



ORIGINAL PAPER

King Carol II's Political View – from the “Governing over the Political Parties” Formula to the Authoritarian Regime

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Abstract

King Carol II's reign was perceived as a controversial period. This paper is aiming to analyse the “governing over the political parties” formula and to observe the way that the political view of the Monarch changed over the years. Without proposing an exhaustive exposition of the governments during the reign of Carol II, I chose some examples which might be the most revealing regarding the approach proposed. By analysing how the King nominated the respective Councils of Ministers, I tried to observe what the reasons behind his decisions were, referring also to the Monarch's relationship with the politicians. The final goal of the paper was on the one hand to outline the political vision of King Carol II and, on the other hand, to identify the way in which the formula of governing over the political parties was implemented.

Keywords: *King Carol II; governing over the political parties; authoritarian regime, political leaders.*

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Introduction

King Carol II's intention to lead the country in an authoritarian manner is not an aspect disputed by researchers; the Monarch's statements and actions were very clear – he wanted and succeeded, especially in the last years of his reign, to lead Romania in an authoritarian way. An increase of the King's prerogatives in the decision-making process was followed by a decrease of the influence exerted by the politicians.

As in the early 1930s a removal of the political forces from the public sphere was impossible, the Sovereign tried to diminish their power; and the best solution was to create Governments that were neither composed nor led by strong politicians. The formula proposed by the King was to govern *over the political parties*. The Monarch's opinion seemed to be a long-term one, as along his reign there were made various attempts to put this formula into practice.

It is important to note that even from the perspective of a government that does not respect traditional rules, there were several options: coalition government, national unity government, concentration government, government *outside* the political party or government over the political parties. It is obvious that the King's favourite formula was the personal government, or as it is called *governing over parties*, in which the political factor was irrelevant; until the achievement of this goal, the Sovereign had to juggle with the other unconventional governing methods mentioned above.

The attempt to create the coalition Government led by General Constantin Prezan

As often mentioned in the memoirs of his close collaborators, a constant wish of King Carol II was to rule over the political parties. The Sovereign had never hidden this desire. Ever since returning to Romania in June 1930, Carol had specified how he wanted to lead the country. In his writings, Nicolae Iorga reproduced the conversation that he had with Carol before his ascension to the Throne, a conversation in which the future King expressed his desire to form a concentration Government that he would have wanted not to be led by a head of a political party (Iorga, 1932: 5; Iorga, 1939: 3).

This Monarch's view seems to have been unshakable, since throughout his reign, one can notice different attempts to accomplish it. In this regard, a first example is found in June 1930. Thus, after the Government of G.G. Mironescu, June 7th-8th, whose single purpose was to abolish the laws of January 1926 (Nedelea, 1991: 83; Scurtu, 1983: 167-168; Scurtu, 1996: 234-234) and to accept Carol's appointment as King of Romania, the new Sovereign tried the highly desired formula at that moment – the Government of concentration. The attempt was made with General Constantin Prezan (Iorga, 1932: 7). Although Prezan had all the support from the King and truly tried to accomplish his mission of creating a coalition government he failed (Argetoianu, 1997a: 40; Iorga, 1932: 10-11). Despite realizing the difficulty of collaborating with a leader of a large political party as President of the Council of Ministers, Carol had no choice but to ask Iuliu Maniu to lead the new Government (Scurtu, 1983: 169-170).

Grigore Gafencu was the one who eloquently summarised the situation from the summer of 1930 in his journal: "From youthful enthusiasm and passion for work, he [Carol] will try personal governments. Afterwards, he will come back to parties from political caution and because it is safer and more comfortable" (Gafencu, 1991: 19). In June 1930 Carol had to accept that his position on the Throne was not yet consolidated,

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and thus he temporarily had to give up his desire to create a Government that would not involve powerful political leaders.

It is important to note that even regarding a Government that did not respect the traditional Romanian norms, the views of the politicians were divided. Thus, there have been discussions among politicians about two main options that could arise if the Sovereign would have managed to impose the chief of the Government, other than an influential party leader. The first of these options was a concentration Government involving politicians from various parties; the second was the creation of a personal Government in which the political factor would be irrelevant (Gafencu, 1991: 126). If the first option could have been accepted by a significant number of politicians, the latter could be rejected even by those politicians who had shown their obedience to the new Monarch.

The Government of *national union* led by Nicolae Iorga

A new attempt of Carol II to break the barriers of traditional Governments took place in April 1931. Thus, amid the aggravation of the domestic economic crisis and the increasing tensions at European level, the Sovereign proposed to Nicolae Titulescu – the Romanian delegate in London – to be President of the Council of Ministers (Constantinescu, 1973: 275-276). According to Nicolae Iorga, Titulescu was also on the list of possible Prime Ministers in June 1930 (Iorga, 1932: 10). Between March and April 1931, Nicolae Titulescu negotiated with most of the political leaders to form a *national union* Government (Gafencu, 1991: 126-133, Iorga, 1932: 34-37, Iorga, 1939: 74); but as the general Prezan failed less than a year before in his attempt to fulfil the Sovereign's wish, so did Nicolae Titulescu.

The difference was that Titulescu seemed to have been “helped” by the King in order not to succeed. Being probably more secure of his position in April 1931 than he was in June 1930 and wanting to remove a complicated collaboration with Titulescu, Carol II easily renounced to his nomination to the Government (Iorga, 1932: 40). Without delay and without further consultations, the mandate was handed to the historian Nicolae Iorga. Iorga, as he explained later, received both the proposal to lead the Government and the list with the Ministers (Iorga, 1932: 43). Thus, Iorga became the President of the Council of Ministers that was in fact led by the King (Nedelea, 1991: 105). Constantin Argetoianu, the Minister of Interior, had also a big influence within the new Government.

The details of nominating the Government led by Nicolae Iorga can be found in the memoirs of Constantin Argetoianu; although he probably added a note of subjectivity, Argetoianu presented the political convulsions from March – April 1931 (Argetoianu, 1997b: 187-212). From the original plan of the King, which had Constantin Prezan (Argetoianu, 1997b: passim 142-179) as a protagonist, continuing with the unsuccessful attempt of nominating Nicolae Titulescu and until the formation of the Government led by Nicolae Iorga, Argetoianu described the events regarding the Romanian political life from the beginning of the year 1931.

Those events underline the King's attempt to undermine the authority of political parties. Planned thoroughly, both the removal of the Government led by G.G. Mironescu (Argetoianu, 1997b: 187-190) as well as the preparation of the new Government reveal the Sovereign's intentions to increase its inflexibility in the state decision-making process, which automatically implied a diminishing of the influence of the political parties.

Thus, the Sovereign entrusted Titulescu to form a *national union* Government that would include all major political parties (Argetoianu, 1997b: 191; Scurtu & Buzatu, 1999: 233). If one takes into consideration the intransigent positions of the Romanian political leaders, it was obvious that such an approach was impossible. But the impossibility of a consensus among all relevant political forces served the cause of the Monarch, who could come up with a government *over the parties* (Argetoianu, 1997b: 207-212; Iorga, 1939).

Although labelled as *national union* Government, in fact, the new Council of Ministers was closer to the formula that the Sovereign wanted – a personal Government. There are several arguments in support of this hypothesis: first, the fact that the Prime Minister received along with the mandate also the list of the future Ministers; another argument could be Constantin Argetoianu's presence in the Government as one of the supporters for diminishing the influence of the political parties and for establishing the authoritarian regime; last but not least, as the King himself stated during the ceremony of taking the oath, the political factor was not so important in appointing the Government members, as they were unleashed from the political parties.

M.I. Costian labelled the Iorga Council of Ministers as a Government *apart from the parties* and considered it, on the one hand, the reply given by the King to the political parties which did not respond to the calls they had received and, on the other hand, a lesson given to the same political parties according to which the country could be led without the significant political parties (Costian, 1933: 83).

Unfortunately for the Sovereign's plans, the negative effects of the economic crisis were stronger than his determination to demonstrate the futility of political forces and in May 1932 the Government of Nicolae Iorga felled (Iorga, 1939: 408-410). Instead, a new Council of Ministers was established, based on traditional formula of involving the political parties (Gafencu, 1991: 244).

The monarchic-liberal Government

Although the idea of a non-party Government turned out to be unrealistic, the King did not give up on his desire to lead the country according to his own interests, unimpressed by the views of the leaders of the important political parties. Having the Iorga "experiment", which confirmed that, at least for the moment, the formula of governing over the political parties rule was not viable, Carol came to implement an ingenious idea. This idea seems to have been the perfect compromise between how he wanted to lead the country and how much the political reality allowed him to put it into practice.

Thus, the acceptable formula for the Monarch seems to have been the creation of a Government bearing the logo of a large political party but being led and composed of second-rate politicians (Chistol, 2007). This idea was implemented in early 1934, when, after the election, the Prime Minister and President of the PNL, I.G. Duca, was assassinated, leaving two very important political positions vacant (Chistol, 2007: 114-131). After the transitional version with Constantin Angelescu (Scurtu & Buzatu, 1999: 283-284), just like in a puzzle game, the assassination of the liberal national leader was precisely the missing piece that facilitated the appointment of the Government headed by Gheorghe Tătărescu. It is important to underline that Tătărescu did not held an important position in PNL at the moment of his nomination (Constantinescu, 1973: 350-351; Chistol, 2007: 143-144). Although the position in the party did not recommend him to be the President of the Council of Ministers, Tătărescu seemed to have been the perfect

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candidate for the King. Thus, after his unilateral appointment as Prime Minister (Chistol, 2004: 138; Călinescu, 1990: 200), the Sovereign could benefit from all the gratitude and later loyalty of the young politician.

The „Guță *redivivus*” Government

At the end of 1937, the Romanian political life entered a period of agitation. The creation of the next Government removed any doubt regarding the Monarch's determination for diminishing the influence of the political leaders who questioned his decisions. After the four-year Government of Liberal Gheorghe Tătărescu, the main political concern was the creation of the new Council of Ministers (Scurtu & Buzatu, 1999: 329). The inter-war practice proved that the elections were not the most important political stake, but the creation of the Government; throughout that period, the political parties that organized the elections as Government leader won them every time (Radu, 2004: 132-133). Thus, every political group tried to maximize its chances in the context of creating the new Council of Ministers.

In order to create the impression of working with the Romanian political groups for the appointing Government, on November 9th-12th, 1937, the King organized consultations with the political parties (Chistol, 2007: 588-593, Ilie, 2018: 79-81). It was expected that, after a liberal government, a national peasant one to follow, or, at least, the political colour of the new Council of Ministers to be different from the previous one. But the King had another plan. It seemed that the Sovereign had neither the patience nor the necessary energy to accept a Government composed by politicians who would not follow his orders. Thus, he did not want Iuliu Maniu as a Prime Minister – this political leader was one of his critics – and he did not want either to collaborate with the far more flexible Ion Mihalache (Scurtu, 1983: 365).

In order not to appear that he was discretionary imposing a new Government without respecting the tradition, the King initially handed over the mandate of creating the new Council of Ministers to the president of the National Peasant Party, Ion Mihalache; but, as he was aiming for Mihalache's refusal, the Monarch also attached the condition of collaborating, within the Government, with the anti-Semitic group of Alexandru Vaida Voevod (Carol, 2001: 133). Ion Mihalache's foreseeable behaviour (Călinescu, 1990: 358-359; Carol II, 2001: 133) allowed Carol to act discretionally; it must be underlined that the refusal of the National Peasant leader gave the King the explanation he needed to justify his future actions.

Thus, when he designated Gheorghe Tătărescu (Scurtu, 1983: 372) to create the new Government, the Sovereign wanted to create a social perception that Tătărescu's appointment was the best, if not the only solution in that context. The King's decision, however, surprised both the politicians and the common citizens. Regarding the nomination of the new leader of the Government, Constantin Argetoianu wrote in his daily notes: “It was a general stupefaction. The world was prepared for everything, but not for a Guță *redivivus*!” (Argetoianu, 2001: 227).

The Octavian Goga Government and “the war of the three roses”

The Government led by Octavian Goga was yet another example of a Cabinet that did not respect the political tradition nor the opinion of important Romanian political leaders. The result of the December 1937 elections, when none of the political parties participating in the elections reached the 40% threshold (*Electoral law* from March 26th, 1926, article 90 in the *Official Gazette* no.71 of March 27th, 1926) and

consequently could not use the major prime (*Official Gazette*, no. 301, December, 30th, 1937, Preda, 2011: 168, Radu, 2004: 45-47). Using the result as a pretext, the Sovereign imposed once more its own will regarding the appointment of the Government (Carol II, 2001: 132).

During King Carol II's reign and before that, there were various methods by which, with the Monarch's silent approval, the political party that organised the election managed to exceed that 40% threshold (Radu, 2004: 132-134). Although there is no clear evidence in this respect, however, certain information from that period suggests that Carol II preferred that no party would reach that threshold in the mentioned elections. If one objectively analyses the situation at the end of 1937 in Romania, the result of the election was indeed a very important piece regarding the establishment of the authoritarian regime.

The King, relying on that result, appointed Octavian Goga as Prime Minister, the leader of the fourth-ranked party, who had received just over 9% of the votes in the election (Scurtu & Otu, 2003: 378). An explanation of the King's decision can be found in his daily notes, where he presented the choice he had made as the only solution. Moreover, from the same journal one may find out what was the true perception of the Sovereign regarding the new Council of Ministers: "[...] it cannot be a long-lasting one, and, after that, I will be free to take more forceful measures, measures that will unleash both the country and me from the unpatriotic tyranny of the sneaky party interests" (Carol II, 2001: 134).

Moreover, the small percentage received by the Goga Government did not automatically represent a unified Cabinet; on the contrary, within the Council of Ministers there were created three groups with different political views. The controversies between those groups were described by Constantin Argetoianu as "the war of the three roses" (Argetoianu, 2002: 10).

By analysing Octavian Goga Government, as well as the previous Cabinets, one may conclude that the King sought for Government leaders that could not prevent him from imposing his own will. Whether he appointed obedient Prime Ministers, or that he chose Premieres whose political support did not give them the necessary authority to act independently of the Sovereign's will, King Carol II succeeded in limiting the involvement of strong politicians – who could have a different political view than his own – in the governmental decision-making process between 1930-1938.

The context of establishing the monarchical authority regime

The establishment of the monarchical authoritarian regime was possible by considering both external and internal reasons. In Europe, the dictatorial and expansionist tendencies of the two major extremist powers had already been put into practice. Furthermore, until 1938, most of the European states had dictatorial or authoritarian regimes (Ghițulescu, 2015: 85). Regarding Romania, I must underline a few key aspects that played an important role in creating the favourable context for the establishment of the monarchical authoritarian regime. First, in terms of social support, the legitimacy of the governing political party was rather low (reflected in the outcome of the elections from December 1937). Moreover, the King himself saw this Government as a transitional one, expressing the desire to replace it very quickly (Carol, 2001: 134).

Another favourable aspect was represented by the dissensions within the Goga Government, reflected in the forming of three groups with different point of view and with divergent directions of action (Argetoianu, 2002: 10). Moreover, the anti-Semitic

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measures, that some representatives of the Christian National Government had undertaken, worried the Western democracies – especially the United Kingdom and France (Călinescu, 1990: 365).

In January 1938 another event that disturbed the democratic process was the dissolution of the Parliament resulted from the elections from December 1937. The dissolution of the Parliament before it could be properly created and before its first meeting was a premiere in Romanian politics (Preda, 2011: 170). Moreover, at the beginning of 1938, a new electoral campaign had started, less than a month after the end of the previous electoral campaign (Argetoianu, 2002: 63, 92)

In an overview regarding the interwar Romanian political life, one can observe that the inherent struggles within the political class have been accentuated by the emergence, since the 1930s, of a new “player” – King Carol II; he found himself in a very favourable position in comparison with the other political actors, but still disadvantaged for his public position – as King of Romania.

Towards the end of the 1930s, this situation has led to a state of agitation among traditional politicians. Somehow similar to the atmosphere described by the Romanian novelist Marin Preda in one of his famous quotations, at the end of 1937 and the beginning of 1938, *the time seemed to have no patience* with Romanian politicians. Thus, most of the political leaders were ready for major changes. Unfortunately for the fate of the country, almost every political leader had his own version regarding those changes.

Thus, the political scene appeared as a multidimensional chessboard, in which the power struggle was going on in different directions. In order to highlight the complexity of this struggle, I will mention some of them: the struggle to reach the government, the struggle for the establishment of the authoritarian regime and, implicitly, the struggle to limit the influence of the political parties, the fight against the Legionary Movement, the struggle against the Royal Camarilla.

Almost every time the sides that were confronting had a different composition; this fact led, on the one hand, to the creation of many new collaborations at the end of 1937 and the beginning of 1938 and, on the other hand, a lot of the former alliances were broken. Thus, the political partnerships and collaboration attempts were diverse and bizarre. One example can be relevant – the non-aggression pact signed between Iuliu Maniu and Corneliu Zelea Codreanu (Scurtu & Otu, 2003: 374). This whole framework demonstrates the disorientation and the fragmentation of the political forces and, at the same time, the uncertainty that relied in the Romania during that short period.

The establishment of the Government led by the Patriarch Miron Cristea

Without speculating, this drifting political scene seems to have been exactly what the Sovereign wanted; under these circumstances, he was thus able to play the role of the saviour in its own script.

Working on a plan depicted by Armand Călinescu (Călinescu, 1990: 371-373), the King finalized the scenario of the coup d'état, helped not only by the Interior Minister, Armand Călinescu, but also by Gheorghe Tătărescu and Ernest Urdăreanu (Călinescu, 1990: 377). As every time he had made an important decision, the King wanted at least to leave the impression that the solution he proposed was the result of consultations with relevant policy makers. Thus, after the meetings with the Romanian political leaders (Argetoianu, 2002: 119-121), the Sovereign decided to change the

regime on February 10th, 1938; the first action was the creation of a new Council of Ministers.

Before passing to the appointment of the Government, one must take into consideration some aspects regarding the governmental structure proposed by the Sovereign. In order to do this, we need to consider the initial political premises and the main forces involved. On the one hand, one can see the authoritarian leadership trends of King Carol. Regarding the politicians, it must be noted that although many politicians were ready to join the Monarch's ideas, there were also voices that challenged his plans, the most important opponent at that moment being Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, the leader of the Legionary Movement (Călinescu, 1990: 372). In terms of social perspective, the electoral campaigns were too long and the political battles were increasing; under these circumstances, the common people preferred a change in the political background as well as the order restoration. As previously mentioned, the confusion in the political scene and the anti-Semitic measures worried the Western countries.

By analysing these elements, one can conclude that the governmental structure adopted by the King was a good solution, a compromise between what the Sovereign wanted, what he could achieve from the disputes brought by a part of the political leaders and what Romanian population and the Western countries could accept, without a strong opposition. Thus, on the evening of February 10th and on the night of February 10th-11th, Carol met at the Royal Palace all the politicians who were supposed to join his ideas of establishing the new regime (Argetoianu, 2002: 120). The proposed Government formula had a well-structured composition: the Prime Minister, the group of ministers without portfolios and the portfolio ministers.

As the President of the Council of Ministers it was appointed the Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church – Miron Cristea, whose popularity among the Romanians was undeniable. In the positions of Ministers portfolio, Carol II named former Prime Ministers of Romania, except for Octavian Goga, Iuliu Maniu and Barbu Știrbei. Thus, as Ministers without portfolio, there were appointed Gheorghe Tătărescu, Alexandru Vaida Voevod, Alexandru Averescu, Nicolae Iorga, Constantin Angelescu, Arthur Văitoianu and G.G. Mironescu (Scurtu & Otu, 2003: 782; Scurtu & Buzatu, 1999: 343). This group within the Government formed the Patronage Committee and its unofficial leader was Gheorghe Tătărescu, as Armand Călinescu's wrote in his journal (Călinescu, 1990: 377).

As for the ministers with portfolio or "the Labor Government" (Argetoianu, 2002: 118), a concentrated formula can be described. On the one hand, in *ad interim* positions, one can find former Prime Ministers, who also held the position of State Secretary. This was a very small group formed by only two persons – Gheorghe Tătărescu, who was appointed as Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Constantin Angelescu, who was to lead the Ministry of Public Works and Communications (Scurtu & Otu, 2003: 782).

On the other hand, there were Ministers in Miron Cristea's Government, who simultaneously led two Ministries. A first example was Mircea Căncicov, who headed the Ministry of Finance and Justice. Another example was Victor Iamandi, who took over the Ministry of National Education, as well as that of Cults and Arts. In turn, General Ion Antonescu led both the Ministry of National Defence and the Ministry of Air and Marine (Scurtu & Otu, 2003: 782).

In terms of political variety, most of the members of the first Government during the authoritarian regime were politicians, mostly members or former members of

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National Liberal Party and National Peasant Party; among them – two young leaders of the traditional Romanian parties: the former NPP member Armand Călinescu and the liberal Gheorghe Tătărescu. Four of the presidents of smaller political parties have also joined the Government: Alexandru Averescu – President of the People's Party; Aleaxandru Vaida Voevod – President of the Romanian Front, Nicolae Iorga – President of the National Democratic Party and Constantin Argetoianu – President of the Agrarian Party.

Referring to the composition of the Government, I must underline that the King did not have a problem with the political parties or the politicians, but he wanted to limit or moreover eliminate the collaboration with those politicians who challenged his decisions.

After the new Council of Ministers had been named and the oath-taking ceremony had ended, a first Government meeting chaired by the King himself took place. There were several important moments in this session. Firstly, the Monarch read the statement he was about to address to the country (Argetoianu, 2002: 123-124) and attempted to justify the actions taken. An important document was adopted – the decree-law that introduced the state of siege. In the short term, the document had the task of regulating the maintenance of order in Romania and, in the long run, it had to provide the appropriate framework or, more precisely, the freedom to implement the new regime. According to this document, the maintenance of public order and the state safety become an attribution of the military authorities, which were entrusted to organize searches “anytime and anywhere”. At the same time, it was instituted the censorship of the press and any other publication and any kind of public assemblies were banned (*Official Gazette*, No. 34 from February 11th, 1938).

During the night between February 10th and 11th, 1938, the county prefects (local administrative staff) were replaced with high rank officers. It was also revoked the convocation of the electoral body. Other immediate actions aimed at strengthening the authoritarian regime were the adoption of a new Constitution on February 27th and the outlawing of traditional political parties by a law decree on March 30th, 1938 (*Official Gazette* no. March 31st, 1938). Thus, the King was able to establish the authoritarian regime with no strong reactions coming from the political forces, from public opinion or from the Western democracies.

Conclusions

From the point of view of the approach I proposed, the culmination of the formula of governing over the political parties was achieved by the appointment of the Government headed by Patriarch Miron Cristea. By governing over the political parties, Carol II managed to annihilate the influence of political opponents. More broadly, the formula of governing over the political parties can be described as *governing over the parties that did not subordinate to the Sovereign's plans*, because the King was supported by most of the Romanian political leaders.

In my opinion, when analysing how King Carol II chose to lead the country, one of his major mistakes was that he ceased to be a *mediator* between the Romanian political forces and choose to be a *player* on the political scene. The Sovereign was indeed the most important and influential actor of the Romania in the 1930s and managed to subordinate many political leaders, succeeding also to neutralize the politicians who did not accept his ideas. Unfortunately for him, in the extremely difficult context of the summer of 1940, the descent from the Romanian Throne to the political

arena made him responsible for the political problems of the country and also for the major territorial losses.

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