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Research Project

What Does Democracy Mean to Romanians?

Progress Report

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Research Design

1. Topic and relevance

The research project *What Does Democracy Mean to Romanians?* focuses on the Romanian population's views on democracy. The study takes a descriptive-analytical approach, trying to extract from a sample of the Romanian population, by means of a survey, those characteristics of governance Romanians associate with the concept of democracy. The aim of the survey is to capture through its questions Romanians' definitions of democracy as they are born out of a genuine experience of and a critical approach to the social and political realm and not merely through the reactive adoption of stereotypes. By understanding what democracy actually means to Romanians, much confusion can be eliminated and the basis for effective political communication can be established both between Romanians and their governments and between Romania and such international bodies as the European Union. Concerning the possible integration of Romania into the EU, our survey can also provide a test of compatibility between Romanians' and other Europeans' views on democracy.

2. Theoretical Context and Relevant Literature

Writings on democracy are extremely numerous, offering a wide range of interpretations and approaches. It can reasonably be argued that, at a theoretical level, no consensus has been reached on what democracy precisely and exclusively consists in or should consist in. Moreover, on a practical level, throughout history, democracy was given different forms, from the Greek direct democracy to the contemporary representative democracy,

and experimentation with various forms of democratic organization continues today.¹ However, this divergence of experiences and opinions suits our study since we did not intend to approach our population with a preconceived definition of democracy. On the contrary, in order to assess empirically what Romanians mean by democracy, we tried to encompass, as the theoretical sources of our questions, as many models of democracy as possible.²

On the basis of the literature, we identified four dimensions of social organization which generally characterize political systems and which may be expected to take a particular range of forms in a democracy: (1) institutions, (2) values, (3) rules and mechanisms, and (4) patterns of social relations. By institutions we understand those bodies able and authorized to shape and influence the political life of a community (ranging from parliament and political parties to mass media and trade unions). Values, such as equality or freedom, are those intangible benefits which the political system is set up to maximize. Rules and mechanisms specify how public decisions are made and implemented. Particular patterns of social relations, such as levels of tolerance towards minorities, perceived gaps between social strata, and general attitudes towards fellow-citizens shape the political culture of a community.

Perceptions of democracy as we assess them thus include both traditional dimensions of the concept, procedural as well as substantive democracy. Procedural democracy refers to the ways in which leaders are chosen and decisions are made in a democracy. This means the way the electoral system is set up, how various branches of

¹ See John Dunn, *Democracy: The Unfinished Journey 508 BC to AD 1993* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

² See, for example, David Held, *Models of Democracy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2nd ed. 1996).

government and institutions divide and share power, and the rules and mechanisms of decisionmaking within and among them (such as rule by majority and consensus-building mechanisms). Substantive democracy refers to the norms which democracies are designed to protect and/or advance. This means primarily human rights, civil liberties, and minority rights.

The observation that the functioning of democracy depends on characteristics of political culture may well be considered a truism in contemporary social science. Key thinkers from Alexis de Tocqueville³ to Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba⁴ have studied the links between culture and political organization, and have identified key factors for the success of democracy. More recently, Robert Putnam has alerted us to the necessity of “social trust” and the resulting availability of “social capital” for the construction and maintenance of an active public sphere which, functioning largely independently from yet supplementing the efforts of the state in the pursuit of public welfare, forms the foundation of a democratic civil society.⁵ In addition, “political trust” among citizens has been identified as essential for allowing the successful interaction of that civil society with the state apparatus and thus, effectively, for democratic governance.⁶ Last not least, at a practical level, the successful involvement of citizens in the political process depends on information about the principles and workings of democracy. On the basis of our research, we will attempt to assess the levels of political information and of social and political trust of the respondents, alongside their views and experiences of democracy, in

³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Bantam Classic, 2000 [1835]).

⁴ Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Sage, 1989 [1963]) and *The Civic Culture Revisited* (Sage, 1989).

⁵ Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁶ Mark J. Hetherington, “The Political Relevance of Political Trust,” *American Political Science Review* 92, December 1998, pp. 791-808.

order to contribute to the investigation of the state of democratic political culture in Romania.

In his *Reflections on the Revolutions in Europe*, Ralph Dahrendorf observes that the path from authoritarian communism to open democratic society in the region has consisted of three parallel processes: constitutional reform, economic reform, and social reform.⁷ The third includes the transformation in social and political attitudes and the civic education which is required for the emergence of a democratic civil society after communism. Several studies have picked up the theme of socio-cultural or political-cultural transformation and examined the relevant aspects of the transitions to democracy in Central and Eastern Europe.⁸ However, empirical investigations of popular views on democracy are exceedingly rare, and a comprehensive study of Romanians views on democracy has not been undertaken. This is the gap which the present study seeks to fill. Our questions are designed to allow respondents to associate particular institutions, values, rules and mechanisms, and patterns of social relations with the concept of democracy and thereby to express their personal views and experiences with it. They assess popular attitudes towards democratic principles and mechanisms as well as Romanians' levels of civic commitment.

As Michael Walzer has argued, although nowadays civic commitment may no longer be routinely perceived as a moral need and obligation (as it may have been in the Greek polis), it is still a vital ingredient in any system of government which could claim

⁷ Ralph Dahrendorf, *Reflectii asupra revolutiilor in Europa* (Bucuresti: Humanitas, 1993).

⁸ See, for example, Seymour Martin Lipset, "Social Requisites of Democracy Revisited," *The American Sociological Review* vol. 59, 1994; Giuseppe Di Palma, *To Craft Democracies: An Essay on Democratic Transitions* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1989); Larry Diamond, "Beyond Authoritarianism and Totalitarianism: Strategies for Democratization," *The Washington Quarterly* vol. 12, no. 1, 1989; and Timothy Garton Ash, *Anul adevarului* (Bucuresti: Humanitas, 1993). On Romania see Dumitru Sandu, *Spațiul social al tranziției* (Iași: Polirom, 1999).

to provide positive freedom for its citizens.⁹ It is therefore vital to harvesting the promise of 1989 to maintain and strengthen public commitment to political information, communication, and participation in order to ensure the social and political welfare of citizens. The present project attempts to make a small step in this direction by giving a voice to the Romanian people with the intention of helping them to better understand themselves and their political expectations and assess their ability and willingness to rule themselves.

3. Approach and Methodology

As mentioned above, our strategy for addressing the challenge of our study involves designing and administering a survey to a sample of the Romanian population. The questions in our survey try to open to respondents a wide set of choices to express their interpretations of democracy. Since we do not intend to impose a unique definition of democracy, we allow respondents the freedom and possibility to associate democracy with any characteristics they choose, even if those characteristics are not among the commonly accepted attributes of democracy.

The majority of the questions in our survey are multiple choice questions which ask respondents to associate the concept of democracy with various possible models of social organization. The questions cover four dimensions of social organization which, in democracy, are commonly expected to take particular forms: (1) institutions, (2) values, (3) rules and mechanisms, and (4) patterns of social relations.

⁹ See Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Macmillan, 1989). Compare Isaiah Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty* (Princeton University Press, 2002).

By institutions we understand those bodies able and authorized to shape and influence the decision making process and political life in Romania (ranging from Parliament and political parties to mass media and trade unions). Our interest is to see which of them Romanians associate with the idea of democracy, which they perceive as agents or pillars of democratization and, not least, which they consider to be the characteristics of democratic institutions (transparency, responsiveness, etc.). In what concerns values, we give respondents the possibility to rank values such as equality or freedom in an order which they find characteristic for democracy. With respect to the third dimension of social organization, rules and mechanisms, the respondents express their views on the ways decisions are and should be taken in a democracy, as well as the compatibility between democracy and various forms of economic organization. They can also express their preferences for changes (e.g.: should referenda be organized more often?). The questions regarding patterns of social relations focus on such issues as tolerance towards minorities, perceived gaps between social strata, and evaluation of the social-psychological bases of democracy (role of consensus, conflict and so on).

This separation into four areas of concern is helpful in the sense that it lays open Romanians' manifold experiences of democracy as reflected in various and complex aspects of their lives (relations with institutions, values held, familiarity and understanding of rules and mechanisms, social relations).

Aside from multiple choice questions, some of which ask for single answers while others allow for multiple responses, the questionnaire also includes a limited number of open questions (providing for more personalized answers). Some questions are "negative," allowing respondents to name deficiencies and failures of democracy. This is

because our questions are designed to obtain from our respondents their assessments of whether and how democracy works in Romania, but also a more general impression of how democracy should function (normative and ideological orientation). We began from an awareness that people might perceive a difference between the Romanian democracy and the ideal of democratic governance, and, therefore, we wanted to offer respondents the possibility to express this discrepancy. People might well disagree with the functioning of democracy in Romania and still value democratic political and social organization.

Before finalizing and administering the survey, we organized a test of the questionnaire among our colleagues (students and professors) at the Invisible College and asked for feedback. This test helped us evaluate some technical issues (amount of time required to respond, level of difficulty of the questions, accessibility of language) and content issues (inclusion of relevant questions, accuracy and coherence of the use of concepts). At a later stage, we also asked for feedback on the translation of the questionnaire into Romanian (the initial version having been in English). Our questionnaire is attached to this report.

4. Data and Data Collection

Each question in the survey solicits information regarding one aspect of the respondents' overall view of democracy. Responses are coded to allow for quantitative analysis. Moreover, each questionnaire includes a section measuring control variables (such as age, gender, income, and level of education) which will help us in assessing the profiles

of our respondents and judging the level of representativeness of our sample. Relevant personal background variables will also be tested for their predictive value.

Our main way of collecting data was by distributing paper questionnaires to be filled in by the respondents. We also used an electronic format of the questionnaire, distributed through e-mail. The paper questionnaires were mainly distributed during two train journeys, covering the following routes:

(1) Bucuresti - Brasov - Sighisoara - Copsa Mica - Sibiu - Brasov - Bucuresti (February 24-25, 2002) and

(2) Bucuresti- Lehliu- Constanta- Bucuresti (March 18th 2002).

We traveled both in two Rapid trains (more expensive, overrepresenting certain income categories) and five Personal trains (relatively cheap, with a larger variety of people) and we asked people traveling to fill in our questionnaire. Our preference for data collection through train trips was determined by the idea of combined efficiency and representativeness of respondents (number and diversity of people and amount of time required to survey them), low cost, size of area covered and ability to reach special categories (such as Hungarian and Roma minorities). The direct contact with people also proved beneficial since we were able to provide clarifications when requested without interfering with the actual answers. The electronic questionnaires were distributed freely. Responses were collected from Bacau, Bucuresti, Cluj, Timis, Constanta, and from Romanians in the diaspora (who will be treated as a special category of respondents). We also distributed surveys through a school in the community of Ganeasa, close to Bucuresti; pupils distributed the surveys to their parents, other relatives, or filled them in

themselves. Finally, we distributed and collected additional copies of the survey using personal and professional networks.

We have collected a total number of 364 completed questionnaires, out of which 20 are in electronic format.

In the next section of our report, we have included some methodological observations regarding our involvement in the data collection. These methodological observations take the form of a report written by each of us who administered the questionnaire. The goals of these reports are to inform readers about the way in which we interacted with the subjects of our survey and the difficulties we encountered during the data collection, and to provide an analysis of how both factors might have affected our results. The data collection reports also provide details about the initial reactions of people towards the subject of the survey, their additional commentaries and, perhaps most importantly, the general attitudes of those who refused to fill in the questionnaire. We find these data collection impressions relevant last not least because the subject of our inquiry is the experience of democracy, and the degree and manner in which people are comfortable with expressing opinions and with getting involved in political communication can provide useful indications of the democratic will of a population.

5. Data Analysis and Implications of the Research

The first step in data analysis is to codify and introduce into a dataset all responses collected. Our dataset has initially been created in Excell. The data analysis software used is SPSS. Our questionnaire has 56 questions and therefore measures 56 conceptual variables, 14 of which are control (or personal background) variables. However, due to

the fact that we coded the responses to questions which allowed for multiple answers as sets of dichotomous variables, the final number of variables in our dataset is 197. We coded our variables in three ways: (1) words for some of the control variables (names of judete, occupation), (2) number of the chosen variant for single-answer questions (for example, in a questions with 5 variants, if the respondent chose the third variant we enter 3); and (3) 1 (not chosen), 2 (chosen) for each answer option in questions which allow for multiple responses.

At the rime of writing of this report, we have concluded the entering of data and are ready to begin studying the results of the survey. A few results are already apparent to us without having begun proper analysis:

1. Our pool of respondents is highly diverse and approximates a stratified sample of the Romanian population with respect to the background characteristics of ethnicity, socio-economic status, and level of education. It includes respondents of all ages (although the young are overrepresented), from many parts of Romania, and from all types of communities (from the extremely rural to most major cities).
2. Views on both what democracy is and what it should be are extremely diverse. Respondents associate the concept with anything from communist to libertarian structures and processes.
3. Romanians' views on which types of economic organization are compatible with democracy and on the relationship between the political and economic aspects of public life more generally appear to be especially unorthodox. Also, questions tapping into the respondents' views on these issues were the most frequently unanswered.

A full report on the results of our survey will be available by the end of 2002.

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Data Collection Impressions

1. Doina Căjvăneanu

I remember that among my most constant impressions along our trip was to notice the difference the type of interviewer can make. Each of us (Radu, Sergiu and me) tended to receive acceptance from quite specific categories of respondents. When handling the survey to the people one could almost feel being scrutinized. I felt that people tended to agree to respond based also on the degree of confidence we could transmit. Firstly, the political aspect of the survey raised doubt and suspicion among people (with the exception of the self-confident), so they looked at us and then decided.

I remember that I was wearing a red sweater and some fancy scarf around my neck and I felt my appearance raised suspicion; I just did not fit the environment. My impression was confirmed because when I decided to get rid of the scarf Radu said “OK”. So, our appearance, most precisely the impression that we were “some of them” was important in creating a “safe environment” for them to express their opinions. The agreement from the train personnel also contributed to the “legal”, safe aspect of our work.

When we mentioned that we were students we attracted equally, I think, sympathy and antipathy (at some point I received an apple along with the completed survey). If our attitude was too submissive, again suspicion was raised. If we were more authoritarian (looking expert-like) people tended to agree more often to complete the surveys. Our professional look made some of them believe that their answers will have a greater impact so they agreed more easily to respond (some were convinced we were from IRSOP or IMAS). Along with this went also a tendency to “capture the interviewer”;

some of the respondents tried to teach us a lesson of politics (curiously, most were communist nostalgics) or to voice their extreme discontent with the present situation.

If I were to mention the category that was most reluctant to answer, this would be old women, while male students were by far the most eager category to answer. Younger women were also more interested in answering than their older counterparts. A Hungarian lady (around 40) with a girl (around 14) encouraged her daughter to fill in the survey because “it’s a good exercise.” A group of fishermen refused to respond, dismissing us. They told us both that they are tired and that, anyway, they are not interested. Indeed, tired people were reluctant to fill in and for others the survey was simply too complicated. Most people found difficulties in answering the questions regarding economic issues. I remember someone asked me to read the questions; he considered the questionnaire very difficult, requiring a lot of thought. He also tried to give answers that he thought would please me.

Another impression I had several times was that when one agreed to fill in (we were traveling on purpose in open carriages) the others were also more easily convinced to respond. There were moments when I could see people with pens and questionnaires all over the train (it felt really good, empowering). An unpleasant situation occurred when I asked two persons (male, 40-50, professional looking, discussing) to fill in. They looked at me as if I was an 8 year-old bothering them with unimportant games. I hated them.

An important fact was that we traveled both on a Sunday and on a Monday, so I think we could speak of Sunday respondents (SR) and Monday respondents (MR). The

MRs were more energetic and maybe more eager to fill in. The SRs were more relaxed and a little patronizing (also due to the fact that we were traveling in a Rapid on Sunday).

My train trip impressions may not be so reliable or relevant because I was the one to administer the least number of surveys. It is difficult to interact with people when one is in the position of both designing and administering the survey and when each rejection tends to be taken personally. It takes good social and communication skills in order to be successful in interacting with people (luckily enough Radu and Sergiu had better skills than I did). At some points it felt frustrating, I felt I could not reach them although it was for their benefit (was it truly?); I felt I knew better than them what was good for them. I remember both Radu and Sergiu listened to what people told them, their problems and so on, given along with their surveys. I knew people had answers and opinions and feelings but they just couldn't put them into the neat, standardized questions of our survey. It was as if we were asking them to play Nintendo when they were used to straw dolls; we asked them to play a virtual, complicated game of democracy, with concepts and mechanisms and tricky questions and I don't think they were prepared for it. Our survey could easily produce a headache (one of my interviewees started sweating, under obvious strain of concentration). I wonder how respondents from traditional democracies (the U.S., for example) would deal with such a survey, if they would feel comfortable and familiar with the questions or if they would prove more eager to fill in.

2. Radu Cristescu

I limit the scope of my observations here to the things that, I thought, are relevant for the results of our analysis. There are some other things, observations concerning details

impressive to me, that I wrote as sketches; but, as Francis Bacon put it, “generally, let it be noted, that those things which I here set down are such as do naturally take the sense, and not respect petty wonderments.”

There were two kinds of answers that differed depending on the kinds of trains we took. There was the motley, fluid, noisy and tired crowd of the local trains, with people familiar with each other, used to the train, the cars, the benches unseparated by compartments, divided by a narrow corridor that makes each push and fret the other, used to the conductor (very traditionally named “the godfather”) as well. And there was the silent and private population of the faster trains, not always more retracted, but less noisy in their refusal or acceptance, more shy in the matter of publicizing their own opinions, with more important and distant business, apprehensive, uncertain about the things they were to find at their destination, unused to being disturbed by anyone else but panhandlers, salesmen, or hooligans – they decide quickly and refused out of indolence.

A great many people seemed to speak from the bottom of their hearts. The circumstances and, perhaps, our clumsiness and our curiosity were probably among the direct causes of such a liberty. Many tend to see inadequacy in common situations as a sign of emotional competence and, truly, good and polite service appears sometimes as ineffective when compared with a speedy but mechanical one. But as our project was bound to be insufficient insofar as its scientific accuracy is concerned, both because of its subject and because of our shortage of money and useful knowledge, our practical innocence and our approach fueled by curiosity and surprise balanced well what is otherwise a source of inexactitude.

It may be strange for someone not acquainted with the strong popular passions in Romania only ten years before and with the scope, depth, and importance of political decisions insofar as the private life of Romanians is concerned, to hear that political opinions could be the subject of those deeply felt and deeply moving confessions we heard. The view all these persons have on the political and the economic outlook of Romania today, as well as on the most salient errors and most urgently needed reforms is completely influenced by their own experiences and by the impressive ones that those next to them had. The most striking news headlines play probably an instrumental role, as a confirmation of the national importance of their own dramas, hopes or suspicions. In totalitarian regimes, politics influences the most personal regions of everyone's life, but the life of everyone is affected differently. That unfortunate experience outlived its time. Our society is still used to partial expedients and palliatives; the misery of those lime experiments inflicted on various people has various shapes though a similar and perseverant consequence: suffering.

More than answers, confessions that unveil that suffering were the most impressive. Some were calm, stately even, others agitated and even furious. And it was not only those who responded; the others, those who refused us, were no less marked in the same way. But besides the people who couldn't answer – some were getting off and others were incapable of writing from poor sight or illiteracy –, many of those who chose not to answer were intimidated because of the inevitable official appearance they learned to distrust of the papers we handed them, or they simply refused because of the futility of our enterprise. The main frustration everybody we came in contact with had, present in various degrees and manners in almost all of the replies, was powerlessness.

We all have by now a limited but intense experience of politics. It taught us that governance in a constitutional democracy is a matter of long and slow transformation; that the consequences of that transformation are complicated, uneven, and sometimes imperceptible; also, that these consequences are not entirely pleasing and almost never the preferred. All that came as a profound disillusionment with constitutional procedures. The radical and immediate solutions, nearly as various as the speakers, almost everybody we spoke with advocated, the suspicion towards the corrupt nature of the compromise and towards the corruption it breeds, were not always transparent in the answers we recorded on paper.

It is also the experience almost all had with state institutions, whether local or central, institutions that were and still are fundamentally oppressive, always feared and seen as an instrument of injustice. People often don't know what the functions of these institutions are besides homing corrupt bureaucrats, hindering their life and taking away the earned income of the decent common individual. That is why, I think, the answers we got do not entirely disclose an opinion about democracy: many simply don't know how it works or how it is supposed to work. Also, that is why they expect more help from persons of leadership than from officials dressed in the expensive and much too tight uniform of an institution.

The most lasting and powerful suggestion or general impression was the poverty and the misery of so many people. They were glad to have a stranger's attention and satisfied when the stranger was benevolent and interested.

However, the solicitude and willingness to respond of so many was truly overwhelming. One thing to explain it is that a train voyage is tiresome and boring, but

we didn't expect to see people so ready to devote time to answer ten long pages of difficult questions. I remember someone who asked me for a questionnaire, just as he would have asked a newspaper boy for a crossword puzzle. We expected even less that those people would be so flattered once aware that their opinions (whether informed or not) were important to us. They enjoyed, I think, the privilege of anonymity.

If anything, such an understanding provided by our research, though quick and still infinitely distant, but which profited from undisguised honesty, of the multitude of terrible grievances and opinions diverse in kind, bearing clarity, intensity, and truth, is the proof that there is no meaning, abstracted from that multitude, democracy could have for Romanians. Our study has to revert to aggregation, but the difficult question we set out from in our research, must be denied an answer. And that because there could be no essence to be drawn from similarity when we meet such a plurality of reasons and interests.

3. Sergiu Lujanschi

“OUR democracy doesn't even come close to what democracy really is about” one man told me in a train. Some kind of a feeling of democracy is supposed to drive the individual's hope for a true democracy to grow in Romania. “Democracy is righteousness!” another man said, “and when justice will prevail then the people will be living democracy.” Is this what democracy means to Romanians? Is this what democracy means? A feeling?

The research team tried to get in touch with people as diverse as possible given the possibilities of such a small enterprise. We targeted different social strata in some

regions of the country and our aim was to deliver the intimate experience of democracy of individuals. Due to the large number of questions asked and the various themes touched my belief was at first that the survey would be too complicated and too long for the average Romanian. But throughout the trip I discovered that individuals enjoyed thinking (because that was needed to complete the survey) about the way a system of government should work. Intimate experience of democracy there was – a married couple stood for about forty minutes to think over one survey together.

We discussed the survey, problems of democracy in general, or of Romania in particular, with many people of various ages (from twenty to seventy) and tried to get in touch with their experience of democracy. In a way, some surveys turned into some kind of an interview and the quality of the discussions opened many understandings of what it means for a country to be democratic. From what I observed, the personal history of the individual mixed up with the imaginary world of what he was taught about in history or politics, by the media, at school or by talking with his friends, give an understanding of what life in a democratic body is or what it should be like.

Traveling through, in and out of the compartments of the train, facing the eyes of the individuals created some psychological profile for the respondents to respond to. Of course some accepted and some didn't, but in many cases the small interaction between us and the person asked to complete the survey determined the decision making about completing. Some chose to fill in the answers just for fun, while many thought of it as a task to be completed with different motives (especially that they will have some kind of a say-so about what will happen to Romania). Some of the respondents were illiterate but still asked us to help them fill it in, while others traveled for short distances and

apologized for not finishing completing it. The ones choosing not to respond usually argued that they are not into politics or that there is nothing left to be said about democracy due to the lifestyle they are facing in one. We were aware of the biases that this type of field research would produce but still our experience and the encounter with the respondents filled many gaps between the researcher and the material studied.

The two trips consisted of traveling with slow, medium and fast trains and going all the way from first class compartments to open second-class wagons. The routes chosen were through the counties of Ilfov, Prahova, Brasov, Fagaras, Mures, Sibiu, Ialomita, Calaras and Constanta. Usually getting out of Bucuresti was the hardest time for finding respondents and because it meant debating our enterprise with the train conductor. In the end we succeeded in having the train conductors (which usually are from different regions of the country than those on the train route) filling in some surveys. Most respondents were either the youth or the oldest. For the middle aged we had more answers from women than from men.

My general impression with the people that I encountered is that democracy is some kind of feeling of liberty within boundaries of law, and that justice is the main need (if not requirement), as well as one that can offer basic welfare for the politically embodied individual within a nation state.

4. Annette Freyberg-Inan

A Fragmented Image of Democracy

I myself did not participate in the train journeys described above, but I met with my teammates the day after their return from the first journey. They were full of impressions,

and as they related them to me I took notes. The following observations are based on those notes.

My teammates set out from Bucuresti on Sunday the 24th of February on Accelaratul 1642 to Brasov. On the first leg of their journey, they collected 25 completed surveys. After Brasov, they took Personal trains to Sighisoara, from there to Copsa Mica, to Sibiu, and back to Brasov, collecting around 150 more. On the Rapid from Brasov home to Bucuresti they did not distribute any more surveys, since they had few copies left and it was anyway too dark in the train by that time.

There were several reasons for which people would decline completing the survey. First, some were traveling for only short distances and did not have the time to complete the survey. Second, some were illiterate (especially Roma and older people). Third, some felt that democracy in Romania was “not their problem” (especially the old). Fourth, some felt they were “too old for that.” Fifth were the ones who were simply not interested. Sixth, a category of people who seemed “active” and had personal preoccupations did not answer. Finally, there was a category of people who felt that they had “lived enough of democracy and did not want to write it anymore.” They expressed a complete sense of powerlessness. Many of them associated politics, in the positive sense, with justice, and felt that democracy had done nothing for them, that they have nothing now. Some who thought that life was better before 1989 responded, but there were many desperate cases who did not even want to respond. Sometimes people in official positions did not want to fill in the survey because it might involve their positions, but there were many exceptions to this tendency. Many couples only asked for one copy to complete together. The same was sometimes true for entire families. Ultimately, the reasons for not

participating had nothing to do with liking or disliking democracy. Radu thought that the people who did not answer had the right reasons not to (such as having lived their lives). Sergiu felt he could tell in advance who would refuse to answer.

Those who had strong feelings about democracy had them because they associated the term with what is happening to them here and now. The lesson is that if democracy affects you personally you will feel strongly about it. Many associated democracy with the freedom to do whatever you want, but also with corruption. There was a frequent association of the concept of democracy with the idea of justice.

Those who clearly favored the pre-1989 regime (according to Radu there were not many of them) tended to give more information than solicited in the survey by adding annotations. It seems that they reject democracy because they lost status after 1989.

Some people tried to give answers which they thought would please us. The team felt that these people could be easily spotted. Generally, it seemed that survey administrators were either to be pleased or to be convinced. Being students seems to have helped them gather responses. People appreciated that they did not get paid for their work.

The three survey administrators had different ways of approaching people, which meant that different people would refuse or accept filling in the surveys for them. Sergiu characterized his own approach as one which asked people to help students go further, and to trust the young. Radu made people feel that he understands them, that he is one of them, that he empathizes. Doina felt that she came across as shy and fearful. She stayed in the background and tried to be diplomatic. She also realized that at times she was

“playing nice” to get answers. The administrators also felt that as their moods changed during their journey, so did their approaches to people.

One thing that became very obvious is that the way you interact with people is important. It is vital to thank them for cooperating. People watch how you deal with others and that will make a difference in how they will react to you. My teammates felt that the most important thing in this kind of work is to leave all your prejudices behind. Also, when interacting with the people, they felt that honesty is the best policy, and tried to answer questions posed to them frankly.

“We were engaged in field research here. We didn’t want to get at a concept but at personal experience.” The exchanges which took place were different from interviews. Opinions were floating around, being volunteered. People shared their motivations for answering or not answering questions, or for answering them in a certain way, because they did not feel like they were being interviewed. It was very important to listen to people. They used the team members to speak through them and felt good about being asked for their opinions. Often this seemed more like sharing a burden, like going to a priest or to a psychologist, than hoping to have influence.

Still, quite a few people wanted to know whether their responses will be on television, or will be taken into consideration by decisionmakers. They hoped that their opinions would matter and were therefore eager to share them. Also, many children asked to be allowed to fill out the survey.

A few details are relevant for the analysis of the data. We observed that several respondents who were Roma declared themselves to be Romanians or Hungarians. Some

people tried to stress the answer they felt most strongly about when checking several response options by marking it with an x or some other signal of emphasis.

Other details are relevant for the practical organization of future surveys. It would have been good to have self-addressed stamped envelopes along, so people who had to leave the train but were interested in participating could have done so. Having different administrators helped, especially since people wanted to please them by agreeing to complete the survey.

The survey was difficult, and the clarifications people sometimes asked of the administrators might affect the results even as they tried not to “lead” people. On the other hand, the conversations helped us very much to achieve our main task - to understand how and what people think about democracy.

The image of democracy which emerged from the data collection is that of an “imaginary democracy,” a picture of ideal social organization put together from various positive experiences throughout different time periods, a fragmented picture. When asked which problems democracy has brought to Romania, many answered that in fact it has been the lack of democracy which has brought these problems. People with only minimal education felt this way as well as more educated ones. When asked where democracy comes from many said that it must come from us, because noone else could make it work here.

Annex: Questionnaire

București, 18 februarie 2002
Colegiul Invizibil
Societatea Română de Științe Politice

Dragi respondenți,

Vă adresăm rugămintea de a completa următorul chestionar cu tema “Ce înseamnă “democrație”?”. Pentru informarea dumneavoastră, chestionarul a fost realizat de un grup de studenți ai Colegiului Invizibil, program aflat sub egida Societății Române de Științe Politice. Studenții au lucrat sub îndrumarea unui coordonator, dr. Annette Freyberg-Inan, profesor în cadrul Colegiului Invizibil și al Facultății de Științe Politice, Universitatea București.

Scopul acestui chestionar este de a afla opiniile românilor în ceea ce privește diferite aspecte ale democrației. Prin amabilitatea de a răspunde întrebărilor noastre, ne-ați ajuta foarte mult în obținerea datelor necesare și relevante pentru studiul propus. Vă rugăm să returnați formularul completat persoanei de la care l-ați primit.

Vă mulțumim,

Annette Freyberg-Inan, Doina Căjvăneanu, Radu Cristescu, Sergiu Lujanschi

Sondaj de Opinie: **Ce înseamnă « democrație » ?**

1. Care este vârsta dumneavoastră ?

_____ ani

2. Care este sexul dumneavoastră ?

___ masculin

___ feminin

3. Care este naționalitatea dumneavoastră ?

___ română

___ maghiară

___ rroma

___ alta, vă rugăm, specificați : _____

4. Care este nivelul dumneavoastră de educație ?

___ nici unul

___ școală primară

___ școală secundară

___ liceu

___ școală profesională

___ colegiu profesional

___ universitate

___ studii post-universitare

5. Care este ocupația dumneavoastră?

6. Sunteți angajat în prezent?

- nu
- da, în sectorul privat
- da, în sectorul public

7. Care este venitul lunar al familiei dumneavoastră?

- până la 1 500 000 Lei
- 1 500 000 -> 6 000 000 Lei
- 6 000 000 -> 10 000 000 Lei
- 10 000 000 -> 15 000 000 Lei
- peste 15 000 000 Lei

8. Câte persoane trăiesc din acest venit?

_____ persoane

9. În ce județ locuiți în prezent?

10. În ce tip de localitate locuiți în prezent?

- un sat
- un oraș cu populația sub 30 000 de oameni
- un oraș cu populația între 30 000 și 100 000 de locuitori
- un oraș cu populația între 100 000 și 200 000 de locuitori
- un oraș cu peste 200 000 de locuitori

11. Care este religia dumneavoastră?

- creștin ortodoxă
- romano-catolică
- greco-catolică
- protestantă
- musulmană
- iudaică
- alta; vă rugăm, specificați: _____

12. Vă considerați o persoană religioasă?

- da, chiar foarte mult.
- da
- moderat
- nu chiar
- absolut deloc

13. Sunteți participant activ într-o organizație de tipul (marcați toate variantele cu care sunteți de acord):

- partid politic
 organizație non-guvernamentală
 organizație profesională
 sindicat
 altul; vă rugăm, specificați: _____
 nu sunt membru

14. Sunteți interesat/ă de politică?

- nu
 puțin
 în general, da
 foarte mult

15. După părerea dumneavoastră, înainte de 1989 România era:

- câtuși de puțin democratică
 mai puțin democratică decât în prezent
 la fel de democratică precum în prezent
 de fapt, mai democratică decât în prezent

16. În prezent, puteți caracteriza România ca fiind o democrație?

- da
 într-o oarecare măsură
 nu

17. Vă puteți gândi la o altă perioadă din istorie în care România era o democrație? Vă rugăm, specificați când:

18. Din câte vă aduceți aminte, când ați întâlnit pentru prima oară cuvântul “democrație”?

- înainte de decembrie 1989
 în decembrie 1989
 după decembrie 1989

19. Din câte vă amintiți, unde ați auzit pentru prima dată cuvântul “democrație”?

- la serviciu
 la școală/ universitate
 acasă
 în mass-media
 în altă parte; menționați unde: _____

20. În ce context întâlniți, în prezent, cel mai des cuvântul “democrație”?

- la serviciu
 la școală / universitate

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- în mass-media
- în discursurile politicienilor
- în discuțiile din cadrul familiei
- în timpul discuțiilor politice cu prietenii
- în altă parte; menționați unde: _____

21. După părerea dumneavoastră, care dintre următoarele instituții promovează cu adevărat democrația în România ? (marcați toate variantele cu care sunteți de acord)

- armata
- poliția
- ONG-urile
- partidele politice
- Parlamentul
- Guvernul
- administrația locală
- întreprinderile de stat
- firmele particulare
- sindicatele
- școlile / universitățile
- judecătoriile
- bisericile
- nici una
- alta, vă rugăm, menționați care: _____

22. După părerea dumneavoastră, care dintre următoarele instituții ar trebui să promoveze democrația? (marcați toate variantele cu care sunteți de acord)

- armata
- poliția
- ONG-urile
- partidele politice
- Parlamentul
- Guvernul
- administrația locală
- întreprinderile de stat
- firmele particulare
- sindicatele
- școlile / universitățile
- judecătoriile
- bisericile
- nici una
- alta, vă rugăm, menționați care: _____

23. Pentru a fi mai democratice, instituțiile publice în România ar trebui în principal:

- să urmeze reguli clare
- să aibă lideri mai competenți
- să fie mai deschise și mai transparente
- să fie mai puțin birocratice
- să fie mai receptive față de public
- nu necesită nici o schimbare

24. După părerea dumneavoastră, democrația în România a fost afectată de (marcați toate variantele cu care sunteți de acord):

- Ceaușescu și regimul comunist
- eșecul în a face publice dosarele Securității
- guvernele post-comuniste
- românii de altă etnie
- în primul rând tineretul
- în primul rând cei în vârstă
- cei ce nu lucrează îndeajuns
- cei ce se opun reformelor
- toți românii
- instituțiile internaționale și alte țări
- alta, vă rugăm, menționați care: _____

25. Pe care eveniment din istoria recentă a României îl considerați ca fiind cel mai nedemocratic?

- execuția lui Ceaușescu
- transformarea FSN-ului în partid politic
- protestele studențești din Piața Universității
- mineriadele
- vânzarea întreprinderilor de stat
- implicarea organizațiilor internaționale ca FMI și Banca Mondială în politica internă a României
- Legea statutului maghiarilor
- propuneri pentru federalizarea țării

26. În general, credeți că mass-media are un rol în funcționarea democrației?

- Da, un rol important
- Da, dar un rol redus, indirect
- Nu

27. În cazul României credeți că mass-media joacă rolul adecvat într-o democrație?

- Da
- Nu

28. Pentru a fi democratic, un guvern trebuie: (marcați toate variantele cu care sunteți de acord)

- să se asigure că opiniile tuturor cetățenilor sunt luate în considerare
- să păstreze suveranitatea națională
- să asigure locuri de muncă
- să aibă grijă de cei nevoiași
- să sporească bunăstarea oamenilor
- să asigure ordine și siguranță
- să-și respecte promisiunile făcute oamenilor
- să facă ceea ce doresc oamenii
- să asigure respectarea drepturilor și libertăților civile

29. Într-o democrație, este cel mai probabil ca cetățenii să fie:

- egali în drepturi și libertăți
- egal de bogați
- inegali

30. Scopul principal al democrației trebuie să fie:

- protecția minorităților
- deciziile luate de majoritate
- libertatea individului
- bunăstarea națiunii

31. Care sunt principalele drepturi ale cetățenilor într-o democrație? (marcați toate variantele cu care sunteți de acord)

- să nu fie supuși controlului statului
- să-și trăiască viața așa cum consideră ei că e mai bine
- să-și exprime opiniile liber
- să fie ajutați de stat de câte ori este nevoie
- să-și aleagă liderii
- să aibă un cuvânt de spus în deciziile politice
- să pedepsească conducătorii incompetenți
- să se organizeze în interes propriu

32. Care sunt principalele responsabilități ale unui cetățean într-o democrație? (marcați toate variantele cu care sunteți de acord)

- să-i pese de ceilalți
- să respecte legile
- să-și facă bine treaba
- să aleagă conducători buni
- să participe la dezbaterile politice
- să-și vadă de treaba sa

33. Principala diferență dintre o țară democratică și una nedemocratică este:

- prosperitatea economică
- prestigiul și influența internațională
- libertatea oamenilor de a face ce doresc
- oamenii sunt mai fericiți
- accesul oamenilor obișnuiți la luarea deciziilor
- economia de piață

34. Ce tip de economie este compatibil cu democrația? (marcați toate variantele cu care sunteți de acord)

- o economie de piață complet liberă
- o economie de piață cu o oarecare intervenție a statului
- o economie controlată de stat

35. Într-o societate democratică, cetățenii ca dumneavoastră, pot face următoarele lucruri (marcați toate variantele cu care sunteți de acord):

- să adreseze petiții autorităților
- să organizeze greve, proteste sau demonstrații
- să înlăture funcționarii publici care nu fac o treabă bună
- să influențeze modul de viață al altor oameni
- să voteze în alegeri
- să îi supună pe alții unei voințe comune
- să opună rezistență autorităților
- să impună limite averii celorlalți
- să găsească sprijin pentru ideile lor

36. Într-o societate democratică, cetățenii au cu adevărat puterea de a (marcați toate variantele cu care sunteți de acord):

- alege lideri
- influența deciziile politice
- conduce țara
- nu au nici una din aceste puteri

37. Considerați că politicienii sunt necesari într-o democrație?

- da
- nu

38. În general, într-o democrație câți oameni influențează deciziile publice?

- unul
- puțini
- mulți
- majoritatea
- toți

39. Cine ar trebui să ia deciziile politice într-o democrație?

- cei împuterniciți de cetățeni
- majoritatea reprezentanților poporului
- cei care sunt interesați de drept
- cei competenți moral
- cei care au pregătirea de specialitate necesară

40. După părerea dumneavoastră, care sunt problemele pe care democrația le-a adus României? (marcați toate variantele cu care sunteți de acord)

- creșterea ratei criminalității
- corupția
- deteriorarea valorilor morale
- cetățenii au pierdut accesul la procesul de luare a deciziilor politice
- sărăcia
- economia de piață
- conflicte în societate
- ineficiența guvernului

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confuzia generală

41. Cum ar trebui să fie organizată economia într-o democrație? (marcați câte un răspuns pentru fiecare secțiune)

toate întreprinderile ar trebui să fie în proprietatea statului
 cele mai importante întreprinderi ar trebui să fie în proprietatea statului
 unele întreprinderi pot să fie în proprietatea statului
 nici o întreprindere nu ar trebui să fie de stat

reprezentanții publici aleși ar trebui să decidă asupra priorităților economice ale țării
 specialiștii ar trebui să decidă asupra priorităților economice ale țării
 piața ar trebui să decidă asupra priorităților economice ale țării

firmele ar trebui să fie sub controlul statului
 firmele ar trebui să fie sub controlul de proprietarii lor
 firmele ar trebui să fie sub controlul de angajați

venitul personal ar trebui distribuit de către stat
 venitul personal ar trebui limitat de către stat
 statul nu ar trebui să se amestece în această problemă

42. Funcționarea democrației se bazează în primul rând pe:

cooperare
 consens
 conflict
 competiție

43. După părerea dumneavoastră, democrația:

vă sporește contactele sociale
 vă diminuează contactele sociale
 nu vă afectează contactele sociale

44. Este mai probabil ca într-o democrație șeful dumneavoastră să fie de altă etnie?

da
 nu
dacă da, atunci acest lucru este: bun
 rău
 neimportant

45. Credeți că într-o democrație căsătoriile interetnice sunt mai probabile?

da
 nu
dacă da, atunci acest lucru este: bun
 rău
 neimportant

46. Credeți că este mai probabil ca într-o democrație conflictele sociale să crească?

- da
- nu

47. Pe care dintre următoarele caracteristici le-ați asocia mai degrabă cu idea de democrație? (marcați toate variantele cu care sunteți de acord)

- distanța dintre bogați și săraci este mai mare
- distanța dintre generații este mai mare
- oamenii sunt mai egoiști și nu vor să îi ajute pe alții
- nivelul de încredere dintre oameni este mai scăzut
- competiția pentru locurile de muncă dăunează relațiilor sociale
- este mai ușor să ai acces la poziții sociale înalte
- este mai ușor să îți faci prieteni din toate straturile sociale
- prestigiul social este obținut prin merit
- sunt mai puține prejudecăți sociale și stereotipuri

48. În ceea ce privește România, credeți că democrația este:

- ceva ce încercăm să copiem de la alții
- ceva impus din afară
- ceva care vine atât din noi înșine cât și din afară
- ceva care vine din noi înșine

49. Ar trebui ca guvernele să ia în considerare sondajele de opinie?

- da, ar trebui luate în considerare
- da, mai mult, ar trebui ca deciziile politice să se bazeze pe sondaje
- nu

50. Ar trebui ca deciziile publice să se fie adoptate prin referendum:

- mai des
- doar în probleme constituționale
- niciodată

51. Principalul scop al României ar trebui să fie:

- democratizarea instituțiilor politice
- privatizarea economiei
- schimbarea mentalității cetățenilor
- scopurile nu pot fi separate unul de celălalt

52. Credeți că rolul proprietății private într-o democrație este:

- esențial
- moderat
- neglijabil

53. Pe cine nu ați vrea să aveți ca vecini? (marcați toate variantele cu care sunteți de acord)

- maghiari
- români
- evrei
- romei
- alcoolici
- homosexuali
- foști pușcăriși
- bolnavi de SIDA
- atei
- străini
- nu contează

54. Cei care conduc țara ar trebui să provină din:

- aceeași categorie socială ca și dumneavoastră
- o categorie socială mai înaltă decât a dumneavoastră
- o categorie socială mai joasă decât a dumneavoastră
- nu contează

55. Credeți că ceilalți oameni din România sunt dispuși să respecte aceleași reguli ca dumneavoastră?

- da, cei mai mulți dintre ei
- prea puțini dintre ei
- în general, nu

56. Credeți că, în general, românii știu ce e mai bine pentru ei și țara lor?

- da
- nu