Selecting candidates through deliberation: the effects for Demos in Romania

Sergiu Gherghina¹ · Victoria Stoiciu²

Published online: 9 January 2020

© European Consortium for Political Research 2019

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 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 the deliberation process.

Keywords Candidate selection · Deliberation · 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, very few such practices exist 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—the Party of Democracy and Solidarity (Demos), founded in June 2018 by a group of academics and activists—used intra-party deliberation to select its candidates. This was initially a civic-political

✉ Sergiu Gherghina
sergiulor@yahoo.com

Victoria Stoiciu
victoria.stoiciu@gmail.com

¹ Department of Politics, University of Glasgow, University Ave, Glasgow G12 8QQ, UK

² Department of European Studies, Babes-Bolyai University, Strada Universităţii 7-9, 400084 Cluj-Napoca, Romania

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 is a connective or as a digital party. The "connective parties" are "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 promote 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 programme, 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 (Gad 2019; Vodová and Voda 2019). 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. Our definition for deliberation allows the inclusion of Facebook discussions 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 3-week break around winter Holidays. In addition, the offline deliberation included two forums open to party members and sympathizers. The forums took place at the end of November 2018 and mid-January 2019. They had on the agenda the preparation for the European elections, the selection of candidates and the structure of the list.¹

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 to criticism within the party in the aftermath of the forum discussions. Critics focused on three points. First, the substance of the proposal contradicts the party statute, which 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. Second, there were flawed procedures because the party and platform members did not have access well in advance to the proposal. Thus, there is no time to debate the pros and cons were before the forum. Third, there is “excessive” horizontalism of the decision-making process that may endanger the party’s institutionalization and could result in random results.

Facing this harsh criticism, the party leadership withdrew the decision. It argued in favour of a change of the party statute regarding gender alternation, to allow for a 2/3 share of women on the list of candidates. A new 2-day extraordinary forum took place 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

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

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 on the platform. However, the public commitment of the party in support of those groups and active recruiting of members and possible candidates 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 generated intense debates and discussion, resulting 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 from a neo-protestant minority, who is an activist for social housing, as well as a 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. The interviewees' profile varies according to gender and age (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.

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 one of our interviewees explained: “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 explained 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 increased considerably 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 put 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 has consolidated Demos’ identity as a horizontal, open and transparent party, which is 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

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

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

The use of deliberation could have an effect on intra-party cohesion in two ways. On the one hand, deliberation can increase the cohesion between the units of the party by providing an arena with informed, reasoned and balanced discussions. 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 their own interests: “Following the deliberation on the electoral list and candidates, a group of people became more coagulated, pushing their 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 emotionality—rooted in the high level of disagreement about certain issues—replaced the reasoned, informed and conscientious arguments. 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 2 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 were people who look for ad hoc engagement and who were usually strongly opinionated without necessarily having a broader picture of the process. While online 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 two of our respondents explained, “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 politi-

cal education, maturity and mutual respect to engage in deliberation, not partisanship that quickly leads to accusations of racism, sexism, 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 whether political institutions are acceptable, they want to comply with their decisions and they support them (Tyler 2006; Hurrelmann, Schneider and Steffek 2007; Levi et al. 2009). The involvement of members and sympathizers in the candidate selection process should increase the legitimacy of those who are selected. This can happen through interpersonal reasoning as the guiding principle as opposed to the bargaining between competing interests (Parkinson 2003, p. 51).

Based on these theoretical arguments, the legitimacy was a key feature of the candidate selection through deliberation. 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 explained 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 Alternative 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). Two respondents explicitly refer to the importance of clear rules “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 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 the 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. One respondent refers to the process as inefficient: “The deliberative process resulted in a rather long time-frame 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 did not complement other mechanisms of decision-making but replaced 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. One could argue that the extensive use of deliberation can hurt 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.

References

- Bächtiger, A., et al. 2010. Symposium: Toward more realistic models of deliberative democracy disentangling diversity in deliberative democracy—Competing theories, their blind spots and complementarities. *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 18(1): 32–63.
- Bennett, W.L., and A. Segerberg. 2014. *The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bennett, W.L., A. Segerberg, and C.B. Knüpfner. 2018. The democratic interface: Technology, political organization, and diverging patterns of electoral representation. *Information, Communication & Society* 21(11): 1655–1680.
- Demos (2018) *Party Statute*. <http://platforma-demos.ro/inlucru/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/StatutulPlatforma.pdf>.
- Gad, N. 2019. A “new political culture”: the challenges of deliberation in Alternativet. *European Political Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-019-00235-z>.
- Gerbaudo, P. 2018. Social media and populism: An elective affinity? *Media, Culture and Society* 40(5): 745–753.
- Gherghina, S. 2013. One-shot party primaries: The case of the romanian social democrats. *Politics* 33(3): 185–195.
- Gherghina, S. 2014. *Party organization and electoral volatility in Central and Eastern Europe: Enhancing voter loyalty*. London: Routledge.
- Grzymala-Busse, A. 2002. The programmatic turnaround of communist successor parties in East Central Europe, 1989–1998. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 35(1): 51–66.
- Hurrelmann, A., S. Schneider, and J. Steffek (eds.). 2007. *Legitimacy in an age of global politics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Levi, M., A. Sacks, and T. Tyler. 2009. Conceptualizing legitimacy, measuring legitimating beliefs. *American Behavioral Scientist* 53(3): 354–375.
- Parkinson, J. 2003. Legitimacy problems in deliberative democracy. *Political Studies* 51(1): 180–196.
- Poguntke, T. 2002. Party organizational linkage: Parties without firm social roots? In *Political parties in the New Europe*, ed. K.R. Luther and F. Muller-Rommel, 43–62. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pop-Eleches, G. 2008. A party for all seasons: Electoral adaptation of Romanian Communist successor parties. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 41(4): 465–479.
- Rosenblum, N.L. 2010. *On the side of the angels: An appreciation of parties and partisanship*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Scarrow, S.E. 2013. New challenges of intra-party democracy: Grassroots activists, instant members, and cyber-militants. In *New technology, organizational change and governance*, ed. E. Avril and C. Zumello, 85–101. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tyler, T.R. 2006. Psychological perspectives on legitimacy and legitimation. *Annual Review of Psychology* 57: 375–400.

- Vodová, P., and P. Voda. 2019. The effects of deliberation in Czech Pirate Party: The case of coalition formation in Brno (2018). *European Political Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-019-00233-1>.
- Wolkenstein, F. 2016. A deliberative model of intra-party democracy. *Journal of Political Philosophy* 24(3): 297–320.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Sergiu Gherghina is a lecturer in Comparative Politics at the Department of Politics, University of Glasgow. His research interests lie in party politics in new democracies (with an emphasis on party organization, recruitment and mobilization), legislative and voting behaviour, and democratization.

Victoria Stoiciu is a policy officer at Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Romania. She holds a Ph.D. from the department of European Studies at Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj. Her research interests lie in social movement, progressive politics and industrial relations.