



## ORIGINAL PAPER

# The role of personal advisors in the Romanian Parliament

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**Abstract:**

This article discusses the role played by the personal political advisors of Romanian deputies and senators in the law-making process, attempting to create a socio-professional profile of the people employed in parliamentary offices and to examine how the recruitment of this type of staff paid from the state budget is organized.

The article uses a methodology based on qualitative and content analysis of semi-structured interviews with former and current personal parliamentary political advisors. The first findings we made show that the majority of personal consultants have higher education, most of them in the field of social sciences. They play a low role in terms of legislative proposals, but have an increasingly significant contribution in terms of carrying out managerial and political communication tasks. Their influence on parliamentarians' decisions is low, and Romanian politicians are still not using them to their full capacity.

**Keywords:** *personal advisors, policy advice, Chamber of Deputies, Senate, parliamentary offices.*

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### Introduction

Through the acts issued by the provisional revolutionary power, Romania returned to the bicameral parliamentary system after 1989. The new Constitution approved by referendum in 1991 and revised in 2003 assigned the Parliament the role of a basic body of the multi-party democratic regime (Olimid, 2009). In the process of transition towards democracy, inspired by the models of consolidated democracies in Western Europe, Romanian parliamentarians have turned to the services of advisors to assist them in their work. In 2006, parliamentary offices and the position of councillors within them were officially established after the adoption of the Law on the Status of Deputies and Senators (Romanian Senate, 2006). The purpose of the law was to clearly regulate the parameters within which the activity of parliamentarians should fall. There was also a delimitation of the boundaries between the activity of political advisors and permanently employed civil servants within parliamentary groups or specialized committees in the Romanian Parliament.

The draft legislation, which is still in force today, contains an article with thirteen paragraphs dedicated to parliamentary offices. The first paragraph provides for the allocation of a sum established by the decision of the joint permanent bureaus of the two Chambers of Parliament, depending on budgetary resources, but “not less than one and a half gross salaries of the deputy, respectively of the senator” (Romanian Senate, 2006), so that members of the legislature can pay their advisors transparently. The law obliges parliamentarians to establish these offices in the constituencies where they were elected, except for deputies representing national minorities and those representing Romanians residing outside Romania. Thus, Romania too saw the establishment of these small institutions called parliamentary offices - which in the United States of America, for example, officially date from 1920, and in France from 1975.

The habit of carrying out parliamentary political activities with the help of political consultants has constantly developed in Romania since that time, but it is far behind France, Great Britain or the United States of America. During this time, some MPs understood that hiring at parliamentary offices can make their work much easier and sought to hire staff trained for this purpose, but there were also those who chose to violate Article 38, paragraph (11) of the law, which provides that: “members of the deputy's or senator's family or relatives/in-laws up to the third degree may not be employed at his parliamentary office” (*Ibid.*). Thus, since 2010, when an online press publication in Romanian first wrote about a phenomenon of hiring relatives at the offices of parliamentarians (Ziare.com, 2010), we have witnessed numerous violations of the law. An illegal practice has been instituted, and it has been present in every legislature. In many cases, MPs lost court trials against the National Integrity Agency and were declared incompatible with holding a public office for a period of time. The involvement of civil society, the media and external institutions has led to a limitation of this practice on the part of some officials.

The greatest pressure for the development of Romanian democracy and the reform of Romanian institutions was exerted by the European Union. Romania had to harmonize its national legislation with EU law and carry out a wide-ranging administrative reform before joining the EU in 2007 (Hintea et al, 2002 *apud*. Cobârzan: 295). Thus, besides the reforms related to the local administration, such as ensuring the decentralization of power, Romanian politicians also adopted a series of draft laws imitating the practice of their Western European counterparts. The practice of appointing special government advisers began in 1998, when the Christian Democrat government

promulgated a government ordinance that institutionalized a support structure for ministers, called the cabinet of dignitaries. Subsequently, legislation establishing a support structure for parliamentarians was adopted, as it already existed in France (since 1975), Spain (since 1997), Portugal (since 2003), and in the European Parliament (after 1992). The European Parliament pays 4060 parliamentary assistants. As little analysis has been undertaken in Romania on the role of parliamentary advisors in political life, the purpose of this article is to create a socio-professional profile of the personal political advisor, to describe the recruitment of these people, to investigate their loyalty to political parties and to assess the role they play in the lawmaking process.

### **Research method**

Taking into account the fact that the activity of personal political advisors is not transparent, and the Romanian Parliament does not make available to the public data about the persons employed in the parliamentary offices, which are considered sensitive information by the parliamentarians, I had to resort to qualitative research methods, namely the qualitative observation method and the semi-structured interview method. The systematic qualitative observation occurred within the Chamber of Deputies during the last two legislatures, between December 2016 and December 2024. Specifically, I analysed the interaction between the deputies of the largest parliamentary groups and their personal political advisors (around ten interactions). I conducted twelve semi-structured interviews with personal advisors from three parliamentary groups, selected according to their level of representativeness. Specifically, both male and female counsellors, junior counsellors, as well as highly experienced professionals answered the questions.

The attitude of the deputy towards his/her personal political advisor, the level of education of the advisor, the way he/she knew his/her employer and was employed, the loyalty towards the employer and the party, the political ambitions of the advisors, all have been tested in interviews and have helped to understand and highlight the general trends in this activity. The data were collected and processed in accordance with the respondent protection requirements, with research tools adapted to the functioning of the Romanian Parliament. In order to obtain the most relevant information, I chose to conduct the interviews as informally as possible, notifying the interviewed advisors from the start that the audio recordings and their names will not be made public, in order to encourage them to respond as honestly as possible during the interview.

Although I managed to obtain the approximate number of counsellors employed at the parliamentary offices, I did not resort to quantitative analysis because in the absence of a solid database including all the personal parliamentary counsellors, it is almost impossible to apply this research method. Consequently, I assume the methodological limitation and the loopholes that this research contains. I do not claim for a moment a high degree of exhaustiveness of the research, but on the contrary, I consider it only an initial work, which can be the basis of much more elaborate analyses.

### **Who are the personal political advisors?**

The counsellor is a person who gives advice. In the New Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian language, the term *counsellor* designates a “person by whom a country leader is advised in leadership matters; an advisor.” (NODEX, 2002). Counsellors, depending on the politicians they work for, can be presidential, governmental or parliamentary political advisors. People who carry out this activity are also called personal advisors, political consultants, collaborators or assistants. Parliamentary advisors are

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assistants to deputies or senators, to whom they offer advice and support, usually of a political nature. Their appointment is essentially a “trust-based appointment” and lasts as long as the respective MP holds that office (James, 2007:8). There are specialized articles that define the person politically appointed by the parliamentarian or minister as a “temporary public official appointed to provide partisan advice..., who is exempt from the requirements of political impartiality that apply to permanent bureaucracy” (Shaw, Eichba, 2018:3). The reason why we do not find in the literature a definition exclusively dedicated to parliamentary political advisors is that most studies in the field of political science or administrative science have focused on the work of political advisors attached to ministers. After all, the parliamentarians' personal advisors have almost the same activities as their colleagues in the government, only they work with a deputy or a senator. As Bernadette Connaughton (2010, 2015) argued, politically appointed staff perform four main types of functions: they are either experts, partisans, coordinators or carers. The work of the political advisors from the parliamentary offices in Romania includes a wide range of activities, from political advice, partisan strategy, initiation of legislative projects to administrative and public communication roles. The parliamentarians' personal advisers are distinguished from the administrative staff by the fact that they are accountable only to the political decision-maker, have flexible working hours and a limited employment contract. The partisan nature of their work and the anonymity under which they work most of the time caused the public to regard them with suspicion. “As advisors, their purpose is to serve the needs of elected officials rather than the public. They assist them in carrying out their parliamentary and ministerial activities, lightening the workload of the chosen elites. However, they must also act as a bridge between elected officials and other agents such as civil servants, media and citizens” (Snagovsky, Taflaga, & Kerby, *quoted work*). Nowadays, each parliamentarian tends to create his own “small political enterprise” by recruiting personal advisors revolving around him for a four-year term. In December 2024, 923 personal advisors were employed in the deputies' parliamentary offices (Chamber of Deputies, 2025), and 95 personal advisors were employed by senators' offices (Senate of Romania, 2025b). These micro teams set up around each parliamentarian are no longer limited to female staff dedicated to transcription and secretarial tasks. The persons who are included in them nowadays must know how to post on social networks, to draw up answers for television shows, to write political statements, to initiate interpellations against the Government, to be able to draft a legislative initiative or to organize a political event. As MPs have become more and more overwhelmed by their current duties or simply grown more comfortable, their advisers have become more and more professional.

In Romania, according to the observations I made in the more than ten years in which I worked in three parliamentary offices, the recruitment profiles have changed, the work has been reorganized, the sectors of activity have diversified, and the profession of parliamentary counsellor has become better known by the general public due to the specialized literature from the United States of America and Western Europe, and better promoted through internship programs; but it has remained as discreet as regards the names of those who practice it. Compared to parliamentary assistants in the West, who have created professional associations and trade unions, who are mobilizing for their status and have increasingly turned political counselling into a profession in itself (Fretel, Meimon, 2015:527), personal counsellors in Romania are each working for themselves. They are not organized in a professional association and there is no database that includes most of them. Their data is held by the Human Resources Departments of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, which are not obliged to make it public.

### Recruitment of personal advisors

The strategies used for the recruitment of personal advisors by the Presidents of the Romanian Senate have been studied for several years by Cătălin Raiu and Ionuț Ciprian Negoită. The study of the two authors, entitled *Bureaucratic Polarization: Balancing Merit and Trust in the Romanian Senate*, reveals that patronage and clientelism are models of weaknesses of a democratic regime and a professionalized state apparatus because the problem of both patronage and clientelism is that they lead to the recruitment of advisors with less experience and doubtful capabilities, which lowers the morale of senior officials and reduces the general expertise of the field in question (Etzioni-Halevy, 2024 *apud.* Raiu, Negoită, 2024:114). This phenomenon is manifested in most parliamentary offices, not just the Parliament's leadership. Usually, one or two personal advisors are hired for their qualities and training, and the others - based on support from the party. The reality is that the recruitment and organization of this type of personnel is discretionary. The interviews reinforced the hypothesis that most of the personal advisors of Romanian parliamentarians come either from a network of clientelism or from political parties. Recruitments based on internships or public competitions launched by MPs after they have been elected are rarer. "I was first a party member, an activist in the party, then I sought deputies or senators in order to be hired as a political adviser. The social capital mattered a lot, the relationships I managed to make within the party and, based on a recommendation, I was contacted by a deputy, I had an online interview, then I was hired". (N.T., personal counsellor with 6 years of experience).

Political activism therefore plays the role of a "trailblazer" for those who want such a career. Those who join the party and work politically become more likely to become personal advisors. They benefit from the clientele relations game between the candidate and his party, as they capitalize in a certain way on the work they have done in the election campaign. In other words, the recruitment of most of the parliamentarians' personal advisors begins before the politician takes office. First there is the establishment of a relationship of loyalty and mutual obligation, then comes employment in the parliamentary office. Out of the 12 analysed situations, in 6 cases the recruitment took place through the party, in another 3 cases it took place on the basis of a recommendation and in 3 cases it occurred following an internship or after the respective persons were noticed in the activity they had carried out previously. "During the internship, I was noticed by a person who held the position of parliamentarian and so I was employed for the first time in a parliamentary office. Subsequently, I continued from one mandate to another." (L.G., personal counsellor with 15 years of experience).

The most difficult step for personal advisors in the Romanian Parliament, as in the case of those in France or Italy, was to be hired for the first time. After a four-year contract, almost all of them continued with the same MP or were taken over by another. "It is a difficult world to penetrate, this world of ours, of political advisors. Do not understand that we take the chisel and the hammer, only that in this environment one enters in two ways: either you are noticed in the internship at the Parliament, or by the traditional way (here he meant - through the party)." (L.G., personal counsellor with 15 years of experience).

A first conclusion we can draw is that it is difficult to get into the network of parliamentary advisors because not everyone who wants to become a personal adviser has the needed relationships. Political circles are quite narrow. The largest party has about four deputies and two senators in an electoral constituency. Once hired, most advisors

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manage to maintain or climb the political hierarchy. “I was recruited to the Parliamentary Office by recommendation on my first employment, on a social case. Subsequently, following the development of relationships with other parliamentarians whom I helped with various services, I continued.” (C.V., personal counsellor with 12 years of experience)

It is easier for political decision-makers to recruit their advisors from the party activist networks, because they already have minimal knowledge of the position, they are often multi-positioned in the party and already know how to use their status for the best connection between the party and parliamentary activity. At the same time, the recruits from among the party members can be more loyal because they share an interest in the partisan game, they are loyal to the party. Instead, these recruitment practices affect the quality of the work of political representatives, because the parties do not necessarily attract the most qualified young people in terms of legal studies, finance, economics or parliamentary diplomatic practice. “Faced with the lack of a guarantee of professional, political and financial stability, personal advisors become dependent on the network of political clientelism to continue their work in different structures of public administration” (Raiu, Negoită, 2024:124). This was also confirmed when most of them stated that they wanted to run for a political or administrative position instead of becoming highly trained personal advisors.

### **Profile of personal advisors in the Romanian Parliament**

Being appointed by the parliamentarian, personal advisors do not need a specific specialization. They can be hired at a parliamentary office even if they do not have higher education, in the position of referent. However, most personal advisors in Romania have graduated from a university. From the data I was able to extract from interviews and from the observations I made, the personal consultants of parliamentarians from the three major parliamentary groups in the period 2016-2024 have higher education with a specialization in Social Sciences, Political and Communication Sciences, Legal Sciences or Engineering. The answers of the 12 personal advisors revealed a ratio of 10 to 2 in favour of those with studies in the Social Sciences. Their interest in this activity arose during college, and most of them got the job shortly after graduating from university. Most of them learned during their work in Parliament what they have to deliver to keep their employers satisfied. “Being a parliamentary collaborator is, in a way, one of the “great schools” of politics, in the sense that it is one of the places for accelerated and intensive acquisition of what can be called the “elective habitus” and also of a network likely to be activated later. In an almost daily and direct relationship with parliamentarians, between imitation and empowerment, the collaborator learns the political game with those who have made it a “profession of faith” (Fretel, Meimon, 2015:528).

The political belief of the personal advisors in the party from which the parliamentarian they serve comes is a strong one. Few would accept to work for an MP from an opposing party, especially those who obtained their position through the party. Personal counsellors who have been hired through a practice program, by recommendation, without the help of party networks, are much more willing to collaborate in the future with parliamentarians from other parties.

The age of the personal advisors in the Romanian Parliament is between 22 and 35 years. Basically, the position of personal parliamentary adviser represents the career debut of political advisors in Romania. In this position, they gain experience, develop clientele relationships and are willing to work for a much lower salary than advisors in the

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Government or in the Presidential Administration. Their main concern is to get ahead and achieve some financial stability. Advancing for them means taking a position as a personal adviser to a minister, party or Chamber president. Some aim higher than that and dream to occupy a position of political adviser in the Presidential Administration or even to run for a political position. Those who come from parties have the desire to run for a deputy position, and the others aim to get a leadership position within the Government. The number of those who excluded any political office is small. Also, the number of those who put the interests of the electorate above the interest of the MP or the party is also small. In general, there is a rift between personal advisors and citizens. In addition to the fact that people working with parliamentarians are more concerned about their own interests and those of the party, they show a certain disregard for the electorate. To the question, "How do you perceive the electorate in Romania?", the advisors have labelled the voting public as: "disappointed", "unstable", "radical", "disengaged", "sloppy", "exposed to disinformation campaigns", "easy to handle", "melancholic towards the Ceausescu regime", "not guilty", "with rational vote", "weirdos", "comfortable", "uneducated", "shallow", "changeable", "kind of uneducated", "uninformed", "faithful to the parties", "unchanged", "pragmatic", "unreliable". In conclusion, citizens are not favourably looked upon by the parliamentarians' personal advisors. All, regardless of political colour, way they were recruited, age, gender or experience, have a rather negative impression of the citizens they have to serve and mobilize to vote. The only ones who were a little more lenient towards the voters were the personal councillors who visit more often in the constituency where their MP was initially elected. This shows that direct communication between voters and the MPs' personal advisors could lead to an improvement in trust between the two parties and, why not, to increased concern from the advisors for the needs of the citizens.

### **Role of personal advisors**

Within a parliamentary office we have two types of personal advisors: those who work from the Parliament headquarters and those in the territory, who work at the physical headquarters of the office. Those in Parliament deal with drafting legislation, formulating questions and interpellations addressed to ministers, writing political statements, managing the relationship with the media, participating in the work of specialized committees and other important meetings. The others remain limited to secretarial tasks – diary management, answering phone calls, contacts with the electoral district and especially correspondence – somehow assisting the members of the team in Bucharest. In many cases, the district councillors work at the headquarters of the branch of the party from which the MP who hired them comes. Their role and influence on the work of the parliamentarian is very small.

When ministerial advisers are studied, there are voices in the literature who argue that politically appointed personnel may even pose a threat to the impartiality of public office and the wider democratic order, because of the influence they hold (Dowding, Taflaga, 2020; Eichbaum, Shaw, 2008). Personal advisors can complicate lines of responsibility, and their presence can negatively alter the decisions of government actors.

In the case of political advisors in Parliament, this finding does not apply. Indeed, they monitor various important sectors such as social rights, defence, taxation and work with the parliamentarian to draft a bill or report (legislative work), but they remain rather limited in their decision. Their sector of intervention in relation to the everyday life of citizens is generally small. This is due to the low influence of parliamentarians, the

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Government legislating a lot through ordinances in Romania. Other explanations for their low influence are their youthfulness and timorous attitude. “There is no very well-developed consulting culture in our country and counsellors are not used at their true value. Parliamentarians who make good laws are helped by people in ministries.” (A.C., personal counsellor to senators, deputies and mayors, with over 8 years of experience). As can be inferred, personal advisors have acquired a special role in parliamentary life, but their influence on politics is still low. Asked if it often happens that decision makers disregard their advice and if it bothers them, most counsellors admitted that in most cases they are not listened to. At the same time, they were not bothered by this situation. “The political consultant must be the right hand of a dignitary. To explain the risks, the benefits, to put on the table two or three working options, to deal with a post, a press release. [...] The final decision must rest with the parliamentarian, because the responsibility and consequences are primarily his.” (V. A., personal adviser to deputies and ministers with 14 years of experience).

Although sometimes they function as real “shadows” – in times of representation and/or legislative work – of the deputy or senator, personal consultants are a fairly invisible staff in the decision-making process. They work in a central institution, in the parliamentary institution, vector of numerous political and partisan tasks, but they fail to overcome the status of assistants subject to the elected representatives who employ them. Specifically, we find that they are part-time officials, willing to prioritize the interests of their party over their own personal beliefs and to prioritize the party and personal ambitions over the opinions of voters.

### Conclusions

If the Romanian Parliament has reached such a low level of trust over the years, the trust of Romanians in the parliamentary institution being around 13% (ISPRI, 2022), this is also imputable to the personal advisers who work around the parliamentarians. Theoretically, they have the mission to facilitate the work of parliamentarians and improve their image in front of citizens. They also have the role to come up with legislative proposals, solutions to citizens' problems and PR actions. The counselling activity, whose functional, professional and political problems we have just shown, presents us with the image of young consultants, with socio-humanitarian rather than legal or economic studies, coming from inside the parties, with personal political ambitions and with low decision-making influence. As for their view of citizens, it is not positive or empathetic. All this data finally leads to a hypothesis that allows us to make the world of personal counsellors more well known. Even if parliamentary consultancy has no major influence, this activity is one of the rare theoretical and practical schools for the training of political auxiliaries, which can serve as a springboard to institutional functions (parliamentary administration, ministerial offices) or partisan (party or parliamentary candidatures) positions. In short, it is an almost mandatory rite of passage in order to enter a world of big politics.

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