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### **Damiana Otoiu:**

### **“They Restored the Palace of Justice, but Not Justice Itself”: The Restitution / Redistribution of Property in Post-Communist Romania**

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## Abstract

The restitution of private property represents a central dimension of the economic, political and social process of restructuration affecting post-totalitarian countries. The present study explores this “reconstruction of property” in post-communist Romania through the investigation of the most significant interest groups involved in the process of real estate privatisation in urban area: the owners’ and tenants’ associations. This analysis aims to answer one main question: how do these “civil society actors” try to or actually influence the formulation and the implementation of public policies concerning property in Romania?

1. In the first part of the paper, I briefly discuss the legislation concerning property restitution, observing at which point housing restitution becomes part of the “political agenda”, who puts it on there, which arguments are used for doing so, and what these laws provide;

2. The second and third sections explore the creation and organisation of the two groups (the owners’ and the tenants’ associations) as well as their actions in political, electoral and media environments. I show that these two groups have ultimately been transformed into satellites of the various political parties. I deem this development to be an illustrative case for the phenomenon of the „partification of politics” (a quasi-monopoly of political parties in interest intermediation, Linz 1990; Arato 1994; see also Fink-Hafner 1998) in the post-socialist context.

My research is based on field work done in Bucharest, Romania (2004–2005): participant observation (in the case of the Owners’ Association), research in the archives (the Owners’ Association, Bucharest, the Association for Private Property, Bucharest, National Romanian Archives) and interviews (mostly semi-structured interviews).

## Introduction

The literature on property rights in post-communist societies has mostly been concerned with either the conceptualisation of property as a political symbol and as a complex of social relations among people and objects<sup>1</sup> or with the economic consequences of the post-socialist reprivatization.<sup>2</sup> However, little is known about the political mechanisms underlying the formulation of the reprivatization laws, i.e. the political negotiations that shaped the legislation concerning property restitution<sup>3</sup> or the institutional and non-institutional actors involved in these negotiations.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of this research is to spotlight the most significant interest groups involved in the process of the restitution of private property in post-communist Romania (namely real estate in urban areas). Two antagonistic interest groups constitute the object of my research: the Association of Owners Abusively Dispossessed by the State and the Association of Tenants in Nationalised Buildings (later abbreviated as the “Owners’ Association” and the “Tenants’ Association”, respectively). While other foundations and associations founded in Bucharest since 1989 in defence of owners’ rights (and tenants’ rights, respectively) have generally endured only for a short time (due to weak organisational structure and small membership numbers), these two associations boast large memberships, various local branches and partnerships with several political parties, having imposed themselves as the sole legitimate representatives of owners and tenants.

1 E.g. Hann, Chris: *Property Relations: renewing the anthropological tradition*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

2 E.g. Przeworski, Adam: *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

3 However, see Stan, Lavinia: *The Roof over Our Head: Property Restitution in Romania*, in: *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 2006 (vol. 22), No. 4, pp. 1–26.

4 But see Otoiu, Damiana: *Mémoire du communisme, acteurs du postcommunisme*, in: *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, 2004 (vol. IV), No. 4, pp. 885 – 918.

Focusing on the creation and organisation of these two groups, as well as on their actions in the political, electoral and media arenas, I show how they have ultimately been transformed into satellites of the various political parties.

The main question that I address in my paper concerns the validity, in this particular case, of the classical distinction between political parties and interest groups/ pressure groups.<sup>5</sup> If the “canonical” definitions emphasise that an interest group “does not seek to form a government itself, but to influence public policy”<sup>6</sup> (Jordan, Halpin, Maloney, 2004: 199), is this “label” still valid for an organisation that aims to influence key institutions (such as the Romanian and European Parliaments or Romanian government) and gain access to policy makers, but also wishes to act as an “electoral machine”? And, if so, does the transformation of the interest groups into satellites of the various political parties constitute an illustrative case for the phenomenon of “partification of politics” (Linz 1990; Arato 1994; see also Fink-Hafner 1998) in the post-socialist context?

## **I. The reconstitution of private property (over real estate) during post-socialism**

After the breakdown of the socialist regime, the restoration of private property was seen by most Romanian politicians as a central dimension of the economic, political and social process of post-totalitarian restructuring. If we oversimplify the political debates concerning the (re)privatisation of real estate, we can distinguish between the defenders of the “restitution policies” (i.e. of restoring the properties nationalised under socialism<sup>7</sup> to their former owners or to their heirs) and those of the “redistribution policies” (a very limited restitution, combined with the selling of state property to the current inhabitants of the buildings). The latter policy (the “redistribution” of real estate) prevailed over the former (the “restitution”) at the beginning of the 1990s. Several versions of a “restitution law” were drafted between 1990 and 1995, but none of these was adopted by the Parliament. However, two special decrees were adopted (no. 61/1990 and no. 85/1992), allowing 3 million tenants living in buildings constructed by the communist state to buy the flats they were currently occupying at very low prices.<sup>8</sup> The leader of the Tenants’ Association heralded the two laws as “an act of benevolence from the State’s leaders. The prices of those flats were [...] reduced to almost nothing by rising inflation, after which the value of a house became, within a few years, comparable to that of a TV set.”<sup>9</sup>

The first so-called “restitution law” (Law no. 112) was promulgated in 1995 and met with strong criticism. Even though it recognised an owner’s right to reclaim his or her property, the law also stipulated that an owner could claim only one building,<sup>10</sup> and only upon the condition that either he/ she lived there at the moment of the reclaim, or the building was not currently occupied (the number of possible property restitutions was thus lowered dramatically). In other words, Law no. 112 was more geared towards “the protection of the current inhabitants”, who had the right to buy the buildings they were occupying if they had not or could not be reclaimed.

A new law drafted by the government was discussed for three years by the Parliament. Contested by the owners as well as by the tenants of nationalised buildings, the law was adopted after the 2000 elections (Law no. 10/2001). Its implementation gave way to the reopening of the administrative proceedings of

5 This contribution leaves aside the distinction between interest groups and pressure groups.

6 Jordan, Grant/ Halpin, Darren/ Maloney, William (2004): *Defining Interests: Disambiguation and the Need for New Distinctions?*, in: *BJPIR*, 2004, No. 6, p. 199.

7 More than 400,000 buildings (of which 150,000 were demolished).

8 Zerilli, Filippo: *Identité et propriété en milieu urbain. Locataires et propriétaires dans la Roumanie contemporaine*, in: *Yearbook of the Romanian Society of Cultural Anthropology*, 1998 (vol. 1), p. 166.

9 E.P., interview, 26 April 2004, Bucharest.

10 The law uses either the term “flat” or “building” and defines both terms as “a housing unit”, a unique “household”.

property restitution.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the representatives of the owners considered this law tantamount to the “expropriation of sold goods”, because it admitted the legality of certain sales that were in fact illegal<sup>12</sup> according to the previous law.

In the second half of 2004, the issue of the reconstitution of private property was reinstated with a vengeance. The “Justice and Truth “ coalition, which won the November 2004 elections with a long list of legislative priorities, first addressed the need to reform the system of justice and to guarantee the “provision of justice “ for the former owners. Indeed, the new government cited Law no. 247 of July 2005 as the basis for embarking on these two reforms, for which it assumed responsibility before the Parliament. The new law was built around the principle of *restitutio in integrum* (stipulating the restitution of all the buildings held by the Romanian state, including the various embassy or party quarters that had been forsaken by the previous laws). Nevertheless, the former owners continued to accuse the government of having “renationalised” their properties, i.e. by recognising the legality of the sale of the nationalised buildings (“they restored the Palace of Justice, but not justice itself”, as a former owner bitterly observed<sup>13</sup>).

If a political scientist wants to explain the political mechanisms underlying the formulation of the reprivatisation laws, he or she has to answer several basic questions: which social and political actors are involved in the elaboration and implementation of restitution policies? Did the “civil society actors” (i.e. the owners’ and the tenants’ associations) influence this process? If so, when? And how? Therefore, in the second and the third parts of this paper, I will explore the most significant interest groups involved in the process of the restitution of private property in post-communist Romania (the former owners’ and the present tenants’ associations), and the interactions between these “civil society” actors and Romanian political parties.

## II. The Owners’ Association Abusively Dispossessed by the State

*“In fact, we made an evaluation of the different positioning of the political parties and we chose, I would say, the lesser evil among them”*

(Leader of the Owners’ Association Abusively Dispossessed by the State, 2004)

### The founding of the Association

The first association defending the rights of the owners emerged in Bucharest in 1992. After more than five years, disappointed in the “naïve” and poorly informed leader of the association at the time, the former owners decided to replace the leader as well as (in 1999) the name of the association, laying the groundwork for the new Association of Owners Abusively Dispossessed by the State (abbreviated hereafter as the Owners’ Association/ Association). The number of current members is uncertain: according to one estimate proposed by an Association member and the group’s lawyer, there are around 300 members; the organisation’s website lists 1,500. According to certain owners we interviewed, there are 2,300–2,500 members; the Association’s president, Theodoru, estimates more than 3,500 nationwide.

Nevertheless, since it aims to impact political decisions, the Association always claims to be the legitimate representative of all its “potential members”. This explains how their target audience can be estimated at “around one million persons”. “There are still some 100,000 owners seeking justice, who have children and grandchildren of their own. [...] We will give our votes (around one million) to the presidential candidate

11 210,000 restitution requests were registered, with more than 41,000 of these in Bucharest (see [www.pmb.ro](http://www.pmb.ro)).

12 Selling the assets taken over by the communist state “without entitlement” (this means following arbitrary confiscations) had been forbidden by Law 112/1995. However, the new law stipulates (art. 46, par. 2): “The legal documents for the alienation [...] of confiscated buildings without a valuable title are legally null and void, except for the cases where the document had been drafted in good faith”. Therefore, it admits the legality of the sale of the buildings nationalised “without entitlement”, and merely conditions it by the “good faith” of the inhabitant who bought the assets in question.

13 V.S, interview, 9 December 2005, Bucharest.

and to the party who present the best guarantees for a fair, immediate and full implementation of a just law”, promised the vice-president of the Owners’ Association on the eve of the 2000 elections.<sup>14</sup>

## Activities of the Owner’s Association

The Owners’ Association uses a wide range of lobbying methods. The most frequent tactic for applying pressure (or “persuasion”) is simply the submission of carefully prepared documentation to the members of the two Chambers of Parliament (in the hopes of a favourable outcome). The executive branch is also a privileged target of the interest groups. The rationale is quite simple, and has to do with the progressive transfer of legislative power to the executive. The Association even lobbies the president by seeking (and obtaining) interviews with him or his councillors.

Other means of intervention – street meetings, strikes, boycotts, etc. – are quite rare, considering the Association’s feeble mobilisation skills. These types of actions are more typical of the mass associative groups, which are well organised and possess a significant agenda for recruitment. N.G., one of the Association’s founding members, admits: “We gave up calling for street demonstrations, since there were always very few people who took part in them”.

## The media spectacle of protests

Since “social movements are more and more dependent on the external media (television, radio, written press) to make their ideas and their demands known”<sup>15</sup>, the leaders of the Owners’ Association gradually realised the importance of this “media management task”<sup>16</sup> and came to perceive the media as a “key strategic arena”<sup>17</sup> (for garnering “public recognition” for their plight and having their claims acknowledged by the authorities). “In the beginning, one did not have any *feeling* for the press”, admits N.G., one of the Association’s founding members. “Then, little by little, we began to... Above all, after our first press conferences, that is when we began to know each other”.

Therefore, the Association’s leaders launched (especially after 2000) different strategies meant to capture the media’s attention. They drafted press briefs, which contained not only “dry” legal texts, commentaries and amendments proposed for existing bills, but also concrete and well-documented cases of politicians, judges and members of the former nomenklatura who had bought – at ridiculously low prices – the villas now being reclaimed by their former owners. Moreover, the president of the Association tried to “negotiate” with the directors of the main dailies to secure the publication of articles on these topics, as well as with the directors of several TV networks to obtain dedicated air time.

Certain “opposition”<sup>18</sup> publications eagerly played the part of disseminating the owners’ messages, above all when the latter organised street meetings or other actions that might turn into *media events*. This was for instance the case with the journal *România Liberă* (whose editorial board was dominated after 1989 by the former opponents of the Communist Party).

## Entering the political arena

To obtain trustworthy contacts within the Parliament, the Association’s president made the decision to negotiate – with a few select potential allies – the potential entry of the Association on the political and electoral scene. In this way, he hoped to vest the owners with direct power to draft the laws that affect them.

14 Mircea Corivan’s speech (representative of the Committee for Private Property in Romania and vice-president of the Owners’ Association) at the 1st international Congress of the Owners (Bucharest).

15 Neveu, Erik: Médias, mouvements sociaux, espaces publics, in: Réseaux, 1998 (vo. 17), No. 98, pp. 19–85.

16 Neveu, Erik: Médias, mouvements sociaux, espaces publics, in: Réseaux, 1998 (vo. 17), No. 98, p. 21.

17 Champagne, Patrick: La construction médiatique des malaises sociaux, in: Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales, 1991, 90, p. 72.

18 I.e. opposed to the “leftist” post-communist regimes in power between 1989 and 1996 (the Social – Democrats, seen as “successor communist” groups).

From the members' point of view, there were several likely partners (the "right", or the so-called "historical" parties, above all the National Peasant Christian Democratic Party and the National Liberal Party) vs. an impossible affiliation with "the neo-communists", i.e. the current Social Democratic Party (and all of its previous incarnations). The "ideological bipolarism"<sup>19</sup>, i.e. the dichotomy between communists and anti-communists that dominated the Romanian political arena during the first post-communist decade, remains a constant reference point in the owners' discourse even today.

Since the creation of the first Owner's Association, the members of the National Liberal Party have supported the owners' activities (e.g. attending their conferences and general assemblies), and in their statements, they have upheld the need to return the property confiscated by the communist regime.

In 1999, the Association also established close ties with the National Christian and Democratic Alliance. This party was founded in 1999 by a group of ex-members of the Christian Democratic Party, headed by former Prime Minister Victor Ciorbea. "Currently, among all the political parties, only the Union of Right Forces and the National Christian and Democratic Alliance understand the need to solve all the injustices that affected the owners", affirmed the vice-president of the Owners' Association on the occasion of the first international Congress of Owners in Romania (Bucharest, September 2000).

Finally, in April 2003, the Owners' Association signed a protocol for collaboration with the National Peasant Christian Democratic Party (2003). "In fact," admits T.,

*"we evaluated the positioning of all the political parties and we chose, I would say, the lesser evil among them. The situation was like that, there was no convenient alternative, and none of the political parties really stand for the restitution. That's the main reason for our choice..."*

### III. The Association of Tenants in Nationalised Buildings

*"We considered that within the programme of the Social-Democratic Party we could find a solution to our problems. They supported us on the basis of an agreement and thanks to this agreement lots of people are occupying comfortable parliamentary seats today"*  
(Eugen Pleșa, president of the Association of Tenants in Nationalised Buildings, 1996).

#### The founding of the Association

From the moment of its founding, the Association of Tenants in Nationalised Buildings (hereafter abbreviated as the Tenants' Association/ Association) has defined itself as a counterweight to the Owners' Association. This is, in fact, the very explanation given by the president of the Tenants' Association vis-à-vis its genesis: the Association was established in 1991(!), with the aim of opposing the actions of the Owners' Association, officially created in 1992 (!): "This is how this association of former owners, of former claimers appeared. [...] This is the reason why we, the tenants, immediately thought that we had to prevent this danger, you see... We've sensed this need of properly organising ourselves." (E.P.)

The Tenants' Association is strongly personalised. The image of the core-group, and the one of its leader, are almost entirely superimposed, as is the case with the Owners' Association. Nevertheless, the latter was a massive movement (especially at the beginning of the 1990s), with more than 10,000 members nationwide in 1997–1998. The Tenants' Association also tends to exaggerate the importance of the movement (from 10,000 active members in 1997–1998, as stated by the president of the Organisational Committee, to "more than 2 million members", according to the president of the Iasi subsidiary). In fact, most of the former members have "betrayed the cause of the tenants" in recent years by buying the apartments they had lived in, as a member of the Executive Committee bitterly observed.

19 Barbu, Daniel: Republica absentă. Politică și societate în România postcomunistă [Absent Republic. Politics and Society in Post-communist Romania]. Bucharest : Nemira, 1999, p. 136.

## Activities of the Tenants' Association

The major activities of this interest group are concerned with parliamentary lobbying and with establishing and maintaining contacts with the political parties. "The tenants (of the nationalised buildings) were always there (at the Parliament), even if the owners were not... or not so frequently. But it is interesting to note that they were never interested in participating in the (Legal) Commission debates. They tried to contact the members of the Parliament with important functions in the Chamber of Deputies, the people with a lot of influence, the leaders of opinion, the presidents of political parties, the leaders of the parliamentary groups, and the president of the Legal Commission. They also developed a strong lobby, by participating in the other debates and thus expressing their point of view", said E.S., member of the Legal Commission of the Chamber of Deputies. The delegates of the tenants intervened as "veto-groups" (protesting against certain political initiatives that were against their interests<sup>20</sup>), but they also tried to provoke legal changes or to initiate reforms.<sup>21</sup>

The representatives of the Tenants' Association also expressed their claims to Romanian President Ion Iliescu (on several occasions, throughout his various mandates). Iliescu, still an important member of the Social – Democratic Party, always upheld the necessity of protecting the tenants in his public speeches concerning the restitution of property, making him one of the tenants' "favourite interlocutors".

## Protesting through mass-media

The media visibility of the Tenants' Association was a constant preoccupation for its leaders. From this point of view, one could say that the group found itself in a privileged situation: the two journals of the Social – Democratic Party, *Dimineata* and *Azi*, constantly devoted long articles to the tenants' plight. Besides those two journals, the Association created its own: *Tribuna chiriaşului* [The Tenant's Gallery] and *Radical* [Radical]. Printed in limited circulation, the journals were distributed to the participants of the street demonstrations.

If the Owners' Association mobilisation of the media was more or less a substitution for the mobilisation of a great number of militants, the Tenants' Association had an essential political resource: great numbers. This permitted the organisation of large *media events*.

## Entering the political arena

Since its creation, the Tenants' Association has always (explicitly or implicitly) aligned itself with various political parties in order to achieve its objectives. Eugen Pleşa, the president of the Association, became a member of the Party for Social Democracy in Romania (PDSR) back in 1992; as he later admitted, "In the beginning we were courted; I do not want to hide the fact that several parties tried to muster our support. We [the members of the Tenants' Association] considered that we could find the solution to our problems within the programme of the Party for Social Democracy in Romania. We were supported on the basis of an agreement signed by both parties and thanks to this agreement many persons now occupy comfortable seats at the Romanian Parliament".<sup>22</sup> In fact, the members of the PDSR (just like President Ion Iliescu) spoke on several occasions in favour of "the protection of the tenants" and of the new owners (the tenants who had bought the buildings that had not or could not be reclaimed). Concerning the position of the Party for Social Democracy and of its most recent "avatar" (the Social – Democratic Party) in the debates of the Legal Commission of the Chamber of Deputies, the statements of E.S., a member of the Commission, are quite eloquent: "The Party for Social Democracy wanted to exploit the tenants, who were far more numerous than the owners, by converting them into electoral capital [...] I am a member in the Commission and

20 For example, the entire series of street demonstrations and protests were addressed to Parliament, before and after the HG no. 11, of 29 January 1997.

21 See, for example, the legislative project intended to complete Law no. 10/2001, initiated in the Senate by three politicians from the nationalist Greater Romania Party, including Eugen Pleşa, the president of the Tenants' Association (BP 168/26 March 2004); see [www.cdep.ro](http://www.cdep.ro).

22 Eugen Pleşa, at the electoral broadcast *Turneul candidaţilor*.

I can testify that I heard no legal argument during these discussions. Maybe there were a few, but they were summoned only to support political positions, including labels such as “communists“ vs. *moşieri* [landowners]”.

## Building a partisan structure: The Social Alliance Party (of Tenants)

Based on the axiom that the militant force of the Tenants' Association and its capacity to mobilise can easily translate into electoral power (i.e. a considerable number of votes), the Association endowed itself with a partisan structure of its own, the Social Alliance Party (of Tenants), on the eve of the local elections of 1996. The party founded its electoral programme on the principle of “social justice”, defined above all as the necessity for a fairer distribution of housing. “When we speak of more than three apartments (and, in the majority of cases, the expropriation involved 8–10 apartments belonging to the same owner, up to 179 apartments, in fact), one cannot say that the nationalisation was extremely unjust”, claimed the vice-president of the Association.<sup>23</sup>

The new Party participated in the local elections of 2 June 1996, but its electoral performance was extremely disappointing: it won only 4,123 votes (0.05%) for all of its mayoral candidates (winning no mandate), 7,394 votes (0.09%) for the Local Councils (winning a single mandate) and 2,432 votes (0.03%) for the District Councils (again, no mandate).<sup>24</sup>

## Choosing “new” political partners?

After the Party's fiasco in the local elections, the president of the Association decided to support Emil Constantinescu<sup>25</sup> as a presidential candidate. This choice was rather unusual, since Constantinescu had run against Iliescu and was supported by a “right” umbrella coalition, the Democratic Convention of Romania, including parties (like the Christian and Democratic Party and the Liberals) and civic movements. In a post-election letter addressed to Constantinescu, the new president-elect<sup>26</sup>, “a group of tenants” explained the reasons behind the choice to endorse him: “During the electoral campaign, we followed you closely, we took note of all your statements, on the radio as well as on TV, and we were persuaded that all your promises will be kept. One of these solemn vows, made to the people on national television [...] was that you would respect Law no. 112/1995 and that you would guarantee the implementation of this document as it is now formulated”.

The decision to support the Democratic Convention's candidate triggered tensions between the Party for Social Democracy, “the traditional ally” of the tenants, and the interest group represented by Eugen Pleşa. The tensions were reflected in *Dimineaţa*, the newspaper controlled by the Party for Social Democracy, for several months. Pleşa's “treason” was amply commented upon in the paper: “The impostor who betrayed the tenants and their good will, the traitor without scruples who cynically passed to the other side of the barricade, pledged his word, his conscience, and his title, asking the mystified tenants to vote for the Convention, because this vote would ensure the preservation of their homes”.<sup>27</sup>

However, by February 1997, *Dimineaţa* had once again become “the loudspeaker” of the Association: the journal resumed regular publication of the tenants' protests, their open letters addressed to the President and interviews with the leaders of the Tenants' Association.

At the same time, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, the leader of the ultra-nationalist Greater Romania Party, urged the president of the Tenants' Association to join his party in order to “fight for the tenants' cause”. The mi-

23 Dimineaţa, no. 45 (1 874), 26 February 1997.

24 Source: the Central Electoral Bureau, the official results of the local elections of 1996, <http://www.kappa.ro/guv/bec96loc/rz96lcf.html>.

25 The candidate of the Democratic Convention.

26 Published in *Dimineaţa*, no. 44 (1 873), 27 February 1997.

27 *Dimineaţa*, no. 22 (1 851), 30 January 1997.

gration of Eugen Pleșa<sup>28</sup> and other members of the Tenants' Association to the Greater Romania Party led to the creation of a specialised section within the Party (formally described in the organisational chart).

In October 1997, the bases for the "Partnership for Bucharest" had been set: the Party for Social Democracy, the Socialist Workers' Party, the Greater Romania Party, the Party of the Retired Persons of Romania and the Tenants' Association all helped to organise what they deemed one of "the most important demonstrations of the leftist opposition" in Revolution Square. Standing again alongside the leaders of the leftist parties, Eugen Pleșa, the president of the Tenants' Association and member of the Greater Romania Party, denounced "the moral fraud" that had allowed the Democratic Convention to come to power and to reduce the tenants of nationalised buildings to mere electoral capital.

## Conclusion

Since the emergence and consolidation of interest groups, pressure groups and civil society in general are considered to be two of the key factors in the democratic transformation of the post-communist states in Central and Eastern Europe, I came to question the role that interest groups had in finding a solution to these "dilemmas of justice in post-communist transitions"<sup>29</sup>, in that they placed the issues of "restitutive justice" and "redistributive justice" high on the agendas of post-communist governments.

The underlying research question of my study was: to which degree did the civil society actors influence the formulation and implementation of public policies concerning property in Romania? If other Central and Eastern European countries experienced "the evolution of a modern interest group system in the democratic consolidation stage"<sup>30</sup>, could Romania – towards the end of the 1990s and even after 2000 – still experience some sort of "party monopoly in interest intermediation", or, to use Arato's term, the "participation of politics"?<sup>31</sup> I kept in mind the "conventional" definition of an interest group (e.g. Wilson, 1990: 8, "an interest group is an organization which has some autonomy from government or political parties"), but also the observation that "organizations that are most significant in particular policy processes tend not to abide by the stereotype that best approximates a pressure/ interest group".<sup>32</sup>

I noticed that the two associations constituting the main focus of my research are closely linked to two major political parties. More importantly, I found that in this specific case, rather than being reduced to opportunistic and ad-hoc alliances, the associations between parties and interest groups tend to remain stable, enduring despite the fact that the political parties in post-communist Romania lack the acuity of an ideological identity.<sup>33</sup> The relative stability of their political options is especially valid in the case of the Owners' Association.

Moreover, since the Romanian political system remains authoritatively dominated by the political parties (*Parteienstaat, partocracy*<sup>34</sup>), the two interest groups comprising the object of our study have not only man-

28 In 2000, Eugen Pleșa was elected deputy on the Greater Romania Party electoral list.

29 Offe, Claus: *Varieties of Transition: The East European and East German Experience*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997, p. 82.

30 Fink Hafner, Danika: Organized interests in the policy-making process in Slovenia, in: *Journal of European Public Policy*, 1998 (vol. 5), No. 2, p. 298.

31 See Fink Hafner, Danika: Organized interests in the policy-making process in Slovenia, in: *Journal of European Public Policy*, 1998 (vol. 5), No. 2, pp. 285–302.

32 Jordan, Grant/ Halpin, Darren/ Maloney, William (2004): *Defining Interests: Disambiguation and the Need for New Distinctions?*, in: *BJPIR*, 2004, No. 6, p. 200.

33 See Barbu, Daniel: *Republica absentă. Politică și societate în România postcomunistă* [Absent Republic. Politics and Society in Post-communist Romania]. Bucharest : Nemira, 1999; De Waele, Jean-Michel (éd.): *Partis politiques et démocratie en Europe Centrale et Orientale*. Bruxelles: Éd. de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2002; Preda, Cristian: *Système politique et familles parisiennes en Roumanie postcommunisme*, in: *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, 2002 (vol. II), No. 2, pp. 555–575.

34 V. Barbu, Daniel: *Du parti unique à la participation*, in: *Partis politiques et démocratie en Europe Centrale et Orientale*, De Waele, Jean-Michel (ed), Bruxelles: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2002, pp. 205–213.

aged to enter the electoral and parliamentary arenas, but also tend to “imitate” the patterns of action of the political parties in a “particracy” (see Calise 1994, Von Beyme 1995, Budge and Keman 1990). The leaders of these two associations simultaneously take an office-seeking perspective (aiming to find themselves at the helm of political parties, seeking to secure eligible positions on the parties’ candidate lists, looking for functions within the governmental commissions that oversee the privatisation process) and a policy-based perspective (aspiring to steer the formulation and the implementation of the reprivatisation laws).

I deem this to be an illustrative case for the „participation of politics” (Arato 1994) in the post-socialist context. Obviously, the conclusions that I have reached from the examination of this particular example need not necessarily be extended to other specific sectors of interest representation. Indeed, I concede that, as Fink-Hafner observed for the Slovenian case, “in certain sectors, the more powerful segments of the civil society (economic groups, above all), succeeded in establishing themselves as partners in institutionalized forms of consultative politics”.<sup>35</sup>

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35 Fink Hafner, Danika: Organized interests in the policy-making process in Slovenia, in: *Journal of European Public Policy*, 1998 (vol. 5), No. 2, p. 298.