

ELECTORAL COMMUNICATION AND THE EUROPEAN AGENDA:
NEW CAMPAIGN PRACTICES?

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Our research relates to the media output of the elections to the European Parliament in a new EU member state: Romania. Voting for the election of the members of the European Parliament (MEPs) appears to be one of the prime institutional concerns, establishing the new status of Romania, a few months after this country became a member of the EU. The study that we propose focuses on communication practices mobilized by the electoral machinery of candidates. The two research questions are the following: on the one hand, have European elections led to a concept of electoral marketing different from the current practices in the Romanian public space? As a working hypothesis: is this a matter of an emerging campaign style which would actually update a new genre of electoral communication? On the other hand, what are the uses of the European argument within the discourse of candidates?

The study relies on concepts issued from the constructivist paradigm and from the qualitative methodology (image analysis, setting analysis, political discourse), supplemented by documentation on the electoral context (media positions of electoral staff, internal communication of the parties, etc.).

1. “EUROPE” AS A MEDIA ISSUE—STRATEGIES FOR CONSTRUCTING PUBLIC PROBLEMS IN THE ROMANIAN PRESS

The first euro-parliamentary elections in Romania were held in November 2007, shortly after Romania had become a de facto member of the European Union. On January 1st 2007 Romania had acquired a new *political status*, by joining the EU. Deemed a “historic event”, the new status marked the end of the so-called *pre-accession* period, started with the initiation, back in 1999, of the first Romania-EU negotiations.

From the perspective of *media debate*, pre-accession highlighted specific practices for constructing a *European “problematic”* (Marchetti, 2003; Mercier, 2003; Beciu, 2006).

- A “*permanent*” agenda. During the negotiations, the media and political discourses were saturated with opinions regarding the barometer of negotiations and with tribulations around the prospective date of Romania’s EU accession (for instance, each time a European official made a declaration, the press started to immediately “split hairs” and interpret it as a “forecast” or impression, with the sole purpose of fuelling the suspense ...). Therefore negotiations were dominated by *factual information* approached from a *technocrat perspective*, specific to *diplomatic discourse*.
- An *expert-type knowledge*. Focusing the media discourse on political-diplomatic information media legitimated expert-type knowledge, based on the euro-institutional language derived from the “high diplomacy level” and technocratic prognosis. Therefore value was added to institutional and/or hierarchical actors (political personalities, experts, negotiators, etc.).
- A *consensual public opinion*. The political and media discourse constantly rendered a consensual opinion climate related to EU accession (which was also confirmed by the accession-favourable opinion surveys). So, the initial question referring to the emergence of a European “*problematic*” becomes: how could the media build a deliberative agenda in a consensual situation?
- *The expert as a “character”*. In the run up to accession (to be more precise between the signing of the EU Accession Treaty in 2005 and accession proper in 2007) there emerged practices that pointed to a certain distancing of journalists from the expert-like style: for instance, the image of the European expert/ negotiator is more and more *personalised*, taking the shape of a *character* that is familiar to the public (Beciu, id. 2006). But what’s really outstanding is that journalists started to tackle the accession issue in an *identity-related framework*: as the date of accession was drawing near, journalists redefined their “mission”, by mainly covering the *Profound Romania* in the run up to accession. A number of media formats and communication campaigns contributed to defining an “authentic” Romania and to emphasising the symbolic distance between “us, Romanians” and “Europe”.

Therefore, upon accession, media coverage of different issues connected to the EU has not contributed to a *deliberative media discourse*. *Euro-scepticism* was not a framework for debate and the outlook of nongovernmental or non-institutional actors contributed only to a small extent to shaping up public knowledge.

This media context did not change significantly in the first year after accession. Consequently the first euro-parliamentary elections of November 2007 did not generate *controversies* or *electoral mobilization*.

2. THE CAMPAIGN FOR EURO-PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS – BETWEEN “NORM” AND POLITICAL CIRCUMSTANCES

The campaign for the euro-parliamentary elections was perceived by the analysts as a first *socialisation* exercise of the political class and the electorate with the European system practice. That is why the importance of the event was correlated mainly with the *new political status* of Romania. On the other hand, the relevance of elections was obscured by another event that dominated the domestic political arena at the time. The almost three-year clashes between Presidency and Parliament focused, among other things, on the introduction of the uninominal voting system. The Parliament decided that the referendum for the introduction of the uninominal vote and the euro-parliamentary elections be held on the same day, on 25th November 2007.

Of course, of the two events, the former dominated the media agenda, giving rise to political rifts and heated public debates. Moreover, voters participated in *two types of electoral rituals* that unfolded simultaneously and were a first in Romania's post-Communist elections history: the campaign for the euro-parliamentary elections overlapped the other “election” campaign, of the supporters of and opponents to the uninominal voting system. By way of comparison with the stakes of the referendum, the euro-parliamentary elections were perceived more like an abstract event, resulting somehow from the “real” political circumstances.

Some of the aspects described above are not specific to the Romanian context though. Generally euro-parliamentary elections, no matter where they were held, pointed to a flaw in political participation, being perceived as an event decoupled from the local political agenda (Marchetti, id. 2003; Garcia; Le Torec, 2003). Hence the interest in analysing the manner in which the campaigns in the respective countries set up a European agenda credible for the electorate.

3. PREMISES FOR STUDYING EUROPEAN ELECTION

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study we are approaching the campaign for the European elections in Romania from the perspective of the *campaign practices* used by candidates. Why would such an analysis be relevant given that, as we have seen, elections were held in a context dominated by the “domestic” political agenda?

The first premise we are considering refers to analysing the European elections from the perspective of a *theory of Europeanization* (Graziano; Marteen, 2006; Featherstone, Radaelli, 2003; Risse, 2002).

Already established as a concept in the political analysis literature, *Europeanization* has to do with the *impact of regulations* on institutions and social actors. Therefore a category of studies emerged, which discuss *the structural*

transformations (“top down”) which national institutions undergo following the adoption of European norms.

Other studies- actually the most numerous- look at the *indirect impact* (“bottom up”) which European regulations have on systems and social actors, insisting on the idea of *adaptation*. The main idea is that Europeanization implies a *gap* between the European regulations and the manner in which non-institutional actors relate to it (Featherstone, Radaelli, 2003). Approaching Europeanization as an “adaptation” and a “cognitive process” is related to a *constructivist model* of analysis, focused on the manners in which social and political actors use various European conventions and “repertoires” *in a given situation*. (Christiansen et al., 2001; Hedetoft, 1998). The approach highlights the social actors’ strategies of ‘resistance’ and ‘negotiation’, their affiliation to certain “imagined communities” as well as “the contradictions” that emerge in the practice of European regulations.

Or, the campaign for the European elections may be relevant for the so-called Europeanization of political/electoral communication.

In this case Europeanization is related to the influence which the European decision making system has on local electoral practices, either we are talking about countries that have already experienced these elections or countries which have recently acquired the status of Community country. In both cases electoral practices will emphasise the *political imaginary* instated in the respective countries in relation to the European institutions, to the role of the MEP, the “European” rituals and interpretation frames, etc.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this study I am talking about adapting electoral practices to the new European context according to a double constraint politicians have to deal with: first, *legitimation* and secondly, *political performance*. Legitimation refers to how to appropriate a “representative” political European identity? How to showcase the alleged Europeanization of the politician?

The elections to the European Parliament highlighted the question of electoral campaigning as a specific *communication genre*: via what type of campaign could one reconcile “*European discourse*” (procedural, normative, expert) and *electoral communication*?

The two research questions are the following: on the one hand, have European elections led to a concept of electoral marketing different from the current practices in the Romanian public sphere? As a working hypothesis: is this a matter of an emerging *campaign style* which would actually update a new *genre* of electoral communication? On the other hand, what are the uses of the European argument within the discourse of candidates?

By approaching the campaign for the euro-parliamentary elections as a *genre of electoral communication* (including discursive practices, various types of

communication, legal regulations, a media system, etc.) we are actually opting for a certain definition of electoral communication: electoral communication is a strategic type of communication pointing to the manner in which political and media actors are relating to:

- *regulations* specific to the system of exerting political power (the political, media system, organisations, etc.),
- *symbols* and *values* specific to public culture;
- *political identities*.

In other words, electoral communication is not equated only with the discursive strategies of the political class and of the teams of advisors who project the image of the politician. The electoral discourse (as a strategic action) presupposes relating the political actor with various “systems”, with public culture and a certain collective memory linked to the past of the politician (Axford, Huggins, 2001; Maarek; Wolfsfeld, 2003).

CORPUS

The analyzed corpus contains electoral advertising and speeches delivered by candidates who represent key political parties in Romanian politics.

METHOD

The study relies on concepts issued from the constructivist paradigm and from the qualitative methodology (image analysis, content analysis, pragmatic analysis of the enunciation), supplemented by documentation on the electoral context. This analytical frame allows us to study the *discursive positioning* of candidates and the type of character they perform in their relation with the electorate.

The results of the research are interpreted depending on the following parameters (supposed to have an influence on the construction of the electoral campaign):

- 1) the typology of campaign practices;
- 2) a comparison between the electoral practices used in the euro-parliamentary elections and the electoral communication already set up across Romania;
- 3) the discursive construction of the “European argument”: how are candidates using European arguments and official discourse in order to legitimize a European position on various issues? Namely, how are politicians invoking European norms: as part of arguments from (regulative) authority (e.g. we have to do x because European regulations make it compulsory), or as an opportunity to open up public debate on the

matters in question and possibly achieve a contextual adaptation of European norms?

4. FINDINGS

A. CAMPAIGN PRACTICES: “THE MOST QUIET CAMPAIGN?”

The first elections to the European Parliament mark the switch from an electoral communication until then dominated mainly by the media (television playing an essential role) to an intensely advertising communication. Direct (outdoor) or media interactions between the candidate and the electorate make room for another campaign concept, based on *visuality* and different ways of expressing the candidate’s personality.

Thus, electoral posters and advertising in the press were the practices that were mostly used in the electoral communication. Also there appeared new ways of inserting the advertising material in the press. For instance, the main opposition party (the Social Democratic Party- PSD) resorted to the *tabloid* (*Libertatea*) which has the widest circulation on the market, to promote its candidates and its euro-electoral discourse. Another opposition party (the Conservative Party) used, among other things, *the sports press* as a platform for electoral advertising while other parties used *free newspapers* for that purpose.

Also the euro-parliamentary elections established the *blog* as an electoral communication resource, about which candidates said it was an efficient method of interaction with the “Internet generation” (it should be noticed that most candidates associate the *blog* with young voters). In the candidates’ view, *blogs* were conceived of more as spaces for formally promoting their electoral programme; little personalised and rather rigid as far as design is concerned, they ended up resembling an official webpage of the party or of the candidate. Actually some of the candidates said they would keep the *blog* also after being elected MEPs. It is an “official” resource of communication which the candidate does not actually use to build a deliberative identity.

Transformations could be noticed also at the level of *outdoor* practices: therefore candidates resorted less to traditional meetings, preferring meeting and shaking hands with the crowds as part of non-electoral local events (a wine fair, folk celebrations, religious celebrations, ceremonies, contests, etc.).

But what’s most noticeable is the minor role played by television in this campaign. Only two television stations (channel 1 of the public television *TVRI* and *Realitatea TV*) produced an electoral grid. Moreover *Realitatea TV*, considered a CNN-like news channel chose *infotainment* formats (during the electoral shows the candidates had to pass various “tests” to prove their “European competence” and received “marks” given by a jury, being assessed by journalists in a humoristic-ironical style).

As far as communication practices are concerned, the first elections to the European Parliament point to an electoral communication “controlled”, to a large extent, by candidates and parties; the press and televisions did not place the candidates in a deliberative space. The main tendency: the electoral communication was focused on the *on the candidate political “persona”*. (Bennet, 2003; Corner, 2003; Street, 2001).

B. ELECTORAL ADVERTISING

CONVERGING STRATEGIES

The electoral advertising used in the campaign for the European elections did not include either negative materials or symbols and slogans pointing to the existence of European agenda topics. Parties and candidates opted for a self-assessing-type of advertising. Irrespective of political options, the advertising discourse in this campaign had a common topic: the need for Romania to be properly represented in the parliament in Brussels. Therefore, most electoral posters pointed, one way or another, to the “*European competence*” of candidates (parties actually counted on the so-called “euro-locomotives”, on those candidates who already enjoyed a more technocrat reputation in the eyes of public opinion).

As it focused on this topic, electoral advertising did not mobilize the electorate on the basis of European values. The only intensely mobilized values referred indirectly to the *European ethos*: so, the advertising campaign drew attention to the importance of the MEP *status*. More value was added to the new sphere of action of the Romanian politicians, the euro-MPs being considered a *special category* – a political world with different standards and rules, hence the need for politicians of “*a different character*” (most advertising materials use either the image of the candidate or the image of the “group”, namely the candidates proposed by the respective party). The implication was that only a certain type of politician can be successful within the new system.

Advertising therefore created a certain *imaginary* related to the European elections and the European institutions: these are systems that from now on will be part of the country’s political culture, but they are based on a *political ethos* different from that of national systems (such a representation somehow points to the abstract character of the European elections).

From a discursive viewpoint, this advertising imaginary related to elections generated a number of specific discourse strategies regarding the construction of the candidate’s image and the mobilisation of the electorate.

We therefore distinguish three types of posters, depending on the way in which the relation of the candidate (or of the party) with the electorate is discursively constructed (Charaudeau, 2005).

First there is this category at the level of which the visual discourse and the slogan add value to the personality of the candidate and also to his or her

competence in relation to an electorate that has not yet set up its “European priorities”- as was intimated. So the slogans of the *National Liberal Party's* (PNL) campaign were constructed as self-assessments (“I, the candidate, I am competent”) always followed by a *questioning* of the electorate (“*What are you doing?*”). Therefore a “*pragmatic*” power relation is set up between the candidate and the electorate, the latter being bound to contribute “themselves” something to the candidate’s action.

¾ **“I’m promoting Romania. What about you?” (PNL)**

¾ **“I’m promoting Romania. What are you doing?” (PNL)**

¾ **“I believe in you. Do you believe in me?” (PNL)**

In the second category we included posters that point to a *didactic power relation*, on the one hand, between the candidate and the electorate and, on the other hand, between the candidate and the European machinery. For instance, the posters of one of the opposition parties, the *Democratic Party* – PD, dwell on the metaphor of the “class” and of the “*graduation of a class*” to suggest that this party proposes a team of candidates able to socialise and deal with the European structures. In other words, the European system requires special competences of the candidates and, consequently, “*a different political class*”. Moreover the *Democratic Party* candidates are credible also because they are being supported by the President of the country (the president’s popularity was thus used as an electoral resource both for the European elections and for a better positioning of the PD on the domestic political arena).

¾ **“The first series of graduates of the new political class. Ready for Europe!”** (in the centre of the image there is a white spot with no picture, reading: “**The teacher – busy with the referendum**”/ alluding to the fact that the President was involved in the campaign for the introduction of the uninominal voting system).

¾ **“The first series of graduates of the new political class. Ready for Europe! The class has learned from the best!” (PD)**

But most advertising materials draw on the discursive logic specific to *commercial marketing*. It’s an electoral advertising that combines *the commercial slogan* (the customer is assigned the decision-making role, according to the principle “customer, your wish is our demand”), *entertainment* and *populist rhetoric*. Most slogans are different types of direct interpellations (second person pronouns are used) through which “friendly voter” (and not the citizen) is mobilized or its attention is drawn. This is how a *power* relationship is instituted between the political “bidder”, who has the initiative and knows the context, and the voter, seemingly called to decide and to choose the “only European” solution.

- ³/₄ **“You are making the offer!”** (PSD)
- ³/₄ **Vote for Stolojan! You deserve the best!** (PDL)
- ³/₄ **“You want in Europe, then go for Stolojan!”** (PDL)
- ³/₄ **“I’ll remain a Romanian in Europe”** (PNTCD- the Christian Democratic National Peasant Party) - the poster shows the group of PNTCD candidates wearing high official suits and peasant’s sandals.
- ³/₄ **“Assert yourself, Romanian! The Conservative Party is supporting you!”** (PC- the Conservative Party)
- ³/₄ **“We are promoting Romania. Don’t let yourself be blinded! You know how good is to know!”** (PNL)- they make a play upon words in this slogan: ‘blinded’ is translated in Romanian by ‘orbit’ which is also a chewing gum brand ‘ORBIT’; what they imply is: don’t let yourself “chewed” by others. The poster shows an ORBIT chewing gum pack reading the above slogan.
- ³/₄ **„Make your voice heard in Brussels! Our candidates are waiting for your support!”** (PNL)

The PSD, the main opposition party, adopted an advertising discourse that oscillated between commercial slogans such as *“You’re making the offer!”* and *impersonal slogans* based on *ideological clichés*, with no clear reference to the European elections.

- ³/₄ **“For a strong and just Romania!”** (PSD)
- ³/₄ **“Honest work will provide a decent living!”** (PSD)
- ³/₄ **“A strong economy, safe and well paid jobs!”** (PSD)

This type of *ideological /impersonal discourse* can be found both in the parties’ programme and in their direct interactions with the electorate (public meetings, events, etc.). Electoral communication in this campaign was built, on the one hand, on a populist-commercial dimension and, on the other hand, on wooden language rhetoric, the latter becoming visible in the candidates’ public speeches and in the way in which they built the European argument.

C. THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE EUROPEAN ARGUMENT

Speaking of tendencies, the parties’ programmes and the candidates’ discourses took the shape of “party documents”, being simply an inventory of the party’s programmatic principles and “standard” priorities (social, political, economic, etc.)¹. Actually the few elements in the parties’ discourse or platform pointed to the existence of an election campaign, be it at national level. Parties and

¹ Here is an example: “Reaching a European living standard, by turning Romania into one of Europe’s most competitive economies, able to ensure a high economic growth, without generating imbalances at macroeconomic, regional and environmental levels”. (PDL)

candidates presented the electorate with a collection of general principles and targets, valid in any situation of political communication. It's true, to this collection of general facts they added the prefix "euro" (*eurohealth, euroeducation, europolitics, etc.*) or the adjective 'European' (*European salaries, European standards, European money, etc.*).

Candidates and parties used the European argument to legitimise their political identity and in general their actions on the domestic political arena. The result was a 'hybrid' discourse, which was not relevant either for a regular election campaign or for a European election, as it lacked a concrete agenda.

Therefore, the European argument was not associated with the European values, institutions and policies and with the community space respectively.

In the candidates' discourses "Europe" points, first of all, to a quality of life: "*We have one single priority: reaching a European living standard. Romania needs a European level political class*" (PDL); "*For Romania to have a health care system compatible with the European one, the PSD suggests..*" (PSD).

Secondly the European argument was sometimes used as part of an expert-like type of rhetoric, to legitimise the "European competence" of a candidate, or, as the case may be, "the European vision" of the party. Consequently, candidates resorted to statistics, schemes and forecasts, all "wrapped up" in a specialised language typical of managerial technocracy.

Actually, the manner in which the electoral actors invoked the European argument on the occasion of elections is similar to the political and media discourses specific to the period when accession negotiations were ongoing- as was shown in the beginning, at that time the media and the political class looked at the phenomenon of European integration from the perspective of the *expert-like type of communication*. But as negotiations entered the final stage, the mass media, the opinion leaders and, to a certain extent, the politicians gradually gave up the expert-like type of language and the political-diplomatic style (although it should be noticed that the "Europeanization" of the media discourse was more conspicuous than that of the political discourse).

Symptomatically, against the backdrop of elections to the European Parliament, the Romanian political class suddenly returned to the communication style used before accession.

D. DISCUSSION

From the point of view of communication practices and the discursive construction of the political character, the campaign for the European Parliament highlights *the de-politicization of electoral communication* manifested through (i) the discursive logic of the "brand" (a combination of notoriety, populism and entertainment) and (ii) the formal discourse made up of banalities².

² For the concept of *de-politicization*, see, Mc Nair, B., 2000

It's worth underlining that the de-politicization of the electoral communication is an already existing tendency in Romanian politics. All elections campaigns in which Romania's incumbent President Traian Basescu participated stood out through a humorous, commercial, populist communication style that turned to good account the entertaining side (*Basescu is back to the target!*). Basescu inaugurated this style in the campaign for his re-election as Mayor of Bucharest earlier in 2004: "*This campaign had the character of a humorous commercial advertising campaign in which Basescu was symbolized as a red chilli pepper (ardei iute), a symbol which evoked his tendency to flare up at unpredictable moments, suggested that he adds spice to Romanian politics, that he is fast and efficient, that his presence is inconvenient and irritating to the political establishment, etc.*" (Fairclough 2006: 101-105). The European elections were an opportunity for other political actors to also adopt this style of electoral communication.

The de-politicization of electoral communication maintained the gap between the "European discourse" and the "electoral discursive logic".

According to the premise of this article, the European elections could make up a *type of electoral communication*. And one of the conditions for the existence of such a type is the manner in which political actors harmonise, at discourse level, the range of European issues (European values and policies and, in general, the ethos of the European institutions) with the electoral marketing and the national political agenda.

From this point of view, the European significance of this campaign was not visible given that political actors simply equated "Europe" either with higher living standards or with a system that needs special political competences. It was not by accident that parties and candidates alike built the European character based on the phrase "European competence" which could be most frequently seen in the bureaucratic, expert like type of language. Being constructed in such a way, the campaign did not contribute to *socialising the electorate* with the European values and practices.

One consequence was that the electoral discourse introduced a *status-related distance* between the candidate and the electorate, sometime made relative only through the ingredients specific to the commercial discourse (the status-related distance is obvious even at the level of identity statements such as "*Assert yourself, Romanian!*").

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