



ORIGINAL PAPER

The executive power during King Carol II Monarchical Authoritarian Regime Case study: Constantin Argetoianu's Government (September 28th – November 23rd, 1939)

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Abstract

The appointment of Constantin Argetoianu as prime minister was made in a difficult period both internally and externally: on the one hand, Romania was facing a governmental crisis determined by the assassination of Armand Călinescu, Premier at that time, and, on the other hand, earlier that month – September 1st, 1939 – the Second World War had started in Europe.

In our study, we will focus on the measures taken by Constantin Argetoianu regarding the single political party established by King Carol II – National Renaissance Front – and, also, on the unfavourable circumstances that the new Prime Minister had to manage. The study has five sections, as follows: the context that led to the nomination of Argetoianu as President of the Council of Ministers, the appointment of the government, the policies that the new Prime Minister tried to implement, the stage of development of the single political party and the decisions taken by the government representatives concerning the reconstruction of the National Renaissance Front; last but not least, we will try to identify the reasons that determined Constantin Argetoianu's resignation.

Keywords: *King Carol II, Constantin Argetoianu, executive power, internal policy, National Renaissance Front*

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Introduction

In our paper we present and analyze the government led by Constantin Argetoianu and the measures he has taken as prime minister, focusing on decisions related to the political party created by King Carol II – National Renaissance Front (FRN in Romanian).

For the beginning, we present the context in which Constantin Argetoianu is brought at the head of the government, namely after the assassination of Prime Minister Armand Călinescu and after the brief government of General Gheorghe Argeșanu, responsible for punishing those who were guilty of murder. The second section contains the appointment of Constantin Argetoianu as President of the Council of Ministers. In this part we present the appointing decree and also the component structure of the Cabinet, which proved to be quite close to the formula of the previous government. The third part is dedicated to the measures the Argetoianu government has taken in the field of foreign policy, taking into account the extremely difficult situation which dominated international relations after the outbreak of conflicts in Europe. Here we also examine the decisions the new President of the Council of Ministers has taken on internal level. We will continue in the fourth part by studying the situation of the royal political party (FRN), a party which, at that time, was quite far from the theoretical concept that the monarch had in mind when he created the first Romanian single party system. The fifth part will be dedicated to the measures relating to the organization/ reorganization of the National Renaissance Front. In the end, we present the circumstances that determined Constantin Argetoianu to resign and an overview of his short government, as well as the context of government instability from the fourth decade of the twentieth century and, especially, during the monarchical authoritarian regime (1938-1940).

The context of Constantin Argetoianu's appointment as President of the Council of Ministers

The confusion created by the start of the Second World War had strong echoes in Romania, although our country had officially declared its neutrality on September 6th, 1939 (Mamina, 1997: 176-186). Driven by the aggressive attitude of Germany in the seizure of territories in Europe (Nolte, 2005: 248), the representatives of the Iron Guard considered appropriate to implement the revenge of the death of their Commander, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, by assassinating the one whom they considered to be main culprit. Armand Călinescu served as Minister of the Interior on the time when Corneliu Zelea Codreanu was arrested – April 16th, 1938; a charge which was brought to the Legionnaire leader at the time of his arrest was that of defamation of Nicolae Iorga, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu accusing the historian in a letter that he was “incorrect” and also that he was “dishonest” (Țurlea, 2001: 29). Armand Călinescu was also seen guilty by legionnaires for their Commander's death occurred during the time when Călinescu had both the position of chairman of the Council of Ministers as well as that of Minister of the Interior. Officially, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu was shot during a transfer between two prisons, the reason given being that of having escaped from escort (Țurlea, 2001: 42). Thus, on September 21st, 1939, a group of six legionnaires assassinated the Prime Minister of Romania, Armand Călinescu around 14:00 o'clock, in the street, in the capital (Chivulescu, 1998: 300-301).

The vacant position was filled on the same day by General Gheorghe Argeșanu, who took the oath of office on the evening of September 21st, 1939 (SANIC, *Fund Președinția Consiliului de Miniștrii*, file no. 167/1939: 77-78). The haste with which it

was created that new government was justified by the desire of the King to punish those responsible as quickly as possible (Carol II: 1997, p. 227-228). General Argeșanu was chosen precisely because of his obedience and harshness he showed in the implementation of the revenge plan designed by the King. As for Gheorghe Argeșanu's nomination as Prime Minister, Carol II made brief characterization of the general, in his diary, showing at the same time, the reasons for appointing him: "He is full of energy, fearless, capable of working as well as possible with all ministers, he will assume full responsibility for all measures to be taken to make full cleaning and will avoid interference on political level, because he will listen to what he is told" (Carol II: 1997, p. 227). The same kinds of reasons – non-contesting of orders and fulfilment of the directives regardless of their cruelty – led to the appointment of Gavrilă Marinescu as the Minister of Interior (SANIC, Fund *Președinția Consiliului de Miniștrii*, file no. 167/1939: 77, 79; Chivulescu, 1998: 321; Gafencu, 1991: 339). Repressive measures taken against legionnaires did not have the desired consequence, which was to scare those who were against the regime, but rather aroused sympathy among the Romanian public opinion; on the other hand, some former political leaders have vehemently challenged the harsh measures adopted (Brătianu, Carol II, Antonescu: 1992: 79-82).

Armand Călinescu's death was a major loss for the sovereign (Mihai al României: 1995: 68), a fact that emerges from the many references that monarch makes in his diary during this period. We can find information regarding the Prime Minister Armand Călinescu's death, in King Carol II's diary, information which shows the importance that he had had for the sovereign: "After six years, I did not expect that I had to record a bloody page in the political history of the country. At 2 o'clock, Călinescu was foully murdered by a band of guardsmen" (Carol II, 1997: 225); "Losing the Council's president, Armand Călinescu, is irreparable. I did not find someone in our country to be better match to the mission he was responsible for. Personally, for me, it is an irreplaceable loss" (Carol II, 1997: 226); "I cannot accept that this good and faithful servant is no longer among us and, at the same time, I feel in not only pain, but also a terrible vacuum in my heart. This is not only a crime, but an act of high treason in these times" (Carol II, 1997: 228); "A reaction was produced for me today. *Je me suis effondré* [I collapsed] and I cried in a terrible nervous breakdown all afternoon. I begin to realize that the disappearance of this trustful man is an enormous loss is for me and for the country. [...] I rarely felt in my heart and in my mind a sense of so complete vacuum. One may say that nobody is indispensable; it is true in most of the cases it is, but this is the exception that proves the rule" (Carol II, 1997: 229); "These days are among the worst I have ever spent in my life" (Carol II, 1997: 230).

The main question for that moment was: "Who would be named prime minister?". As the King Carol II himself stated in his daily notes: "Ghiță Argeșanu is a good man, but he is not a politician. He does whatever he is told, but when he takes personal initiatives he has no general view" (Carol II, 1997: 232). Those being the facts, it had to be found a replacement. After rejecting the option of appointing someone from inside the government, the King and his close collaborators, had reached a few conclusions. First, they considered that there must be a continuity concerning the regime established on February 10th/11th 1938; moreover, they concluded that it was necessary to implement a new policy, that of increasing the number of the members of FRN by attracting those political forces who remained hostile to the monarchic authority regime (Carol II, 1997: 231). Thus, the only option of future prime minister was to choose someone from outside the government; this is how the King Carol II describes a possible candidate: "1. He has to be a supporter of the regime and of the FRN. 2. He has to be able to impose [himself]

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to the government and the outsiders. 3. He does not have to be too *colourful* [s. M.I.] in foreign policy. 4. He has to be able to polarize as many people from the outside. 5. He does not have to be a person who would give the government an aspect of personnel government. 6. He has to be full of energy” (Carol II, 1997: 231). At the end of the discussions the King’s choice was Constantin Argetoianu. Although he fulfilled most of the conditions required by the monarch, he was not seen by the sovereign as the most appropriate for being Prime Minister. Referring to the appointment of Constantin Argetoianu as president of the Council of Ministers, Carol II wrote in his diary: „It was very, very hard for me to decide, because not even Argetoianu was the most suitable for this position. He is an aged man and, therefore, he is behind the times; he is an old-fashioned politician and this is bad [...] Today, a worse decision taken without delay is better than a perfect one taken after much hesitation and with a waste of time” (Carol II, 1997: 232, 233).

The establishment of Constantin Argetoianu’s government

The King was put in an unexpected situation when Armand Călinescu was murdered; Gheorghe Argeșanu's government lasted for only one week and, thus, Carol II had to decide again on the name of the new Prime Minister. Rushed to make a decision, the Monarch was trying to find a compromise formula. We have discussed above some points that the King mentioned in his diary regarding the future Prime Minister of Romania; regarding Carol's future decisions, two issues were very important: to continue Călinescu's policy regarding the FRN and the strengthen of the regime established on February 10th/11th, 1938 and to find a Prime Minister. Besides the obedience on following the King’s decisions, the chosen person had to legitimize the regime both at the internal and external level. Constantin Argetoianu who was an experienced politician and, at that time, was a royal advisor (Mamina, 1997: 166) and also held the position of President of the Senate (Scurtu, Buzatu, 1999: 355), best met the sovereign's requirements.

After choosing the person who was appointed to lead the Council of Minister, the next step was the establishment of the Cabinet (SANIC, Fund *Președinția Consiliului de Miniștrii*, file no. 167/1939: 85-86). The list of the new government was composed by many former ministers: Victor Slăvescu – Ministry of Public Works and Communications; Mitiță Constantinescu – Governor of the National Bank, Minister of Finances; Paul Teodorescu – Minister of Air and Navy; Mihail Ralea – Minister of Labor; Nicolae Marinescu – Minister of Health and Welfare; Petre Andrei – Minister of National Education; Grigore Gafencu – Minister of Foreign Affairs; Nicolae Zigre – Minister of Cults and Arts; Professor N.D. Cornățeanu – Minister of Agriculture and Estates; Traian Pop – Minister Secretary of State for making the inventory of public wealth; General Gabriel Marinescu – Minister Secretary of State for public order; N. Ottescu – Minister of Interior; General Ioan Ilcuș – Minister of National Defense; Alexandru Radian – Minister Secretary of State for propaganda management; C.C. Giurescu – Minister Secretary of State for National Renaissance Front organization; Mihail Șerban – Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of Agriculture and Estates; Mihai Măgureanu – Undersecretary of State at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers; D. V. Țoni – Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of National Education; Ion Marin Sadoveanu – Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of Cults and Arts; Deputy general Gheorghe Mihail – Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of National Defense; Victor Jinga – Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of National Economy; Coriolan Băran – Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of the

Interior; August Filip – Undersecretary of State attached to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (SANIC, Fund *Președinția Consiliului de Miniștrii*, file no. 167/1939: 87).

The only changes made in the structure of the new government were: Nicu Ottescu at the Minister of the Interior instead of Gavrilă Marinescu, who was moved to the Minister of Public Order (the Ministry of the Interior was divided into Minister of the Interior and Minister of Public Order). The appearance in the government of two new ministries (Minister for Propaganda and Minister for National Renaissance Front Organization) reveal the weaknesses identified by the monarch both in terms of his regime and also on the poor development of the FRN and anticipates the policy that Carol wanted to put into practice, namely the revival of the Front (Carol II, 1997: 233).

Internal and external aspects regarding Constantin Argetoianu's government

Constantin Argetoianu's appointment as a chairman of the Council of Ministers took place in an extremely difficult period regarding both the external and internal policy. The Second World War had begun a month earlier, on September, 1st, 1939, while Romania was passing through a difficult period, created by the assassination of Prime Minister, Armand Călinescu. Thus, the authoritarian regime of King Carol II, established in February 1938, was facing one of the biggest challenges of its short existence.

The non-aggression pact signed between Germany and the USSR, on August 23rd and violent actions launched by Germany on September 1st, 1939, followed by the great European powers which entered the war (Berstein, Milza, 1998: 136-139), put the Romanian political leaders in a rather difficult situation. The policy of neutrality that Romania adopted in that context was established by the decision of the Council of Ministers, taken on September, 4th, 1939 (Călinescu, 1990: 428; Burcin et al, 1999: 21). Two days later, on September 6th, the members of the Crown Council decided in favour of neutrality (Mamina, 1997: 178-187; Călinescu, 1990: 429-431).

In a period when the political and diplomatic construction of Europe, based on the League of Nations, crumbled, Romania was isolated, with no external support (Scurtu, Otu, 2003: 541), although in theory was a part of Little Entente and the Balkan Entente (Sandache, 1998: 76). In such conditions, the only plausible solution was neutrality, as the Romanian Foreign Minister – Grigore Gafencu – had declared to the German minister in Romania – Wilhelm Fabricius – on August 27th, 1939 (Scurtu, Otu, 2003: 542).

Most of the members of Armand Călinescu's Cabinet were maintained after September, 28th and, following that directions, Romania's orientation in terms of foreign policy also continued. The changes made to the structure of the Council of Ministers covered only domestic policy; maintaining Grigore Gafencu at the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was relevant for the future direction of the external level being (Gafencu, 1991: 337). Bringing Constantin Argetoianu as the leader of the government was a "shy" attempt to demonstrate to the other European states, particularly to Germany, that Romania's foreign policy was a pro-German one, the new Prime Minister being seen as a politician with pro-German opinions. There were voices that challenged even the orientation of Constantin Argetoianu, who was perceived rather as neutral regarding the foreign policy, as Grigore Gafencu himself mentioned (Gafencu, 1991: 339).

The neutrality declared in early September 1939 proved to be an active one. In this respect, an example was the attitude of Romanian leaders on the situation of Poland, which displeased both the Moscow authorities and those in Berlin (Scurtu, Otu, 2003: 543-544). The main guidelines on foreign policy on which the King and the members of

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the government agreed upon imposed: on the one hand, circumspection regarding the policy of the USSR, and that of Hungary and Bulgaria (Carol II, 1997: 248-249), and, on the other hand an attempt to develop better relations with Germany (Nedelea, 1991: 170; Carol II, 1997: 262-263) and Italy (Carol II, 1997: 261-262). At that time, Romanian politicians' biggest fear came from the USSR. The expansionist policy that the great Eastern power had begun to implement made Romania to closely monitor every move of this state. In this respect, the King and some of the members of the government decided to create a block of neutrals (Midan, 2008: 163; Dandara, 1985: 369) that would have as founding members the states that previously (1934) signed the Balkan Pact – Romania, Yugoslavia, Turkey and Greece; two other states – Italy and Hungary were supposed to join that new neutral block (Scurtu, Otu, 2003: 547-554; Carol II, 1997: 259). Disapproved by the major European powers because it would have shown the unity of the states from this region, the project of creating a block of neutrals in the Balkans has proved its inefficiency in the end (Scurtu, Otu, 2003: 553-554).

Supported by the King Carol II, in terms of domestic policy Constantin Argetoianu continued the policy that Armand Călinescu had started. The direction drawn up by the previous government was taken by the new Prime Minister and represented an attempt to develop a strategy that intended to prepare the country for the new international order, mainly the world war that involved most of the great powers from European Continent. In this regard, the King and the representatives of the new government elaborated a set of measures, among which the most important ones referred to: equipping the army, keeping public order and the fight against illicit profiteering.

It should be noted that in addition to the two directions of domestic policy outlined by the sovereign for the premier – that of connecting the country to external realities (by equipping the army, paying attention to public order and fight against illicit profiteering) and the direction of reorganization of FRN, there were other important decisions taken by the government during that period. Among them it is worth mentioning the Law Decree establishing the setting up of the Metropolitan Seat of Oltenia signed on November 8th, 1939 (Argetoianu, 2003: 210).

The situation of the single royal political party in September 1939

The reduced level of development regarding the reorganization of National Renaissance Front is confirmed, on the one hand, by the reality depicted in Carol's diary, the king being disappointed by the poor structure of the single party and, on the other hand, by the changes that the Sovereign made in the structure of the Council of Ministers. Thus, the monarch wrote in his diary only three days after Armand Călinescu's assassination: "Oh, why FRN was not thoroughly organized? It is the only fault I can find to this poor dead man [...] the work should be done quickly and thoroughly in order to create the Front as the political organization capable of mobilizing the national consciousness" (Carol II, 1997: 230). The establishment of a new ministry that had as main purpose to organize the royal political party was a change in the government structure that demonstrates King's determination to increase the FRN influence over the state; this ministerial branch was led by Constantin C. Giurescu (Secretary of State in charge with the organization of the National Renaissance Front).

The Sovereign's efforts did not stop there; he had also established a ministry of propaganda led by Alexandru Radian (Secretary of State responsible for Propaganda). Those important decisions underline the Monarch's determination in opening a new phase in the process of FRN evolution and, thus, in the process of developing his authoritarian

regime. Although he constantly was interested and involved in the progress of the single political party, before September 1939, the King had given most of the responsibilities regarding this political organization to Armand Călinescu; this type of arrangement shows the confidence that the Sovereign had in his Prime Minister. After September 21st, 1939, King Carol II became the *ideologist* of the FRN. He was also the only person involved in the decision making process regarding the new political party and, at the same time, the only person proposing and imposing the method to be followed in order to implement those decisions.

Therefore, the relationship between Constantin Argetoianu and the King appears not only as subordinated, but also as obedient. This fact is also confirmed by the Prime Minister's lack of authority regarding the government program. In order not to leave room for interpretation, during their very first meeting, the King informed the future Premier, as the first point of their discussion, about his position concerning the policy the government had to follow; the main action that Argetoianu had to accomplish was to continue the direction set by the previous government and, at the same time, to strengthen the National Renaissance Front (Carol II, 1997: 233).

Constantin Argetoianu's obedience to the throne can be seen from his desire to please the King both in actions and statements. The newly appointed premier tried to show his devotion to the Monarch, immediately after taking the oath; in this respect, he sent his first Prime Minister speech to the King in order to find out his opinion. That statement appears to have been not only approved, but even appreciated by the Sovereign (Carol II, 1997: 235).

Measures taken by the government on the organization/ reorganization of the National Renaissance Front

In addition to the measures the government has applied for adjusting the domestic policy to the deployment of forces in the international relations, there were numerous attempts to revive the single political party during the short period of Constantin Argetoianu's government. From Carol II's point of view, the National Renaissance Front was a very important part of the authoritarian regime established in February, 1938; that was the reason why the single political party received special attention from the Monarch after Armand Călinescu's death. Regarding the FRN, the King believed that there was a need to implement a more aggressive policy (Carol II, 1997: 239) described in his diary as "political revival" or "the start-up" of the royal political party. In this respect, the Prime Minister – as the voice of the government – and the Sovereign had different opinions on how quickly the reorganization of FRN should be implemented: "Yesterday evening, the Council of Ministers decided *the start-up* of FRN on November 1st. The King, however, wants us to start faster. We will start on Monday, 16th [of October], on His Majesty's birthday" (Argetoianu, 2003: 180).

By choosing his birthday as the date for launching the new policy regarding the development of the Front and by according a special importance to the organization of this event, Carol demonstrated once again that he wanted to transmit to the public opinion that the country, the monarchic authoritarian regime, the royal political party and the King were four entities interconnected and having the same value. The sovereign desired to create a strong and sincere solidarity of the people with the King, with the regime established by him and also towards his decisions; the citizens' instrument for demonstrating their attachment to the King and his ideas was the National Renaissance Front.

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Thus, on October, 16th, 1939, starting from the *scenario* developed by Carol II, Constantin Argetoianu, supported by ministers and leaders of the single political party, has put into stage the project of re-launching the Front, by organizing big events all over the country. The FRN Manifesto was read by Constantin C. Giurescu as the starting point of the impressive events (SANIC, Fund *Ministerul Propagandei Naționale. Presa internă*, file no. 403/1939: 120-125; Țurlea, 2006: 140). Constantin C. Giurescu was the author of the Manifesto, while the Prime Minister and the leaders of the FRN were contributors in elaborating this document; the act was presented to the Monarch at the beginning of October, 1939 (Carol, 1997: 239). The list of measures taken by Argetoianu for better organizing the political party continued with publishing the royal decrees of appointing FRN's secretaries of provinces and counties and also with printing *Romania* as the official newspaper of the FRN. Both the King and Armand Călinescu supported the idea of publishing this newspaper and from its very beginning it was put under Cezar Petrescu's direction; however, the periodical was not issued as the official newspaper of the National Renaissance Front until October 1939 (Scurtu, Otu, 2003: 396).

To accomplish another Sovereign's request, namely the increasing of the number of FRN members (Țurlea, 2010: 311), Constantin Argetoianu discussed with the leaders of the traditional political parties (Argetoianu, 2003: 180-181, 204-205, 215); by the Law Decree from March, 30th, 1938, the activity of traditional political parties was declared illegal. The President of the Council of Ministers did not succeed in increasing the number of the former political leaders that supported the monarchical regime. Various leaders, such as Iuliu Maniu, remained hostile to the regime and the FRN (Argetoianu, 2003: 224; Bruja, 2006: 189)

As chairman of the Council of Ministers, Constantin Argetoianu signed the decree of establishing the National Student Front, an organization which mandatory registered all students from Romania (the Law Decree on setting up the National Student Front was published in the *Official Gazette*, no. 242, October, 19th, 1939). This organization was following Carol's policy to politically enrol the population in the regime established on February, 10th/11th, 1938. Thus, according to their age, Romanian citizens were enrolled either in "Straja Țării" (Guard of the Country), or in this new organization – the National Student Front, or in the single political party – the National Renaissance Front.

Conclusions

The controversies between the sovereign and the President of the Council of Ministers appear soon after Argetoianu's appointment, each of them having his own version regarding their disputations. Thus, the King perceived Argetoianu as being increasingly absent during meetings with ministers, characterizing him as disinterested and lacking in initiative (Carol II, 1997: 252-255, 273). On the other hand, the Prime Minister, who initially had assumed the continuation of Armand Călinescu's policy and had become responsible for some unpopular initiatives, began to move away from this position, considering that the Monarch should take responsibility for his own decisions (Argetoianu, 2003: 218). In this context, the King decided to replace Constantin Argetoianu, putting him in the position to resign, and brought Gheorghe Tătărescu to the leadership of the Council of Ministers (Carol II, 1997: 275, 286-289).

Analyzing Constantin Argetoianu's short government – September 28th to October 23rd, 1939 – we can draw two key observations. On the one hand, this period is characterized by precipitation in the external relations and confusion on internal level, the last one being caused by the assassination of the President of the Council of Ministers,

Armand Călinescu. The King's and the Prime Minister's attempts to govern the state are not the result of a previous politically plan, but rather the result of trying to individually solve the arising problems. On the other hand, the analysis of the government period leads to the observation of dysfunctional relationships between the sovereign, Carol II and the Prime Minister, Constantin Argetoianu, each of the two starting from different premises regarding the cooperation between them and at the same time, having often different views on the decisions that had to be taken. The relationship between the King Carol II and the Prime Minister Constantin Argetoianu could not save the National Renaissance Front and could not prevent Romania from entering the World War II.

Both in terms of duration and in terms of royal dismissing of the governments, as well as in terms of the manner that the Monarch understood to interact with the President of the Council of Ministers, the government led by Argetoianu fits perfectly in the broader context of government instability that characterized the reign of Carol II and, especially, the monarchical authoritarian regime (1938-1940).

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