**Selecting candidates through deliberation: The effects for Demos in Romania**

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**Abstract**

Over the last two decades several Romanian political parties advertised inclusive and open candidate selection but often ended up with decisions taken by central level elites. Demos, a party formed in 2018, is the first to use deliberative democracy for candidate selection. The deliberation included the party members and took place online in in December 2018 – January 2019, with several moderators and facilitators coming from the party ranks. This article analyses the effects produced by this deliberation process for the internal life of the party and for its external image. The analysis uses interviews conducted with party members who coordinated or were actively involved in deliberation.

**Keywords:** deliberation, candidate selection, intra-party divisions, legitimacy

**Introduction**

The idea of inclusive candidate selection is not new among the Romanian political parties. Since 2004, when the social democrats were the first ones to organize primaries for candidate selection (Gherghina, 2013, 2014), several parties referred to this procedure as a potential avenue to follow. Yet, little has been done in practice and so far only in the European elections. In 2014, the youth branch of the liberals chose their candidates based on online primaries. In the preparation for the 2019 election, a newly emerged party used intra-party deliberation to select its candidates. This is the Party of Democracy and Solidarity (Demos), founded in June 2018 by a group of academics and activists. It was initially launched as a civic-political platform in September 2016, which continued to function in parallel after the party's registration. This platform is relevant for the party's decision-making process next to party's decisional fora. The party positions itself on the left side of the political spectrum aiming to be an alternative to the social democrats, which are the successors of the communist party (Grzymala-Busse, 2002; Pop-Eleches, 2008) and winner of the popular vote in all but one parliamentary election in post-communist Romania.

Demos can be seen as a connective or as a digital party. The "connective parties" are defined as "organizations in which technology platforms and affordances are indistinguishable from, and replace, key components of brick and mortar organization and intra-party functions" (Bennett, Segerberg and Knüpfer, 2018, p. 1676). The digital party is the contemporary equivalent of the mass party and presupposes the use of technology to inform its members about activities or to engage them (Gerbaudo, 2018). Both these models replace the classic vertical / hierarchical structures with assemblies, forums and interactive processes,

and promotes communication between party members and sympathizers instead of a top-down decision-making process. This kind of interaction means a continuous dialogue between the party organization and its sympathizers, promoting higher transparency, trust and ultimately legitimacy. The online platform used by the party brings together the elites, members and sympathizers to discuss ideas and reach decisions. All major decisions, including the political program, agenda and leadership were the outcome of deliberation, open forums and online polls. Unlike all other parties in the country, Demos has no president but a collective leadership. This article aims to identify both the internal and external consequences of deliberation for Demos. The qualitative analysis rests on interviews conducted with party members involved in the coordination or actively involved in deliberation.

Demos is a relevant case for analysis because it is the first party in Romania to use deliberation for candidate selection. The other contributions to this symposium show how this approach is increasingly used in Europe especially by newly emerged parties. The party has showed a strong preference for deliberative forms of democratic engagement, quite similar to what discussed by Barbera and Rodriguez-Teruel in this symposium. As a newly emerged political party, Demos had to set up procedures to select its candidates for the 2019 European elections, the first major electoral competition in which it could participate. The party statute provides general guidelines and principles, but makes no references to specific procedures (Demos, 2018). In addition, the relatively low party membership held the risk of diminishing the legitimacy of a candidate selection process that would involve a small number of people. To enhance the legitimacy of the candidate selection procedures, the party

leadership decided to use deliberation on the online platform where sympathizers could also express opinions.

**General features of the deliberation in Demos**

In this article, deliberation stands for what is known in the literature as Type II deliberation. This involves "more flexible forms of discourse, more emphasis on outcomes versus process, and more attention to overcoming 'real world' constraints on realizing normative ideals" (Bächtiger *et al.,* 2010, p. 33). In demos, the deliberation took place both online and offline. The online deliberation took place between November 2018 and January 2019 and used a closed Facebook group. Several party members in the central office acted as moderators. All members had Facebook accounts, could freely post, initiate a debate and make comments. Occasionally, during the deliberation, due to high level of conflict, moderators closed the comments section. In the light of the definition we use for deliberation, the Facebook discussions can be seen as deliberative exchanges. The offline deliberation complemented this process and consisted of several weekly meetings open to all party members and sympathizers. These meetings started in November 2018 and took a three-weeks break around winter Holidays. In addition, the offline deliberation included two forums open to party members and sympathizers. The forums were organised at the end of November 2018 and mid-January 2019 and had on the agenda the preparation for the European elections, the selection of candidates and the structure of the list.[1]

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[1] In the European elections Romania uses a closed-list PR system.

The results of deliberation indicate that party members, members of the civic platform and active sympathizers could be selected as candidates. This decision rests on three reasons: the desire to remove the borderline between party members and sympathizers, the provision of incentives for future membership enlargement, and the limited pool of recruitment due to low membership. The forum participants also decided by vote that 2/3 of the candidates have to be women, the main argument being to address the under-represented category of women in Romanian politics. With this, the party intended to send a positive signal and to encourage women to become party and platform members.

The decision about the women quota on the list led criticism within the party in the aftermath of the forum discussions. Critics pointed at 1) the substance of the proposal, which contradicts the party statute that refers to gender alternation as a core value and bears the risk of projecting an image of Demos as a niche party, hence limiting its electoral potential, 2) the procedures that were flawed because the proposal was not submitted well in advance to the party and platform members and thus the pros and cons were insufficiently debated before the forum and 3) the "excessive" horizontalism of the decision-making process that could endanger the party's institutionalization and could result in random results.

Facing this harsh criticism, the party leadership withdrew the decision, arguing that the party statute regarding gender alternation has to be modified to allow for a 2/3 share of women on the list of candidates. A new two-day extraordinary forum was scheduled for mid-January 2019 to decide changes to the party statute, the structure of the list and the candidate selection. Until the extraordinary forum, all candidates had to submit their applications, which were supposed to be voted online. The selectorate included the same three categories that

attended the previous forum: party members, the platform members and the platform sympathizers. All these had to register online in order to get the right to vote. Until the new forum, online deliberations and weekly meetings were open to these categories of voters.

Although some face-to-face deliberation took place during the weekly meetings, due to the winter holidays most deliberation took place online, with no predefined procedures or rules, except the moderation ensured by a few party members or leaders. The deliberation focused on the structure (with 2/3 of the candidates being women) and on the composition of the list. The most contentious issues during the deliberation were the possible presence on the party's lists of several under-represented groups: women, sexual minorities and ethnic minorities. All three groups are under-represented in Romanian politics, inside the party and also on the platform. However, the public commitment of the party in support of those groups and active recruiting of members and possible candidates among the under-represented groups succeeded in attracting a large number of women, a transgender person and a Roma person as candidates for the electoral lists.

The extraordinary party forum was organized as planned, which was characterized by intense debates and discussion, and resulted in several decisions taken by vote. It approved the list structure with 2/3 women candidates together with a change of the party statute. It also selected and established the order of candidates on the list according to the number of votes. The voting placed at the top of the party list a Roma woman belonging to a neo-protestant minority, activist for social housing, victim of evictions and social exclusion.

**The effects of deliberation**

In line with the goals of this symposium, our analysis distinguishes between institutional and policy effects and focuses on the former for Demos. The institutional effects investigated here are the communication established by the party organization with the electorate, internal fragmentation, and the legitimacy acquired by the party. To assess these effects, we conducted six semi-structured interviews with party members from various positions: one ordinary member, one from the public relations office, two from the secretariat and two from the executive committee. The secretariat is a broad category that includes all secretary positions in the party, including those affiliated to the executive committee. There is gender balance among the interviewees and their I also some variation with respect to age. An overview of their profiles is included in Table 1. The questions evolved around the deliberation that took place within the party and touched upon themes such as the use of social media, the legitimacy of the process, internal fragmentation, efficiency of the process and pros and cons of deliberation.

**Table 1: An overview of interviewees profiles**

| Interview No. | Gender | Age | Party position |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| I1 | Male | 40 | Secretariat |
| I2 | Female | 38 | Public relations office |
| I3 | Male | 29 | Active party member |
| I4 | Female | 40 | Executive committee |
| I5 | Female | 30 | Secretariat |
| I6 | Male | 40 | Executive committee |

*Communication with the electorate*

The communication with voters lies at the core of party activities since they aim to get electoral support. Earlier research identified two major forms of communication with voters: at the level of elites and involving the party organization (Poguntke, 2002). Elite communication means direct messages initiated by party leaders or visible party members, usually those who are elected in public office. The second type of communication uses the party organization as an intermediary to establish the connection. Deliberation contributes to the second avenue and the involvement of party members and sympathizers in the decision-making process sends clear messages to the electorate. Demos used the avenue of organizational communication with a deliberative component for both ideological and pragmatic reasons. Its left-wing ideology, with features of inclusiveness and equality, showed an inclination towards dialogue and variety of opinions. The pragmatic reason was the absence of a leader who could mobilize the electorate through direct communication. As explained by one of our interviewees "Demos has no public figure whose notoriety overpasses the one of the party. In all other political parties, the image of the party overlaps entirely with the image of the party leader; this is not the case with Demos. We do not have leaders" (I2).

The deliberation process used by Demos for candidate selection increased both the online and offline communication between party elites, members and sympathizers. For example, one of the interviewees explains that "the communication became more intense since the leaders were contested during the deliberation by the members or sympathizers and they had to reply, to come up with explanations. Following these deliberations, more

party forums were organized" (I5). Although the party was always open to communication with members and sympathizers, the frequency of interactions has increased during the deliberation for candidate selection and list structure. Between 1 December 2018 and 13-14 January 2019 (the days of the extraordinary forum), the number of exchanges and comments on the online platform related to elections and candidates almost doubled compared with the previous period. This led to the empowering of some groups of members and sympathizers, who are usually silent in the traditional hierarchical structure of intra-party decision-making. As one of the interviewees puts it "the fact that people who were not party members could vote and also candidate created a chance for some marginalized categories, such as Roma people or members of the LGBT community, to be present on our lists" (I5).

The inclusiveness of the candidate selection process sent a clear message to the electorate regarding a new way of doing politics. Overall, the process of deliberation consolidates Demos' identity as a horizontal, open and transparent party, quite different from what the other actors in the Romanian party system do. This type of message has the potential to mobilize the electorate: "Of course, externally is was of help to present the list as a result of an inclusive democratic exercise, because many thought this was a strategic, electorally motivated move from the Demos leadership who decided to put on the top of the list a Roma woman" (I3).

*Intra-party cohesion*

There are two ways in which the use of deliberation could have an effect on intra-party cohesion. On the one hand, it can be argued that deliberation can increase the cohesion

between the units of the party by providing an arena on which discussions are informed, reasoned and balanced. On the other hand, broad inclusiveness in core organizational processes could be a source of tension because it gives voice to isolated opinions and undermines the position of committed participants (Scarrow, 2013; Bennett and Segerberg, 2014). The emergence of emotionality in the deliberation process can induce stronger cognitive biases and promote extreme partisan views (Rosenblum, 2010). The deliberation in Demos followed this second path and resulted in intra-party divisions.

It did so by enhancing the homogeneity of some groups at the expense of the unity of the entire party. The process of deliberation empowered some groups of members and sympathizers, who used it as an opportunity to promote its own interests: "Following the deliberation on the electoral list and candidates, a group of people became more coagulated, pushing its own agenda and, this way, confiscated the space for debate, because they are very vocal and intolerant" (I6). The emergence of strong groups led to the creation of tensions as clearly indicated by one of our respondent: "I think internal fragmentation and the emergence of some party factions for supporting some candidates is a negative effect, it leads to internal conflicts and polarization (…) I think the party is now divided as a result of this process" (I5).

The intra-party division in Demos resulting after deliberation may be explained by the gradual stepping away from the rules and procedures of deliberation. The reasoned, informed and conscientious arguments were partially replaced by emotionality rooted in the high level of disagreement about certain issues. In some cases, this disagreement touched upon very personal, identity related issues, such as feminism, gender or sexual orientation. Another possible explanation has to do with the extensive use of the online over the offline format.

While offline meetings were organized on a weekly basis and the extraordinary party forum lasted two days, coming in fact at the end of the deliberative process, the online deliberation were much more frequent and more engaging. The online deliberation attracts partisans who do not commit to the party building process, but who are eager to interact. These are people who look for ad hoc engagement and who are usually strongly opinionated without necessarily having a broader picture of the process. While on-line platforms satisfy the connectedness desideratum, they "seem ill-suited as basic building blocks of a deliberative model of intra-party democracy" (Wolkenstein, 2016, p. 24). All this happened in Demos, as explained by two of our respondents, "Facebook is a very toxic environment for any debate, people become radical" (I6) and:

> The risk is that the deliberative democracy becomes the dictatorship of those who accuse more, who blame more and have a louder voice. One needs political education, maturity and mutual respect to engage in deliberation, not partisanship that quickly leads to accusations of racism, sexisms, and transphobia (I2).

*The perceived legitimacy*

In the context of this deliberation process, we refer to legitimacy as to the grassroots subjective approach in which the public assesses the relevance and quality of institutional performance. Citizens decide if political institutions are acceptable, they want to comply with their decisions and they support them (Tyler, 2006; Hurrelmann, Schneider and Steffek, 2007; Levi, Sacks and Tyler, 2009). The involvement of members and sympathizers in the candidate

selection process is expected to increase the legitimacy of those who are selected. This can happen through inter-personal reasoning as the guiding principle as opposed to the bargaining between competing interests (Parkinson, 2003, p. 51).

Based on these theoretical arguments, the selection of candidates through deliberation was expected to be quite legitimate. In the words of one member of the central office "The deliberative format also increases the legitimacy, by providing accurate information about what people want and think" (I6). In practice, the legitimacy effect was limited because there was a broad contestation of the procedures used to select candidates. The criticism was oriented against the absence of pre-established criteria for candidacies, which could filter applications and inform voters. This led to a situation in which two candidates withdrew from the electoral list after being voted and two members of the decisional party executive and ethical committees resigned as a sign of disagreement with what happened. All these gave a bitter taste to both the party elites and members who acknowledged that the level of legitimacy was below expectations. One person in the central office explains that "there were also negative effects and the legitimacy of the list and of the entire process could have been higher" (I5), while a party member contends along similar lines "the legitimacy of the list could have been higher, this is what we expected, but unfortunately many have contested the results" (I3).

There were also some radical views, which contested even the minimal achievements about legitimacy:

I do not see a direct link between the deliberation and the legitimacy of candidates. Many aspects regarding the list did not make the subject of debate, were not discussed at all, the selection criteria were not debated, everybody's candidacy was accepted, according to the rule 'let's see what we get'. Then, afterwards, many voices contested the list, the order of candidates on the list (I2).

**Relevance for the broader field of study**

This brief analysis shows how democratic deliberation does not always produce the intended consequences for a political party. On the contrary, if it is not carefully prepared and organized, it can have a boomerang effect and produce negative outcomes. More precisely, Demos used deliberation for candidate selection to enhance the communication with its electorate, to stabilize the intra-party cohesion and to provide legitimacy to the final list of candidates. Out of these three, the communication with the electorate improved as a result of deliberation. This followed two paths: 1) the members and sympathizers became more active in the internal life of the party throughout the discussions involved by deliberation and 2) the broader electorate got to know about the democratic procedures used internally by this party and could perceive it as an outlier among the other Romanian parties, which are usually non-transparent and centralized when it comes to candidate selection. The external consequences of deliberation, reflected in the communication with voters, allows for parallels with the Czech Pirate Party or the Danish Alternativet presented in this symposium, which used deliberation to forge coalition agreements or enhance legislative activity.

The unintended effects of deliberation include higher divisions within Demos and the weak legitimacy. These were mainly due to the poor preparation of the deliberation, without

much attention paid to the procedures. The interviewees indicate the absence of broad information, well-defined rules for deliberation, mechanisms to re-establish consensus or to avoid the hijacking of the deliberation by several strong groups that pursued their interests. One of the shortcomings was the basic access to information: "the deliberation was flawed by the lack of information, because deliberation means that everybody receives information, in a structured manner, regarding the debated issue and then you deliberate" (I4). The general idea of clear rules has been explicitly highlighted by two respondents: "If there are no established mechanisms to re-create consensus, then the effects can be damaging for the party" (I1) and "the negative effects are not the due to the deliberation process as such, but rather to the way it was implemented (…) If we could have anticipated these tensions, we could have had managed them better, but we were not prepared. We should organize this better in the future" (I5).

Another indicator of the precarious preparation was that several Demos members saw the process as being time consuming and with questionable results when it comes to party's ability to compete in the political arena. Many saw the deliberation as absorbing crucial and limited party resources, thus having a negative impact on other campaign related aspects such as the party manifesto, the production of electoral materials, support mobilization or fund raising. The view of the process as inefficient is well summarized by one respondent: "The deliberative process resulted in a rather long timeframe for the decision making, sometimes we cannot stay connected to rhythm in which things change on the political arena due to this time-consuming process" (I5).

Finally, the deliberation was not intended to complement other mechanisms of decision-making but rather to replace them. Political action, which is crucial for newly formed political parties willing to run in their first elections, could not be replaced by deliberation because the two have different logics. It could be argued that the extensive use of deliberation can be detrimental to political action as long as there is nothing else in place. In the words of one central office respondent "If deliberation is used in excess and any internal authority is contested because everybody decides on everything, then this is a problem. It is as if you appoint a government, elect a parliament and then for every small decision you organize a referendum" (I6). Equally important, a competitive environment in which people are not prepared to accept other opinions is barren soil for deliberation. Demos appears to have committed the error of rushing into deliberation without ensuring the climate to allow it functioning: "We must work more on creating a compromise-oriented culture inside the party, so that the deliberative process becomes more efficient" (I5).

All these illustrate that deliberation is not a cure for all diseases. Although it has many virtues, deliberation does not fulfil tasks and cannot replace procedures that are linked to bodies of political representation. Successful deliberation requires careful consideration to its functioning principles, thorough preparation and readiness to address problems that may emerge. The case of Demos is illustrative for how deliberation can fall short on producing the intended consequences when these requirements are only partially covered.

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