

POLITICS

FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION ENDANGERED?

TRENDS

A group of civil society organizations (Pro-Democracy, Romanian Helsinki Committee and others) staged a protest over the new law for registration and functioning of political parties, which requires that new parties have 50,000 members in at least 21 counties in order to be able to register, regardless of whether they are eligible or not for public funding. The law claims to solve the problem of 'parasite' parties, which managed to obtain free premises for their headquarters from the local authorities and then lived on it for the past decade, with no voters, zero electoral performance and modest revenues out of petty businesses. In Bucharest, however, mayors have solved gradually the problem of petty parties and only the lack of political will by other local governments can account for the long survival of some. To tackle this tiny problem a disproportionate mechanism was set up, as the standards set in this draft are unusual to say the least (Fig. 1). In fact, they are comparable only with those in Kazakhstan and are strikingly at odds with the practice in established liberal democracies.

Fig. 1. Number of citizens necessary for founding a political party

Country	Number of citizens	Percent from total population
Lithuania	400	0.001
Moldova	5,000	0.11
Bulgaria	50	0.0006
Estonia	1,000	0.07
Macedonia	500	0.02
United Kindom	2	0.000003
Germany	3	0.000003
Neederlanden	2	0.000012
Romania	10,000 or 50,000	0.44 or 0.22
Kazakhstan	50,000	0.33

Source: Pro-Democracy

Reducing the ability to register a party is pointless both legally – it will prompt buying of old parties, a practice already present elsewhere in the region – as well as politically, since Romanians are far from happy with existing parties (Fig. 2).

With the exception of villagers who traditionally are close to the government party, the rest of Romanians, from every region or type of town, from every education or age group, do not feel attracted by any political organization (Fig. 3). Political participation remains very low, with only 8% having in the last decade participated to any political activity (such as campaign meetings) besides voting, and the majority (51%) perceiving that the country is headed in a wrong direction. Interest for politics is high, but participation is low, which means that existing participation channels are not attractive for citizens.¹¹ Reducing further the possibility for political association is therefore a bad idea and the President, to whom the civil society appealed for mediation, should send the law back to legislators for removal of the 50,000 threshold.

Fig. 2 Close to any political party

	Percent of total	Percent of those who feel close to a party
PSD	21.3	53.0
PRM	6.4	15.8
PD	2.9	7.2
PNL	4.2	10.6
UDMR	3.5	8.7
PUR	0.5	1.2
PNTCD	0.7	1.6
Altul	0.8	1.9
Total	40.2	100
None, or could not tell	60	

Source: CURS, September 2002

Business as usual on the corruption front

As many as 14.5 % of Romanians confess to have bribed a civil servant in the past year, meaning in absolute figures more than two million petty corruption occurrences. This is a considerable figure, taking into account that not every citizen needed to deal with the administration over the last year. From those who bribed, half report full satisfaction with the service received in exchange, compared to 38% who report partial satisfaction and 12% who are unsatisfied. The majority of Romanians feel that civil servants from both local and central administration did not change their attitude towards accepting bribes in the last five years. This explains the persistence of low public confidence in government institutions, the judiciary, and even opposition political parties, which are perceived as not doing much in this respect (Fig. 4).

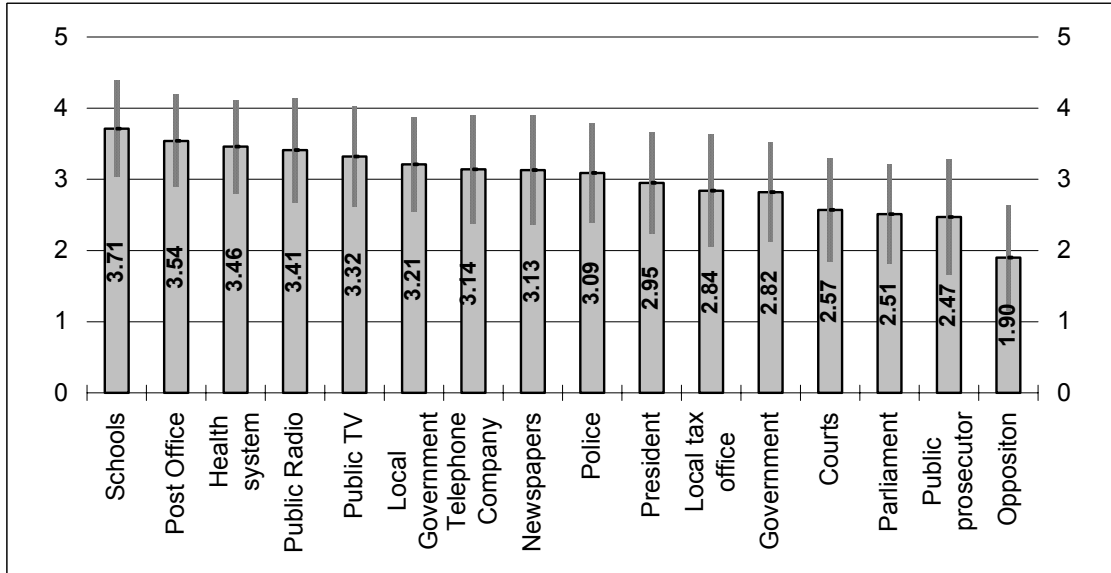
Fig. 3 Sympathy for a political party, by locality size, %

	Town over 200,000 inhabitants	Town between 100,000-200,000 inhabitants	Town between 30,000-100,000 inhabitants	Town under 30,000 inhabitants	Village	Total
Yes	28	6	10	6	50	100
No	32	7	15	7	40	100

Source: CURS, September 2002

¹¹ source: CURS, 2002

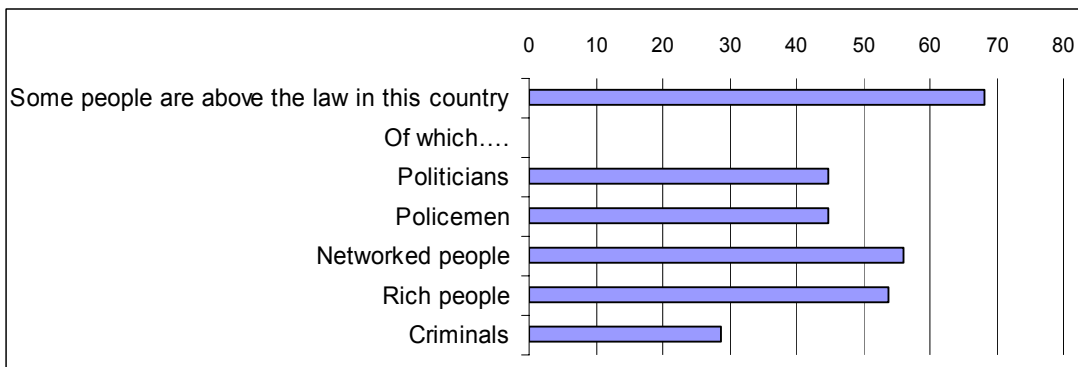
Fig. 4. The following institutions work in the public interest...



Average score (7 = yes, 0 = no) and standard deviation
Source: CURS, September 2002

Figures of the opinion polls are telling about the growing discontent with the 'politics as usual'. Romanians perceive both politicians and policemen, who should serve the public interest, as being above the law, together with the 'networked' people and the rich. The majority perceives the laws as being unfairly applied.

Fig. 5. Perceptions of legal unfairness (%)



Source: CURS, September 2002
