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# **INFORMAL POLITICAL ORDER IN TRANSITIONAL SOCIETIES**

## **THE CASE OF THE ‘LOCAL BARONS’ IN ROMANIA**

**Valentin Quintus Nicolescu\***

*‘Nicolae Titulescu’ University, Calea Vacaresti, Nr. 185, Sector 4, 040051 Bucharest, Romania*

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### **Abstract**

The relation between political culture, informal economic and political practices and the democratization process in Romania is often discussed or incriminated in the public sphere, but still heavily understudied. My research interest focuses around the concept of Informal Political Order (IPO) and the relationship it has with the democratic process in Romania. As a starting point, the IPO can be defined as a grass-roots structure which is perceived to offer stability and minimal efficiency in managing local affairs. My thesis is that in the case of Romania can be identified the existence of an IPO, which shapes the process of democratic consolidation, its most visible feature being the so called ‘local barons’. My first aim is to identify the characteristics of the Informal Political Order, and then to try to formulate answers to the following research questions: how does the IPO operate? What is the relation between the Informal Political Order and the process of democratic consolidation? What social roles ‘local barons’ perform, apart from those reflected by the media? From the methodological standpoint, I must state that my research is part of a wider qualitative project, already underway, focused on the informal political order in the Romanian case, constructed on two separate dimensions – empirical and theoretical.

*Keywords:* political culture, local barons, informal political order

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### **1. Introduction**

My research interest focuses around the concept of Informal Political Order (IPO) and the relationship it has with the democratic process in Romania, by focusing on the case of the ‘local barons’.

First, I shall attempt to present the thesis of my research and to define the concept of informal political order and also the group. Secondly, I will try to put the issue of the local barons in a wider perspective, both socially and culturally. And finally, I’ll present my findings in the form of a condensed story of a local baron.

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\* E-mail: valentin\_nico@yahoo.com

My research interest focuses around the concept of IPO and the relationship it has with the democratic process in Romania. As a starting point, the IPO can be defined as a grass-roots structure which is perceived to offer stability and minimal efficiency in managing local affairs. My research is constructed around the following affirmations: in the wake of the 1989 revolutionary turmoil in Romania emerged an IPO, paralleling the new political regime emanating from Bucharest. In the following years, confronted with the new institutional and administrative order of the democratic Romanian state, the IPO consolidated and even developed instead of diminishing and perhaps disappearing.

## 2. Context and problematization

The conditions leading to this state of affairs can be summed up to a minimum of three: 1. The post-revolutionary vacuum (not solely a power vacuum, but the absence of a recognizable order and of a legitimate authority) that followed after December 1989; 2. The fact that the successor state proved to be a weak one (at least until 1999), fact which meant that when the informal and formal orders interacted, the latter had to accommodate by confirming the reality on the field, e.g. by offering administrative and political positions to individuals that developed strong or powerful positions within the IPO; 3. The existence of a non-participatory political culture - in the terms used by Almond and Verba [1], a subject-parochial one, especially in the countryside. As I stated at the beginning of my article, the aforementioned IPO can be defined as a grass-roots structure which is perceived to offer stability and minimal efficiency in managing local affairs. The IPO cannot be reduced to cultural factors, which undoubtedly can shape such particular informal structures, but the IPO can be essentially related to certain institutional contexts and processes and also to specific forms of political cultures [2]. A similar statement can be formulated in regard to the possible reduction of IPO to mere social networks. The IPO was constituted by a combination of county and local administration, management and service personnel from the previous communist era, superposed on the older, rural patriarchal order. Here is necessary to mention that in the Romanian case, the urban-rural distinction is not a valid one, at least in the case of small and medium-sized cities [3].

The IPO appears to be seen as legitimate by the populace, perhaps as a direct consequence of the subject-parochial type of political culture forged during (at least) the previous half-century of authoritarian and totalitarian rule [4]. In this respect, I see the IPO as a constitutive part of the Romanian political culture and as a very useful conceptual tool for providing a better understanding of the inner workings of a parochial type of political culture.

The most visible expression of this structure (IPO) is represented by the so called 'local barons' (*baroni locali*), associated in the media especially with administrative and political corruption, but who are seldom performing a number of roles within the community – cultural, social and so on.

The term of *local baron* (*baron local* in Romanian language) appeared during the post-socialist transition and it was coined by the mass media in order to identify those individuals at a local level having political, economic and/or social capital and who were using/mixing it in order to augment their power positions both locally and nationally. Intimately linked with corruption and trans-partisan politics, the concept gained instant popularity, becoming a marker of the murky quasi-legal politico-economic transactions of the post-socialist period. This specific category of persons emerged during the early years of transition in a context of failed reforms and severe economic crisis which resulted in the growth of the informal economy and the proliferation of associated economic practices due to instability and uncertainty [5]. The term itself ‘baron’ reflects the public perception of this category. Its pejorative meaning implies the existence of an informal power and influence structure operating outside the boundaries of legality and which has a great deal of control over the economic, public and political spheres. It also implies the presence of an informal vertical hierarchy based on some specific form of recognized authority, starting from the lowest local level to the national one, usually described in similar, quasi-feudal terms such as ‘clientelism’ or ‘clientelar system’ [6, 7].

The issue of the local barons is particularly understudied. There are a number of studies which have indirectly offered a useful frame of reference, but no serious steps were taken yet towards studying this particular aspect of Romania’s transition. Perhaps the first time local barons were mentioned in the literature was in 1995, by Vladimir Pasti, who described the power structure in Romania in the beginning of the 1990’s. The social networks associated with the ‘baronial’ structures in Romania were most notably studied in 2008 by Gabriel Hâncean [8]. On a regional level, perhaps the most relevant research still is *Making capitalism Without Capitalists* done by Gil Eyal, Iván Szelényi and Eleanor Townsley [9]. Unfortunately, this ambitious endeavour didn’t take into consideration the Romanian and the Bulgarian cases, perhaps due to the lack of a well developed civil society as it was the case for the Central European countries such as Hungary, Czech Republic or Poland (the presence of which was considered an essential variable by Eyal, Szelényi and Townsley [9]).

In April 2011 an economic website in Romania tried to put together the necessary data for a nationwide map of local barons as reflected in the media [<http://www.econtext.ro/eveniment--2/dosar/exclusiv-econtext-cine-conduce-romania-harta-baronilor-locali-din-romania-baronii-vechi-si-noi.html>, accessed on 18 March 2013], using a reductionist approach that related the local barons to the administrative or political functions they (sometimes) occupy. Thus, the local baron was defined as a person holding a public office (mayor, prefect, local counsellor and so forth) and who has an abusive behaviour, breaking the legal boundaries in order to obtain illicit gains.

This approach was problematic from two main points of view – definitional and methodological. The definition was fairly misleading and inoperative, e.g. some of the well-known local barons did not meet the criteria

described in the definition, but that didn't make them less of a local baron, at least in the public view. Thus, defining the local barons in these terms actually offers nothing more than a synonym for corruption, therefore eliminating the need for a special term 'baron'.

Methodologically, the study was raising more problems than it solved, by limiting the research only to the (local) media and also by monitoring only those persons that were presumably operating at a county level. Thus, the low-level and the national ones were not taken into account, seriously affecting the results. Another problem relates to the fact that the study tried to cover both present-day barons and former ones, extending the timeframe of the survey to the entire post-1990 period. Generous as it may seem, this approach raises a number of interesting questions, such as: how can someone become a local baron? How can one stop being one? By going bankrupt or by going to jail? Do the local barons perform other roles than those presented by the media? In other words, is the 'baron' exclusively a 'bad guy', as portrayed by the journalists, or could there be identified certain dimensions of the concept which could be connected to various forms of social practices specific to the relatively small communities, where the baron becomes more of a patriarchal figure for the community in which he operates? These questions were not provided with proper answers, but implicitly suggested that the abovementioned study actually focuses solely on the notoriety and media visibility of some local barons and not on the local barons *per se*. The simple fact that they're no longer holding a public office does not mean that their informal status has drastically changed, especially in regard to their perception by the local community.

Due to the inherent difficulties regarding the definition of the local barons, I considered necessary to formulate an operational definition that will prove useful for my approach of the field research. Therefore, I propose the following definition, which sees the local baron as local strong men that 1. forged their business from a favourable starting position (usually as former small communist party apparatchiks, management or mass organizations activists); 2. make use of informal economic and political practices in order to further their positions and 3. are translating their economic and social capital into a political one in order to enhance their control over the local economy and decision-making. Thus the local baron is not necessarily a public official, but he's usually in good relations with those filling such posts. These relations involve campaign funding or formal/informal support from the part of the local baron and from the public official implies facilitating the access to public contracts and favouring the baron in order to win auctions for public projects such as infrastructural works, building rehabilitation, or even garbage disposal. From this perspective, individuals like the local barons may or may not be party members, (usually in a local organization, depending on the level they are in – local, county, regional or national) but they have strong political connections, this state of affairs being accrued by the administrative and fiscal decentralization process and also by the reform of the voting system that took place in 2008 [10, 11].

In other words, the local barons are supporting in public offices corrupt, corruptible or controllable (not necessarily in an illegal manner) individuals but they are not having a front position themselves. Being a local baron involves a good degree of corruption, but it is not defined by it. The baron does not seek to get rich fast, but he tries to build a legal business which he would manage and develop seldom through the use of informal economic and political practices. Corruption, from this point of view, is but the mean to strengthening a certain economical and political position of the local baron. On the other hand, as the field research showed, the local barons perform a certain social role as informal community leaders. Their economical and political status reflects in the social hierarchy of their community, people having a certain degree of expectations regarding the barons – they support and donate to the church, provide their employees with a higher standard of living (and this is seldom done through informal means) and so forth. This particular status of the local baron and also the aspects mentioned above clearly differentiates this category from other types of felonious networks operating in various parts of the country.

This must be understood in the wider cultural, political and economical context of Romanian history. Corruption and venality have been part of the everyday life for a very long time [12], thus being a structuring framework for norms, behaviours and institutions - socially, economically and politically. This is also reflected in the language: there are a relatively great number of words and expressions used to describe corrupt behaviour and especially the ‘gifts’ and practices associated with it (sometimes relating to the type, the amount and so forth) and to my knowledge Romanian is the only language in which ‘right’ (as in human or civil rights) means also bribe.

On the other hand, Romania has a very troubled history in relation with the democratic process. From 1938 until 1990 Romania, like most of the Central and East European countries experienced no less than three authoritarian or totalitarian regimes – the dictatorship of King Carol II from 1938 to 1940, the fascist-military totalitarian rule of Ion Antonescu (with a short period when he associated with the far-right Legionary Movement, establishing the National Legionary State in 1940-41) and from 1948 until 1989 the communist rule. The short period of 1944-1948 was characterized by a bitter power struggle between the established political forces (such as the National Liberals or the National Peasant’s Party) and the communists supported from Moscow, the result of which is the establishment of the communist totalitarian regime. In this respect, the effects of this historical process on shaping the Romanian political culture were profound – political information wasn’t available except from through official channels (therefore reflecting the regime’s ideological positions rather than the reality), participative behaviour was severely discouraged and so forth. Consequently, as Alina Mungiu-Pippidi notes, in Romania’s case, “participation rates, social trust or membership in civic organizations are [...] fairly typical for the post-communist world” [4]. But, in my opinion, not only the abovementioned interval needs to be taken into account when discussing Romanian political culture. A much wider perspective is needed here, one that is

not limited to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but rather tries to take into account the bigger picture of Romanian democratic experience. This would provide the researcher with a better understanding of the way in which Romania's political culture was shaped. From this perspective one can notice that Romanian society had only a small window of opportunity to construct a more participatory form of political culture – the interwar period. Before that, the census vote was too restrictive to enable such a process, actually encouraging a more subject-parochial type of political culture. In retrospective, I can say with confidence that the longest democratic period in Romanian history is the post 1989 interval.

To summarize, the thesis of my research is that the *local barons category represents the most visible part of an embedded model of informal political and economical practices that is both widely spread and pre-dating the transitional period in Romania.*

### 3. Methodology

The field research was carried out in two small towns in the Oltenia region, namely Boldeni and in Scipien (the names of places used in this paper are pseudonyms). Both cases reflect the historical pattern of communist industrialization and modernization: both started at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as small and relatively poor villages but, during the late 60's gained in importance, due to the constant development and modernization programs dictated from the centre. They have been industrialized, systematized [13]. This 'golden age' ended, as expected, after 1990, for the most part of the decade both cities looking more or less like ghost towns, thus reflecting the general path of recession and economic decay that characterized the whole country [5]. During the transition a timid revival took place, their economy being dominated by the textile and food industry. In one case, the once proud city stadium is now hosting a great number of textile production units, whilst the football team has been disbanded.

I choose to focus my research on the low-level barons (usually based in small towns) for two main reasons: due to the inherent difficulties regarding the access to those in more powerful positions or that have a higher visibility and also due to their reluctance to cooperate in a sociological study.

Our field research is part of an ongoing qualitative project regarding the local barons' issue in Romania. We used a within-methods triangulation approach – the combination of questions and narratives in regard to a specific issue. The data used in the analysis represents a collection of stories gathered during an extended period of time (for about two years), from both members of the community and local barons. The data was collected through participative observation (involving informal discussions, participation in various community events and so on). Secondly, my research is also comprised from a series of semi-structured interviews with local barons in which I tried to test some hypothesis generated as a result of the data collected from the participative

observation. The method of analysis is an interpretivist one, which stands out by departing from methods implying the coding of information and by promoting dynamic analysis and the interaction between the researcher and the subjects, thus bringing to light meanings that are the result of this interaction [14]. With regard to the interactions between the 'subject' and the 'object', I am assuming a *reflexive* approach that implies the permanent interaction between the two during the field research.

#### **4. The story**

The story of our subject – we'll call him Caraion (the name is a pseudonym) – starts during the late communist period. Then, he was a secretary in charge with propaganda in a textile factory. He had 'good origins': he was born and raised in a village nearby, from a peasant family. This represented a prerequisite for anyone trying to have a political career in those days. Caraion felt limited by his work in the factory and thought that he could do better for himself and for his family, therefore decided to become politically active. That meant going back to school in the evening. Therefore, it can be observed the combination of two elements which are enhancing his position of authority and influence: the party school and the factory (seen as a space where he is able to manifest his authority). In addition, his 'good origins', valued by the communist party (he was coming from a family of modest peasants), make him believe in his ability to become a leader of those like him, the men and women he manages at the factory. Nevertheless, he tries and succeeds to remain 'one of the men' in the sense that he keeps a good level of knowledge regarding their relationships, their needs (some of which are the result of the same political regime that he represents). The lack of food or gas, the interventions for getting an abortion approved, for obtaining a transfer or a house are common for him and, paradoxically, constitute a double advantage for him as a party apparatchik: on one hand he knows the illegal practices and has the authority to end them (as the party demanded) and, on the other hand he is offered with the possibility to use this knowledge for his own interest, in order to fulfil his needs. The fact that he's of humble origins, 'one of the guys' determines him to follow the second strategy. Therefore, he becomes the patron of some small networks of scarce goods exchange (part of the black market phenomenon) such as coffee, Kent cigarettes or foreign made soaps, tolerates petty thievery from 'the State' (sawing machines parts, textile materials, food and so on), all of which establish a network of interdependence that will prove crucial for his post-communist career.

It must be noted the fact that the relationship with the Communist Party in terms of Caraion's political function didn't put significant constraints on him. Actually, the opposite is true. The Party requested a certain level of performance in various areas of activity. Failure to perform did not attract severe sanctions due to the fact that the plan requested was unrealistic, fact that enhanced the

level of complicity and interdependency amongst party apparatchiks, who were reporting fake data to the centre:

“A: There was no activity that wasn’t planned at the centre and that didn’t require a certain level of performance. As a consequence, your entire activity with the men had to be executed in such a manner that you succeeded. Off course, no one would take your head, they knew that there were exaggerations and that those standards were impossible. But you had to try and get as close as possible to them.

*Q: And you were aware of this?*

A: Of course. Everyone was, everyone knew”

Thus the emergence of a particular model of informal economy can be observed, which is placing our subject in a position of power, mirroring the formal one. The small-scale informal economy, the corruption or the traffic of influence were generating for those involved in this mechanism supplementary income which, due to the fact that it could not be transformed into goods and services, were kept as savings. Those savings played a crucial role in the period immediately following 1989, by becoming the initial capital invested by Caraion to start his business.

“A: My parents had a small manufacturing workshop which was part of a wider socialist associative organization [...]. They went to a lot, they had to deal with the Law 18, although they were modest people. Even the prosecutor said <What are we doing here, this people don’t have even a carpet on the floor!>... The Law 18 dealt with those having a supposedly illicit income.

*Q: And how did they manage to get by?*

A: Well, the prosecutor didn’t find much, although they were doing... they had a bit, but they hid it so the Control won’t find it. And this proved to be of help to me, making it a bit easier to start my business. I was a bit privileged, I was a step ahead of everyone else and who had to start from nothing.”

Another important aspect that needs mentioning is that of social relations developed by the local baron, in Putnam’s [15] and, perhaps more useful, in Bourdieu’s [16] terms – as social capital. I was mentioning above the duplicitary stance assumed by the party activists in relation to the demands formulated by the central institutions. This duplicity becomes more relevant when looking at the way in which a parallel social framework emerged, used to informally solve citizen demands regarding real problems which they are confronted with, problems that never reached the government’s desk. Worth mentioning in this respect is Cătălin Augustin Stoica’s concept of neo-traditionalism, developed initially by Kenneth Jowitt – Stoica notes that this system of informal relations predates 1944 and it became part of the new Marxist-Leninist order [17]. Interesting is the fact that this framework is based on a relationship system which mirrors the formal structure of authority provided by the party-state, thus emptying it of its original sense and role and being transformed into a vehicle for interests which prove to be even contrary to those of the Communist Party. Perhaps the most relevant example of this ‘takeover’ is offered by the folklore of the period, which interpreted the Party’s acronym PCR as standing for ‘Pile,



Cunoștințe, Relații' (put a good word, Connections, Relations). In this context, Caraion makes the best of this structure of social connections and develops a strategy aimed towards the enhancement of his own position within it. He would not abandon it after 1989, but on the contrary. He will start using kinship to ensure that he brings into his family powerful or useful people. When confronted with a problem regarding a certain job for someone in his family, he makes use of these relations: "There were no legal ways to do this, because there was someone in power that did not agree with this, and that was that. Therefore he must be made to depend on someone else and someone else, through other methods, using different constraint methods... [...] I had my own guys – my godfather – [...] and we started to make interventions by using other politicians that this person depended for advantages for running the county. And then those above put the pressure on him do change his mind. That's how we did it, this is how it works".

One of the most important questions regarding the local barons relates to his motivations. The most surprising thing is that Caraion's answers do not reflect the stereotypical imagery associated with the local barons in the media or by the common perceptions – his main incentives are not purely economical as one might expect, but relate especially with his status within the community. He's interested in maximizing his prestige, he's conscious of his responsibility as a community leader and he enjoys this position: "[...] wishing to keep myself well both socially and economically, to gain a new status in society, not to be just another regular guy, I constantly wanted to be high in society, to stand for something and give back to society. That's why I did what I did."

## **5. Conclusions**

The 'local baron' epitomizes the informal political and economical practices of post-communist Romania, probably being the most visible agent of the informal political order which emerged in the wake of the Revolution. In this article I tried to briefly sketch some characteristics of the local barons by exploring the data collected so far during the field research. Perhaps the most relevant aspect revealed by my research is the troubling relation between the local baron and his community of residence. This could be seen both as a result of the communist period but also as a continuation of a body of practices and relations which by far precede the totalitarian regime, reflecting the embedded structures of the patriarchal traditional society, with far-reaching implications for the understanding of contemporary Romania's political culture.

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