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Tying loose ends: political parties and individual private funding in Romania

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ABSTRACT
Private funding in election campaigns has traditionally been studied in relation to its consequences or to private companies. However, we know little about why individuals privately fund political parties. This paper aims to identify the drivers for such behaviour in the context of the campaign for the 2020 parliamentary elections in Romania. We analysed all 98 individuals who paid extra-large membership fees, made donations, or provided high-value loans to political parties. The results show that the money provided by individuals in campaigns is given for narrow and egoistical interests rather than party-related goals. These include maintaining a favourable status quo, securing further nominations, gaining access to public office, moving from central to local politics, and acting as a smokescreen between companies and parties. These observations are not party-specific but characterize the entire political spectrum.

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Private funding; individuals; self-interest; public office; central politics

Introduction

Private funding is an important component of campaigns in many democratic elections around the world. While private funding can have positive effects on political competition, especially in countries where public funding is limited, there is a broad consensus in the literature that it can also generate problems in the electoral process. Earlier research has gone in four main directions to address the problems raised by private money in political campaigns. First, private funding can provide resources for some political parties to buy votes from the population (Auyero 2000; Nichter 2008; Stokes et al. 2013; Mares and Young 2019). Second, private money may create a vicious horizontal circle in which political actors and private companies establish long-term relationships that reinforce each other (Gherghina and Volintiru 2017; Das and Maiorano 2019; Aspinall and Hicken 2020). Third, political parties appoint people they trust or who contribute financially to their campaigns to key positions

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in order to control access to resources and to keep these individuals indebted (Berenschot and Aspinall 2020; Kopecký et al. 2012; Klíma 2019). Fourth, private money can be used to buy public offices in many countries, irrespective of those countries' experience with democracy, political culture, or general level of corruption (Radford et al. 2020; Amundsen 2013).

So far, private funding in election campaigns has been extensively studied in relation to its consequences and by linking money trails to private companies. However, we still know little about what drives individuals to engage in private funding for political parties. This paper seeks to fill this gap in the literature and aims to identify the drivers for individual private funding in an election campaign. We look beyond companies and show that the money provided by individuals – including ordinary citizens, elected politicians, and appointed officials – to candidates in campaigns is intended to facilitate the pursuit of narrow and egotistical interests. Understanding the contributions of private individuals to campaigns is relevant because these can form the basis for a longer chain of corruption that negatively affects the political and economic development of a society. The article makes a theoretical contribution to the study of campaign funding by enriching the meaning of private funding through the addition of the individual component. It also makes an empirical contribution by presenting evidence illustrating how this mechanism works in practice and why individuals engage with it.

The present analysis focuses on the 2020 parliamentary elections in Romania, chosen as an exemplary case of a situation in which political parties amassed extensive private funding, although they also received generous public funding, especially when they were in parliament. The analysis covers the private funding received by six relevant political parties, of which three are established parties, two were formed in the last decade and and one was established prior to the 2020 elections. We rely on data collected from the reports filed by parties and submitted to the Permanent Electoral Authority in Romania. The units of analysis are all the individuals who paid a fee, donated, or provided a loan higher than the thresholds discussed in the research design. We use narrative analysis that rests on a 'before and after' type of investigation into individuals' professional development, which matches the private funding in which they engage with their political or public office careers. While interviews are the ideal method to gauge their intentions when making private contributions, the topic is highly sensitive, and our attempts to interview some of these individuals were unsuccessful, as potential respondents either ignored our attempts to interview them by not replying to our e-mails or declined the invitation for an interview even though anonymity and confidentiality were promised in line with the standards of academic ethics. As such, our analysis instead uses CVs and public records to identify the career trajectories of everyone who engaged in private funding during the 2020 legislative elections. The information comes from the website of the Permanent Electoral Authority, the websites of the Parliament Chambers,[1] the personal websites of the people engaged in private funding, and news reports from central and local media outlets (for details, see the research design section).

The next section reviews the literature on private funding by individuals during election campaigns and explores what these individuals expect in return. The third section presents the research design, with an emphasis on the case selection, data sources, and methods of data collection. Next, we present a brief overview of Romanian party politics, public funding regulations, and the revenue and expenditure of Romanian parties. The fourth section presents our interpretation of the results. The conclusions summarize the key findings and discuss their implications for the broader field of study.

Private funding during election campaigns

The private funding of political parties is considerably higher during election campaigns than at other times. This usually consists of membership fees, company donations, and individual donations (van Biezen 2004). The idea behind individual private funding is closely linked to private funding from companies. Donations made by individuals and companies are often difficult to separate, as companies' CEOs individually donate money to parties separately from their companies' donations (Gherghina and Volintiru 2017). This theory section begins by exploring the general arguments related to private funding (including company donations) and then narrows the focus to individuals.

The literature on corporate electoral donations explores corporate owners' intent to maximize profits. The latter strategically donate money at election time so that the company's manager can influence the policy-making process in matters that directly concern it after the donated party wins the elections (Evertsson 2018, 41–2). Private sector companies sometimes play an important role in the electoral mobilization of their employees (Mares et al. 2018). They can also offer preferential employment, party donations, or direct cash benefits through vote-buying, and in exchange for their mobilization and monitoring services, these private sector actors can receive preferential access to public contracts (Gherghina and Volintiru 2017). Private sector actors can also be targeted for resource extraction through corruption by publicly employed party brokers who cannot extract benefits from the state but through the state functions they control, as in the case of Greece (Trantidis and Tsagkroni 2017).

Corporations donate money to parties for two reasons: pragmatism and ideology. The first refers to making donations to the party deemed to have the best chance of winning in exchange for lobbying opportunities. The latter refers to donations to the party the company feels closest to ideologically to influence the election result in their favour (McMenamin 2012). Private funding is accompanied by two types of expectations from donors: short-term, when results are envisaged immediately after elections (e.g., policy influencing opportunities) or, in the longer term, in the form of future lobbying opportunities (Power 2020, 32). Moreover, once the recipient party gains access to government positions, private contributors expect to become recipients of public procurement to maximize their economic profits (Hopkin 2005; Kera and Hysa 2020; Gherghina and Volintiru 2017). In other cases, donors expect to secure specific political positions (Radford et al. 2020).

Individual private funding

Moving beyond corporate donations, individuals also engage in the public funding of political parties. The literature provides two major categories of reasons why this happens: 1) economic rationality and related theories argue that individuals pursue their own interests when giving money to parties, and 2) several strands of literature identify drivers beyond utility maximization related to altruism, ideology, or the pursuit of reciprocity.

Let us begin with economic rationality, by which individuals can be considered self-interested and rational and seek to maximize their utility (Mueller 2003; Persson and Tabellini 2000). By donating money, they expect favours from politicians that can come in different forms. In political activities that do not involve high costs, the approach to maximizing utility is not relevant, but the situation changes in the case of significant private contributions (Hopkin 2004). However, this cost-benefit approach may be problematic if the costs of the contribution exceed the donors' benefits in exchange for the contribution. Although significant donations that could have an electoral impact can lead to the return of political favours, this approach mainly explains what motivates smaller donations. Larger donations are often instrumental, and can be made for a variety of reasons such as 'purchase orders, protection from punitive legislation or sanctions, political patronage, the seeking of access to decision-makers and entree into desirable circles' (Fisher 1999, 20–21).

Other relevant theoretical contributions to understanding the determinants of the donation decision associate private election funding with political investment in the purchase of benefits (Gill and Lipsmeyer 2005; Morton and Cameron 1992; Snyder 1990). In simple terms, private donors purchase post-election services with pre-election donations (Gill and Lipsmeyer 2005). The market for donor investments in election campaigns is similar to an asset market where contributors invest money, which is then returned through other favours only if the chosen candidate or party wins (Snyder 1990). Along similar lines, the relationship between donors and politicians can be understood through the lens of the principal-agent theory, where donors interested in maximizing profits are the principals and politicians who depend on private resources are agents (Fox 2012, 191–92). The rent-seeking theory posits that companies finance political candidates because they expect that public contracts and favourable legislation will appear on the political agenda as a result (Evertsson 2018).

However, individual party funding is not limited to maximizing donor self-interest and material gains. Some argue that it may also be related to altruism and considerations of fairness, equity, equality, and reciprocity (Komter 2007, 101). There is a relationship of reciprocity and equality between donors and parties in the sense that private donors expect their favour to be returned by the parties to an equivalent extent (Komter 2005, 48). The reasons behind individuals' desire to give are not related to obtaining material, economic gains in return as in the case of utilitarian thinking, but rather, they are related to gains such as influential positions, prestige, and power (Evertsson 2008, 38). Ware (1992, 76–77) seeks to identify a middle ground between the economic theory approach and the opposite approach that sees donations as an altruistic gesture. He proposes that the two perspectives should not be approached separately but as points on a continuum, where at one end, A finances B, only if B will support A, and at the other end, A supports B without a specific interest in mind. There is evidence supporting the existence of this middle ground since the reasons why individuals donate money in election campaigns vary from access to political office and material gains to feelings of solidarity and social benefits (Francia et al. 2003).

Donors from political action committees in the US are mostly motivated to gain access and political influence in shaping legislation. At the same time, individual donors are ideologically motivated and uninterested in establishing long-term relationships or opportunities with political candidates (Barber 2016). Prior research indicates that usually, these donors are wealthier, more ideological or even ideologically extreme, more educated, and more politically active (Hill and Huber 2017; Barber 2016; Francia et al. 2003). Private electoral funding has been compared with political participation: party funding can be driven by the same factors that motivate individuals to get involved in other types of political participation. People do not always expect certain benefits in return for their participation (Ponce and Scarrow 2011). Instead, individual private funding is sometimes rooted in the belief that it can change the outcome of elections. Donations may be perceived as complementary to voting in an attempt to change the election stakes (Hill and Huber 2017). The alternative to electoral donations as political investments (see above) is that small donations can be seen as a form of consumption that does not require direct material benefits in return. This type of donors can be portrayed as 'consumer contributors,' and their contributions can be determined by their ideological beliefs, the persuasion of others in their social network, or simply because they have the resources to do so (Ansolabehere et al. 2002, 20).

All these prior studies indicate that private donations can be associated with multiple factors. This study proceeds inductively, as described in the next section, to identify the extent to which instrumental factors applied to individual funding in the 2020 legislative election in Romania. Our approach does not capture the specific factors beyond utility maximization because we rely on objective data collected from the candidates' behaviour rather than enquiring about their reasons. For example, we could not gauge the potential role of ideology in the individuals' motivations to donate because this could only have been done via interviews.

Research design

To identify which of these drivers work in practice, we focus on the private funding provided to political parties by individuals in the most recent legislative elections in Romania (December 2020). The individuals involved can be private citizens, elected politicians, or appointed public officials. The country is an appropriate setting for our study because political parties accumulate large sums from private donations at every election cycle, despite receiving generous public funding. According to the reports published on the website of the Permanent Electoral Authority in Romania, these sums have increased for many parties over the last decade (Permanent Electoral Authority 2022). Moreover, earlier evidence indicates that some Romanian political parties sought private donations from various individuals in exchange for political favours (Gherghina and Mişcoiu 2014).

We focus, in this study, on the private funding received by all six political parties represented in the Romanian parliament before the 2020 elections. The parliamentary parties receive most of the public funding, which covers their regular expenditure related to campaigns and (in theory at least) limits their incentives to search for private funding. According to Law 334/2006 (chapter 3), the public funding to parties is allocated as follows: 75% is divided between parliamentary parties proportionally to the votes received in the legislative election, and a further 25% is divided between all political parties (including the parliamentary ones) proportionally to the votes received in the local election. There is a very high correlation between the vote distribution across political parties for local and legislative elections since these two types of elections are usually organized six months apart.

The six political parties are People's Movement Party (PMP), National Liberal Party (PNL), Pro Romania (PRO), Social Democratic Party (PSD), Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) and Save Romania Union – Freedom, Unity and Solidarity Party (USR-PLUS).[2] Four of these six parties gained parliamentary representation after the 2020 election, while PMP and PRO failed to pass the electoral threshold.[3] Of the six parties covered by our analysis, three are established, and three were either newly emergent before the 2020 elections (PRO) or formed in the last decade (PMP and USR-PLUS).

Data and sources

Our analysis covers the private funding provided by individuals and firms to political parties in the form of extra-large membership fees, donations, and loans. Law 334/2006 (Art. 3) lists five sources of funding for a political party: its own activities, state funding, membership fees, donations, and loans. The first two sources are irrelevant to this analysis since they refer to parties' own generated revenues and public funding. We focus on the remaining three sources, which fall into the realm of private funding either from individuals or companies. Loans must be repaid within three years, but in the absence of a clear mechanism to control for repayment, these loans resemble donations.

The regulations set caps for all three types of private funding relative to the minimum monthly gross salary at the national level. In January 2020, this salary was 2,230 RON,[4] which is approximately 450 EUR. Party membership fees can only be paid by individuals and cannot be higher than 48 gross salaries (21,600 EUR). There is no total cap for membership fees, and parties must declare all fees that exceed ten gross salaries. For donations and loans, there are three types of caps: an individual can donate or loan to a party up to 200 gross salaries (90,000 EUR), a company can do so up to 500 gross salaries (225,000 EUR), and the total cap on private donations and loans is 0.025% from the public budget that year. Candidates can make private donations as long as the sums are within 60 gross salaries (27,00 EUR). All donations exceeding ten gross salaries are done through bank transfer and cannot be confidential; their details are included in the official revenue declaration that parties must submit to the Permanent Electoral Authority. The consequences for exceeding the maximum limit of public funding stipulated by law are fines and the suspension of public funding (Law 2006).

To account for the large sums of money, we selected all membership fees higher than ten minimum gross salaries (5,000 EUR) and all donations and loans above 100 minimum gross salaries (44,500 EUR). The threshold for membership fees corresponds to the legal requirement, while for donations and loans, we set the thresholds with two empirical criteria in mind: unusual sums and feasibility. First, the sums above the threshold of 100 gross salaries are very high for donations, and they are a considerable financial stretch compared to ordinary donations that are much smaller (e.g., 10–12 gross salaries). We set the threshold for loans at the same value for consistency reasons. Second, these thresholds filtered out the small contributions that individuals have a limited impact on the party and would have made the analysis very difficult. The latter is related to the extensive search and verification of sources required in the data collection for this study. The membership fees covered in this study cover 100% of the total fees reported by parties, almost 30% of the total private donations, and 100% of the total private loans.

This analysis covers all 98 individuals who paid a fee, donated, or provided a loan higher than the thresholds mentioned above. The decision to focus on larger sums was made to help us gauge the instrumental motivations, with smaller donations being more frequent and possibly motivated by non-utilitarian factors (e.g., ideology). We focus on the last step in the donation process, in which the individuals give money to political parties without examining the sources of funds. For example, we do not question if they are from the individuals' own resources or comprise money from interested businesses conveyed to the party via individuals. Since companies may donate money and have done so in the past in Romania (Gherghina and Volintiru 2017), we did not expect to find many incidences in which individuals are the middlemen. The data for private funding, CVs, and political careers comes from the website of the Permanent Electoral Authority (Permanent Electoral Authority 2022), the websites of the Parliament Chambers (Chamber of Deputies of Romania 2022; Senate of Romania 2022), the personal websites of the people engaging in private funding, and news stories from media outlets at national (*Adevarul, Gandul, Evenimentul zilei, Mediafax, RealitateaTV*) or local level (e.g., *Jurnal valcean, Ora de Sibiu, Mesagerul hunedorean, Pagina Olteniei, Ziarul de Iasi*). In the case of the news stories, we tried to locate more than one source per individual to avoid any misinterpretation caused by potential media reporting bias.

Method

To understand the drivers behind extra-large membership fees, private donations and loans made by individuals, we use narrative analysis. This type of analysis positions the story as the object of investigation. The story is what we do with the research materials (Riessman 1993), which is a set of events put in order to convey a particular meaning or an explanation for a phenomenon (Riesmann 2008). Narrative analysis shapes the events around us into stories using two types of building blocks: one consists of the structures that indicate how to set up a story and how to order the events or actions; the other includes the understanding of how social life works (Murray 2018). Through these procedures, narrative analysis uncovers hidden motivations that cannot be grasped directly (Murray 2018). In this study, narrative analysis is used with the aim of outlining the reasons behind private funding based on a 'before and after' examination of the data. This examination results in a story that orders the evidence to give meaning to the act of funding political parties relative to a series of outcomes.

The examination of data involved an inductive approach with three steps. First, we systematically scrutinized the positions (office) and occupations of the 98 individuals before the 2020 election. We proceeded similarly for the period after the elections, for which we also considered the lists of candidates for national elections. These were important because an individual could have been nominated without getting elected. Second, we compared and contrasted these positions to identify patterns. Based on the observations, we clustered these patterns into five categories: maintaining the status quo, getting a nomination for MP lists, moving between local and national politics, accessing public office, and public procurement. For example, when an individual held an elected office at the local level and was then placed on an electable position for the party list for parliament, we considered this to be a move between local and national politics. These categories are not exhaustive; they just reflect the reality discovered in the Romanian case. We devised them based on independent coding done by two of the authors and a research assistant. Each coder examined the positions held by the donors before and after the donation and assigned them to a category, and then we checked the similarity. The value of the inter-coder reliability as per Krippendorff's alpha indicates an agreement higher than 0.90.

Third, to verify the causal narrative we were building for each individual, we triangulated it as much as possible with news stories from the media. We used circumstantial evidence verified with the help of sources external to our endeavour. The media reports on cases where political parties ask candidates to make financial contributions in exchange for political positions. For example, a politician from USR-PLUS provided details to the media about several parliamentarians who had paid large sums of money to be nominated to electable positions for the legislative elections (Dinu 2021). The triangulation of our narrative with the media evidence illustrates that the envisaged causal mechanism is in place and compensates for the absence of hard evidence revealing the reasons behind the private contributions.

The electoral system, competition, and party funding

The 2020 legislative elections in Romania used a closed-list proportional representation system that was in place between 1990 and 2008 and has been used again since 2016. There is an electoral threshold for representation which can be met in two ways: either 5% of the total of valid votes at the national level or 20% of the valid votes in at least four constituencies for all political competitors (Law 208/2015, Art. 94). The threshold is different for electoral alliances and coalitions: 8% of the total number of valid votes at the national level for two members, 9% for three members, and a 10% level for four or more members. The following lines briefly describe the six parties included in the analysis and illustrate their importance in the Romanian political arena.

PSD is the largest party in post-communist Romania and the main successor of the communist party. It has won all but one popular vote in the parliamentary elections and has been part of many coalition governments. Its electoral support was relatively stable between 2000 and 2012, gaining approximately one-third of the vote (Gherghina 2014). The party enjoyed a significant increase in the 2016 elections to 46%, followed by a backslide in 2020 back to its previous level of support (approximately 29%). In 2012, the party ran in an electoral alliance with the PNL, winning approximately 58% of the votes together. In 2016 the PSD had a landslide victory with roughly 46% of the votes (Marian 2018). Next, PNL is the second largest party in the country, with a continuous presence in Parliament since 1996 and an average vote share of around 20% since 2004. It has had a high intra-party dynamic, with many splits and mergers over time. The most recent merger was in 2014, which consolidated its position as the second most important party in the country. PNL was in government before the 2020 elections and has been part of several coalition governments with many parties across the political spectrum. Two government coalitions have included the PSD: between 2012 and 2014 and since October 2021.

USR-PLUS began as an electoral alliance in February 2019 between the two parties. USR was formed in 2016 to run in the legislative elections of the same year. It ran an anti-corruption campaign and came third with almost 9% of votes (Dragoman 2021). The party was in opposition until the 2020 legislative elections. PLUS was formed at the end of 2018 by a former technocratic prime minister who had been in office between November 2015 and December 2016. The Alliance came third in the 2020 elections with slightly more than 15% of the votes; the two parties merged in April 2021. UDMR is the party of the ethnic Hungarian minority in Romania and has had a continuous presence in Parliament since 1990. Its share of votes is very stable at around 7%, and it has gained extensive government experience over time alongside many parties across the political spectrum.

PMP emerged from the People's Movement Foundation, formed in March 2013 due to an intra-party conflict within the liberal democrats (PDL), the main opposition party at the time. Two factions emerged within the PDL: one supporting the country's then-president Traian Basescu and the other supporting the party leader Vasile Blaga. Basescu's supporters left the party after Blaga secured a new term in office and formed the PMP in January 2014. In October 2015, Basescu joined the party after finishing his term as head of state and was elected party leader in the same month (Mișcoiu 2022). In the 2016 national legislative elections, it got roughly 5.5% of votes, making it the fourth-placed party. In the 2020 national elections, the party received a 4.8% vote share. PRO is a splinter from the PSD, formally established in late winter 2018 by a former prime minister (Mișcoiu 2022). Many other former high PSD officials have joined the party, which has had a solid presence in Parliament due to its intra-parliamentary formation until the 2020 legislative elections. The electoral result (almost 4.2% of votes) did not allow the party to pass the threshold.

A decade ago, the candidate selection procedures for legislative elections varied greatly in terms of centralization, from decisions taken exclusively by parties' central offices to extensive territorial autonomy for local branches in selecting candidates (Gherghina 2014). Since then, the political landscape has changed, and parties using centralized decision-making have vanished from the political arena to be replaced by parties using considerably more decentralized approaches in which local branch delegates select candidates. Consequently, for the 2020 legislative elections, as illustrated by our review of their statutes, all the parties covered by this study used a mix of central and local party units in the selection of candidates. More important for the topic of this article, the candidate selection in Romanian parties is exclusive, being done by the party elite either at the central or local level (Cordero et al. 2018). Thus, those wishing to be selected as a candidate can influence the selection process by providing financial assistance to the party.

Revenues, expenditure, and private funding

The aggregate revenues and expenditures per party are a useful starting point to establish a point of reference on how much money is circulated in national legislative elections in Romania. The numbers reported in Figure 1 are shown in EUR (vertical axis - €) and represent the total revenues reported by the political parties in the declarations submitted to the Permanent Electoral Authority. These are the total revenues from the five sources of funding mentioned in the previous section. The average income for the seven competitors in 2020 was 16.5 million EUR, ranging between PSD at the high end with more than 42 million EUR and PLUS at the low end with just under 2.2 million EUR.

The two largest parties (PSD and PNL) have considerably higher revenues than their competitors, with a great deal of the total financing coming from public funding due to their massive presence in Parliament prior to the 2020 elections. These discrepancies between parties can also be observed in terms of expenditure, where the average is almost 17 million EUR, with values of almost 10 million (PMP) and almost 45 million (PSD) at

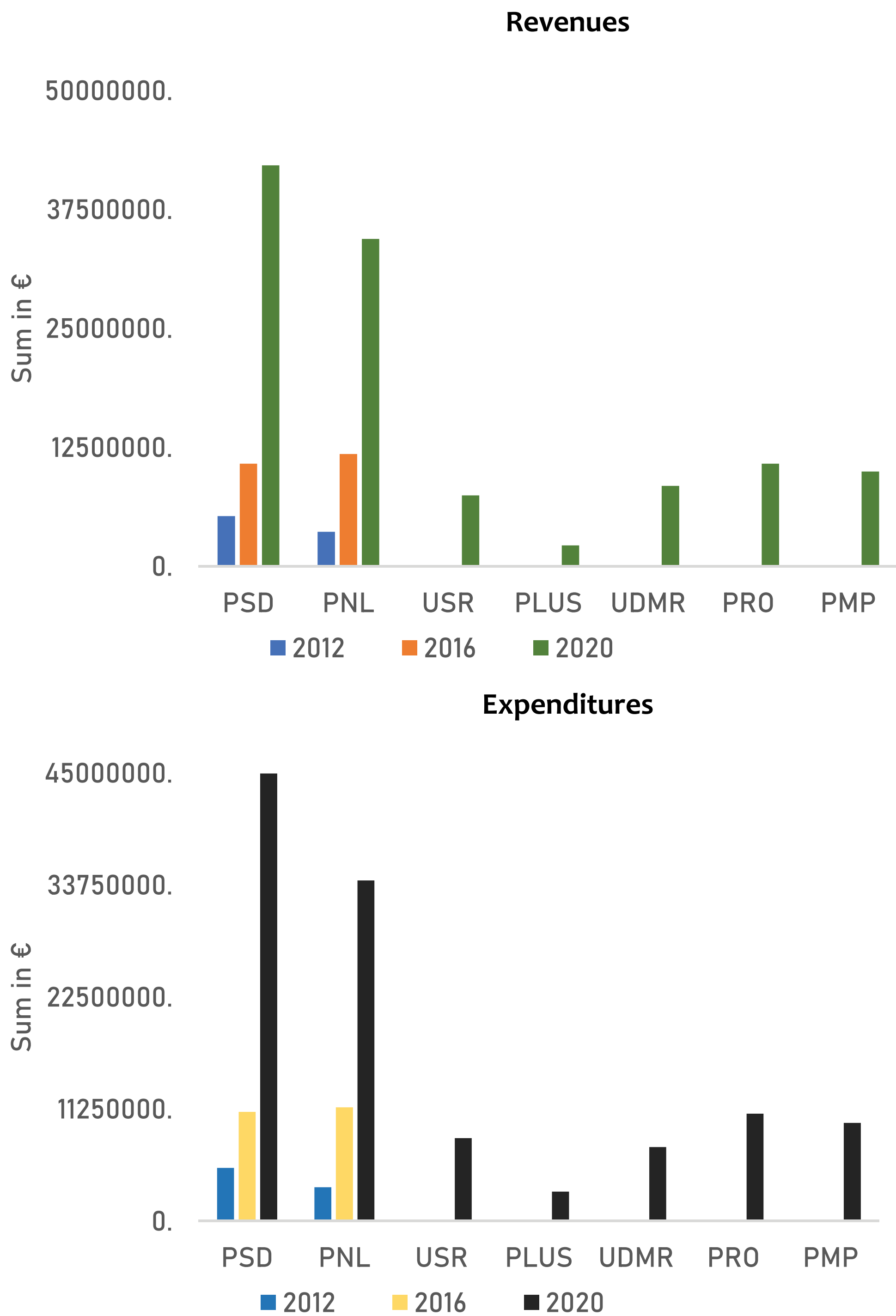

Figure 1. Aggregate revenues and expenditures per party. The income and expenditure were calculated separately for USR and PLUS because they were different parties at the time of the elections (December 2020).

the two extremes. PSD and PLUS spent slightly more than the level of their revenues, while the remaining parties either matched their revenues and expenditures (PNL, PMP, USR and PRO) or saved some money (UDMR).

We have data for 2012 and 2016 available for only PSD and PNL, which can be useful in understanding the development of revenues and expenditures over time. Both parties have an ascending trend across the three elections. PSD doubled its revenue in 2016 compared to 2012 and had four times higher revenue in 2020 compared to 2016. PNL tripled its revenue in 2016 compared to 2012 and then tripled it again in 2020 compared to 2012. The same patterns apply to expenditure. Figure 2 shows a comparison between the respective percentages of private funding in the revenues of the two parties, illustrating the importance of this type of funding for them. These percentages are relative to the total amount presented in Figure 1, the graph on the left. In 2012 and 2016, both parties relied heavily on private funding, with roughly 90% of their revenues coming from private sources. The two parties have extremely similar percentages of private funding in relation to their total. Since 2016, both parties raised more funding than in 2012, and the private funding has increased at the same pace as the total revenues (see the discussion above).

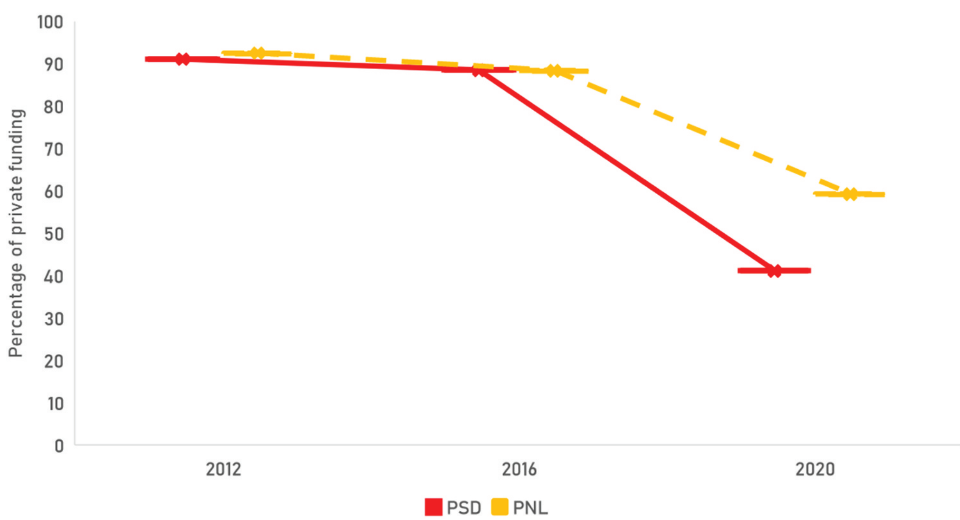

Figure 2. The percentage of private funding from total revenues (PSD and PNL).

In 2020, the percentage of private funding in the total revenues of the two parties dropped significantly. PSD got 40% of its funding from private sources, while the rest came from public subsidies. PNL got approximately 60% of its funding from private sources. Since the total revenues for both parties had tripled or quadrupled compared to 2016, the private funding had also increased, but at a lower rate. In 2020, PSD received roughly 17 million EUR from private sources compared to 9.5 million EUR in 2016, while PNL received almost 20.5 million EUR in 2020 compared to 10.5 million EUR four years before. Overall, the amount of private funding has therefore increased over the last three legislative elections. This increase coincided with a major boost in public funding, which

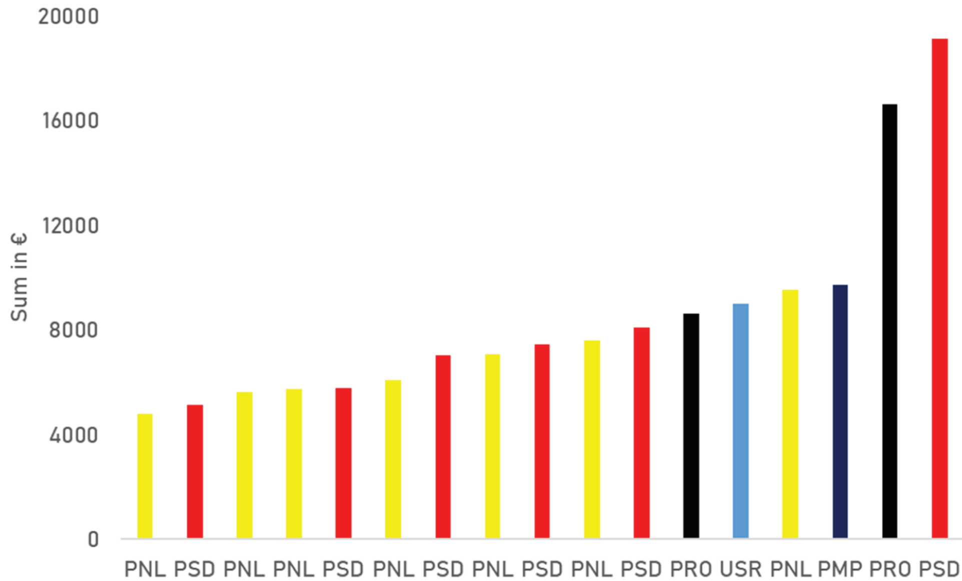

Figure 3. Extra-large membership fees in the 2020 election campaign.

was mainly determined by a higher minimum gross salary at the national level, which rose by 212% between 2016 and 2020 (Permanent Electoral Authority 2020).

Analysis and results

The overview of private individual donations and loans shows that political parties in Romania prioritize different sources of private income. Figure 3 depicts the sums received by political parties in the form of extra-large membership fees. Each bar represents such a fee and the party to which it was paid. All political parties, with the exception of PLUS, benefitted from at least one such membership fee paid in 2020. While PRO received two fees and PMP

Figure 4. The private donations to political parties in the 2020 election campaign.

only one, the values of the fees were very high. Although PNL received seven fees, most of their values were relatively small. This is the only type of private funding where broad coverage across parties could be observed. Donations and loans were dominated by particular parties.

Figure 4 indicates that almost all the individual donations larger than 100 minimum gross salaries went to PNL in 2020. From a total of 36 individuals donating money, 34 donated to the Liberals. Many donated sums close to the maximum allowed by the law (90,000 EUR), but six individual donations exceeded the maximum limit.

Figure 5 presents the distribution of private loans made to political parties in the 2020 election campaign. The bars indicate that slightly more parties took individual loans than those that benefitted from private donations. Loans were mainly used by PSD and PRO, while PNL does not appear at all. The majority of the loans were at the upper limit specified by the law, and these were relatively equally shared between the two parties. USR and PLUS have episodic appearances in the figure at the lower end of the amounts lent to parties by individuals. Out of the 45 loans taken by parties, USR and PLUS took only three.

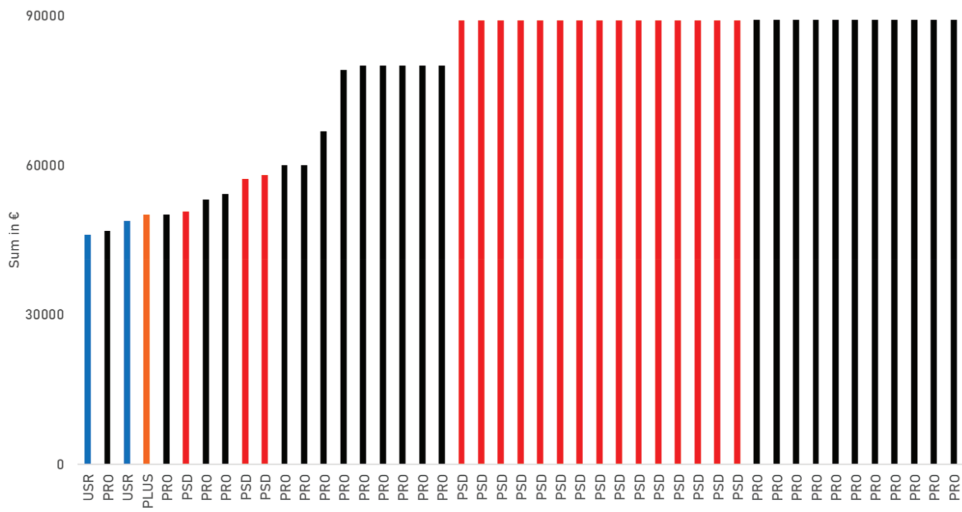

Figure 5. Private loans to political parties in the 2020 election campaign.

Explaining individual funding

The empirical evidence presented in this section comes from 64 out of the 98 individuals scrutinized for their private donations. These are the donors for whom we could identify sufficiently complete information that allowed us to build a comprehensive narrative. The remaining 34 persons that engaged in private funding were not covered in this study due to insufficient information being available to identify the reasons why they contributed to parties. More precisely, we know the sums that they paid (fees), donated, or loaned to parties, but no details about what they did either before or after the elections could be found. Based on the existing evidence (Appendix 1), we identified five main drivers for those who provide private funding: maintaining the status quo, securing nominations for MP lists, moving between local and national politics, accessing high public office either at central or local level, and public procurement (Appendix 1). The nomination for MP lists refers to those who were not parliamentarians at the time of the elections. If someone was a parliamentarian and provided funding to the party to get nominated, then the person sought to maintain the status quo. Also, there were cases in which an individual who donated was both nominated on the list of MPs and gained access to a public office. We placed these people in the category in which they were successful; for example, if they failed to gain a parliamentary seat having been nominated and were later appointed to a public office, we placed them in the latter category.

These five drivers are valid for all three types of funding and are observable across almost all the political parties included in the analysis. The following pages provide several illustrative examples for each driver, which we chose as representative cases. To begin with, status quo preservation refers mainly to the party's central office (e.g., its MPs or government), but there are also local-level officials. There are two possibilities for MPs: they paid fees or made donations to ensure that their seat would be held or that they would be moved to a safe constituency. Although there is some variation in the degree of centralization and inclusiveness across Romanian parties (Gherghina 2014), nominations for the parliamentary lists depend to a great extent on the party leadership and/or the executive committee. As such, individuals who wish to continue in parliamentary office can persuade the party to give them a renomination.

Some MPs wish to continue in office in the same constituency. For example, Iulian Muraru was elected in 2016 as a deputy in Iasi County.[5] Four years later, he donated 55,600 EUR and was re-elected as a deputy in the same county. Other MPs wish to continue in office by moving to a safe constituency. For example, Mara Calista was a PNL deputy in Teleorman county, where PSD had strong support. In 2020 she donated 46,760 EUR to the party and became a deputy in Neamt County, where PNL has several safe seats. Another example from the same category is that of Alexandru Cuc, who was a deputy in Giurgiu County until 2020 and then became a senator in Neamt County, where PSD also wins seats on a regular basis. He paid the largest membership fee to PSD among the investigated cases (19,114 EUR). All these instances indicate that donors are placed in safe seats in their party's electoral strongholds, also being among the few (or the only ones) on the lists of candidates in those constituencies making donations.

Some individuals occupying an important public office at local or central level also wanted to keep their position. For example, Stelian Dolha had been a county governor since 2016 and was re-nominated by the PNL government in 2020, a year that coincides with a donation of approximately 65,000 EUR made to the party. A particular case that can also be classified as maintaining the status quo is that of Emanuel Soare, who occupied the position of county governor until the 2020 elections and then became deputy county governor. His donation was 61,169 EUR. At the central level, Liviu Bratescu was state secretary of the Ministry of Culture before the 2020 elections. He donated 55,760 EUR (Appendix 1), and after the 2020 elections, he occupied the same position despite several government changes elsewhere; all these changes involved PNL, the party to which he donated money.

The second driver for private funding was securing nominations for the MP lists. Two individuals who paid very large membership fees were nominated at the top of the Senate lists by their parties. Maricel Popa was the president of the county council until 2020 but lost the local elections organized in September 2020 and was out of local office. His party (PSD) then nominated him on the Senate list and received a payment of 8,080 EUR in the form of a membership fee. Similarly, Florin Gagea paid a fee of 9,720 EUR to PMP and was nominated the first on the Senate list for Mehedinti County. Donations work equally well to achieve such ends, and five people from the list of donors were nominated on the MP lists without prior experience. For example, Adrian Felician Cozma donated 66,000 EUR for those elections, which coincided with a nomination on the list for the Chamber of Deputies. He had been a county councillor until the elections. Alexandru Cristea Kocsis had no previous position and was nominated on the Chamber of Deputies list by the PNL. He made a donation of 55,650 EUR to the party. None of the individuals who privately lent money to the parties were in this category.

The third category relates to moves from the central to the local level. All cases consist of donations with values between 88,000 and 89,200 EUR (at the upper limit permitted by law) made by former four deputies, senators, or state secretaries who became presidents of the local county council after the 2020 local elections. These moves from central to local politics are not considered demotions since local politics has many advantages for politicians (Chiru and Gherghina 2020), two of which are limited media scrutiny and a greater possibility of continuity in office. Consequently, situations such as we observed in which these four people incentivized the party to nominate them for a local elected office with the help of a donation are likely to happen.

Access to public office covers mainly elected local office but also some cases of appointed central office. For example, two people who paid membership fees of 8,618 and 16,620 EUR, respectively, were nominated as candidates for local or county councils. The local elections took place two months prior to the general elections, which is why private funding can be easily linked. Some donations matched the promotion at the local level from one elected position to an appointed position. For example, Valentin Barbu, who donated 73,400 EUR, became a county governor after the 2020 elections, leaving a previous job as deputy president of the county council. He was appointed to that position after losing an election for president of the county council. Other cases reflect access to the central office; one of these is Liviu Gabriel Bulgaru, who donated 58,660 EUR to PNL and was initially nominated on the list for the Chamber of Deputies. After failing to get elected, he was appointed General Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture. Another case was that of Catalin Boboc, who moved from an appointed position at the local level (county governor) to an appointed position at the central level (State Secretary in the Ministry of Work and Social Protection). His donation was 50,000 EUR.

There are also four cases of individuals who lent money to political parties and gained access to public office. For example, the PSD took a loan from Gheorghita Mitocariu at the maximum value legally allowed, and he ended up being appointed advisor to one of the PSD deputies. These advisors are hired by the Romanian Parliament for the duration of a parliamentary term and are nominated by political parties.

Public procurement is associated with both donations and loans. In terms of donations, George Cătălin Stângă appears twice in Appendix 1 because his money for PNL could be interpreted both as a preservation of the status quo (leader of the Galați county branch) and as access to public procurement. The latter is straightforward: a company headquartered at Stângă's residence, which is run by one of his relatives, has many contracts with the Romanian state (nutotei.ro 2021). Five people lend money to PSD and PRO, which are linked directly to private companies that receive public money from contracts with the state. Sometimes these individuals are the administrators of private companies, as is the case with Consuela-Diana Binder, who lent PRO 40,000 EUR. In other cases, the spouse of the person who lends money owns a company that benefits from public procurement. For example, Mirel-Alexandru Marcu lent PSD 89,000€, and his wife's company has won several state contracts. These examples of private funding are in line with the behaviour of private companies, which help to fund political parties during campaigns before the money returns to them in the form of profits from contracts with public institutions (Gherghina and Volintiru 2017; Das and Maiorano 2019). The only difference is that in the five cases outlined in Appendix 1, the money donated to parties is provided by individuals representing the companies to avoid the caps on that type of funding. Private companies can lend parties a certain amount, and the loan assigned to an individual means extra money for the parties from the same company.

Conclusions

This article aimed to identify and explain the patterns of individual private funding in the campaign for the 2020 parliamentary elections in Romania. Our results indicate the existence of five different trajectories among the individuals who fund political parties by paying extra-large membership fees, making donations and providing loans. The results show that individuals contribute private money to parties' campaigns to maintain the status quo, secure nominations, gain access to public office, move from central to local politics, and act as a smokescreen between companies and parties. These observations are valid for the people scrutinized in this paper and are not party-specific, although some parties use some types of private funding more than others. For example, PNL relies heavily on donations, while PRO and PSD extensively depend on loans. The evidence from Romania reflects the arguments provided by the prior literature about the pursuit of self-interest. Individuals give money to parties and receive immediate benefits, mainly in the form of access to resources. As such, all their pre-election gestures appear to be motivated by what they will get in the post-election setting (Snyder 1990; Gill and Lipsmeyer 2005), including the maintenance of the status quo when this is favourable.

These results have several important implications for party politics and elections beyond the specific national case covered here. First, if private money plays such an important role in maintaining individuals in their positions or offering seats on candidate lists, the involvement of members in the intra-party selection process becomes redundant. The validity of such procedures can be questioned if it is the people with money who get the positions and public office they desire. Second, there appears to be a limited place for meritocracy in Romanian politics. There is no assessment based on previous performance, and those who pay substantial sums to political parties get a position in public office. In line with previous findings, such practices call the credibility of election outcomes into question (Kera and Hysa 2020). The people's choice is limited to those who contribute private funds to campaigns. In Romania, the greater emphasis on public funding does not appear to diminish the appetite of political parties for private funding. The latter has many strings attached, as illustrated in this article, and parties perpetuate this behaviour.

Third, we have illustrated how not only can companies play an important role in politics (through horizontal clientelism), but individuals can also do so. Individuals are sometimes the representatives of private companies, but very often, they have their own personal aims and interests. This expansion is relevant because it involves more resources but also more demands from those who pay fees, donate money, or give loans to parties. The exchanges are more intensive, and the access to resources is controlled by political parties to a greater extent. The evidence set out in this paper illustrates how electoral and organizational clientelism (patronage) form a cycle by which individuals provide the financial resources a party needs and are rewarded with access to various positions and offices in return. Once in office, these individuals continue to provide financial resources and demand either the maintenance of the status quo or a change to it according to their preferences.

This paper represents the first exploratory attempt to map the patterns of individual private funding in Romania. One limitation of the study is its limited coverage of motivations beyond utility maximization – including ideology – due to the data we used in the analysis. Further research can address this shortcoming and dig into individual donors' motivations through semi-structured interviews. The type of data used in this paper only allowed us to assess some general relationships. A systematic use of interviews with private donors could confirm and add nuance to the observations presented here, including outlining the causal mechanisms triggered by private funding. Another direction for research could be to compare the private donations made by individuals and companies to reveal their similarities, overlaps, and divergences. Such an approach would allow the researcher to observe if their motivations to donate differ and could provide a deeper understanding of the role money plays in contemporary politics.

Notes

1. The Romanian Parliament is bicameral and comprises the Senate (Upper Chamber) and the Chamber of Deputies (Lower Chamber). Both Chambers are chosen in a similar way, for a four-year term in office, at the same time. The responsibilities of Senators and Deputies are very similar.
2. USR-PLUS became a political party after the 2020 election when two parties (USR and PLUS) merged. During the campaign, the two were in an electoral alliance, therefore we included PLUS in the analysis.
3. A fifth political party gained parliamentary representation in 2020: Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), which was formed in autumn 2019. The party was not included in the analysis due to its extra-parliamentary status before the 2020 election.
4. In 2020, the exchange rate was 1 RON = 0.21 €. We use this rate to calculate the sums presented in this article.
5. The county is the territorial administrative unit of Romania. It corresponds to a constituency in the parliamentary elections. There are 41 counties plus the capital city, which differ in terms of size (population). The number of parliamentarians in each county (constituency) is proportional to the population.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Drivers for Donations, Individuals and Amount

Driver and Party	Person	Amount (€)
Maintain the status quo	*Membership Fees*	
PNL	Vasile Cristian Achiței	7050
	Cătălin Daniel Fenechiu	9500
	Laurențiu Leoreanu	6069
	Cătălin Nițu	4760
	Eugen Nazare Țapu	5732
PSD	Alexandru Cuc	19114
	Ion Doldurea	5782
	Nicolae Rotea	7000
USR	Cătălin Drulă	9000
	Donations	
PNL	Daniela Cîmpean	46736
	Mara Daniela Calista	46760
	Arghir-Marinel Cionca-Iustin	50000
	Liviu Brătescu	55760
	Iulian Alexandru Muraru	55600
	Laura Iuliana Scântei	55860
	Emanuel Soare	61169
	Nechita Stelian Dolha	64420
	Cristian Buican	68400
	Ionel Palăr	89600
	Eugen Pîrvulescu	105760
	George Cătălin Stângă	114600
	Corneliu Mugurel Cozmanciuc	115800
	Ioan Cristian Chirteș	115960
Nomination for MP lists	*Membership Fees*	
PMP	Florin Gagea	9720
PSD	Petru-Bogdan Cojocaru	5120
	Maricel Popa	8080
	Donations	
PNL	Luminița Rodica Barcari	46000
	Theodora Mariana Nicoleta Benedek	49060
	Cristea Alexandru Kocsis	55650
	Sorin Nacuta	58760
	Adrian Felician Cozma	66,000
	Loans	
PRO	Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu	50000
	Ion-Vlentin Voicu	53000
	Cătălina-Maria Alexe	80000
	Laurențiu Peiu	89200
	Ciprian-Nicolae Văcaru	89200
PSD	David-Alexandru Burghiu	57200
Move between local and national politics	*Donations*	
PNL	Iulian Dumitrescu	88000
	Cătălin Dumitru Toma	88000
	Costel Alexe	89200
	Ionel Ovidiu Bogdan	89200
Access to public office	*Membership fees*	
PNL	Tudorița Lungu	5600
	Ionel Palăr	7600
PRO	Dănuț Eugen Patu	16620
	Florea Petru	8618
PSD	Camelia Gavrilă	7440
	Donations	

(*Continued*)

Driver and Party	Person	Amount (€)
PNL	Adrian Flavius Moraru	44600
	Cătălin Boboc	50000
	Liviu Gabriel Bulgaru	58660
	Romeo Dan Dunca	89200
	Mihai Lupu	89200
	Hubert Petru Ștefan Thuma	89200
	Dumitru Beianu	89480
	Adrian Nicolae David	90200
	Vasile Iulian Popescu	114760
	Loans	
PRO	Octavian Duca	54200
	Florian-Antonio Badea	89200
PSD	Gheorghiță Mitocariu	89000
	Gabriel Vitan	89000
Public procurement	*Donations*	
PNL	George Cătălin Stângă	114600
	Loans	
PRO	Consuela-Diana Binder	80000
PSD	Cezar Batog-Bujeniță	89000
	Iosif Buble	89000
	Mirel-Alexandru Marcu	89000
	Mihai-Leonard Rotaru	89000