



ORIGINAL PAPER

10th/ 11th of February 1938 in Interwar Romanian Politics: an *Almighty* King and a Political Class on its Knees

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Abstract:

The paper presents the internal context that led to the establishment of the authoritarian regime and also describe the unfolding of the events of February 10th/ 11th, 1938. It is also analyzed the plan for establishing the regime and, at the same time, the way that the King Carol II positioned at that moment on the Romanian political scene. Another purpose of the research is to identify the relation between the King and the Romanian political class and to observe the manner in which the Sovereign has capitalized on the authoritarian position that the new regime has offered him.

Keywords: *King Carol II; political class; coup d'état; authoritarian regime; Council of Ministers.*

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Introduction

The monarchical authoritarian regime established on the 10th/11th of February, 1938, although lasted for a short period of time – just over two years, until September 1940 – had a deep political significance. Thus, the actions undertaken in February 1938 by King Carol II put an end to that period of interwar Romanian democracy, during which, despite various shortcomings that can be mentioned, Romania experienced a democratic regime. From the perspective of Great Romania, this is the only period that can be seen as a landmark of Romanian democracy until what followed after December 1989. One should not forget that the authoritarian monarchy, viewed at a historical scale, was the first of the undemocratic stages which Romania experienced successively over the next 5 decades. After the abdication of Sovereign Carol II, the Antonescu regime followed and, after some preliminary stages, the communist regime was established.

Thus, a simple calculus shows that the last one hundred years of Romanian history were divided in approximately equal proportions between the democratic and the undemocratic regimes, for which reason I consider very important to study and to understand this regime of the authoritarian monarchy, as well as the dictatorial periods that followed it.

In my opinion, the understanding of the Romanian non-democratic periods is essential, because it allows us to have a pertinent opinion on the Romanian political culture and, more importantly, a clearer picture of how politicians and common people perceive politics and how should they make things happen on the political stage. In other words, studying and analyzing the mechanisms and essential aspects of undemocratic regimes, facilitate the understanding of the way in which, in democratic times, politicians and populations, whose mentality was created during undemocratic periods or at least influenced by those periods, understand to act or relate with the political plan.

The context of establishing the monarchical authoritarian regime

Although I will not insist on depicting the external plan, there must be pointed out some essential aspects that characterized the period between the two World Wars, aspects that influenced to a great extent what happened in Romania between 1938 and 1940. Thus, the interwar period, although it was characterized by a relative stability for Europe, represented, at the same time, the period in which the extremist left and right (Communism and, respectively, Fascism and Nazism) were developed and strengthened. Towards the end of the interwar period, there were already two extremely powerful totalitarian regimes in Europe that manifested their expansionist intentions in an ostentatious manner. In the 1930s, there was a significant increase in the undemocratic actions taken by influential political leaders; it was therefore created a climate of uncertainty that led to the emergence of authoritarian and dictatorial regimes in most European countries (Nolte, 2005; Cîrstea and Buzatu, 2007; Bernstein and Milza, 1998).

Returning to the internal plan, the prerequisites for the establishment of a new regime were primarily created by the outcome of the December 1937 elections; at that moment, for the first time in the interwar legislative elections, none of the political parties participating in the elections had reached the 40% threshold, in order to benefit of the first majority and, thus, to form a parliamentary majority (*Official Gazette* no. 301 from December 30th, 1937; Carol II, 2001: 132; Preda, 2011: 168). The direct consequence was that none of the parties was entitled to ask to be the leader of the executive branch (Mamina and Scurtu, 1996: 122).

This result allowed King Carol II to appoint Octavian Goga as the head of the Government; Goga was the leader of the Christian National Party, the party ranked fourth in the elections, with only 9,15% of the votes. The Monarch's plan – as he himself stated in his diary – was to replace the Council of Ministers, after a short period of time, as the new cabinet did not have any legitimacy to lead. About the Government led by Goga, the Sovereign wrote in his daily notes: “[...] 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).

Without detailing the composition of the new Government headed by Octavian Goga, it should be specified that Armand Călinescu was appointed in the new Council of Ministers in a key ministry, namely the Ministry of Interior. Why can this be important? Because, as one will see, Călinescu had become one of the King's trustworthy men (Carol II, 2001: 135; Călinescu, 1990: 364, 366) and, at the same time, he was one of the most important supporters of the Sovereign's desire to move towards an authoritarian government.

According to the practice of the interwar period, after the appointment of a new government, legislative elections were to be held; thus, on January 18th, 1938, by his royal decree, Carol dissolved the parliament just before its first meeting and, at the same time, he set the dates for the next parliamentary elections – March 2nd for the Chamber of Deputies and March 4th-6th for the Senate (Argetoianu, 2002: 42; Preda, 2011: 170). As a result, less than a month after the end of the previous elections (December 1937), a new electoral campaign started in late January and proved to be even more intense than the previous one. In this new electoral campaign, which obviously did not bring stability, but even stirred the spirits, there were numerous acts of verbal and physical violence (Argetoianu, 2002: 63, 92).

In order to complete the overall picture of the context for establishing the authoritarian regime and understanding how precarious the internal situation became, it is necessary to recall three other essential aspects: the situation inside the Government, the slight repositioning of the parties on the political scene and the international reactions to coming to power of an extreme right party in Romania.

Regarding the Government, there were major dissensions within it, a situation that was far from effective collaboration; three groups could be identified within the Cabinet: the group around the President of the Council of Ministers, Octavian Goga, a group that had its own vision of the anti-Semitic measures the Government had to take, obviously formed around the professor A.C. Cuza and, last but not least, the national peasant group around Armand Călinescu (Argetoianu, 2002: 10). The latter was the one who was leading the Ministry of Interior and the one who was only responsible for orders coming directly from the King. Paradoxically, this has led, in the context of the electoral campaign, to repressive actions of the police against the representatives of the National Christian Party – the Government leading party (Scurtu and Buzatu, 1999: 335). The divergences within the Council of Ministers were notorious in the era, Constantin Argetoianu calling them as *the three roses war*, alluding to the three groups mentioned above (Argetoianu, 2002: 10).

Regarding the repositioning on the political scene, I would like to underline a sensible tendency of regrouping, as it was the reunification of the National Liberal Party by the union of NLP led by Constantine I.C. Brătianu with NLP headed by Gheorghe Brătianu (Scurtu, 1983: 393). As far as the National Peasant Party is concerned, there

were some discussions of “rebuilding” the party by uniting it with the Romanian Front, a political party led by one of the former NPP presidents, namely Alexandru Vaida Voevod; the reluctance of Vaida Voevod prevented the unification (Călinescu, 1990: 365; 367). Another example in the direction of regrouping on the political stage was represented by the discussions on creating a *constitutional block*, but the negotiations among Gheorghe Brătianu, Iuliu Maniu, Alexandru Averescu and Grigore Iunian, did not materialize (Scurtu and Buzatu, 1999: 337).

A different repositioning can be seen with regard to the two largest parties on the Romanian political scene, namely the National Liberal Party and the National Peasant Party. Thus, both parties declared to be against the Legionary Movement; this situation resulted in an improvement in the relations between the two political groups (Scurtu, 1983: 393-394). It is worth mentioning that, after a long period, both were at the time in opposition. Moreover, after the discussions between the leaders of the two parties a possible collaboration was in sight; this collaboration had as a starting point the desire to maintain the democratic regime and, externally, to respect the traditional alliances of Romania (Scurtu and Buzatu, 1999: 337).

Concerning NPP, it is worth mentioning the exclusion of the centrist group, consisting of Armand Călinescu, Virgil Potârncă, Vasile Rădulescu-Mehedinți and Dinu Simian; the explanation of their exclusion is that they had accepted the Monarch's offer to enter the Government led by Octavian Goga (Chivulescu, 1998: 72-79).

Regarding the Legionary Movement, it is important to underline the refusal of the representatives of this political party to continue their collaboration with NPP (Scurtu, 1983: 394), a collaboration that took place during the electoral campaign from December 1937, on the basis of the Non-Aggression Pact, signed between Iuliu Maniu and Corneliu Zelea Codreanu (Scurtu and Otu, 2003: 374). In the meantime, the Legionnaires undertook actions aimed at suggesting a takeover of power in the near future by the Iron Guard; these actions included the setting up of a commission for the development of a new constitution and the establishment of schools for mayors and prefects (Țurlea, 2001: 27).

Various tensions were recorded within the governing party – the National Christian Party (Călinescu, 1990: 366). One of the main reasons for the dispute was that NCP had been formed by joining the National Christian Defence League (the leader of which was Professor A.C. Cuza) and the National Agrarian Party (led by Octavian Goga). The merger had been a formal one in many counties, which led to even violent conflicts between the Goga and Cuza groups, the main factor determining the tensions being the division of administrative positions (Scurtu and Buzatu, 1999: 335).

Concerning the international reaction, it should be noted that both politicians and the Western press, especially those in London and Paris, were worried about the establishment of a new Government in Romania led by a party with an extreme right-wing orientation (Călinescu, 1990: 365).

To those reluctances coming from outside, Sovereign Carol responded by ensuring on maintaining the country's foreign policy, faithful to Great Britain and France. In this respect, for example, Istrate Micescu was appointed as head of Foreign Ministries. He attended the university courses in Paris, being a law graduate and a law doctor in Paris. At the time of taking over the Foreign Ministry, Istrate Micescu was a professor at the Faculty of Law in Bucharest, Carol calling him “the smartest of all”, referring to the members of the Government (Carol, 2001: 135).

The plan and the preparations for regime change

The accentuation of the internal contradictions, on the one hand, worried the Western democracies, and on the other hand, concerned the population, which seemed to expect an action meant to stop the aggravation of the Romanian political scene and the numerous acts of violence recorded within the new electoral campaign.

It was, apparently, exactly the atmosphere that King Carol wanted; moreover, in that context, he chose to play the saviour's role. It is important to keep in mind that the plan for the events from February – March 1938 was drawn by Armand Călinescu. He was truly the man behind the scene of the authoritarian regime; he was, in fact, the mastermind that elaborated the strategy under which the authoritarian regime was to be imposed. The sovereign chose to take into account Călinescu's opinions, because he began to trust him and he appreciated the clarity and the efficiency with which Călinescu managed to transpose his authoritarian ideas in the form of concrete solutions.

A detailing of that plan can be found in Călinescu's journal in which he reports the audience to the King he had on January 31st, 1938. To observe the defining role played by Armand Călinescu, I will mention some of the proposals that he exposed to the Sovereign during the meeting, ideas that will be found transposed into practice, point by point, in the immediate future. Călinescu spoke initially about the decline of political parties, considering them unable to manage the internal political situation and qualifying them as “true associations of speculating the benefits of the power”. The Interior Minister continued by emphasizing the anarchy of the electorate, the serious situation in which the country was found and the role of the sovereign as arbitrator.

After the bleak radiography he made on the political situation, Armand Călinescu finally came to present the possible solutions. Thus, he considered it necessary to change the constitution, but to maintain the individual rights and the parliamentary regime (Călinescu, 1990: 372). According to the Interior Minister's view, the constitution was to be subjected to a plebiscite, and with the changes introduced, a government with enlarged powers would be established, a government that can no longer be changed by the Parliament. At the same time, he proposed that a strong personality should be brought to the leading of that Council of Ministers. The King was supposed to be the only decision maker within the state and a proposed solution was the outlaw the political parties (Călinescu, 1990: 372-373).

The plan proposed by Armand Călinescu was finalized the next days and on February, 9th, the small team proposed for implementing the plan organized a meeting. This group was led by the Sovereign, who brought his trusted man, Ernest Urdareanu, at that time Administrator of the King's Domains; they were joined by Armand Călinescu and Gheorghe Tătărescu (Călinescu, 1990: 377). The last two were the leaders of the young generation of each of the two major Romanian parties, NPP and NLP.

10th/11th of Februarie, 1938: the unfolding of the events

In order to establish a new regime that would have given him even more freedom regarding the decision making process, the Monarch had theoretically two solutions: either he would give a coup d'état and impose by force his plan, or he would try to persuade the political leaders to join him in order to give to the public the impression of a consensus regarding the change of the political regime. The solution chosen by Carol II did not fit perfectly into any of the two scenarios.

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Realizing that he could not implement the plan to establish a personal regime by force without arousing reactions of disapproval from both the population and the political class, the King sought to obtain the approval of as many politicians as possible for his political project. An important aspect of the internal context, capitalized by the Sovereign, was the division of the political class, which led to the emergence of two political blocks at the end of 1937 – the pro-carlist and the anti-carlist one (Chistol, 2007: 601; Ilie, 2018: 83-84).

Helped by the precarious internal situation and showing political ability, the King managed to choose the most favourable solution for himself. Thus, without resorting to violent alternatives and at the same time without accepting any deals with the politicians – deals that could have compromised his initial plan – the Sovereign managed to persuade most of the personalities consulted to join him in the attempt to impose his authoritarian ideas. It should be noticed that the lack of cohesion of the Romanian political class has turned Romanian political parties and their leaders into an easy prey for the dominant King, who used them as puzzle pieces, each having its own role in legitimizing the royal actions.

Regarding the unfolding of the events, the February 10th, 1938, was a busy day, with the Sovereign discussing with most of the former presidents of the Council of Ministers and most of the leaders of the major political parties. Regarding the leaders of the two large political parties, they had different views on approving Sovereign's ideas. If both C.I.C. Brătianu and Iuliu Maniu refused to participate personally as part of the new governmental team, regarding the participation of the members of the political groups they were leading in forming the Council of Ministers, the opinions were different. Thus, the president of NLP agreed to the accession of Gheorghe Tătărescu and other national liberals to the government, while the president of the NPP said he would not support the presence of national peasants within the Council of Ministers; the latter, however, said he would not try endanger the King's plans (Scurtu and Otu, 2003: 385; Mușat and Ardeleanu, 1988: 792). The major resemblance was thus that the two political leaders positioned neutrally, by actions and affirmations; none of the two were at that moment ready to criticize or oppose to the actions of the Sovereign. The only political leader that did not take part at the negotiations was Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, whose opinion was not requested since at that time he was the fiercest opponent of the King (Călinescu, 1990: 372).

Following those prior discussions that the Monarch had with some of the country's major political leaders about his intentions (Argetoianu, 2002: 119-121), Carol II invited at the Royal Palace, the politicians who were to be part of the future Government, on the evening of February, 10th (Argetoianu, 2002: 120).

In short, the team formed by the Sovereign had three essential components, the overall intention being to create a government that the public opinion will accept and even support. The three major components were: the President of the Council of Ministers, position where a prestigious person had to be placed; the group of the state secretaries without a specific portfolio in which former Prime Ministers entered, and last but not least, ministers with portfolio; those last positions were filled by well known politicians that the Sovereign accepted at the end of the negotiations with the party leaders.

The first move regarding the establishment of the new Government was to put the Council of Ministers under the leadership of Patriarch Miron Cristea. He was a respected personality in Romania and he was involved in the events that led to the union

from 1918. Miron Cristea was also elected as the first patriarch of the the Romanian Orthodox Church in 1925, in a country that was overwhelmingly Orthodox Christian (Nedelea, 1991: 145-150). For the patriarch this was not the first attempt to enter Romanian politics; during the period 1927-1930, he was one of the tree regents in charge with leading Romania. From the perspective of the King's plans, Miron Cristea's anti-Semitic position was another advantage.

In order to strengthen the approval from the political leaders, the Government also included ministers without portfolio – the title used was that of *state secretaries*. Those positions were occupied by former Prime Ministers: Constantin Angelescu, Gheorghe Tătărescu, Arthur Văitoianu, G.G. Mironescu, Alexandru Vaida Voevod, Alexandru Averescu and Nicolae Iorga (Argetoianu, 2002: 121; Mamina, 1997: 163). From the list of former Prime Ministers, only three of them did not join the new Government – Iuliu Maniu and Octavian Goga, who did not accept King's proposal and Barbu Știrbey, who was not invited because of Sovereign's personal reasons (Scurtu and Buzatu, 1999: 344).

That group of state secretaries without portfolio was named by Carol as the Patronage Committee, as the King mentioned in his daily notes, inside that committee, Gheorghe Tătărescu proved to be the person that Carol was relying on. At the same time, the King's trustworthy man in the Government continued to be Armand Călinescu (Călinescu, 1990: 377).

“The Labor Government” – as Argetoianu called it (Argetoianu, 2002: 118) – had the following members: Armand Călinescu – Ministry of Interior, Gheorghe Tătărescu – Ministry of Foreign Affairs (interim), Mircea Cancicov – Ministry of Finance and interim at the Ministry of Justice, Victor Iamandi – Ministry of National Education and interim at the Ministry of Cults and Arts, General Ion Antonescu at the Ministry of National Defense and interim at the Ministry of Air and Marine, Gheorghe Ionescu-Sisesti – Ministry of Agriculture, Domeins and Cooperatives, Constantin Argetoianu – Ministry of Industry and Trade, Constantin Angelescu – Minister of Public Works and Communications, Voicu Nițescu – Ministry of Labor and Dr. Ion Costinescu – Ministry of Labor, Health and Social Welfare (Scurtu and Otu, 2003: 782).

After the establishment of the new Council of Ministers and the finalization of the declaration that the Monarch was to address to the country in the attempt to justify his decisions (Argetoianu, 2002: 123-124), for maintaining the order in the state, special actions were taken. The most important document in this respect was the law-decree through which the siege was introduced (*Official Gazette* no. 34 from February 11th, 1938). According to this document, all that was related to the maintenance of public order and state security passed into the hands of the military authorities; it was stated that the Ministry of Interior, a minister under the direction of Armand Călinescu, was the one supervising the police actions and also ensuring the general safety. Thus was stated that the military authorities had the right to search "wherever and whenever it will be require". Censorship of the press and any publications was instituted; at the same time, meetings of any kind were forbidden.

In order to have the entire country under control and at the same time to prevent possible negative reactions from the population, during the night between 10th and 11th of February, was decided that the prefects of counties would be replaced with senior officers (*Official Gazette* no. 34 from February 11th, 1938). The reason is easy to understand, since among the leaders of the Romanian Army Carol II not only had officials who were devoted to the Crown but also a real support given by the army

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leaders since his return to the country in June 1930 and manifested throughout all his reign.

Thinking perhaps that problems might arise if elections were held, the Monarch also decided to revoke the elections (*Official Gazette*, no. 35 from February 12th, 1938). The situation of the legislative power became clear: the parliament emerged after the elections held in December 1937, as we mentioned earlier, had been dissolved and the organization of the new elections was cancelled (Ghițulescu, 2015: 212). Thus, taking the representatives of the legislative power out of the scene, the Sovereign could concentrate only on controlling the executive forum.

Reactions regarding the events from 10th/ 11th of February 1938

As far as the political leaders were concerned, they did not hurry to take action against Carol II's decisions; moreover they approved the Sovereign's authoritarian plans, showing that they were willing to collaborate within the Government established by the King. It is important to note that the political class not only lacked the necessary cohesion to act as a whole and to form a strong legislative power, but more precisely those politicians whose main mission was to legitimate the democratic parliamentary system and thus to limit the authoritarian tendencies of the executive branch, namely those chose to join the Monarch's political team and support his authoritarian plans.

Regarding the approval that the King received from the political class in the establishment of the new regime, I would like to note that a simple calculus of the results of the December 1937 elections shows that the political parties supporting Carol II represented, best case scenarios, less than half of Romanians' votes. The two political leaders Iuliu Maniu and Corneliu Zelea Codreanu and hence two political parties NPP and the Legionary Movement obtained 35,92% and respectively 15,58%, thus together more than 50% of the votes. We can conclude that the two political leaders were speaking in behave of more than 50% of the voters when they were expressing their opposition regarding the authoritarian regime of the Monarch.

The two were the only political leaders that challenge the establishment of the new regime. Thus, if initially Iuliu Maniu stated that he would not oppose the royal plans, shortly after, he manifested his disapproval regarding the King's decisions through a speech held in front of his party members and also trough a letter he addressed to the Patriarch Miron Cristea (National Archives of Romania, Fund Inspectoratul General al Jandarmeriei, file no. 6/1938, p. 20-21). Corneliu Zelea Codreanu positioned himself also against the new regime, but realizing that the new political context was not at all favourable, on February 21st announced the dissolution of the party he was leading – "Everything for the Country".

Regarding how the population perceived the change of the political regime, the limited information available in this regard proved that the events of February 10th, 1938 did not determined vehement reactions among citizens. For the common people those decisions were meant to put an end to the political instability registered since 1937. Thus the population expressed the hope that the rather poor internal situation would improve and the aggravation on the political scene will diminish.

One of the main actions of the Government was to develop a new constitution, subjected to a plebiscite (Constantinescu, 1973: 412) and adopted on 27th of February; this fundamental law had the role of legislating King's actions. Another important decision, that paradoxically struck the political class – which had not only claimed it but actually helped Carol II to establish the new regime – was to outlaw the political parties

through the law-decree from March 30th, 1938 (*Official Gazette* no. 75 from March 31st, 1938).

The year 1938 thus appears to be an extremely favourable one for the Sovereign, who became the only one in charge of the decision-making process. Carol II, together with the political team gathered around him, managed to implement the authoritarian plans and at the same time annihilate the actions of the so-called opposition.

Conclusions

In my opinion, a better plan to impose Carol II's authoritarian ideas could not have been outlined. Thus, with the proposed cabinet, where politicians of various political colors entered, except the two mentioned before, Iuliu Maniu and Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, the King succeeded in obtaining the support of the political leaders and formally of the political parties led by them. In other words, many of the Romanian political leaders put "their signatures" on the act of the coup d'état orchestrated by the Monarch. From this point of view, it is essentially to observe the political abilities that Carol II showed in February 1938.

Because in February 1938 the Monarch did not exclude the leaders of the political parties from the plan he wanted to impose, it is the reason why I chose to put in the title that the political class was *brought on its knees* and not that it was *defeated*. Moreover, those leaders became the main support that King Carol II had in the early 1938. As it was previously mentioned, the second ally for the Sovereign was represented by the army through which he managed to control the situation in the whole country.

Recalling the proposed wording of the title, that the King was *almighty* and the political class was *on its knees*, February 10th/11th truly represents a moment of utmost domination of the Sovereign who became a very powerful leader and who succeeded to subordinate a large number of politicians; excluding Iuliu Maniu and Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, the rest of the relevant political leaders, and implicitly the parties led by them, gave their consent to the Monarch to impose the authoritarian regime.

In conclusion, wishing to speculate the difficult situation existing at the European level, which among the Romanian population produced, if not panic, at least worry, Carol II decided to undertake the power and to become the only leader of the country. Helped by the disorganization and conflicts within the political class, the Sovereign even attempted to pose as the saviour of the Romanian nation. Either he did not take into account the possibility of a failure of his plans, or simply chose to ignore the possible negative results of his actions, it is certain that the Monarch, by monopolizing the state power, assumed a huge responsibility. In violation of the principle of the balance between privileges and obligations, Carol II put himself in the precarious position of becoming the main person responsible for possible failures. The outcome was not a good one for the King who, as we know, in September 1940 paid with his throne the decisions he made.

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