10 Live Fast, Die Young

Romanian Coalitions in Time of Crisis

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Introduction

Romanian political elites strategically used moments of crisis to solve unrelated political problems. These moments included the formation and termination of cabinets. The mechanisms politicians employed to force cabinet changes increased the country's risk of democratic backsliding. In their reactions to the 2008 financial crisis and to the COVID-19 pandemic, politicians forced cabinet change by challenging procedures or by modifying how institutions function, as well as encouraged the use of non-transparent individual payoffs to secure party switching within the parliament.

Exogenous crises were not in themselves a cause for authoritarian innovations. As in other European countries, moments of crisis worked as a magnifying glass to expose vulnerabilities and illiberal agendas which had been building up for years (Bohle and Eihmanis 2022). Crises were also not the most immediate cause for coalition instability but were used to confirm entrenched patterns of coalition politics that make those coalitions even more unstable. Among these, this chapter highlights the role of the president in coalition formation, political parties' fluid ideologies and flexibility in adjusting their issue positions, and party switching in parliament.

Between 1990 and 2022, Romania had 36 cabinets chaired by 21 prime ministers (Table 10.1a). The country stands out as the most unstable in the region. Three out of four of these cabinets were coalitions. Political elites often chose to use moments of disruption opportunistically to reshape alliances and achieve office or policy goals unrelated to solving the crisis itself. These strategies have been motivated by presidents' agendas to increase their own power through the formation of loyal cabinets, by party leaders' agendas to eliminate political opponents and deliver self-serving, often corrupt policy objectives, and by parliament members' (MPs) individual goals that lead to party switching. The prominence of such opportunistic agendas is facilitated by ideologically flexible parties and the absence of transparent coalition governing programs. Informal institutions such as extreme party switching and corruption add to the set of challenges that subvert Romania's democratic consolidation (Anghel 2022).

Table 10.1a Romanian cabinets 1990–2021

Cabinet number	Cabinet	Date in	Election date	Party composition of cabinet	Type of cabinet	Cabinet strength in seats (%)	Number of seats in parliament	Number of parties in parliament	ENP, parliament	Formal support parties
1	Roman	1990-06-28	1990-05-20	FSN	maj	263 (66.4)	396	10	2.19	
2	Stolojan	1991-10-17		FSN, PNL, MER, PDAR	sur	312 (78.8)	396	10	2.22	
3	Văcăroiu I	1992-11-20	1992-09-27	PSD	min	117 (34.3)	341	12	5.86	PUNR
4	Văcăroiu II	1994-08-18		PSD, PUNR	min	145 (42.5)	341	12	5.96	PRM, PSM
5	Văcăroiu III	1996-09-03		PSD	min	105 (30.9)	340	12	6.31	
6	Ciorbea I	1996-12-12	1996-11-03	PNTCD, PDL, PNL, UDMR, PSDR, PNLCD	sur	191 (55.7)	343	11	6.10	PER, FER
7	Ciorbea II	1997-12-05		PNTCD, PDL, PNL, UDMR, PSDR	sur	187 (54.7)	342	10	6.60	PER, FER
8	Ciorbea III	1998-02-11		PNTCD, PNL, UDMR, PSDR, UFD	min	148 (43.4)	341	10	6.58	PER, FER, PDL
9	Vasile I	1998-04-17		PNTCD, PDL, PNL, UDMR, PSDR, UFD	sur	189 (55.1)	343	10	6.58	PER, FER
10	Vasile II	1998-10-27		PNTCD, PDL, PNL, UDMR, PSDR	sur	188 (54.8)	343	10	6.52	PER, FER
11	Isărescu I	1999-12-22		PNTCD, PDL, PNL, UDMR, PSDR	mwc	178 (51.9)	343	10	6.55	PER, FER
12	Isărescu II	2000-09-14		PNTCD, PDL, PNL, UDMR	min	161 (46.9)	343	10	6.68	PER, FER
13	Năstase I	2000-12-28	2000-11-26	PSD, PSDR, PC	min	155 (44.9)	345	7	4.08	UDMR, PNL
14	Năstase II	2003-06-19		PSD	min	160 (46.6)	343	6	3.54	UDMR
15	Popescu-Tăriceanu I	2004-12-29	2004-11-28	PNL, PDL, UDMR, PC	min	153 (46.1)	332	6	4.87	
16	Popescu-Tăriceanu II	2006-12-04		PNL, PDL, UDMR	min	140 (42.4)	330	6	5.07	
17	Popescu-Tăriceanu III	2007-04-05		PNL, UDMR	min	73 (22.2)	329	6	5.21	PSD
18	Boc I	2008-12-22	2008-11-30	PDL, PSD	mwc	225 (67.4)	334	5	3.67	
19	Boc II	2009-10-01		PDL	min	115 (34.4)	334	5	3.72	
20	Boc III	2009-12-23		PDL, UDMR, UNPR	min	145 (43.5)	333	6	3.93	
21	Ungureanu	2012-02-09		PDL, UDMR, UNPR	min	158 (48.2)	328	6	4.00	UDMR

(*Continued*)

Table 10.1a (Continued)

Cabinet number	Cabinet	Date in	Election date	Party composition of cabinet	Type of cabinet	Cabinet strength in seats (%)	Number of seats in parliament	Number of parties in parliament	ENP, parliament	Formal support parties
22	Ponta I	2012-05-07		PSD, PNL, PC	min	151 (46.5)	325	6	4.07	UNPR
23	Ponta II	2012-12-21	2012-12-09	PSD, PNL, PC, UNPR	sur	273 (66.3)	412	8	4.41	
24	Ponta III	2014-02-26		PSD, PC, UNPR	min	192 (49.7)	386	8	4.10	
25	Ponta IV	2014-03-05		PSD, PC, UNPR, UDMR	mwc	210 (54.4)	386	8	4.47	
26	Ponta V	2014-12-17		PSD, UNPR, PC, PLR	sur	222 (55.4)	401	8	4.09	
27	Ciolos	2015-11-17		non-partisan	non		370	7	3.32	
28	Grindeanu	2017-01-04	2016-12-11	PSD, ALDE	mwc	174 (52.9)	329	6	3.51	UDMR
29	Tudose	2017-06-29		PSD, ALDE	mwc	168 (51.1)	329	6	3.51	UDMR
30	Dăncilă I	2018-01-29		PSD, ALDE	mwc	159 (48.5)	328	7	3.56	UDMR
31	Dăncilă II	2019-08-27		PSD	min	124 (37.7)	329	7	4.06	
32	Orban I	2019-11-04		PNL	min	69 (21)	329	7	4.17	USR, UDMR, PMP, ALDE
33	Orban II	2020-03-14		PNL	min	78 (23.7)	329	7	4.04	USR, UDMR, PMP, ALDE
34	Cîțu I	2020-12-23	2020-12-06	PNL, USR PLUS, UDMR	mwc	169 (51.2)	330	6	4.25	
35	Cîțu II	2021-09-06		PNL, UDMR	min	114 (34.5)	330	6	4.25	
36	Ciucă	2021-11-25		PSD, PNL, UDMR	sur	205 (62.1)	330	7	4.71	

Notes:
For a list of parties, consult the chapter appendix.

The number of parties in parliament does not include parties that have never held more than two seats when a cabinet has formed.

Cabinet types: min = minority cabinet (both single-party and coalition cabinets); maj = single-party majority cabinet; mwc = minimal-winning coalition; sur = surplus majority coalition; non = non-partisan.

This chapter focuses on the role of the financial crisis that started in 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic in coalition politics. It claims that by using exogenous crises, Romanian elites also increased the risk for a crisis of democracy from within. The 2015 refugee crisis and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war also contributed to the amplification of illiberal agendas. Such moments of external disruption were opportunities for politicians to attempt coalition, institutional and party system changes, and accelerated the country's internal crisis with democratic consolidation.

The institutional setting

The formal institutional setting that influences coalition formation did not undergo many changes in the last two decades. The most notable fluctuations are in the formal and informal powers of the president in shaping coalitions. The president's role in coalition formation can be connected to heightened coalition instability, particularly during periods of cohabitation. A 2020 Constitutional Court decision that curbs the powers of the president could change that in the future. This section takes stock of the principle changes in the institutional setting that structure Romanian coalition politics.

The main institutions that shape coalition politics in Romania are the parliament, the president and, on occasion, the Constitutional Court through some of its rulings. According to the 1991 Constitution, Romania is a semi-presidential regime, combining a popularly elected president with a prime minister and government accountable to the parliament. This includes Romania in the category of premier-president democracies (Samuels and Shugart 2010). This architecture of power has led to conflict as a result of the dual legitimacy it allows (Gherghina and Mișcoiu 2013), but the dual executive has not in itself been a danger for the democratization of Romania (Elgie 2010). On the contrary, having a dual executive with independent sources of legitimacy has tempered presidential tendencies to centralize power, as was the case of the Popescu-Tăriceanu II and III cabinets (Anghel 2018), or curbed the prime minister's self-aggrandizing agenda, as it was the case during the Ponta I and Ponta II cabinets. Electoral outcomes that led to cohabitation also increased the likelihood of more frequent cabinet changes as a result of conflicts between the prime minister and the president.

Conflicts between the prime minister and the president appeared because the Constitution leaves some room for interpretation on how much leeway the president has in choosing the premier. The Constitutional Court was called upon several times to mediate such conflicts (Ștefan 2019). If a single party wins an absolute majority, the Constitution compels the president to nominate that party's premier proposal. The prime minister designate thus becomes the *formateur*. If no party has an absolute majority, the president could, in principle, select whichever candidate they desired for the position. The level of discretion the president can exercise in choosing the prime minister has been formally limited by a 2020 ruling of

the Constitutional Court (Romanian Constitutional Court 2020). At that time, the president triggered a constitutional conflict by insisting on re-nominating the leader of his own party, Ludovic Orban, as prime minister, although he had lost a vote of no confidence. The Constitutional Court weighed in on this 2020 conflict stressing that the president should only nominate a candidate who has a reasonable chance of acquiring an absolute majority in parliament. Orban was not eligible, despite the president's determination to nominate him.

This 2020 Constitutional Court decision sets new formal limits on the role of the president in shaping cabinets. Limiting the president's discretion in nominating the premier could reduce coalition instability. However, it also reduces the chances of triggering early elections and thus reinforces a different source of coalition instability: party switching within parliament. According to the Constitution, the president can dissolve parliament and call for early elections only if the parliament rejects the president's premier nomination twice, and after consulting the speakers of the two chambers and the leaders of the parliamentary groups (Art. 89). With the new court ruling, the president cannot nominate premier candidates without them having a real chance at also winning the confidence of an absolute majority of parliamentarians. This makes it unlikely that the president will have the opportunity to trigger early elections.

The informal powers of the president have also been limited by the Constitutional Court decision discussed above. Before this decision, potential junior coalition parties had some incentives to select the party of the president to support in government, as in the case of Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu I or Boc II. The president's strength in informal cabinet formation negotiations will now diminish.

The party system and the actors

Party system change

The party system has largely stabilized in the past two decades and so became more predictable. New parties entered the parliament or split from existing parliamentary parties in every electoral cycle but usually had a short life. In terms of ideological positioning, the 2008 financial crisis, the pandemic and the refugee crisis of 2015 revealed more authoritarian characteristics in the rhetoric and ideology of the mainstream Romanian political parties. The advent of the pandemic also contributed to the emergence of a new extreme right nativist party: the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR). The entry of AUR in parliament in 2020 pushed the mainstream parties even closer as they sought to fend off the rise of this extreme party, further blurring their ideological identities.

Romania has had a proportional electoral system since 1990. A 5 per cent threshold was introduced in 2000 to limit party system fractionalization. This

threshold contributed to the institutionalization of the party system (Casal-Bértoa and Mair 2012; Enyedi and Casal Bértoa 2018). Parties themselves separated between those that institutionalized and became a fixed presence in Romanian politics and those who became vehicles for different influential politicians or businessmen (Coman 2012; Gherghina and Soare 2017; Thürk 2019). Those parties, such as the Dan Diaconescu People's Party (PP-DD), Pro-Romania (PRO), or the Popular Movement Party (PMP) had a short life as parliamentary parties. Political parties have shown great ideological fluidity from one election to another (Borbáth 2019). This fluidity partially enables parties' inclination for fast paced and frequent coalition reshuffles. When choosing allies, parties often prioritized office-seeking goals which created ideologically disconnected pre-electoral and post-electoral alliances (Chiru 2015; Anghel 2017).

In 2008, an electoral reform shifted the electoral system from a closed-list proportional representation arrangement to one in which all candidates ran in single-member districts (Marian and King 2010). That system was only used for the 2012 elections after which Romania returned to the previously used closed-list proportional representation system. Six to seven parties on average win representation in the Chamber of Deputies. Government formation has been confined to a narrow circle of parties; new parties have usually only become members of the legislature from the position of a junior partner in an electoral alliance. Only three parties had a continuous presence in the legislature from 1990 to 2022: the Social-Democratic Party (PSD), the National Liberal Party (PNL), and the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR). The Liberal Democratic Party (PDL) was another major player in politics. After running under different names since the early 1990s, it eventually merged with PNL in 2014. The 2016 elections saw three new parties enter parliament, deeming observations of a spike in programmatic and extra-system volatility (Borbáth 2021). These new parties were the 'Save Romania' Union (USR), Pro-Romania (PRO), and the Popular Movement Party (PMP). Among these, USR was the only party to pass the 5 per cent threshold in the 2020 elections.

The 2014 merger of PDL into PNL was an important occasion for party system re-alignment. But the political system did not polarize on a left-right scale as the PNL and PSD emerged as the main competitors. Historically, the PNL and PSD represent different electorates on the left-right economic scale. PNL represents centre-right and urban voters, while the PSD represents the centre-left, rural, and small-town constituencies. Both parties also share socially conservative views; they are inclined to support nationalist, traditionalist views on the GAL-TAN dimensions, and neither is Eurosceptic. Most differences persist in terms of economic policies. The frequent alliances between these two parties have also blurred some of these distinctions and revealed more similarities than differences in their policy agendas.

Table 10.1b Romanian party system conflict structure 2007–2021

Cabinet number	Cabinet	Median party in the first dimension	First dimension conflict	Median party in the second dimension	Second dimension conflict
17	Popescu-Tăriceanu III	PC	Econ. left-right	PC	GAL-TAN
18	Boc I	PDL	Econ. left-right	PDL	GAL-TAN
19	Boc II	PDL	Econ. left-right	PDL	GAL-TAN
20	Boc III	PDL	Econ. left-right	PDL	GAL-TAN
21	Ungureanu	PDL	Econ. left-right	PDL	GAL-TAN
22	Ponta I	PDL	Econ. left-right	PDL	GAL-TAN
23	Ponta II	PSD	Econ. left-right	PSD	GAL-TAN
24	Ponta III	UNPR	Econ. left-right	UDMR	GAL-TAN
25	Ponta IV	UNPR	Econ. left-right	UDMR	GAL-TAN
26	Ponta V	UNPR	Econ. left-right	UDMR	GAL-TAN
27	Ciolos	UNPR	Econ. left-right	UDMR	GAL-TAN
28	Grindeanu	PMP	Econ. left-right	UDMR	GAL-TAN
29	Tudose	PMP	Econ. left-right	UDMR	GAL-TAN
30	Dăncilă I	PMP	Econ. left-right	UDMR	GAL-TAN
31	Dăncilă II	PMP	Econ. left-right	ALDE	GAL-TAN
32	Orban I	PMP	Econ. left-right	ALDE	GAL-TAN
33	Orban II	PMP	Econ. left-right	ALDE	GAL-TAN
34	Cîțu I	USR	Econ. left-right	UDMR	GAL-TAN
35	Cîțu II	USR	Econ. left-right	UDMR	GAL-TAN
36	Ciucă	USR	Econ. left-right	UDMR	GAL-TAN

Notes. Median parties for the period 2007–2012 (cabinets 1–23) retrieved from Bergman et al (2019).

Ideological fluidity also brought the main political parties – PNL and PSD – closer in times of crisis. PNL and PSD coalesced at the start of the 2012–2016 electoral cycle to form the Ponta I and Ponta II cabinets. At that time, they jointly campaigned against the austerity programs developed by the PDL-led cabinets of Boc II, III and Ungureanu in response to the financial crisis. During the 2015 refugee crisis, PNL and PSD revealed the same hostility toward welcoming and integrating refugees. Under the leadership of PNL President Klaus Iohannis, Romania voted against EU plans for refugee burden sharing and did not invest in refugee integration. The PSD-led cabinets at the time agreed with this policy. The Russia-Ukraine war also reveals similar pro-EU, Atlanticist and pro-NATO policies in both mainstream parties, which makes the collaboration between PSD and PNL under PNL premier Ciucă very functional. The intensification of the Russia-Ukraine war on Romania's borders created some more incentives for this grand coalition to remain united under the leadership of PM Ciucă, a former army general and former Chief of the Romanian General Staff.

Some parties were consequential for cabinet formation and termination despite their short life span. Most notably, former PM Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu

split with the PNL in 2014 and negotiated to bring his Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE) into the Ponta V cabinet. During the 2016–2020 cycle, Popescu-Tăriceanu's ALDE was also a key ally in supporting the PSD-led Grindeanu, Tudose and Dăncilă I cabinets, and contributed to the successful motion of no confidence against Dăncilă II by withdrawing his parliamentarians' support. This move was a gamble; Popescu-Tăriceanu tried to disassociate himself from an unpopular government close to elections. Even so, ALDE failed to enter the 2020 legislature.

The anti-establishment Save Romania Union (USR) grew on an anti-corruption platform and out of a grass roots movement but officially became a party only in 2016 when it also entered parliament. The vote for USR represented citizens' response to Romania's crisis with the quality of democracy rather than a response to exogenous shocks. USR employed populist rhetoric distinguishing between the honest people and the corrupt elite. During its tenure in parliament, however, USR increasingly expanded its policy concerns to become a more mainstream centre-left party. In 2021, it briefly entered a coalition with PNL and UDMR but finally found its reformist agenda incompatible with that of the other 'status-quo' parties. With the loss of some of its populistic appeal, the USL has constantly dropped in voters' preferences and is not likely to become a contender to either PNL or PSD for the upcoming electoral cycle.

Eighteen national minorities (not including the Hungarians) are represented in Parliament where they form the National Minority Caucus (NMC). This united group of deputies is not unlike that of a united, disciplined, and institutionalized party and has made the difference on multiple occasions in creating cabinet majorities (Anghel and Thürk 2019). Their role remained unchanged throughout the years and it always offers support to the incumbent cabinet.

Electoral alliances and pre-electoral coalitions

Issue-based bloc alignment defined Romanian electoral strategies and the creation of electoral alliances. As I discuss elsewhere, for each electoral cycle, the opposition challenged the incumbent parties based on (a) their communist legacy (1990–1996), (b) poor economic performance (1996–2000), (c) corruption (2000–2008/2009), (d) presidential allegiance and austerity measures (2009–2012/2014), and (e) undermining the rule of law (2014–2020) (Anghel 2023). Such 'anti-' campaigns produced temporary polarising voting patterns that delivered cabinets either around the centre-left PSD or the centre-right PDL or PNL. However, as discussed above, ideological fluidity allowed for frequent collaborations among seemingly opposing parties and the reconsidering of alliances after elections. The PSD and PNL even established a pre-electoral alliance (together with PC, and then formed the Ponta I and Ponta II cabinets) and post-electoral coalitions (Boc I and Ciucă cabinets). In

Table 10.1c Electoral alliances and pre-electoral coalitions in Romania, 2004–2021

Election date	Constituent parties	Type	Types of pre-electoral commitment
2004-11-28	PNL, PDL	EA, PEC	
	PSD, PC	EA	
2008-11-30	PSC, PC	EA, PEC	
2012-12-09	PSD, UNPR, PNL, PC	EA, PEC	
	PDL, PNTCD, FC	EA	
2020-12-06	USR, PLUS	EA, PEC	Separate declarations

Notes:
Type: electoral alliance (EA) and/or pre-electoral coalition (PEC)
Types of pre-electoral commitments: written contract, joint press conference, separate declarations, and/or other

interviews with the author, PNL leaders also confirmed the informal agreement that guaranteed the support of PSD for the Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu III minority cabinet.

The 2012 elections were the last ones to see pre-electoral coalitions openly compete (see Table 10.1c). In 2012, the USL alliance defeated a three-party alliance formed around the PDL. Pre-electoral coalitions are largely advantageous to small parties who cannot make it beyond the 5 per cent threshold. However, once in an alliance, parties need to meet the 10 per cent threshold. Since the merger between PNL and PDL in 2014, all major parties have manifested an interest to run alone, leaving their satellites to fight for themselves or absorbed individual parliamentarians from smaller parties on their party's lists.

Government formation [ca 1000 words]

The bargaining process

Romanian politics recorded a relatively low number of inconclusive bargaining rounds (see Table 10.2). Post-election cabinet formation is uncomplicated when pre-electoral coalitions win elections (Ponta II, Grindeanu). The role of the president in designating their preferred prime minister becomes most relevant when the winner of elections is less straightforward (Boc III, Cîţu I), confirming previous expectations related to coalition outcomes in semi-presidential systems.

The fragility of Romanian cabinets is the result of bargaining for the re-shaping of majorities between elections. The bargaining that takes place for individual payoffs leads to frequent party switches, which changes majorities in parliament. According to Klein (2016), every fifth legislator defected from their party between 1996 and 2012. Tables 10.1a and 10.1b show that on occasion, the strength of the incoming cabinet differs from the strength of the

Table 10.2 Government formation period in Romania, 2007–2021

Cabinet	Year in	Number of inconclusive bargaining rounds	Parties involved in the previous bargaining rounds	Bargaining duration of individual formation attempt (in days)	Number of days required in government formation	Total bargaining duration	Result of investiture vote (Senate result in parentheses)		
							Pro	Abstention	Contra
Popescu-Tăriceanu III	2007	0	PNL, UDMR	0	0	0	303	0	27
Boc I	2008	4	PDL, PSD	7	22	15	324	0	115
			PSD, PC, PNL, UDMR	1					
			PDL, UDMR	4					
			PDL, PNL, UDMR	1					
			PDL, UDMR, PSD	8					
Boc II	2009	0	PDL	0	0	0			
Boc III	2009	1	PDL, UDMR, UNPR	7	71	7	276	0	135
			PDL, UDMR, PNL	1					
Ungureanu	2012	0	PDL, UDMR, UNPR	1	3	1	237	0	2
Ponta I	2012	0	PSD, PNL, PC	1	10	1	284	0	92
Ponta II	2012	1	PSD, PNL, PC, UNPR	1	12	1	402	0	120
			PSD, PNL, PC, UNPR, UDMR	1					
Ponta III	2014	0	PSD, PC, UNPR	1	0	1	346	0	191
Ponta IV	2014	0	PSD, PC, UNPR, UDMR	3	0	3	377	0	134
Ponta V	2014	0	PSD, UNPR, PC, PLR	6	0	6	389	0	115
Ciolos	2015	0	no party bargaining	1	13	1	295	0	133
Grindeanu	2017	0	PSD, ALDE	7	24	7	275	0	103
Tudose	2017	0	PSD, ALDE	1	8	1	282	1	136
Dăncilă I	2018	0	PSD, ALDE	1	13	1			
Dăncilă II	2019	0	PSD	1	0	1			
Orban I	2019	0	PNL	1	24	1	261	0	139
Orban II	2020	0	PNL	1	38	1	286	1	23
Cîțu I	2020	0	PNL, USR PLUS, UDMR	1	17	1	260	0	186
Cîțu II	2021	0	PNL, UDMR	1	0	1			
Ciucă	2021	0	PSD, PNL, UDMR	1	0	1	318	0	126

outgoing cabinet. That reflects party switching, although these numbers do not account for how MPs' movements across parties offset each other in the final count.

The informal institution of party switching ensures the continuation of some individual payoffs – electoral, office, or policy – and the perpetuation of parties but undermines cabinet stability and blurs parties' ideological content and accountability. The practice of party switching is closely related to high coalition turnover and weak trust in political parties. Moments of crisis matter in these calculations as they also create the incentives for parties and individual MPs to reconsider their allegiances and preserve or recuperate some electoral capital. This happened most obviously in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis.

Party switching can both undermine and shore up governments. Personal ambitions led party leaders and individual members of parliament to switch parties at key moments. The Boc II and Boc III cabinets famously formed as a result of individual defections from different parties followed by the creation of another parliamentary group, the Union for the Progress of Romania (UNPR). In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and of the government's unpopular austerity measures, individual MPs from the governing parties sheltered from the electoral cost of their government's policies and switched to the opposition. As the 2012 elections neared, PDL parliamentarians switched sides to the PSD or PNL. They later voted to bring down the Ungureanu cabinet and supported the formation of the minority cabinet Ponta I.

Party switching is closely entwined with high levels of corruption and clientelism. In an interview with the author, Prime Minister Ungureanu confirmed he witnessed the bribing of MPs to vote against his cabinet, but he was not in the position to prove it. During the time prime minister Ponta chaired his first cabinet, his party, the PSD, and his coalition partner, the PNL, received tens of parliamentarians fleeing parties dropping in popularity. Dăncilă II formed with the official withdrawal of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE), but her party's (PSD) parliamentarians were also running to join more popular parties as elections approached. Finally, these parliamentarians participated in bringing down the Dăncilă II cabinet. According to local media, ALDE chairman Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu made similar accusations of vote buying and transactional party switching during the motion of no confidence against the Dăncilă II minority cabinet (Popescu-Tăriceanu 2019). This way to negotiate cabinet formation is rarely discussed in the literature.

The conversation around party switching shows once more how Romania's internal crisis with the quality of democracy is important in coalition formation outcomes. The exchange of material benefits for votes is difficult to trace, but corruption among public officials has been proven to be widespread. According to the annual reports from the National Anti-Corruption Agency, the number of ministers, parliamentarians, local representatives, and directors of

national companies who are sent to trial yearly under corruption charges is in the high tens (National Anti-Corruption Directorate 2019).

The composition and size of cabinets

Just over half of the cabinets formed between 1990 and 2022 were minority cabinets (see Table 10.1a). Among the post-communist states, Romania stands out with more than double the amount of minority cabinets compared to runner-up Latvia (Bergman et al 2019: 6; Anghel 2023). Parties' preferences to run alone in elections favour a hinge party strategy of keeping options open to both left and right (Arter 2016). Smaller parties, such as the PC, UDMR, UNPR, PMP, ALDE and the national minority caucus, transferred their support according to strategies of political survival or other office or policy goals. With the exception of Ponta II, minimum winning coalitions – such as Boc I, Grindeanu, and Cîțu I – usually form immediately after elections. The frequent cabinet reshuffles within electoral cycles often lead to the formation of minority cabinets. That is the outcome of widespread and normalized coalition volatility, under the conditions of which smaller parties often calculate that the cost incurred for only offering legislative support or for easily shifting alliances and withdrawing government support can be easily offset in little to no time.

Once the Social Democrat Party (PSD) and the main right-wing party, the National Liberal Party (PNL), overcame their reluctance to govern together, the political scene also opened up to the idea of *grand coalitions*. The PSD first gave support for a PNL-led minority cabinet in 2008 (Popescu-Tăriceanu III) then governed together with PNL in 2012 (Ponta I and Ponta II). The appearance of the anti-establishment party Save Romania Union (USR) created some space for new coalition alignment strategies in 2016. USR entered parliament as a natural ally for PNL. However, PNL and USR only briefly governed together in 2021 (Cîțu I), before PNL and PSD rejoined forces in late 2021 in the Ciucă government.

The allocation of ministerial portfolios

Romanian cabinets are usually composed of the prime minister, one or more deputy prime ministers (or 'ministers of state' up to 2004), regular ministers, and, quite often, ministers without portfolios or 'delegate ministers'. Ministers usually come and go with the premier. The premier has full powers to dismiss cabinet members, who very rarely refuse to quit when asked to do so. Prime ministers face limited constraints in appointing new cabinet members. As the procedure also involves the president, in situations of cohabitation, this can lead to conflict. That conflict usually plays out exclusively for the public, as the prime minister has the final say. According to a 2008 Constitutional Court Decision, the president can only refuse the nomination of a minister once.

Ministers are an expandable resource with short life spans. For example, over 70 ministers had passed through the PSD cabinets in two years (2017 and 2018) (see Table 10.3). According to Romanian law, a major political reshuffle or the change to the structure of the government can only be done with parliamentary approval. However, there is no limit to the number of times a prime minister can change the ministers in their cabinet. Prime Minister Dăncilă's proposal to change several ministers at once at the end of 2018 and in 2019 resembled a cabinet reshuffle, which the president refused. That conflict died out before the Constitutional Court would have inevitably been asked to mediate.

The structure and size of cabinets change with most new cabinets. Table 10.3 shows at least 53 different types of portfolios that have been created in 30 years. During government formation, portfolio allocation is roughly proportionate to the size of a coalition member in parliament. The largest party usually takes the prime minister position, and then coalition parties take turns in choosing their preferred portfolio. Portfolios with more resources are usually thrashed out between equal sized coalition partners. Negotiations for all other public offices are carried away from public scrutiny. Apart from party size, other informal aspects such as specific portfolio requests from a strong party leader can also become part of negotiations.

Junior coalition partners usually have an interest to bargain for a portfolio that matches prominent aspects of their campaign platform. For example, USR bargained for the Ministry of Justice to pursue its anti-corruption platform (Cîțu I). UDMR always bargains for the Environment portfolio due to an interest to administer the country's foresting industry that is prominent in the counties with ethnic-Hungarian population (Popescu-Tăriceanu III, Boc III, Ungureanu, Ponta IV, Cîțu I and II, Ciucă).

Each minister is usually shadowed by three-to-five junior ministers who are political appointees. One of those junior ministers can come from the minister's party, but the rest represent other coalition partners.

Coalition agreements

Following in the footsteps of previous scholars studying the content of coalition agreements in Romania, this chapter only records for analysis those documents that qualify as the treaty of the coalition: the public contract between the political parties that agreed to govern together. Applying this definition, on 22 January 1994, PSD and PUNR signed the first coalition agreement we have on record, ceding four portfolios to PUNR. PSD then delayed its implementation for seven months. PSD ignored the threats made by PUNR to bring down the cabinet for as long as possible. This was the start of a weak relationship that Romanian parties have with written commitments. Parties often challenge the promises made to each other, while the dominant party in the coalition consistently tries to maximize the utility of cabinet membership at the expense of coalition stability. When parties of equal sizes enter coalitions, each one looks for possibilities to govern alone in minority cabinets

Table 10.3 Distribution of cabinet ministerships in Romanian coalitions, 2007–2021

Cabinet	Year in	Number of ministers per party (in descending order)	Total number of ministers	Number of watchdog junior ministers per party	Number of ministries	1. Prime Minister	2. Finance	3. Foreign Affairs	4. Labour and Social Protection	5. Interior
Popescu-Tăriceanu III	2007	14 PNL, 4 UDMR	18		16	PNL	PNL	PNL	PNL	PNL
Boc I	2008	10 PDL, 9 PSD, 1 Ind.	20		20	PDL	PDL	PSD	PSD	PSD
Boc III	2009	11 PDL, 3 UDMR, 1 UNPR, 2 Ind.	17		17	PDL	PDL	PDL	PDL	PDL
Ungureanu	2012	10 PDL, 3 UDMR, 2 UNPR, 2 Ind.	17		17	PDL	PDL	UNPR	PDL	PDL
Ponta I	2012	10 PSD, 9 PNL, 2 PC	21		17	PSD	PSD	PNL	PNL	PSD
Ponta II	2012	14 PSD, 11 PNL, 2 PC	27		21	PSD	PNL	PSD	PNL	PNL
Ponta III	2014	25 PSD, 2 PC, 1 UNPR	28		22	PSD	PSD	PSD	PSD	UNPR
Ponta IV	2014	20 PSD, 3 PC, 2 UNPR, 2 UDMR	27		22	PSD	PSD	PSD	PSD	UNPR
Ponta V	2014	16 PSD, 2 UNPR, 3 PC, 2 Ind.	22		20	PSD	PSD	IND.	PSD	UNPR
Grindeanu	2017	23 PSD, 4 ALDE	27		22	PSD	PSD	ALDE	PSD	PSD
Tudose	2017	22 PSD, 4 ALDE, 1 Ind.	27		22	PSD	PSD	ALDE	PSD	PSD
Dăncilă I	2018	20 PSD, 4 ALDE, 2 Ind.	28		22	PSD	PSD	ALDE	PSD	PSD
Cîțu I	2020	9 PNL, 5 USR, 3 UDMR, 1 Ind.	20		19	PNL	PNL	IND.	PNL	PNL
Cîțu II	2021	13 PNL, 6 UDMR, 1 Ind.	20		19	PNL	PNL	IND.	PNL	PNL
Ciucă	2021	10 PSD, 8 PNL, 4 UDMR, 1 Ind.	23		21	PNL	PSD	IND.	PSD	PNL

Table 10.4 Size and content of coalition agreements in Romania, 2007–2021

Coalition	Year in	Size	General rules (in %)	Policy specific procedural rules (in %)	Distribution of offices (in %)	Distribution of competences (in %)	Policies (in %)
Popescu-Tăriceanu III	2007						
Boc I	2008	3150	61	0	13	0	16
Boc III	2009	713	0	0	0	0	80
Ungureanu	2012	713	0	0	0	0	80
Ponta I	2012	5961	66	0	6	0	24
Ponta II	2012	5961	66	0	6	0	24
Ponta III	2014						
Ponta IV	2014	687	6	18	15	0	61
Ponta V	2014	540	100	0	0	0	0
Grindeanu	2017	271	0	0	55	0	45
Tudose	2017	271	0	0	55	0	45
Dăncilă I	2018	271	0	0	55	0	45
Cîțu I	2020	520	70	20	0	10	0
Cîțu II	2021						
Ciucă	2021	846	33	43	0	24	0

or with less demanding junior partners. In other words, parties often sign contracts without a clear intention to keep promises for a long time and constantly seek to maximize office payoffs. This lowers trust among politicians and diminishes the importance of written commitments. As a result, most coalition agreements in Romania remain simply ceremonial and lack a strong policy focus (see Table 10.4).

There are two other reasons for this pattern. First, the Constitution requires that every new cabinet that asks for an investiture vote submit a government platform. The government platform is usually a long meandering list of major policy objectives and priorities for the full four-year term. This document is almost never discussed in public and is not binding for the cabinet. Previous scholarship on Romania did not include them as part of the coalition agreements (see Ștefan 2019; Klüver and Bäck 2019; Anghel 2023). The existence of these mandatory policy documents eliminated some of the responsibility for parties to discuss policy more in detail and seal it with a contract of a more private and binding nature. These documents are usually collective efforts of party policy advisors and staffers and are not the object of tense negotiations given their non-binding nature and high degree of generalizability. Coalition partners have usually agreed to this government policy platform with ease.

Second, Romanian politicians are (usually) more concerned with office distribution during negotiations than with policy negotiations. However, they do not want to share the dominance of these concerns with the public. As a result, the public does not get to follow closely the debates over office distribution or see these procedures coded in writing. Consequently, with few exceptions, politicians understand the coalition agreement they present to the public as

a sign off on who gets to enter the cabinet. This preference for insubstantive coalition agreements became manifest in the 2012–2020 electoral cycles. While Ponta II started off with a detailed pre-electoral USL agreement among PSD, PNL, and PC, this would be the last substantive coalition agreement recorded for Romania.

Coalition governance

The role of individual ministers in policy-making

According to the Romanian Constitution, the president is the head of state. This endows the president with ceremonial capital and informal powers in internal politics. Formally, the president's powers are quite limited in coalition governance. Informally, presidents are well connected to governments led by their own parties. In situations of cohabitation, the president can be a strong reactive or oppositional force, thus becoming an agent for the opposition. In this case, they can veto parliament legislation and ministerial appointments once.

De facto, the prime minister is the single most powerful politician in the Romanian political system. The prime minister has the right to appoint and dismiss ministers, has steering or coordination rights vis-à-vis cabinet ministers, has full control over the agenda for cabinet meetings, and has the ability to monitor ministers. Prime ministers and the parliament can override presidential vetoes.

The role of individual ministers in policy-making cannot be formally restricted by the prime minster. However, when ministers hail from the same party as the premier, it naturally follows that ministers are more responsive to informal interference from the premier in their respective jurisdictions. Junior ministers are appointed according to a pattern of divided portfolios. The role of the junior ministers is to oversee the minister.

Ministers rarely manage to associate themselves with policy achievements. A high frequency of ministerial turnover also leads to slow reform and weak policy implementation. Unwritten rules largely stipulate that most ongoing business or negotiations carried out by third parties with a government official tend to start over or suffer important delays every time a minister is replaced.

Coalition governance in the executive arena

The cabinet meets on a weekly basis. During these meetings, cabinets make decisions via consensus. Should conflict emerge, the prime minister is expected to act as an arbiter. Usually, leaders of coalition parties other than the premier's assume roles as deputy prime ministers. This allows for easy configurations in party summits (PS) or coalition committees (CoC) before the weekly meeting of the coalition cabinets. CoCs thus become the main conflict-solving mechanism as coalition party leaders are all present and can hammer out party concerns and negotiate agendas (see Table 10.5). Ad-hoc PS are also convened outside the government building on occasion.

Table 10.5 Coalition governance mechanisms in Romania, 2007–2021

Coalition	Year in	Coalition agreement	Agreement public	Election rule	Conflict management mechanisms			Personal union	Issues excluded from agenda	Coalition discipline in legislation/ other parl. behaviour	Freedom of appointment	Policy agreement	Junior ministers	Non-cabinet positions
					All used	Most common	For most serious conflicts							
Popescu-Tăriceanu III	2007	N	N/A	No	CoC	CoC	CoC	Yes	No	All/All	No	Comp.	Yes	Yes
Boc I	2008	POST	Yes	No	PS, CoC	CoC	PS	No (PSD)	Yes	All/All	No	Varied	Yes	Yes
Boc III	2009	IE	Yes	No	PS, CoC	CoC	PS	Yes	No	All/All	No	Varied	Yes	Yes
Ungureanu	2012	IE	Yes	No	PS	PS	PS	No (PDL)	No	All/All	No	Varied	Yes	Yes
Ponta I	2012	IE	Yes	No	PS, CoC	CoC	PS	No (PNL)	No	All/All	No	Varied	Yes	Yes
Ponta II	2012	PRE	Yes	No	PS, CoC	CoC	PS	No (PNL)	No	All/All	No	Comp.	Yes	Yes
Ponta III	2014	IE	Yes	No	PS, CoC	CoC	PS	Yes	No	All/All	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Ponta IV	2014	IE	Yes	No	PS, CoC	CoC	PS	Yes	No	All/All	Yes	Varied	Yes	Yes
Ponta V	2014	IE	Yes	No	PS	PS	PS	Yes	No	All/All	Yes	Few	Yes	Yes
Grindeanu	2017	POST	Yes	No	PS, CoC	PS	PS	No (PSD)	No	All/All	Yes	Few	Yes	Yes
Tudose	2017	POST	Yes	No	PS, CoC	PS	PS	No (PSD)	No	All/All	Yes	Few	Yes	Yes
Dăncilă I	2018	POST	Yes	No	PS	PS	PS	No (PSD)	No	All/All	Yes	Few	Yes	Yes
Cîțu I	2020	POST	Yes	No	PS, CoC	CoC	CoC	Yes	No	All/All	Yes	Few	Yes	Yes
Cîțu II	2021	POST	Yes	No	PS, CoC	CoC	CoC	Yes	No	All/All	Yes	Few	Yes	Yes
Ciucă	2021	POST	Yes	No	PS, CoC	CoC	CoC	Yes	No	All/All	Yes	Few	Yes	Yes

Notes:

During periods where the values for the variables remain identical, the first and last applicable cabinets are listed. The last applicable cabinet is right-justified in the Coalition column.

Coalition agreement: IE = inter-election; PRE = pre-election; N = no coalition agreement, PRE, POST = pre- and post-election.

Conflict management mechanisms: IC = inner cabinet; CaC = cabinet committee; CoC = coalition committee; PCa = combination of cabinet members and parliamentarians; Parl = parliamentary leaders PS = party summit.

Coalition discipline: all = discipline always expected; most = discipline expected except on explicitly exempted matters, Spec. = discipline only expected on a few explicitly specified matters, no = no discipline expected.

Policy agreement: few = policy agreement on a few selected policies; varied = policy agreement on a non-comprehensive variety of policies; Comp. = comprehensive policy agreement; no = no explicit agreement

President Klaus Iohannis used the COVID-19 pandemic to aggrandize his own powers (Anghel and Jones 2022). Together with Prime Minister Ludovic Orban, he institutionally and rhetorically targeted the parliament, the Constitutional Court and the ombudsman with the intention to weaken their position in the system. As a result, future Romanian executives will find it easier to resist judicial oversight and to interpret the law and the constitution entrepreneurially. This is likely to amplify Romania's democratic deficit with uncertain effects on coalition outcomes. The combination between increased executive powers and the context of the crises – first the pandemic and then the Russia-Ukraine war – led to the creation of a grand coalition between mainstream parties that makes governance more opaque. The 2021 unprecedented nomination as prime minister of a retired general and former Chief of the Romanian General Staff, Nicolae Ciucă, led to the staffing of the government with military types, halted the access of reformists, and showed plans to increase the power and oversight of intelligence services.

Governance mechanisms in the parliamentary arena

Parliamentary coordination is important in key moments related to cabinet investment and during motions of no confidence. Parliament discipline is also important for major votes related to the budget and a number of other laws. Few independent-member initiatives are adopted, while most laws passed by the Romanian parliament originate in bills proposed by the government (Anghel 2023). Passing government-sponsored laws needs coordination among coalition members. The success rate of government-sponsored bills lies at over 90 per cent. This is a similar figure to what previous scholarship observed of in West European countries (Kreppel 2020: 126; Field and Martin 2023).

The role of the leaders of the Senate and of the Chamber of Deputies is crucial for coalition coordination. While some party leaders preferred cabinet positions, others preferred to take over the leadership of the Senate or the Chamber of Deputies. In times of crisis, their role becomes even more important. They are also the ones who have oversight of negotiations for party switching, which this chapter previously identified as a major input to coalition formation and termination.

Given the important role of the two speakers, the failure to coordinate with them can lead to dramatic outcomes. According to the constitution, should something happen to the president, the Senate spokesperson takes over as head of state. This position became very important during one of Romania's most difficult rule of law crisis. In 2012, as USL took over the executive following a successful motion of no confidence, the PSD chairman Victor Ponta occupied the prime minister position, while Crin Antonescu, the PNL chairman, was elected Senate spokesperson. After controlling these positions, the USL impeached President Traian Băsescu, and Antonescu became interim president through the virtue of his position as Senate spokesperson. During this time,

PNL and PSD showed their most overt inclinations toward an authoritarian interpretation of the constitution and other legal procedures.

President Băsescu's impeachment was ultimately not confirmed by popular vote due to the absence of a quorum. The quorum was confirmed as a requirement for impeachment by the Constitutional Court. According to insiders interviewed by the author, the PSD leaders had wanted the interim PNL president not to accept the ruling of the Constitutional Court, but Antonescu refused. Because the two coalition leaders, Ponta and Antonescu, did not coordinate on this matter, the plan to forcefully remove president Băsescu failed.

The role of party group leaders is also very important in maintaining party unity and ensure coalition coordination on the parliamentary floor. As discussed above, parties can lose or recruit parliamentarians with ease. Keeping in contact with individual MPs is fundamental for cabinet stability. PPG leaders are the first to deal with defections. They are also the ones who organize the vote on legislation, follow the voting agenda, and coordinate with the government.

Cabinet duration and termination

The duration of cabinets

On average, Romanian cabinets survive less than a year. The predominance of minority cabinets does not correlate with a shorter cabinet duration. Minority cabinets, such as Năstase I, Văcăroiu II, Popescu-Tăriceanu I, Boc IV, Văcăroiu I, and Popescu-Tăriceanu III, are notable for lasting double or triple that amount of time in office. This is particularly true of minority governments that have the support of the main ethno-regional party (UDMR) and the national minority caucus. Comparing minority governments to one another, cabinet performance – measured by the success in passing legislation record and cabinet duration – correlates with detailed support agreements. Nevertheless, the four least durable cabinets were also minority cabinets. Surplus and minimum winning coalitions fall somewhere in-between in terms of duration. Such extreme variation in terms of stability warrants further investigation of minority cabinet performance beyond duration and passing legislation.

The termination of cabinets

Terminal issues are often connected to parties' opportunistic strategies. Political parties easily switch from a cooperative to a competitive strategy to improve electoral prospects. This is the reason why some parties leave unpopular cabinets close to elections (see ALDE withdrawing from Dăncilă I; UDMR withdrawing from Ponta IV; PSD withdrawing from Boc I). Terminal issues are rarely related to the parties' position in the policy space.

Only eight governments have been terminated by technical reasons, more specifically by parliamentary elections (see Table 10.6). Increasingly, cabinets

Table 10.6 Cabinet termination in Romania, 2007–2021

Cabinet	Relative duration (%)	Mechanisms of cabinet termination	Terminal events	Parties	Policy area(s)	Comments
Roman	55.4	8	13	FSN		Miners' rampage on Bucharest combined with conflict over policies between PM and President (both from the same party)
Stolojan	100	1				Terminated by elections
Văcăroiu I	44	5				Minority cabinet searching for a more stable parliamentary majority
Văcăroiu II	92.5	7a		PSD, PUNR	3	Conflict over policies (bilateral treaty with Hungary) plus proximity of legislative elections (parties need to distance themselves from the government
Văcăroiu III	100	1				Terminated by elections
Ciorbea I	24.8	9				Major cabinet reshuffle (cabinet asks for renewed confidence; as a side effect, one minor party loses its cabinet seat)
Ciorbea II	5.4	7a, 7b		PNTCD, PDL	8	'Either him or me' – part 1: conflict between PM and one cabinet member triggered by/combined with conflict over policies
Ciorbea III	4.6	5, 7b		PNTCD, coalition parties (PM vs coalition)		'Either him or the coalition' – part 2: PM undesired by almost all coalition parties, was forced to resign; PDL to come back in cabinet
Vasile I	20.2	7a		CDR, UFD	8	One party leaves the cabinet and the coalition – unhappy with the policies of the cabinet
Vasile II	54.1	7b		PNTCD, coalition parties (PM vs coalition)		PM 'revoked' by the president; PM forced to resign as he lost the trust of the coalition parties
Isărescu I	78.5	7a				One party (PSDR) forms a new coalition with main opposition party and is therefore excluded from cabinet
Isărescu II	100	1				Terminated by elections
Năstase I	63.1	7a		PSD, PC		Coalition between PSD and PC breaks, PC excluded from cabinet
Năstase II	100	1				Terminated by elections
Popescu-Tăriceanu I	49.2	7a		PC	2	One party leaves the cabinet and the coalition – unhappy with the policies of the cabinet
Popescu-Tăriceanu II	16.8	7a		PNL, PDL		Major tensions between coalition parties has led to exclusion of one party from the cabinet (minority cabinet gets the confidence of the parliament with the help of the major opposition party)

(*Continued*)

Table 10.6 (Continued)

Cabinet	Relative duration (%)	Mechanisms of cabinet termination	Terminal events	Parties	Policy area(s)	Comments
Popescu-Tăriceanu III	100	1				Terminated by elections
Boc I	19.5	7b		PDL, PSD		Conflict over personnel (revocation by PDL of the PSD Minister of Interior)
Boc II	1	6				Successful motion of no confidence
Boc III	71.6	9				PM decided to resign: his government has become increasingly unpopular
Ungureanu	25.7	6				Successful motion of no confidence
Ponta I	100	1				Terminated by elections
Ponta II	29.8	7b		PSD, PNL		Break-up of the governing coalition (PNL leaves the cabinet)
Ponta III	0.7	5				Coalition enlargement with UDMR
Ponta IV	28.4	9	10			Presidential elections have forced UDMR to leave the cabinet (Hungarians voted overwhelmingly against the PM who also a runner-up in the presidential elections)
Ponta V	44.4	9				Major fire in capital highlights corruption, protesters ask for PM resignation; PM resigns
Ciolos	100	1				Terminated by elections
Grindeanu	11.4	6, 8		PSD		PM refuses to resign and is defeated by motion of no confidence lead by own party PSD
Tudose	15.7	9				PM resigns
Dăncilă I	53.6	7a		ALDE		ALDE withdraws from cabinet; cabinet becomes increasingly unpopular
Dăncilă II	9.3	6				Successful motion of no confidence
Orban I	21.2	6				Successful motion of no confidence
Orban II	100	1				Terminated by elections
Cîțu I	17.6	7a		USR, PNL		USR PLUS withdraws from cabinet
Cîțu II	7.6	6				Successful motion of no confidence

Notes:

Technical terminations

1: Regular parliamentary election; 2: other constitutional reason; 3: death of Prime Minister

Discretionary terminations

4: Early parliamentary election; 5: voluntary enlargement of coalition; 6: cabinet defeated by opposition in parliament; 7a/b: conflict between coalition parties: (a) policy and/or (b) personnel; 8: intra-party conflict in coalition party or parties; 9: other voluntary reason

Terminal events

10: Elections, non-parliamentary; 11: popular opinion shocks; 12: international or national security event; 13: economic event; 14: personal event

have been brought down through successful motions of no confidence. Five out of 19 minority cabinets were terminated through motions of no confidence. Some of these cabinets were not coalition cabinets (Orban I, Dăncilă II, Boc II). Most notably, the Grindeanu cabinet was brought down through a motion of no confidence introduced by the prime minister's own party, the PSD. This was a rare situation in which the head of the main governing party PSD and the head of cabinet did not agree on how to carry justice system reform to benefit the corrupt purposes of the PSD party leader, Liviu Dragnea, but Prime Minister Grindeanu refused to resign.

Conflicts and tensions usually emerge when the premier is not also the leader of the governing party. In the 2016–2020 electoral cycle, the separation between who was the head of cabinet and who was the leader of the PSD led to many cabinet reforms. PSD chairman Liviu Dragnea could not assume public office and become the prime minister because of a previous suspended sentence for electoral fraud. This story ties back to Romania's democratic deficit crisis. Dragnea nevertheless kept a tight grip on the cabinet through the nomination of prime ministers personally loyal to him, less known nationally and mostly connected to local party branches. During his almost four-year mandate as president of the PSD, Dragnea chaired over the party's increased personalization, self-serving justice reforms, internal contestation, MP defections, and the change of three prime ministers. This self-centred and conflictual leadership also led to one of the most unusual termination of the Grindeanu cabinet discussed above.

Protest movements have also been a non-marginal actor in coalition cabinet termination. This is worth noting in the case of Romania and is understood more widely throughout the region. The increased number of protests is a sign of increased activism within civil society. The financial crisis of 2008/2009 and the austerity measures that followed finally led to the resignation of Prime Minister Boc and to the switch to prime minister Ungureanu. Since 2011, a series of citizen mobilizations have emerged in Romania, showing clear continuity of civil disobedience (Abăseacă and Pleyers 2019). Street protests led to the decision of prime minister Ponta to resign (Ponta V) and to the formation of the first full technocrat government under prime minister Cioloș. Street protests also made prime minister Grindeanu step back from his original decisions to uphold Dragnea's imposed reforms to the rule of law.

Conclusion

Romanian coalition politics is characterized by high instability. The role of the president in coalition formation, political parties' fluid ideologies and pliability in adjusting their issue positions, and extreme party switching can largely explain this outcome. Romania's democratic deficit contributes to the amplification of coalition instability. This chapter shows some of the ways in which coalition formation and termination can be used by entrepreneurial elites to this end, particularly in times of crisis.

Crises do not increase coalition instability, but elites use moments of crisis opportunistically to solve unrelated political problems (Guasti and Bustikova 2022). The fallout of the financial crisis of 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic functioned as a magnifying glass for underlying trends of elite-driven democratic erosion in Romania. Elites experimented with authoritarian interpretations of the law and other institutional procedures to reshape cabinets. During the financial crisis, this led to the downfall of the Ungureanu cabinet and to the formation of Ponta I. During the pandemic, such self-aggrandizing policies led to maintaining prime minister Ludovic Orban in power, despite his losing the support of the legislative majority (Anghel and Jones 2022).

The financial crisis and the pandemic created opportunities for political leaders to make institutional and informal changes as part of their crisis response. Elites used such disruptions to motivate strategic alliance reshuffling thus increasing coalition instability. During the 2008–2012 electoral cycle, Romania's cabinets enacted austerity measures that led to widespread popular dissatisfaction (Boc III). The leading coalition party at the time, PDL, suffered numerous defections to the opposition as individual MPs looked to find better political deals for the following electoral cycle.

The breakdown of the ruling coalition marked the start of a period in which opportunistic political parties manipulated anti-austerity public sentiment to justify challenges to the rule of law, including to the balance of powers and judicial independence. Frequent changes of cabinet composition became necessary to deliver that illiberal agenda because not all ministers supported autocratizing moves (see party composition shifts from Ponta II to Ponta V).

The three parties that started this illiberal agenda and pushed Romanian elites to experiment more actively with authoritarian innovations were the PSD, PNL, and PC. In 2012, the PNL withdrew from supporting some of the alliance's most severe illiberal actions that would have included challenging Constitutional Court decisions, while PM Ponta maintained that agenda with PSD, PC, and UNPR support (Ponta III–V). During the following electoral cycle (2016–2020), the PSD followed through on their intentions to alter the independence of the judiciary. Most notably, the yearly turnover of PSD prime ministers from 2017 to 2019 was the result of the then PSD Chairman Liviu Dragnea's attempt to maintain support for his agenda to alter the rules of the criminal code to favour his own ongoing law suits. Liviu Dragnea was, nevertheless, convicted for influence peddling in 2019.

The COVID-19 pandemic also revealed patterns of opportunistic behaviour within the PNL leadership (Anghel and Jones 2022). The advent of the pandemic overlapped a constitutional conflict between president Klaus Iohannis and the legislative majority over the nomination of a prime minister. The president pushed the limits of the constitution to secure the executive for his party, the PNL. Although the presidential agenda was finally deemed unconstitutional, the health emergency was eventually used to justify the need for stability and the president still managed to install his PM choice and a PNL single-party cabinet, voted by a grand coalition (Orban II). This solved political issues only

temporarily. The procedural innovations the PNL and the president supported continued a long-standing process to concentrate power in the executive at the expense of the parliament and the judiciary. President Iohannis and prime minister Orban also enacted COVID-19 rules that bypassed parliament and continued to challenge the motivation of the Constitutional Court in striking down such arbitrary decision making.

In addition to how mainstream parties use moments of crisis to reshape cabinets and increase their power, the COVID-19 pandemic was also a springboard for the extreme right Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR). AUR entered parliament propelled by an anti-vaccine conspiratorial rhetoric, a successful strategy in a vaccine-sceptic country. They are also the only officially Eurosceptic party in the parliament and have a nativist, racist rhetoric with antisemitic tones. Once elected with 9 per cent of the vote in 2020, AUR leaders remained equally extremist. Their extremism lowers the coalition potential of AUR and creates more structural incentives for the mainstream parties – PNL and PSD – to govern through grand coalitions. AUR will challenge the mainstream consensus to keep extremists out office once they increase their popular appeal.

The 2015 refugee waves bypassed Romania's territory and overlapped the rule of a technocratic government (Cioloş). But the issue of third-country migration led to a unified political expression across party lines against supporting non-white non-European migrants, which further blurred party identities. Similarly, the Russia-Ukraine war also shows a unified world view; there is a cross-party loyalty to NATO commitments and widely shared security concerns over Russia's imperialism, which does not lead to conflicts within the incumbent Ciucă led PSD-PNL cabinet. More generally, both the issue of migration and that of the Russian invasion of Ukraine do not leave much space for political conflict – all Romanian mainstream politicians reflect the nation's hostility toward non-white non-European migrants and support NATO policies. In keeping with previous coalition termination patterns, it is more likely for the PNL-PSD coalition to break down as a result of disputes over office distribution or proximity to elections then in response to policy issues.

Overall, Romania managed to resist the far end of elite attempts to alter democratic institutions along the lines of Hungary or Poland. Although the country has struggled to improve its democratic track record in the last years, it is still a laggard in securing an independent judiciary, fighting corruption, and upholding human rights compared to other post-communist EU member states (Mungiu-Pippidi 2015; European Commission 2022). This is reflected in how elites manage governance in times of crisis. Disruptive events created the window of opportunity for incumbents to deploy discretionary leadership, including in the formation and termination of cabinets. Such interventions weakened constitutional checks and balances. As a result, Romanian democracy remains a work in progress, while politicians preferred patterns of coalition governance are a source of stagnation.

Appendix: *List of parties*

Parties	
PSM	Socialist Party of Labour (Partidul Socialist al Muncii)
PPDD	People's Party – Dan Diaconescu (Partidul Poporului – Dan Diaconescu)
PRM	Greater Romania Party (Partidul România Mare)
PStDR	Romanian Socialist Democratic Party (Partidul Socialist Democratic din România)
FSN	National Salvation Front (Frontul Salvării Naționale)
PDAR	Agrarian Democratic Party of Romania (Partidul Democrației Agrare din România)
PSD	Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat)
UNPR	National Union for Romania's Progress (Uniunea Națională pentru Progresul României)
PSDR	Romanian Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat Român)
PUNR	Romanian National Unity Party (Partidul Unității Naționale Române)
MER	Ecologist Movement of Romania (Mișcarea Ecologistă Română)
PER	Romanian Ecologist Party (Partidul Ecologist Român)
PC	Conservative Party (Partidul Conservator)
PNLCD	National Liberal Party – Democratic Convention (Partidul Național Liberal Convenția Democrată)
PDL	Democratic Liberal Party (Partidul Democrat Liberal)
PNTCD	Christian Democratic National Peasants' Party (Partidul Național Țărănesc Creștin Democrat)
UDMR	Democratic Union of Hungarians from Romania (Uniunea Democratică a Maghiarilor din România)
PAC	Civic Alliance Party (Partidul Alianței Civice)
PNL	National Liberal Party (Partidul Național Liberal)
PL93	Liberal Party 93 (Partidul Liberal 93)
UFD	Union of Right-Wing Forces (Uniunea Forțelor de Dreapta)
PLR	Liberal Reformist Party (Partidul Liberal Reformator)
ALDE	Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (Alianța Liberalilor și Democraților)
AUR	Alliance for the Union of Romanians (Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor)
PMP	People's Movement Party (Partidul Mișcarea Populară)
USR	Save Romania Union (Uniunea Salvați România)
PRO	PRO Romania (PRO România)
PUSL	Social Liberal Humanist Party (Partidul Umanist Social Liberal)

Notes:
Party names are given in English, followed by the party name in Romanian or a minority language in parentheses. If several parties have been coded under the same abbreviation (successor parties), or if the party has changed their names, these are listed in reverse chronological order followed by the period during which a specific party or name was in use.

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