanians praise the democratic political model as valuable, the speculative denial of participation culture in the present Romanian society seems to be ungrounded. In fact, the real issue of Romanian political life is represented by the gap existing between the culture of participation, seen as an ideal, and the culture of participation, seen as a fact. Does this distance tend to be less significant as regards the young people? Is the Romanian young people's involvement in democratic life similar to the European participation trend or it is different from it?

Keywords: *contemplation, participation culture, political participation, the young people.*

1. Introduction: Romanians between the culture of contemplation and the culture of participation

The 1848 generation upheld that the dimension of Romanian existence is similar to a sleep from which Romanians should awake in order to face the present reality. This critical reaction of the 1848 generation was determined by the ease with which Romanians dealt with life issues in general, as well as by their detachments and inertia which they used to manifest much too often.

Constantin Noica shares the same opinion while underlining - in his essay *Superarea românească* - that in a self-revealed Faustian Europe there is a people which lacks a Faustian dimension: the Romanian people". Considering that the word "Faustian" means "knowledge with any risk" and, similarly, "thirst for power with any risk", the great philosopher concludes that "we have neither been, nor seem to be ready to become Faustian". In conclusion, Romanians are not interested in relating to historicity but to eternity.

"The careless, abstracted, uncalculated, smiling, God trusting Romanian acts not when one can, but rather when one is no longer able to; it is only despair before the nothingness which determines him to act. <<Be what it may be! >> the Romanian says somehow resigned: the imperative saying <<now or never>> that infuriated the Romanian is the symptom of a one-moment fever which, once over, the man feels released from the burden imposed on him by time and one can restart the dialogue with eternity".¹

The Romanian peasant, somehow detached from the earthly ones, feels oneself solidary with the eternal nature and lives in accord with God's laws and the law governing

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¹ Mircea Vulcănescu, *Dimensiunea românească a existenței, Izvoare de filosofie*, Bucharest: Bucovina Publishing House, 1943 (my translation); original text: "Românul nepăsător, neatent, necalculat, surâzător, încrezător în Dumnezeu trece la fapte nu când poate, ci când nu mai poate; numai deznădejdea în fața neantului duce la acțiune. <<Fie ce-o fi!>>, spune românul oarecum resemnat : imperativul, <<acum ori niciodată>>, care-l scoate din fire pe român, este simptomul unei febre de-o clipă, apoi, omul ieșit de sub vreme își reia dialogul cu veșnicia".

human life in general. The Romanian “lives in the cosmic horizon and in the consciousness of a destiny that originates in eternity”.²

Is the portrait of the Romanian, as it was depicted by the great philosophers quoted above, still valid today? Can we talk today about the meditating Romanian who is in a dialogue with the eternal? Is this the true nature of the Romanian, a nature in which one has been trapped and from which one cannot be separated even despite of the present times?

If the answer is yes, then could we talk today about a predominating non-participation culture that is specific to Romanians? Are there significant differences that could be identified in relation to various age categories when it comes to defining participation vs. non-participation culture? Do young people have a participation culture that is more developed in comparison with the elderly people?

We can notice that Romanian young people, as well as the elderly ones, no matter if they are governed or governing (we also refer to the political group representing the opposition), tend to complain about the Romanian democratic life, which they regard as a failure, and tend to put the blame on the other one(s). At least in words, everyone manifests lack of satisfaction as to the evolution of democracy and the quality of the citizens' involvement in Romanian political life after 1989. In other words, Romanians do not clap their hands; they do not appreciate non-participation, inactivity, political apathy or lack of political initiative etc. Romanians deny and depart from all forms of political non-participation. Under these circumstances, the statement according to which Romanian society lacks a participation culture is ungrounded. The real issue of Romanian political life is different, i.e. the distance between participation understood as an ideal and participation culture understood as a fact.

2. The participation deficit and participation culture incurred in the case of Romanians

Participation democracy is an on-going process which implies that human beings and social groups are involved in the decision-making and resource management processes. Within this process citizens are active subjects and are involved in the development of political projects and programs. Participation democracy implies mechanisms whereby decision-making processes are made with and through the citizens' involvement. The citizens' suggestions and protests must be taken into consideration by the political decision-making agent no matter if the latter agrees or not with the content thereof and no matter if these suggestions/protests aggrieve or not the latter's personal interest. We can notice that the participation model of democracy manifests a maximalist position, while suggesting that democratic legitimacy may be enhanced only if individuals have real chances to effectively get involved into the decision-making process that influences their lives. The participation model is not easily implemented in young democracies. From this perspective, the Romanian society is not an exception. Sociological studies³ prove that in the Romanian society the dominating pattern of political culture is the so-called dependent one, which is characterized by: insufficient political information and communication, low levels of subjective civic competence, attachment to the political system, cooperation, solidarity, organizational participation – in general, and political and civic participation – in particular.

² Lucian Blaga, “Spațiul mioritic”, in *Opere filosofice*, Bucharest: Minerva Publishing House, 1985, p. 340 (my translation); original text: „trăiește în zăriștea cosmică și în conștiința unui destin emanat din veșnicie”.

³C. Barzea, Cecchini, Michaela; Harrison, Cameron; Krek, Janez; Spajic-Vrkas, Vedrana Manual pentru asigurarea calitatii educatiei pentru cetatenie activa in scoala, edited by UNESCO, Council of Europe, Centre for Educational policy Studies© TEHNE - Centrul pentru Dezvoltare și Inovare în Educație, 2005 (pentru versiunea în limba română), E.Nedelcu, Romanian Political Culture and European Political Culture: Similarities and Differences, in *Lex et Scientia*, Bucharest, 2005, p.254.

Although more than a half of the Romanians understand the importance of political participation and know and appreciate democratic values and principles, it is only a low percentage of them that declares to be directly involved in our societies political activities or to be members of political organizations or to take part in protests etc. *Most Romanian citizens prefer passive civic obligations, as they prefer to conform to the political and legislative system without aiming to participate in the elaboration or modification of laws or to monitor the manner in which public money is spent / in which those entitled to govern the state do their duty. Only 8.6% of those interviewed considered that active-participation is a citizen obligation, as well. (E. Nedelcu, 2010)*

Romanians – in a significantly large percentage – do not expect the governing team and the police to treat them correctly and respectfully, an aspect which explains the citizens' non-involvement in political life, *their acceptance of a dependent role in relationship with the political system, their incapacity to assimilate the role of subjects in the relationship they have with authorities. One can notice that Romanians, no matter their educational level, sex, profession, age, manifest a non-favourable attitude towards the government and the police. On the other hand, in old European democracies, 88% of the citizens who have higher education expect to be treated equally and to be respected by the government. As regards political communication, although most of the population declares that it talks politics (85.6%) either frequently or sometimes, an important percentage (54.5%) declares that it talks politics only with persons who may be trusted, i.e. family and friends⁴. If 14.5% of the interviewed ones do not talk politics and 54.5% talk politics with the close friends and family, it means that the situation of political communication is still unsatisfactory in Romanian society. Today there is an important percentage of subjects who feel limited when it comes to political communication. The feeling that there is insufficient freedom in communication may be explained through several factors, such as: a perpetual state of suspicion, which was characteristic of the former regime, the effect generated by the political control in institutions, the individual's personality.*

In conclusion, we cannot deny that a participation culture exists in Romanian society since most citizens appreciate political and democratic models from other countries, since they know and appreciate the values and principles of democracies and understand the importance of reinforcing the EU project, a process which they perceive optimistically⁵. Similarly, we cannot deny the low concern for initiatives, political and civic affiliation and cooperation that are specific to the dependent political system that is characterized by a low number of citizens who participate in political life.

3. The evolution of the Romanian young people's participation in democratic life

The present paper is going to analyse two important aspects regarding the Romanian young people's participation in democratic life, i.e.: participation at elections and their organizational affiliation. The present paper is going to point out the similar and different attitudes, as well as the political behaviour that are specific to the Romanian youth and to the EU young people. As to the participation in political elections, in conformity with Eurobarometer 2013, most Romanian respondents (63%) have voted in a political election in the past three years. On the other hand, only 37% of the Romanian young people declared that they did not vote during that period.

In comparison with 2011, Euro-barometer 2013 points out a 3 % decrease of the Romanian young people's participation in elections and an increase with 4 % of their non-

⁴ Elena Nedelcu, *Democrația și cultura civică*, Bucharest: Paideia Publishing House, 2000.

⁵ Eurobarometru, 2013.

participation. As regards participation in elections, according to the data comprised by the above mentioned document, Romanian young people follow the same general trend as the other young people from the UE. "Over half of those surveyed have voted in a political election at the local, regional or national level in the past three years (56%). Of the 44% of respondents who did not vote, only a fifth (21%) did so out of choice and a further 23% were not eligible to vote because of their age. These findings represent a decrease in participation since 2011, when 62% of respondents said that they had voted and 37% had not. (...). Participation in political elections has decreased the most in Hungary, from 67% in 2011 to 39% - a drop of 28 percentage points. Respondents in Sweden are also considerably less likely to vote in 2013 (49%) than they were in 2011 (74%). In Poland there was also a significant decrease in voting, from 74% in 2011 to 52% in 2013, (...) in Austria, from 83% in 2011 to 62% in 2013."⁶

As to the probability of voting in the European elections in 2014, according to the Euro-barometer 2013, approximately two thirds of all respondents (64%) say that they are 'likely' to vote in the next European elections in 2014. Almost three in 10 are certain that they will vote in the next election (28%). Just over a third (35%) says they are 'unlikely' to vote. Approximately two thirds of all Romanian respondents (63%) also say that they are 'likely' to vote in the next European elections in 2014, and 32% of those interviewed are certain that they will vote in the next election. We may conclude that Romanian young people follow the same trend as the other young people from the EU.

As regards the country-level analysis, the Euro-barometer indicates that there is a difference of 33 percentage points between the countries with the lowest and highest levels of respondents indicating that they are 'likely' to vote in the European elections in 2014. "In Belgium, where voting in the European elections is normally compulsory, four in five (80%) of respondents say they are likely to vote. There are six other countries with high proportions of respondents showing positive intentions towards voting in the next European elections: the Netherlands (76%), Sweden (76%), Italy (76%), Ireland (76%), Luxembourg (75%) and Malta (75%). The countries with the lowest level of respondents indicating they are likely to vote are: Slovenia (47%), Estonia (48%) and the Czech Republic (48%)"⁷.

The second aspect regarding Romanian young people's participation in democratic life – which is being subjected to analysis – is represented by their organizational affiliation. As to the Romanian young people's belonging to an organization, according to the data from Euro-barometer 2013, the situation is as follows: sports clubs participation: 16%; a youth club, leisure-time club or any kind of youth organization: 12%; a local organization aimed at improving your local community: 8%; a cultural organization: 8%; any other non-governmental organization: 5%; an organization promoting human rights or global development: 5%; an organization active in the domain of climate change/environmental issues: 5%; a political organization or a political party: 8%; none of these: 60%.

At EU level, the young people's belonging to an organization is as follows: "Over a third of respondents say that they have been active in a sports club within the past year (35%). The next most popular activity is being involved in a youth club, leisure-time club or any kind of youth organization (22%). 15% of respondents are involved in a local organization aiming to improve the local community, while 14% are active in a cultural organization. Fewer than one in 10 respondents say that they are part of other types of organizations: 8% participate in an organization promoting human rights or global development; 7% are part of an organization involved in climate change/environmental issues and 5% are involved in a political organization or political party. In addition, one in eight

⁶ Flash Euro-barometer 375. European Youth: Participation in Democratic Life, Survey coordinated by the European Commission, May 2013.

⁷ Idem.

respondents (12%) says that he/she is involved in another non-governmental organization. (...) Despite the fact that the majority of respondents have participated in an activity of one of the organizations enumerated above, a significant proportion has not taken part in any of the organizations at all (44%).”⁸

We can notice that, as regards the young people’s affiliation to sport clubs, Romanians occupy a much lower position in comparison with the European average: 16% in comparison with 35%. A similar situation exists as regards young people’s affiliation to youth organizations: 12% in comparison with 22%. In fact, except for political organizations, Romanian young people’s affiliation to all the other categories of organizations is much lower than the European average. The percentage of Romanian young people who do not belong to any organization (60%) significantly surpasses the European average (44%).

However, a positive aspect is represented by the fact that, in comparison with 2011, the degree of organizational affiliation calculated for EU young people has increased, as revealed by the data recorded in the Euro-barometer 2013: “There has been an increase in participation of four percentage points in each of the following groups and clubs: youth clubs or leisure-time clubs or any kind of youth organization (22%), local organizations aiming to improve the local community (15%), organizations involved in climate change/environmental issues (7%) and other non-governmental organizations (12%). There has also been an increase in the participation in organizations promoting human rights or global development (8%, +3 pp) and in sports clubs (35%, +1 pp).”¹

Conclusion

If the percentage of Romanians who declared that they participate in elections (63%) is above the European average (56%), organizational affiliation reveals the opposite. Organizational affiliation, especially the political and civic one, is a much more eloquent index for measuring effective participation of Romanians in political life. Unfortunately, it is this aspect which disadvantages Romanian young people in relation to the other EU young people coming from countries which have a long democratic tradition; Romanian young people record low levels of organizational affiliation in all areas: from sport organizations to the civic ones that promote human rights. Organization inactivity is for Romanians significantly higher (60%) in comparison with the European average (of 44%).

The feeble implication of young people in political life, which is also true for states that have a long democratic tradition, is not a comfort, however. The effects of this deficit are even more dangerous in younger democracies than in traditional democracies which have acquired implicit mechanisms of correction for the democratic dysfunctional issues that they are facing.

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⁸ Flash Euro-barometer 375. European Youth: Participation in Democratic Life, Survey coordinated by the European Commission, May 2013

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