

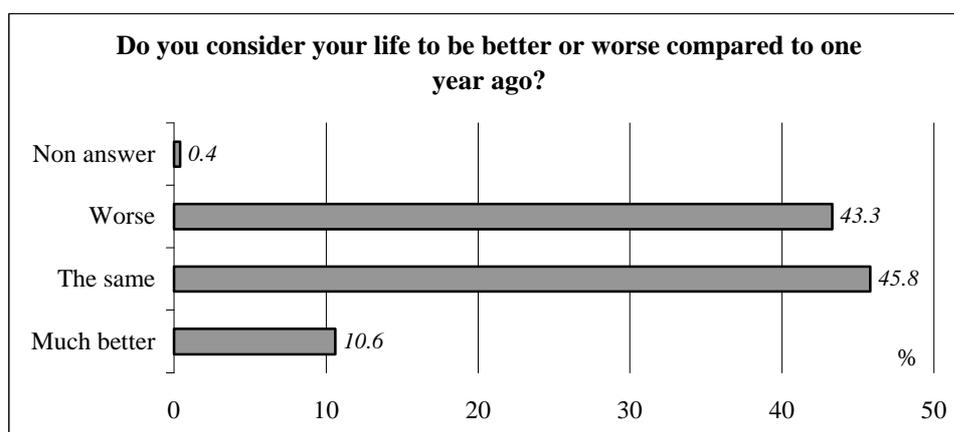
POLITICS

MOST ROMANIANS BELIEVE THERE IS A CONFLICT BETWEEN CITIZENS AND THE POLITICAL ESTABLISHMENT¹⁶

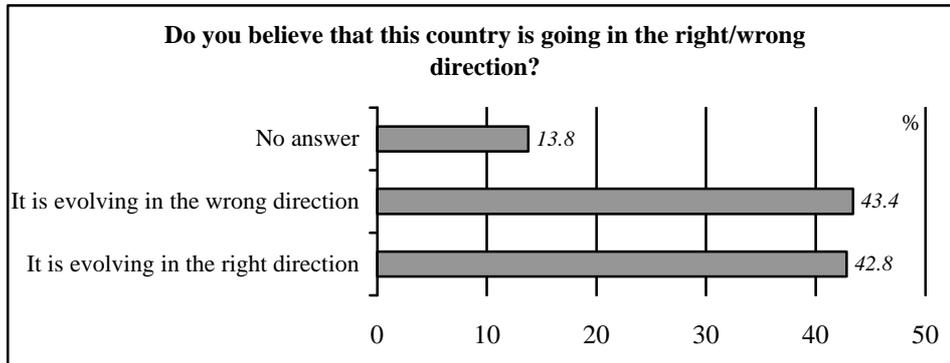
A New Political Elite Badly Wanted

The pattern set in the first half of 2001 seems set to continue in the second half of the year. The government has no challenge from the political opposition, which is divided and confused, but has to face a growing popular discontent, as living standards are stagnant or declining. The urban population reports a decline in their living standards compared to the previous year (33% being worse off, only 10 % better off and 46% the same). The trend of the last months shows an increased skepticism towards the direction the country is heading: the number of skeptics is now slightly surpassing the number of optimists.

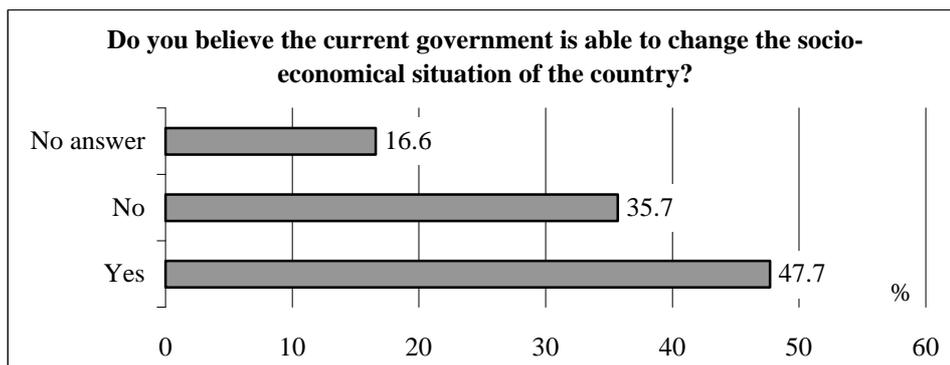
Fig. 1. Subjective welfare



¹⁶ Based on the same survey -see footnote 2 on page 16.

Fig. 2. Optimism

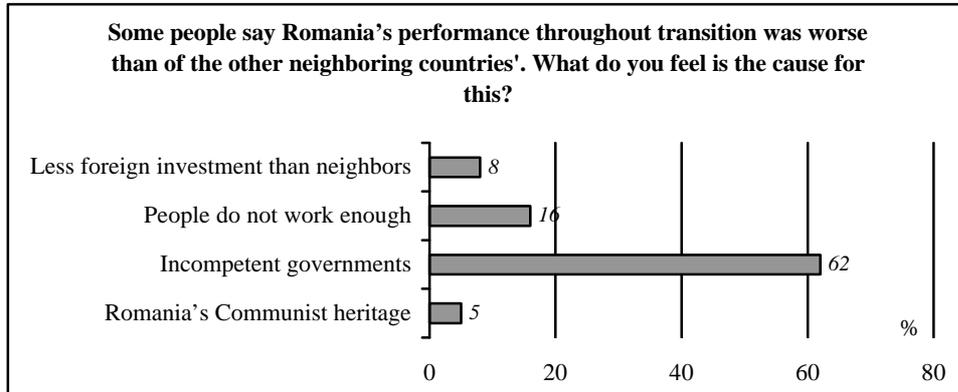
The government still rests upon a majority of voters who trust it to solve Romania's social and economic problems (48%), but with a growing body of skeptics (37%). It is also for the first time since the last elections that in urban areas the government falls short of an absolute majority to endorsing it.

Fig. 3. Trust in the government's ability to improve things

The mechanism of this discontent has older roots. Romanians expect a different quality of governance from their politicians, a different approach to government. Anything, which is not a radical break with the perceived arrogant and corrupt practices of the 'political class', is quickly turning conformist approval into either radical disappointment (feeding the popularity of extremist parties), or political parochialism (expanding the growing body of those not interested in politics and who declare they would not vote next time). Except these two directions, neither being encouraging, it seems that the political public opinion has little resources for anything else for the time being.

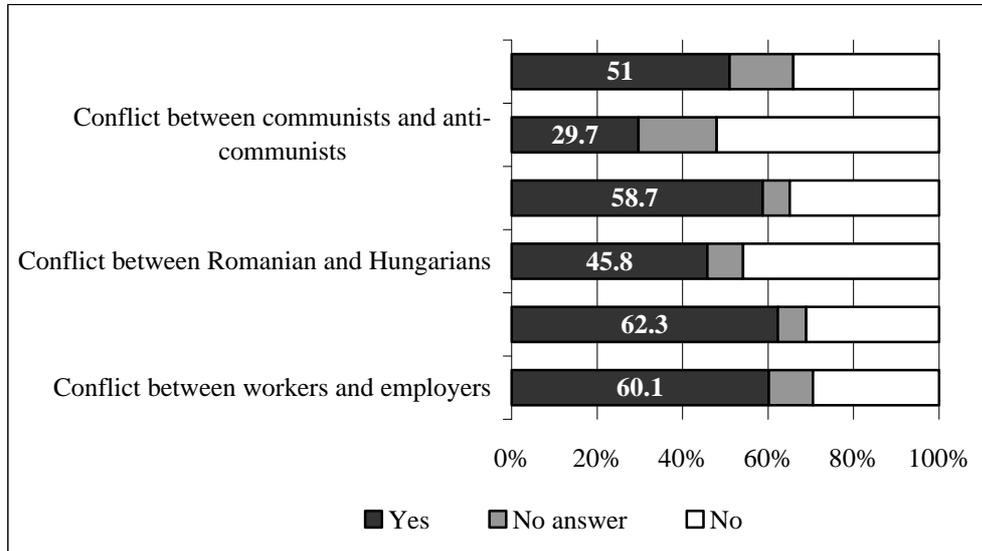
Despite their traditional reputation of believers in conspiracy theories, this time the Romanians blame overwhelmingly the unsuccessful transition on domestic factors (78%), compared to only 5% on the difficult heritage of communism and 8% on the West for not helping Romania enough. Most of this blame is laid on the governments which have run Romania in the last decade.

Fig. 4. Blame the failed transition on...



Medium size cities inhabitants (population ranging from 30 000 to 200 000), the worst hit by recession, blame the political class significantly more than those from smaller towns and big cities. There is a significant association between the economic performance of the region and the anger with the political class. However, on average this anger reaches impressive levels: the absolute majority of Romanians (51%) consider that in Romania ‘there is a conflict between the political class and the rest of the population’, and 19.3% single this out as the one most important underlying conflict within the Romanian society

Fig. 5. Perception of conflicts



Fortunately, this discontent draws upon various partisanships and ideologies, ranging from the far left to the far right. The most unhappy with the political class is the constituency of ApR (“Alliance for Romania”), confirming previous analyses (see EWR, 1/2001-Politics section) that a similar type of constituency is shared by two anti-system parties, one moderate (ApR), and one radical (PRM –“Greater Romania”), but otherwise all constituencies contribute to this strong group asking for another political elite.

Fig. 6. Perception of conflicts and political affiliation

What political party would you trust for being able to solve this issue	Believes there is a conflict between political class and the rest of the Romanians			Total %
	Yes %	No %	No Answer %	
PSD	51.0	37.4	11.6	100.0
PRM	62.0	25.5	12.4	100.0
PD	61.1	31.1	7.8	100.0
PNL	56.7	41.7	1.7	100.0
UDMR	50.0	40.0	10.0	100.0
PNTCD	66.7	16.7	16.7	100.0
ApR	60.0	20.0	20.0	100.0
Other	37.5	62.5	0	100.0
None	44.7	33.8	21.5	100.0
Total	51.0	34.1	14.9	100.0

However, is it realistic to imagine that Romania could have a new political class overnight? The radical desire to get rid of a political class perceived as unaccountable can feed anti-system parties at any moment. Teodor Melescanu (ApR) was limited in his pledge to offer a new quality of leadership by the much more radical offer of Vadim Tudor (PRM); Tudor was limited by the strong media mobilization against him. A leader stronger than Melescanu and less dangerous for the freedom of the media than Vadim Tudor would have, however, a huge potential constituency. Traian Basescu, despite being the most popular leader in the urban areas, has not stepped into this role yet. But the need for something else is so pressing that even the reputedly anti-monarchist Romanians start to believe that a 'Bulgarian way' is possible for the next elections.

Fig. 7. Do you believe something similar to what happened in Bulgaria (elections won by new party headed by former king) could arrive at the next Romanian elections?

Our Bulgarian neighbors gave a negative vote to the entire political class, by electing a new party led by the former King, Simeon. Do you think that a similar situation could take place in Romania?	%
Strongly believe	13.6
Believe it possible	24.9
Believe it unlikely	43.9
No answer	17.6
Total	100.0

Unlike the Bulgarian ex-King Simeon, the Romanian King Michael is old, less active politically and less popular. Having such large numbers agreeing that such an unlikely development could happen does not reveal a recent pro-monarchist drive of Romanians, but rather the despair of voters seeking any solution to shake the whole political system and its corrupt ways. Urban

Romania shows a balanced preference for leaders, with Nastase and Basescu as the most popular (both under 20 %, though), followed by Vadim Tudor and Teodor Stolojan. In the absence of villages from our sample, Ion Iliescu ranks only the fifth in the trust of urban-dwellers. PSD is confirmed, however, despite Iliescu's low popularity, as the only strong party even in the urban areas, with PRM coming second.

Fig. 8. Trust in leaders

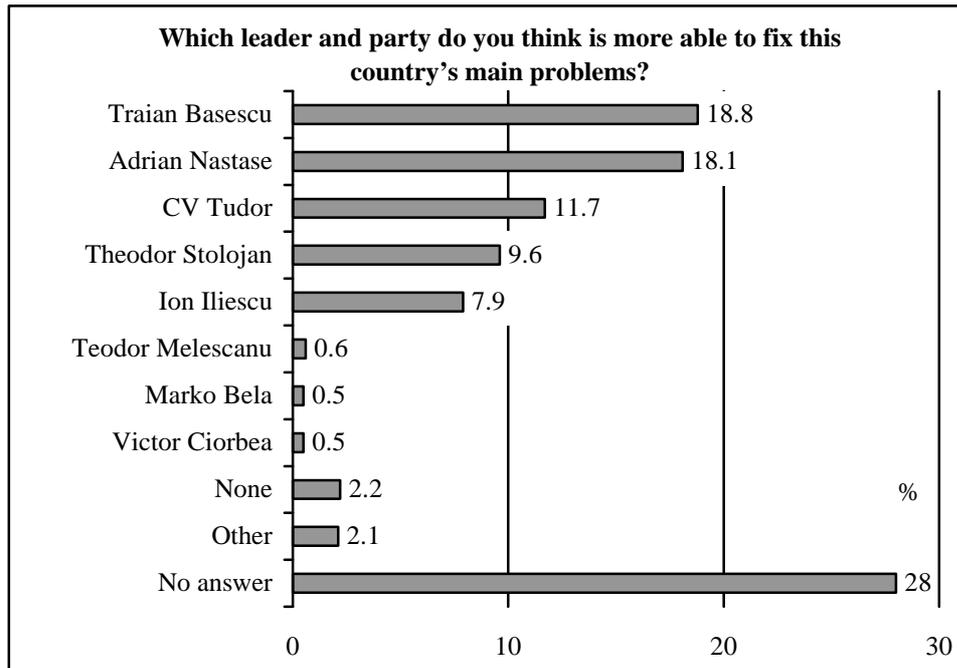
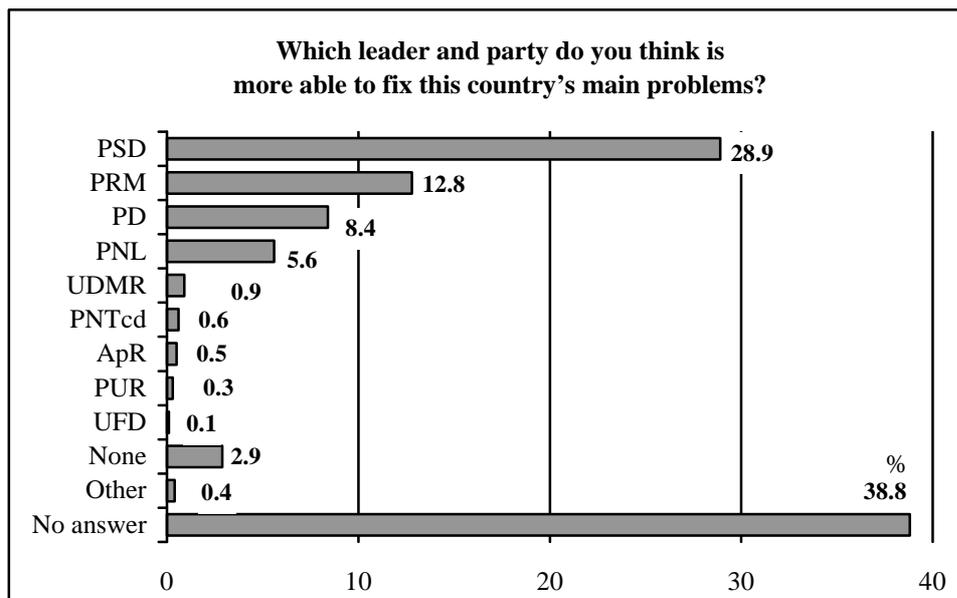


Fig. 9. Trust in parties



Policy options

More transparency of the vote in Parliament is needed

Despite the temporary rise in political trust at the beginning of the year, the Romanians' patience with the political class looks every day more exhausted. Trust has declined on all accounts, and both people who are politically partisan and those who are not, blame the political class in general, and the MPs in particular, for the situation of the country. This situation may not look dangerous in the short run, given the absence of any solid political alternative to the Nastase government at the moment, but it is certainly menacing in the long run, as people may be driven towards more populist political alternatives. The recently started debate on the constitutional reform should address openly the dislike of their representatives by the Romanian voters. The radical solutions proposed so far, such as abolishing a Chamber of the Parliament or giving up the direct election of the President are, first, unlikely to be adopted and, second, would prove unable to solve the problem even when adopted. Romanians would very likely never endorse in a referendum a change of the semi-presidential system, as they perceive the direct election of the President to be the main gain of the Romanian democracy. Voters would very likely agree to any cut of the Parliament's size or of one chamber, but one should not expect the MPs to vote for their own downsizing. One should identify a solution with the potential to be passed by the Parliament, to be endorsed by voters and to be able to succeed in establishing a more accountable system while easing the popular anger against the political class. Three proposals come closer to this ideal:

- 1) Giving up the political immunity for anything else than political acts. This would give the public the impression that the political class is more accountable and would stop the drive of tax evaders and embezzlers to seek refuge in the Parliament.
- 2) Giving up both the practice and the regulation which makes secret practically every important vote of a representative. The main reason why constituents do not trust their representatives is that they cannot find out how they vote in the Parliament. The emphasis on the secret vote was due in the early nineties to reminiscences from authoritarian times of communist takeover. Anti-communist parties feared that they would be held accountable for their voting against the government, and the authors of the 1991 Constitution agreed on this point. These fears are now overcome as Romania is a consolidated democracy. The main goal the voting procedure must achieve now is the accountability towards the voters.
- 3) Automatic dismissal from the Parliament of representatives who swing parties. They should be replaced with the next ones on the party list. Our party system needs stabilization: the parties need internal discipline, and voters must know that MPs stand for what they were elected for, not their own interests. Besides, Romania is a proportional system and the vote is entrusted to party lists.

Defections may occur in older democracies, such as in the American Senate earlier this year, but in the context of a consolidated two party system and single unit constituencies.

Many proposals put forward these days require, to various extents, the modification of the Constitution. However, the transparency of the vote can be enacted without any constitutional modification if an agreement to this effect is reached among political parties. Strange enough, while the media is ravaged by the passion for majority systems and uninominal vote, this much simpler, down-to-the earth proposal has never been seriously considered.