Romania: Between national politics and European hopes

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INTRODUCTION

Romania organised elections for the European Parliament (EP) for the third time since joining the European Union (EU) in 2007. This time the elections occurred during the Romania six-month rotating Presidency of the EU. During this Presidency, Romania organised various meetings with representatives of the member states, covered intensively by national media. As a result, the European agenda became more visible in the public debate, the peak being reached during the informal summit of EU heads of state or government held in Sibiu to discuss the EU strategic agenda for the post-election period.

POLITICAL CONTEXT

Romania is regularly mentioned as one of the most pro-European countries in the post-communist area (Clapp, 2017). Since 1995, in the name of the national interest, there has been a strong convergence among all mainstream parties on pro-EU positions, implicitly inducing radical parties to moderate their stances (Pytlas and Kossack, 2015). Occasionally, critical voices have emerged within different parliamentary parties; however, parties' official positions have regularly been aligned on a stable pro-EU discourse. This positioning echoed the high level of endorsement of the EU within Romanian society. A closer look at the Eurobarometer pinpoints a decline in this support over time. By the early 2010s, the previous trans-party consensus had started to crack. In particular, the topic of Europe has been indirectly politicised by the 2018 referendum on changing the definition of family in Romania's Constitution. The campaign for the referendum featured the opposition between Romanian values based on Christian-Orthodox morality and cosmopolitanism and EU values. Progressively, the EU has become a confrontational theme with regard to the maintenance of the safeguard mechanism for Romania (the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism); with different intensities, the decision received criticism from all parliamentary parties. Note that numerous extra-parliamentary parties assumed hard Eurosceptic positions (Soare & Tufiş, 2019).

For this year's EP elections, twenty-three parties/alliances and seven independent candidates initially registered. After checking eligibility, only thirteen par-

ties/alliances and three independent candidates hit the campaign trail for the thirty-two Romanian seats in the EP (plus one, after Brexit). The initial increase in the number of parties is connected to the 2015 changes in party regulations, which decreased the minimum number of members necessary for the registration of a party from 25,000 to three members, without any territorial diffusion criteria (Popescu and Soare, 2017)[1]. If we compare the 2014 and 2019 effective number of parties/alliances and independent candidates, there are no significant changes to be reported.

However, the supply of parties in competition has changed in a relevant manner. Among the new competitors, there are the Union Save Romania (USR), a pro-European new party created in 2015 with a platform focused on the fight against corruption, and the Party for Freedom Unity and Solidarity (PLUS) founded by the former Prime Minister and former European commissioner for Agriculture and rural development, Dacian Cioloş, with a liberal and pro-European programme.[2] Two new parties share origins with the Social Democratic Party (PSD): It is the case of Pro-Romania Party, recently created by former Prime Minister Victor Ponta and of Prodemo, founded by a former social-democrat MEP, Catalin Ivan. If Prodemo's programme is explicitly focused on defending national values, ProRomania's programme officially promotes a modern and pro-European version of social-democracy.

<div align="center">THE CAMPAIGN</div>

As in the previous EP elections, the electoral campaign has been marked by a strong national twist. Although the institutional commitments of the EU's rotating presidency induced an increased visibility of EU themes in the national media, the campaign remained focused on domestic politics. Part of the explanation is connected to President Klaus Iohannis's decision to call a consultative referendum on the issue of justice to be held on the same day of the EP elections. The president's initiative followed a long series of tensions around controversial reforms of the Criminal Code promoted by the ruling party (PSD). Note also that presidential elections are scheduled for December 2019, with a probable run-off between the incumbent president Iohannis, endorsed by the National Liberal Party (PNL), and a possible candidate of the ruling social democrats (PSD). The organisation of the referendum has been interpreted as an anticipation of the December elections, with one of the hottest topics in Romanian politics – anti-corruption – taking centre stage. In this context, the declaration of the European Socialist Party (EPS)[3] expressing deep concerns on the

1. Note that the number of signatures required for registering candidatures has been a hot topic of debate in the pre-election period, being criticised by civil society organisations and new parties on the ground that it provides a major obstacle for participation. According to the law, registration procedures require at least 200,000 signatures for a political party and at least 100,000 for independent candidates.
2. The two parties run together as Alliance 2020 USR PLUS.
3. For details: https://www.pes.eu/en/news-events/news/detail/PES-closely-monitoring-situation-in-Romania/

matter of the justice system reforms in Romania, promoted by the social democrats, induced increased tensions. PES President Sergei Stanishev declared the affiliation of the ruling PSD party to be frozen pending a clarified commitment to the rule of law. A formal discussion over PSD's membership is scheduled for June, after the EP elections. Similarly tense relations can be found in the case of the PSD government partner, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE). The liberal Alliance has been explicitly threatened with exclusion from the group of European liberals on the ground of their support for the contested reform of the justice system.[4] Significantly, the leader of the European liberals, Guy Verhofstadt, participated in the closing meeting of the campaign of the 2020 USR PLUS Alliance.

During the campaign, the cracks in the pro-European consensus have become more visible. This is particularly obvious in the patriotic-centred campaign of the three main parliamentary parties: PSD, ALDE, and PNL. With the slogan "Patriot in Europe", the PSD has organised its campaign around the need to guarantee a representation in Europe that "knows how to speak, that desires to speak, has the courage to speak and to defend the country's interest".[5] A similar view echoes from the liberals' campaign whose slogan, "Romania above all", recalls the slogan of Donald Trump's presidential campaign. Note also that the PNL opened its candidate list by recruiting a famous journalist, Rareş Bogdan, known for his provocative style and nationalist themes.[6] ALDE's campaign also placed a strong emphasis on the need to guarantee the respect for Romania in Europe ("In Europe with dignity"). This focus is consistent with the vehement criticisms voiced by ALDE head of list, the MEP candidate Norica Nicolai, targeting "the double standards" of the EU in comparing Romania with the old Member States in regard to the justice system reform.[7]

RESULTS

Taking into account the votes from overseas, the total turnout for the EP elections in Romania was 51.20% - a significant increase from the turnout in the previous round of elections in 2014 (32.44%). There are two main factors that account for the significantly higher turnout. Firstly, the elections came after two and a half years of pressures from PSD to modify the Criminal Code, on the one hand, and by significant street protests organized by civic movements, directed at preventing PSD from implementing these changes, on the other. This prolonged confrontation polarised the population to a higher extent than before and acted as a mobilizing factor for seg-

4. For details: https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/tariceanu-dupa-ce-guy-verhofstadt-a-amenintat-cu-excluderea-alde-din-familia-alde-europa-1108669.
5. For details: https://m.adevarul.ro/news/politica/surse-primele-nume-psdpentru-europarlamentare-1_5c852ab84452l9c57e17767e?fbclid=IwAR03JzLzLuEVcGSKPYcyjwMRdqTrBP7Z3QloQht3p8YYKRROViX1rQp68pw.
6. For details: https://revista22.ro/opinii/rodica-culcer/unde-ne-sunt-liberalii.
7. For details: https://romania.europalibera.org/a/norica-nicolai-ie%C8%99ire-violent%C4%83-%C3%AEmpotriva-liderilor-alde-%C8%99i-ppe-destul-m-am-s%C4%83turat-de-dublul-vostru-standard-/29857345.html.

Table 1 - Results of the 2019 European Parliament elections – Romania

PARTY	EP GROUP	VOTES (N)	VOTES (%)	
National Liberal Party (PNL)	EPP	2,449,068	27.0	
Social Democratic Party (PSD)	S&D	2,040,765	22.5	
2020 USR-PLUS Alliance (USR-PLUS)		2,028,236	22.4	
PRO Romania		583,916	6.4	
People's Movement Party (PMP)	EPP	522,104	5.8	
Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR)	EPP	476,777	5.3	
European Liberal and Democrats Alliance (ALDE)	ALDE	372,760	4.1	
Gregoriana Carmen Tudoran (Independent)		100,669	1.1	
George Nicolaie Simion (Independent)		117,141	1.3	
Peter Costea (Independent)		131,021	1.4	
Other parties		247,365	2.7	
Democratic Liberal Party (PDL)	EPP			
Mircea Diaconu (Independent)	ALDE			
Total		9,069,822	100	
Turnout (%)			51.2	
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)			5	

	SEATS	SEATS IN CASE OF BREXIT	VOTES CHANGE FROM 2014 (%)	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014 IN CASE OF BREXIT
	10	10	+12.0	+4	+4
	8	9	-15.1	-8	-7
	8	8	+22.4	+8	+8
	2	2	+6.4	+2	+2
	2	2	-0.5		
	2	2	-1.0		
			+4.1		
			+1.1		
			+1.3		
			+1.4		
			-13.1		
			-12.2	-5	-5
			-6.8	-1	-1
	32	33			+1

ments of the electorate that were previously less inclined to vote. Secondly, the referendum initiated by the president and held on the same the day as the EP elections also increased the turnout for this round of elections. It should be noted that these two factors combined to increase turnout particularly in urban areas, which accounted for 57.40% of the total votes.

PSD and ALDE, current governing partners in Romania, recorded significant losses. Despite opinion polls consistently crediting ALDE with about 10% of vote intentions, the party failed to reach the threshold and will not have any European MPs (MEPs). At the 2014 elections, PSD received 37.6% of the votes and had 16 MEPs. In 2019, although it received a similar number of votes as in 2014, about two million, the increased turnout decreased the relative share of PSD to only 22.6%, relegating the party to second position and awarding it only eight MEPs.

The National Liberal Party was the winner in this round, increasing its share of the vote from 15% in 2014 to about 27% in 2019, and increasing the number of European MPs from six to ten. The second undisputed winner is the alliance between the Union Save Romania (USR) and the Party for Freedom Unity and Solidarity (PLUS). The former became a parliamentary party only in 2016 while the latter was officially registered as a party only recently (October 2018), but both have roots in the civic movements that fought against the judicial reforms planned by PSD. The newly-formed alliance managed to obtain over 21% of the votes, winning eight EP seats.

Despite PNL's recent history of governing in coalition with PSD, over the last four years the liberals and USR-PLUS have been the main opposition forces in the Romanian Parliament, arrayed against PSD, although it remains to be seen how the relationship between them will evolve. The first test will come by the end of this year during the presidential election campaign, when both parties will have to decide whether to have a common candidate or whether they will each propose their own candidate. For now, it is important to note that PSD lost its first place in all but one of the largest 20 cities in Romania, while USR-PLUS reached first place in 15 cities and PNL in the remaining four.

Among the diaspora votes, the USR-PLUS alliance won close to 44% of the votes, PNL almost 32%, and PMP won 8% of the votes. PSD, usually not a favourite of Romanians living abroad, paid a particularly hard price this time, when it won less than 2.5% of the diaspora votes. It should be mentioned that the abysmal performance of PSD comes after multiple rounds of elections, which made it very difficult for the diaspora to vote, and after the August 10, 2018 protest organised by the diaspora in Bucharest, which ended with gendarmes using unnecessary violence against peaceful protesters.

At the moment it is unclear which European groups some parties will join in the EP. For PNL, PMP, and UDMR things are clear, they will stay with the group to which they previously belonged, the EPP. The USR-PLUS alliance has purposely avoided discussing this issue during the campaign, in an attempt to attract as many voters as possible. As already indicated, they are in negotiations with ALDE and it is very likely that they will join this group, especially now that the Romanian ALDE has not passed the threshold.

The PSD membership in the S&D was frozen prior to the elections. Considering that the leader of PSD, Liviu Dragnea, was jailed and removed from leadership of the party, it is reasonable to believe that PSD will stop trying to modify the Criminal Code and that it will re-enter the good graces of the S&D group. It helps that PSD, even after a w eak performance in this round of elections, is still able to bring eight MEPs to the S&D group. The last unknown is the Pro Romania Party, which separated from PSD under the leadership of Victor Ponta, a former PSD prime minister. As of this moment, it is not clear which EP group the party will join.

Summing up, the local Romanian context managed to increase turnout to the highest level recorded for an EP election in Romania since joining the EU. Moreover, the local conflicts have somehow prevented clear anti-EU parties from becoming relevant actors in this round of elections, although PSD has adopted significant parts of the anti-EU discourse. It remains to be seen whether the party will continue to go in that direction (a distinct possibility if S&D refuses them, which is not very likely) or if, being forgiven, the S&D will act as a "civilising" factor that will bring the PSD back to a more pro-European stance.

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