

POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF ROMANIA'S MODERNIZATIONS: how the Romanian party system evolved from the 1990's to the present*

Florin N. Fesnic

Babeş-Bolyai University

fesnic@fspac.ro

Abstract

This paper offers a structural account of the evolution of the major partisan alignments in Romania¹. I argue that in the 1990's there were three major blocs: left, right and "extreme right" (*welfare chauvinist*), and these were largely the outcome of two processes, modernization from above during Communism and the subsequent transition to democracy and a market economy. Unlike in the case of the other two blocs, the success of the extreme right (PRM) was short-lived; one major consequence of generational replacement is that its natural constituency, the nostalgics of the old regime, is slowly disappearing. The result is that we are moving away from party competition between three major blocs to competition between just two blocs, left and right.

Keywords: modernization, transition, values, partisanship, voting, Romania

There are quite a few variables that can play an important role in shaping a country's party system. Romania is no exception. Without being exhaustive, we can consider the impact of institutions (especially the electoral system), political factors (such as the performance in office, which may partly explain the disappearance of the PNȚ-cd), and external influence (e.g., the EU). In this paper I will focus on the role of structural determinants which, I argue, also play an important role. More specifically, I consider that the Romanian party system of the last 25 years is the joint product of modernization (social and economic) before 1989 and of the political, economic and social processes started by its transition to a post-Communist regime.

* This research was supported by the CNCS-UEFISCDI grant PN-II-ID-PCE-2011-3-0669.

¹ The paper is an updated version of a section of my doctoral dissertation (Fesnic 2008); a previous version of the paper was presented at the 61st Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association in Chicago, IL (Fesnic 2003).

In the 1990's, political life in post-Communist Romania was dominated by three major blocs: left, right, and "extreme right" (*welfare chauvinist*²). The core constituency of each of these blocs was, in one way or another, a product of modernization. The left is representing mostly rural Romania, one that has yet to modernize. The right is a product of successful modernization – an urban, young, well-educated, dynamic constituency. The extreme right constituency, the voters of Greater Romania Party (PRM), emerged after the transition from the prior regime as the side effect of a kind of 'defective modernity,' the outcome of the process of rapid urbanization and industrialization imposed from above during Communism. As this last group of voters grows older and new generations, socialized under very different conditions from previous generations, come of age, the PRM has suffered a kind of natural death (even before the disappearance of the leader of the party). This evolution and its consequences for party competition will be illustrated in the final part of the paper, where I present a comparison of voting patterns in the 2000 and the 2014 presidential elections.

The structural roots of Romanian partisan constituencies

In the second half of the twentieth century, Romania has experienced substantial economic and social transformations. After 1989, these changes were consequential for party competition. One important side effect of the process of socioeconomic transition was the marginalization of blue-collar industrial workers, which became the main supporters of the extreme right (PRM).

Moore (1966) described Communism as a process of rapid, forced modernization imposed from above. Romania was no exception – as a matter of fact, Romanian Communism is an extreme illustration of this process. Developmental policies in Romania, as in the Soviet Union, had a manifest urban bias. They were a conscious attempt to overcome social and especially economic underdevelopment (Mungiu 2002, 9-16). Urban areas and the working class were the beneficiaries of these policies; rural areas and the peasants were the losers. In the Soviet Union, "the regime's policy was ultimately based on the impoverishment of the peasant as the means for securing those forced savings in consumption which provided

² One of the early proponents of the concept of "welfare chauvinism" (mixing support for leftist, redistributionist economic policies with nationalism, xenophobia and authoritarianism) was Herbert Kitschelt (1995).

the capital for industrial expansion” (Inkeles and Bauer 1959, 71). Similarly, in Romania the development of urban areas was paramount and rural areas were ignored. Agriculture was constantly sacrificed in favor of industry (Masson 1985, 258-62). The share of urban population in Romania increased from just 23.4 percent in 1948 to 54.1 percent in 1992 (INSSE 2006).

Such policies were not universal across the Communist region. They would have been redundant in Czechoslovakia, one of the most urbanized and industrialized areas of Europe (especially the Czech part). Therefore, if we want to assess their impact, it is more appropriate to compare the social well-being of Romanians with that of the inhabitants of another post-Communist country with a similar level of development. Table 1 presents some indicators of social development for Romania and its southern neighbor Bulgaria:

Table 1. Social development in Romania and Bulgaria (2001)

	GDP per capita in 2001 (in US\$)*	Population using adequate sanitation facilities (%)**	Population using improved water sources (%)**	Physicians per 100,000 people**
Romania	1,825	53	58	184
Bulgaria	1,803	100	100	345

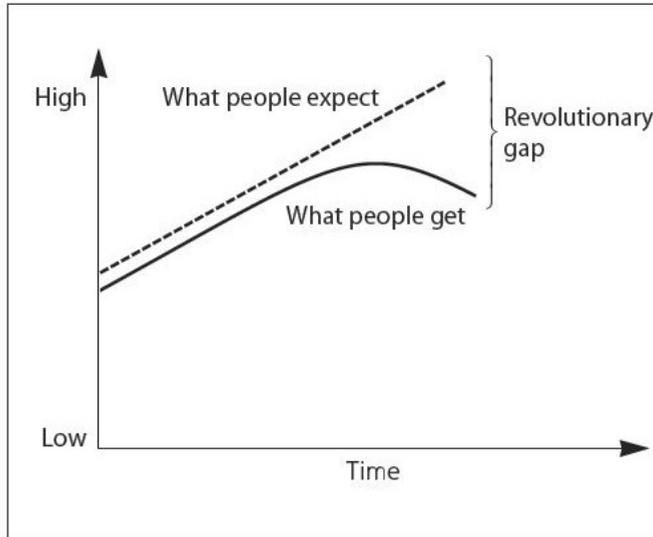
Sources: * United Nations Statistics Division, ** United Nations Development Programme 2001, 169.

Clearly, Romania has a long way to go before catching up not just with the post-industrial West, but even with some of its neighbors. Moreover, this lagging behind is primarily a reflection of extremely poor social conditions in rural Romania, in a country where 45 percent of the population continue to live in villages (UNDP 2003, 100), and urban-rural disparities are comparable to those found in many Third World countries. In one analysis of social underdevelopment in the Third World, Handelman noticed the gap between urban centers, where “at the close of past century, 72 percent of the population had access to proper home sanitation – and rural areas, where that figure fell to 20 percent” (Handelman 2006, 8). That means a 52 percent gap between urban and rural. Although I do not have disaggregated figures for Romania, I believe that a similar measure is the

proportion of the population without access to running water. In 2003, the numbers were 12.3 percent for urban and 84.3 percent for rural – a 72 percent gap (UNDP 2003, 108).

If urban industrial workers were the main beneficiaries of forced modernization in Romania, they became the main victims of the transition to post-socialism. A core feature of the former regime was “the ‘social contract’ between the regime and society, of which industrial workers were among the main beneficiaries” (Crowley 1994, 592). In addition to free health care and education, subsidized housing and a host of other benefits, workers “put a premium on increased material rewards and job security” (Bahry 1993, 515). After the fall of Communism, governments were both unable and unwilling to pursue such policies, which had become untenable. Since urban workers benefited from those policies far more than rural inhabitants working in agriculture, they also felt more heavily the impact of these changes. In the 1990’s, “the meaning of ‘social injustice’ seem[ed] to have shifted from absolute to relative deprivation” (Bahry 1993, 537). The theory of relative deprivation (Davies 1962; Gurr 1970), tells us that it is not necessarily those who are objectively worst off (in this case, rural inhabitants employed in agriculture), who would become politically the most radical segment of the electorate. Rather, the most likely candidates for such radicalization are urban industrial workers, for whom there is a large gap between what they believed they were entitled to and what they actually received after the transition (Figure 1):

Figure 1. Relative deprivation and revolutions



The J-curve theory of revolutions

Note: 'What people expect' and 'What people get' refers to expectations of government.

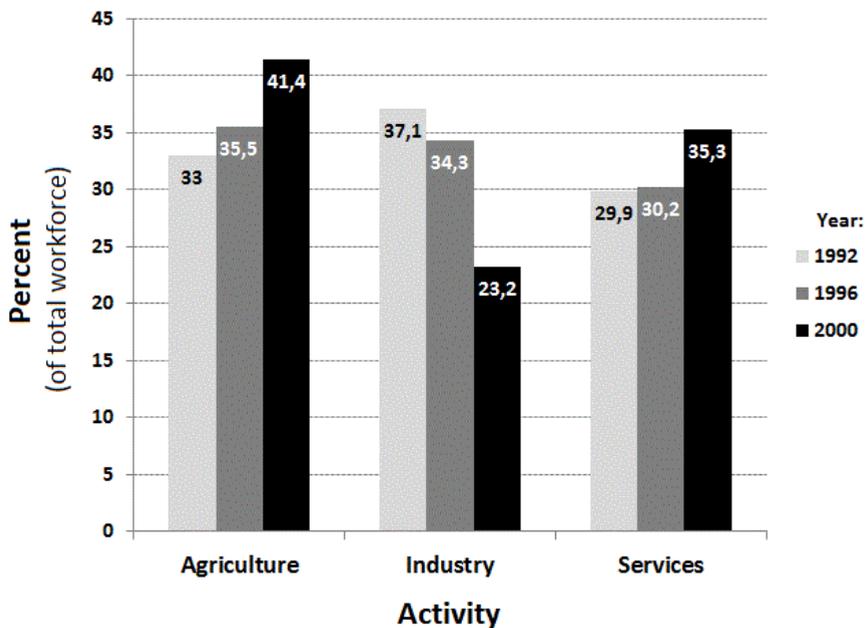
Source: Hague and Harrop 2004, 138.

The concept of relative deprivation, used to explain a wide range of phenomena, is equally useful for explaining support for extreme right-wing parties. Apter, for instance, argued that

In both [less economically developed countries] and advanced industrial countries, the productive system and the world economy are changing in ways that generates polarization, marginalization, functional displacement, dispossession, and with them a growing predisposition to violence [...] There is a growing discrepancy between the declining industrial labor force and its absorption into an expanding service industry. Reemployment of the displaced worker becomes more and more difficult [...] Such problems have [...] political consequences [...] There have been marked increases in primordialism, racism, and discrimination (1987, 35-37).

Apter's account offers us reasons to expect a radicalization of blue-collar industrial workers in countries affected by a radical restructuring of industry, as it was the case with Romania in the 1990's (Figure 2):

Figure 2. The evolution of the Romanian workforce, 1992-2000



Data source: UNDP 2001, 107.

The restructuring of the Romanian economy and the changes in governmental economic and social policies after 1989 had some remarkable consequences. As the data in Figure 2 indicate, during the decade following the transition there was a substantial decline of the workforce employed in industry, paralleled by an increase of the workforce employed in agriculture. Moreover, “starting from the mid-nineties, [...] the domestic migration flows have for the first time in more than a century and a half of official Romanian statistics reversed themselves and started to go mostly from the urban areas, affected by industrial restructuring towards the rural areas, turned into last resort shelter for the huddled masses of dislocated workers” (UNDP 2007, 88). The 1992 census data indicate that, in that year, 45.7 percent of Romanians lived in villages; by 2002, the share of rural population rose to 47.3 percent (INSSE 2006).

Obviously, we would expect such developments to have an impact on electoral politics. I argue that political life in post-Communist Romania was, until recently, dominated by three major blocs: left, right, and “extreme right” (welfare chauvinists), and the constituencies of each of these blocs are/were, in one way or another, a product of modernization. The left is representing mostly rural Romania, one that has yet to

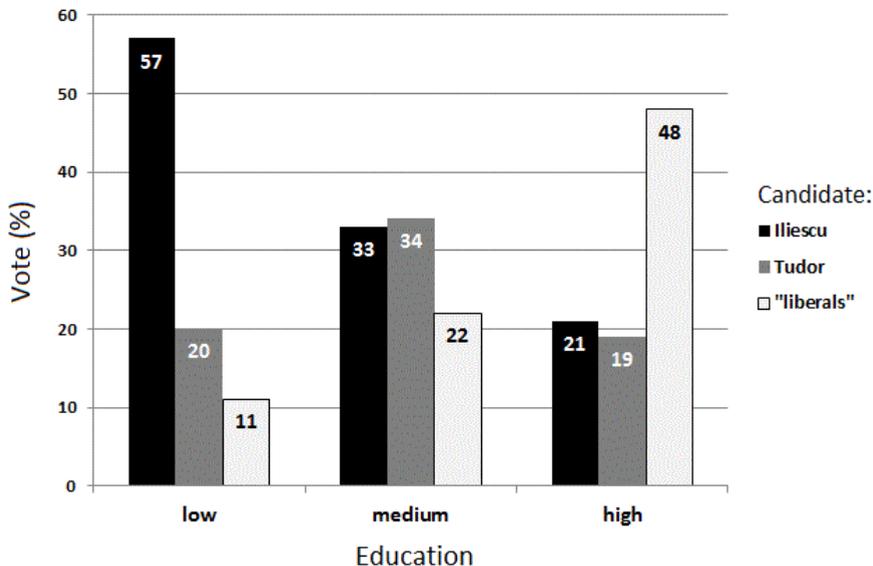
modernize. The right is a product of successful modernization – an urban, young, well-educated, dynamic constituency. The extreme right constituency, the voters of Greater Romania Party (PRM), emerged after the transition from the prior regime as the side effect of a kind of ‘defective modernity,’ the process of rapid urbanization and industrialization imposed from above during Communism. Gradually, new generations of voters come of age. They were socialized under very different conditions from previous generations and they also have different objective economic and social interests than the urban industrial workers of the old regime. The end result is that the natural constituency of the PRM is shrinking.

Political consequences of Romania’s modernizations: contrasting party competition in the 1990’s and 2000’s

The first part of this paper described the social and economic transformations which occurred in Romania after the transition. This was consequential for Romanian politics (for both partisan constituencies and the party system), leading to the emergence of three major blocs (left, right and extreme right) in the 1990’s. In the 2000’s, this was followed by the slow, but rather unavoidable disappearance of the extreme right and the consequent move from a three-blocs to a two-blocs system.

In the second part of the paper I will use survey (exit poll) data to support these assertions. The data reveals that each of the major constituencies (formerly three, now two) has/had indeed a very distinctive profile. To this end, I use data from a poll and a survey conducted by IMAS in 2000 (during the first round and a few days before the second round of that year’s presidential election), and from an exit poll conducted by Antena 3/Sociopol during the second round of the 2014 presidential election. The dependent variable is “vote”; the independent variable is the respondents’ level of education. I consider education as useful in two ways, as a determinant of values and as a proxy for social class.

Figure 3. Education and vote, first round of the 2000 presidential election

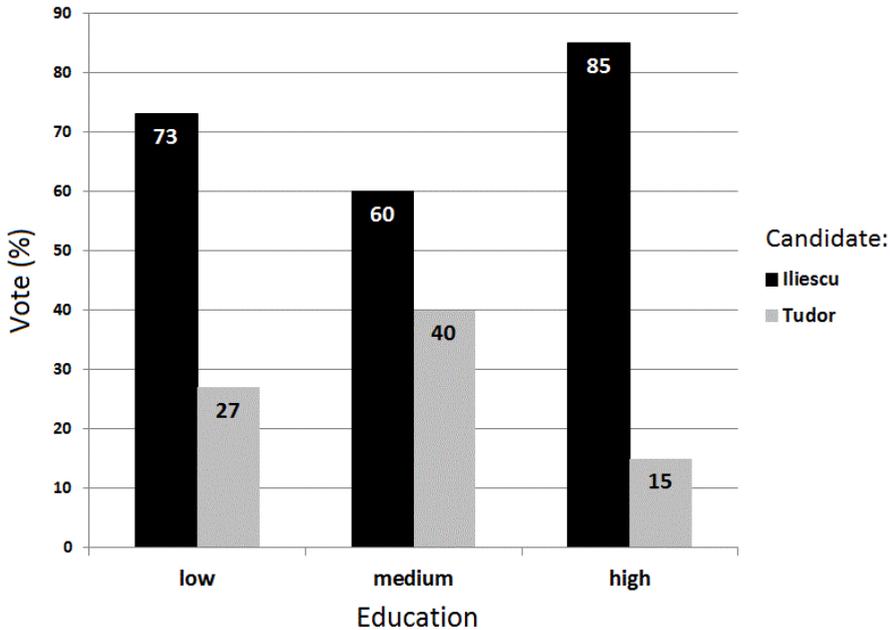


Data source: IMAS exit poll, November 26, 2000

Note: the original data had four categories for education (“eighth grade or less”, “vocational” (*școala profesională*), “high school” and “college”). For the sake of consistency with the data for 2014, where there were only three categories (“low”, “medium” and “high” education), I computed here (and in Figure 4) the percentages for “medium” education as the unweighted average of the second and the third original categories. The percentages for the “liberal” category represent the sum of the votes for Stolojan and Isărescu.

Figure 3 shows that each of the three aforementioned blocs had indeed a very distinctive constituency. The leftist candidate, Ion Iliescu, draws a disproportionate level of support from the least educated group, a mirror image of the pattern of support for the “liberal” candidates (Theodor Stolojan and Mugur Isărescu). Education is negatively correlated with support for the left and positively correlated with support for the moderate right (“liberals”). Finally, in the case of the extreme right candidate, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, we observe a third pattern of support, very different from either of the other two: the leader of the PRM draws most support from voters with average education.

Figure 4. Education and vote, second round of the 2000 presidential election

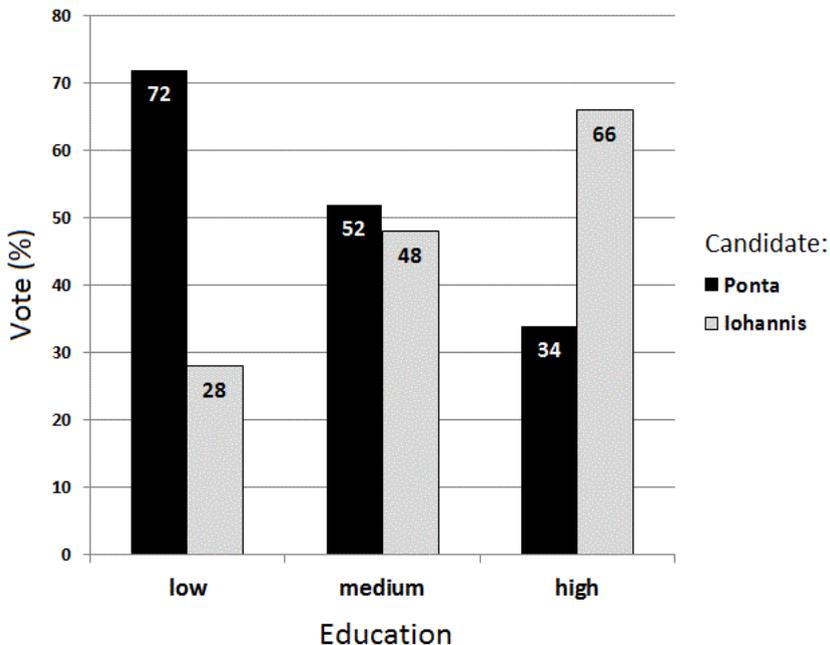


Data source: IMAS pre-election poll, December 6-7, 2000

Note: the original data had four categories for education (“eighth grade or less”; “vocational” (*școala profesională*); “high school”; “college”). In the figure above, the percentages for “medium” education represent the unweighted average for the second and the third original categories.

Figure 4, based on the results of a second survey, conducted between the first and the second round of the 2000 presidential election, confirm the distinctive profile of the extreme right constituency (the electorate of Tudor). They also show how the presence of Tudor in this second round, much like the presence of his French counterpart, Jean-Marie Le Pen, in the second round of the French presidential election less than two years later (in May 2002), has led to an unusual alliance between the left and the moderate right electorates. In Romania, as the following results indicate (Figure 5), this alliance was circumstantial and short-lived; as the extreme right gradually became a negligible force, electoral competition returned to the pattern of competition characteristic for the 1990’s, left versus right.

Figure 5. Education and vote, second round of the 2000 presidential election



Data source: Antena 3/Sociopol exit poll, November 16, 2014.

As it becomes immediately apparent from Figure 5, based on the results of an exit poll conducted during the runoff presidential election of 2014, the left and right electorates continue to be clearly distinguishable. Adrian Năstase's description of the two constituencies as "two Romanias" (*cele două Români*)³ continues to be as accurate as it was a decade ago.

Conclusion

The good news is that, unlike in the 1990's, Romania does not currently have an extremist/anti-system party. The bad news is that, as the events of the summer of 2012 illustrate, this does not make liberal democracy in

³ „Rezultatul votului [...] arată că, în prezent, există două Români. În primul rând, este vorba de o Românie urbană, în creștere, cu o solidă componentă liberală [...], care așteaptă de la stat mai degrabă șanse decât sprijin; aceasta este România care l-a votat pe Traian Bănescu. Dar mai există și o Românie rurală, cu oameni în vârstă și oameni săraci, care are încă nevoie de ajutor nu doar pentru dezvoltare, ci și pentru supraviețuire; acești oameni au avut încredere în mine” (Năstase 2004).

Romania foolproof. On that occasion (and others), it was not only the left, but also significant parts of the (liberal?) right, which showed a lack of genuine commitment to the guiding principles and institutions of liberal democracy. Even though we have also occasionally witnessed exemplary mobilisation from segments of civil society toward defending democracy (the last presidential election offers an example in this respect), it is not clear yet whether, and to what extent, this will have a long-lasting impact, bringing positive change in “the other Romania” and the party(ies) representing it (particularly the PSD, but also the PNL). Politically, for the time being, the “non-modern” half of Romania appears just about as strong as the “modern” half.

References

- Antena 3. 2014. “Antena 3 alegeri 16 noiembrie 2014 (Antena 3/Sociopol exit poll)”. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dizsWITIf0M>>.
- Apter, David E. 1987. *Rethinking Development. Modernization, Dependency, and Postmodern Politics*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Bahry, Donna. 1993. “Society Transformed? Rethinking the Social Roots of Perestroika.” *Slavic Review* 52(3): 512-554.
- Crowley, Stephen. 1994. “Barriers to Collective Action. Steelworkers and Mutual Dependence in the Former Soviet Union”. *World Politics* 46 (4): 589-615.
- Davies, James C. 1962. “Toward A Theory of Revolution.” *American Sociological Review* 27(1): 5-19.
- Fesnic, Florin N. 2003. “Modernization, Transition, and Voting in Romania”. Presented at the 61st Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL.
- Fesnic, Florin N. 2008. “Welfare Chauvinism East and West: Romania and France”. PhD dissertation, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. <<http://search.proquest.com/docview/304626606>>.
- Gurr, Ted Robert. 1970. *Why Men Rebel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hague, Rod, and Martin Harrop. 2004. *Comparative Government and Politics: An Introduction*, 6th ed. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Handelman, Howard. 2006. *The Challenge of Third World Development*, 4th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- IMAS. 2000. “Sondaj la ieșirea de la urne - Alegeri Parlamentare și Prezidențiale - 26 noiembrie 2000”.

- <<http://domino.kappa.ro/imas/home.nsf/Intrebari/62B7F52554281906C22569A3007D35D5?OpenDocument>>.
- IMAS. 2000. "Alegerea Președintelui României - sondaj pre-electoral (6-7 decembrie 2000)". <<http://domino.kappa.ro/imas/home.nsf/Intrebari/DA8D23BADD50A951C22568F1007840DC?OpenDocument>>.
- Inkeles, Alex, and Raymond Bauer. 1959. *The Soviet Citizen. Daily Life in a Totalitarian Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kitschelt, Herbert. 1995. *The Radical Right in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Masson, Danielle. 1985. "Roumanie: La 'Société Socialiste Multilatéralement Développe' et sa Paysannerie." In C.N.R.S., *Paysans et Nations d'Europe Centrale et Balkanique*. Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose.
- Moore, Barrington. 1966. *Social Origins of Dictatorships and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Mungiu-Pippidi, Alina. 2002. *Secera și buldozerul. Scornicești și Nucșoara: mecanisme de aseroire a țăranului român*. Iași: Polirom.
- Năstase, Adrian. 2004. "Cele două Români". *Revista 22* 15(51), <<http://www.revista22.ro/cele-doua-romanii-1362.html>>.
- United Nations Development Programme. 2001. *National Human Development Report: Romania 2001*. Bucharest: UNDP.
- United Nations Development Programme. 2007. *National Human Development Report: Romania 2007*. Bucharest: UNDP.
- United Nations Statistics Division. 2014. "Per capita GDP at current prices". <<http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=SNAAMA&f=grID%3A101%3BcurrID%3AUSD%3BpcFlag%3A1>>.