

The Risks of growing Populism and the European elections:

A brief overview of the Romanian case

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The present paper is a part of a broader European debate concerning the rise and risks of populism in the midst of a European Union tormented by an economic, social and intellectual crisis. I would like to present here a brief overview of the Romanian political landscape and the scars that populism left behind, from an historical point of view.

While analyzing the rise of populism in nowadays Romania, we must have in mind its particular set of characteristics, more precisely the fact that we are facing a resurrected political life, after the Communist “ice age,” which put a dramatic end to the debate between democracy and all types of authoritarianism, in terms of the Romanian national project.

When looking for manifestations of populism in Europe, what is yet little known by the foreign audience is that we can find the roots of populism in interwar Romania as politicians and all walks of life debated, often with unwavering passion, the relation between Romania and the yet in nuce project of a European construction. Having to face continental projects such as Kudenhove-Kalergi PanEuropa and Aristide Briand's Memorandum, populism started to rise, as some feared the total loss of independence.

The same fears would come back to life after the Revolution of 1989, as the old “demons” of the past would arise once more to confront the European project. Thus, in the context of a difficult political transition from a totalitarian to a democratic regime, from centralized economy to free market, the political class would have a recourse to the decades-old arguments of the loss of sovereignty and the need of a “Romanian position,” different from the European integration.

This research paper is divided into several chapters with an arboreal structure that help create a clear picture, for those unfamiliar with the Romanian political landscape, of the history and present life of populism.

I. What is populism and why do we must take it seriously into consideration? A short review of the term and its meanings in the last decades

Populism can be defined as an antagonistic political doctrine where we have two sides in an apparent irreconcilable conflict between the many, and yet weak, and the few but powerful – the mass versus the elite: “any of various, often anti-establishment or anti-intellectual political movements or philosophies that offer unorthodox solutions or policies and appeal to the common person rather than according with traditional party or partisan ideologies”².

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² See <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/populism> Last visited on January 2nd 2014.

We have therefore a first working definition that would help us orientate our research on what this concept might be, as this sub-chapter looks at another difficult approach to today's democratic politics, an approach that in nowadays troublesome world has become more and more common; populism.

There is an identity issue as the populists do not perceive themselves as such, as duly noted by the scholar Margaret Canovan in her 1981 work called *Populism*³, as those who can be fitted in this category often dismiss the term as not applying to them. Having a self-perception, and perhaps a self-delusion, of being “true democrats” that defend the interests that are being neglected of the common people, they create and accept a *modus vivendi* with nowadays accepted democratic practices and blend in the political landscape. The society assists to the rapid rise of the so-called “anti-politicians” from all walks of the political spectrum either right- or left-wing or centrists. This populism finds its manifestation for instance in the proposal of new referenda that address the basic feelings of the citizens, on controversial issues, as populists often adopt hard-core stances on seemingly outrageous issues.

Another manifestation that links to the referendum is by criticizing and often leading to the dramatic rejection of referenda initiated by the mainstream politicians that are presented to the people as having nothing to do with their day to day agenda. Today, populism appeals to people from all social classes, not just the poor and the uneducated that are discontent with politics and it often generates short-term bursts of political engagement, but often with no visible continuation other than the perturbation of the established order and the lack of viable, long-term solutions. It does not propose a viable and self-sustaining approach to day politics.

Academic definitions

While speaking about populism, one must take into consideration its multitude of academic definitions and the problems that this multitude implies. In the words of a classical work, written by the Romanian political scientist Ghiță Ionescu in collaboration with Ernest Gellner:

“There can, at present, be no doubt about the *importance* of populism. But no-one is quite clear just what it *is*. As a doctrine or as a movement, it is elusive and protean. It bobs up everywhere, but in many and contradictory shapes. Does it have any underlying unity? Or does one name cover a multitude of unconnected tendencies?”⁴.

Ghiță Ionescu and Ernest Gellner have provided us in their work *POPULISM. Its Meaning and National Characteristics*, published in 1969 with some of the first working definitions, although yet some imperfect ones in their attempt “to base an assessment of whether populism is a unitary concept,

³ Margaret CANOVAN, *Populism*, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981, p.5.

⁴ Ghiță IONESCU and Ernest GELLNER (editors), *POPULISM. Its Meaning and National Characteristics*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1969, p. I.

regardless of the variety of its incarnations, or whether it is a simply word wrongly used in completely heterogeneous contexts”⁵.

Having its historical roots in the “imperial Russia and the late-nineteenth-century United States”, populism, according to Donald MacRae, “is not primarily a phenomenon of the main steam of European history. It is, however, compounded from elements of thoughts and modes of apprehending of classical and Western Europe”⁶. We have therefore a dream of the past, based upon “the idea that once was a good, a sacred time [...] It was a time of simple, spontaneous order”⁷. This Golden Age is something to be desired upon and is the job of the populists to get the nation back then, when everything was simpler.

The difficulty to identify populism is increased by what Margaret Canovan notices in her 1999 article called *Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy*. She clearly states that populism is inextricably link to democracy, being perceived “as a shadow cast by democracy itself” as, in Canovan’s own words, the “democracy as we know it has two faces a ‘redemptive’ and a ‘pragmatic’ face and that their coexistence is a constant spur to populist mobilization”⁸.

For her, democracy requires two types of making politics – one is *pragmatic* while the other is *redemptive*⁹. The pragmatic type of making politics is mostly seen as the “management of violence” since “democracy is essentially a way of coping peacefully with conflicting interests and views under conditions of mass mobilization and mass communication”¹⁰. We have therefore a type of conflict management that provides the necessary environment for ordinary people to live their lives and fulfill their aspirations, with a relative low expectancy regarding the government capabilities and a fair degree of non-confidence in the concentration of powers in a single hand.

The redemptive side implies a more passionate approach, since democracy can lead to a better society; it is “the promise of a better world through action by the sovereign people”¹¹. The people can take back the control over their destiny as we are dealing with politics of faith, the faith in a better tomorrow. Yet, those two sides of the democracy must coexist in order to prevent any wrongdoings. It

⁵ *Ibidem*, 1969, p. 3.

⁶ Donald MACRAE, “Populism as an ideology” in Ghiță IONESCU and Ernest GELLNER (editors), *POPULISM. Its Meaning and National Characteristics*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1969, p. 154.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 155.

⁸ Margaret CANOVAN, “Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy” in *Political Studies* (1999), XLVII, pp. 3-4. Available online at http://scholar.google.ro/scholar_url?hl=ro&q=http://xa.yimg.com/kq/groups/9509988/1570434442/name/Margaret%2BCanovan.pdf&sa=X&scisig=AAGBfm03b7oXcMKm2fE6q2giS050vK4TWg&oi=scholar&ei=NazTUsyHMMb8ygOmloGACg&ved=0CDEQgAMoADAA Last visited on January 15th 2014.

⁹ This section draws on Margaret CANOVAN “Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy” in *Political Studies* (1999), XLVII, pp. 9-16.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

¹¹ Margaret CANOVAN “Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy” in *Political Studies* (1999), XLVII, p. 11.

is here that the danger lies, as accordingly to Gerry Stoker “populism feeds off the tensions between these two understandings of democracy”¹².

It is an idea that can be also be found in the now famous work of William Riker, *Liberalism against Populism*¹³. Riker contradicts “the idea that democracy can find expression through the establishment of the popular will”¹⁴. He speaks there about the so-called “paradox of voting” meaning “the coexistence of coherent individual valuations and a collectively incoherent choice by majority rule. In an election with three or more alternatives (candidates, motions, etc.) and three or more voters, it may happen that when the alternatives are placed against each other in a series of paired comparisons, no alternative emerges victorious over each of the other: Voting fails to produce a clear-cut winner.”¹⁵.

Saying that, and taking into consideration Riker’s arguments upon the existence of individualities of voters, that cannot be shaped into a coherent choice, and the risks of manipulation of voters, one can say that “populist democracy is an inferior way of deciding anything” the solution being the promotion of “a limited government and as much protection of people’s interests against government as possible through a liberal constitution that defends the citizens’ freedoms”¹⁶.

The literature on populism is a vast one¹⁷ and for the limited purposes of this paper I have reviewed some just a minor fraction of it in order to offer to a general audience the basic tools for understanding this concept and its importance for the work in case. As we can see, populism is above all about style, a style of making politics orientated toward acquiring and maintaining influence within a society while using the tools of democracy.

II. Populism and its beginnings – how interwar Romania planted the seeds of today populism¹⁸

¹² Gerry STOKER, *Why Politics Matters. Making Democracy Work*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 144.

¹³ William RIKER, *Liberalism against Populism: A Confrontation Between the Theory of Democracy and the Theory of Social Choice*, W. H. Freeman, San Francisco, 1982.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 140.

¹⁵ William RIKER, *Liberalism against Populism: A Confrontation Between the Theory of Democracy and the Theory of Social Choice*, W. H. Freeman, San Francisco, 1982, pp. 3-4.

¹⁶ Gerry STOKER, *Why Politics Matters. Making Democracy Work*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 141.

¹⁷ For an extensive overview of the literature, at least until the year 2004 please read more in GIDRON Noam, Bart BONIKOWSKI, *Varieties of Populism: Literature Review and Research Agenda*, Harvard University, Working Paper Series, No. 13-0004 available online at http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/gidron_bonikowski_populismlitreview_2013.pdf Last visited on January 20th 2014.

¹⁸ For in-depth analysis of that period please see some of my earlier works on which this sub-chapter is based on: Mihai SEBE, *Ideea de Europa în România interbelică. Idea of Europe in Inter-war Romania*, Working Paper Series, Working Paper no. 29, European Institute of Romania, Bucharest, November 2010, available online at http://www.ier.ro/documente/working_papers/WP_29_website.pdf and Mihai, SEBE *Perspective românești cu privire la planurile interbelice de creare a unei “Confederații dunărene”. Spre o Strategie europeană a Dunării avant la lettre. Romanian Perspectives Regarding the Inter-war Plans of Creating a “Danubian Confederation”. Toward a European Danube Strategy avant la lettre*, Working Paper Series, Working Paper no. 31, European Institute of Romania, Bucharest, December 2011, EISSN 1841 – 4281, available online at http://www.ier.ro/documente/working_papers/wp_31.pdf, 65 pp.

Trying to understand nowadays Romania and its politics it is an endeavor that cannot ignore the intense political activity of the interwar period and its peculiarities as its off-chart movements (such as peasantism or extremist moves) are inseparable from the social and civic history of the Romanian society. The communist dictatorship, in some ways, only froze some of the lingering conflicts that re-appears after the 1989 movements.

The political emergence of new actors

The creation of Greater Romania in late 1918 after the end of the First World War brought with it the agrarian reform and the electoral suffrage that brought to “political life” the peasants and the peasant parties of the country. The Great War, through the way it changed the life of the entire society, brought to the stage new social classes previously excluded. The peasants who upheld most of the war effort has decided to gain a more active role in the state politics by demanding radical social and political reforms. The hardships of war, as well as the lack of preparation of the Romanian society for the incoming war, were forgotten in the new political climate dominated by the Bolshevik revolution and the crumbling of Central Europe empires.

The most important aspect was, according to the German historian Armin Heinen, the emergence of the peasants as a distinct political force. Heinen perceives a growing role for the victorious soldiers who have found their civic conscience as well as the awareness of their importance – the *Primum movens* of change in interwar Romania. “The soldiers who took part in the First World War returned with a new self-esteem conscience from the trenches. They were no longer the obedient labor force, ‘political working beasts used for votes’, but independent peasants, who had proved in the war that the welfare and the sufferance’s of the nation depend on them. They demanded freedom, social justice and the elimination of ‘politicking’”¹⁹.

The 1921 Agrarian reform, as well as the universal suffrage, leads to a new political dynamics orientated toward the contestation of ancient elites. We will have other the “immediate” consequences of the Great War: the creation of Greater Romania, redesigned frontiers and social and political reforms, two “secondary” consequences but with a great impact on later politics.

“We have to add to this, as two distinct consequences, the emergence of a diffuse contestation of traditional elites belonging to the pre-1914 world, as well as the 1918 emergence – for the first time in the Romanian politics – of the ‘myth of the savior’ through the figure of the ‘general of the peace’,

¹⁹ Armin HEINEN, *Legiunea “Arhanghelului Mihail”. Mișcare socială și organizație politică. O contribuție la problema fascismului internațional*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 1999, p. 94, [”Soldații participanți la primul război mondial s-au întors cu o nouă conștiință de sine din tranșee. Nu mai erau forțele de muncă supuse, « dobitoace politice pentru vot », ci țărani independenți, care demonstraseră în război că de ei depind bunăstarea și suferințele națiunii. Ei cereau libertate, dreptate socială și desființarea « politicianismului »].

Alexandru Averescu – the starting point of a series of ‘saviours’ – either individuals or political parties – that will find its peak in 1940 with the figure of another general, Ion Antonescu”²⁰.

The pre-Great War parties, the Conservative Party and the National Liberal Party had a conflicting fate in this new landscape, as the Conservative Party lost its landlords base as a direct consequence of the agrarian reform, and it disappeared in 1925. As for the National Liberal Party, it found new opportunities in the emerging market economy of interwar Romania having reached its peak in the 1920’s and early 1930’s.

Yet one of the most important events on the political arena would be the emergence of one-person political movements. The first of these charismatic “saviors” would be the famous war general, and later on marshal, Alexandru Averescu, who founded the League of People on 3/6 April 1918, which turned into the People’s Party on 17 April 1920, a political movement “which wanted to break the bipolar system liberal-conservative that has dominated the Romanian political stage for half a century”. It was the centuries-old blame game, as even during the war general Averescu started building his political image by attacking the “others”, the pre-war political class, by blaming them for the ill-prepared war²¹.

We have to add also the Peasant Party founded by Ion Mihalache in December 1918, who based itself on the peasant class by claiming the importance of the development of agriculture as well as of the small agricultural property, as basis for the economic development. Due to its conflict with the mainstream National Liberal Party, in 1926, the Peasant Party fused with the National Party of Iuliu Maniu, a Transylvanian-based party, to form the National Peasant Party.

Politics at the extremes – far-left and far-right movements

Yet, the real winners of those changes would be the totalitarian movements that would see a rise in the number of supporters and a rise of their influence in society. In the aftermath of the Russian revolution, in November 1918, the Social Democrat Party would change its name into the Socialist Party only to change it once more in the Romanian Communist Party in May 1921, while adhering to the 3rd International. Its internationalist politics as well as its subordination to Moscow made it a marginal party during the interwar period.

A more powerful treat would be for the Romanian democracy the rise of the far-right parties which used the existing tensions to get to power. Having presented themselves as the “true” opposition

²⁰ Florin ȚURCANU, “Roumanie, 1917 – 1920: Les ambiguïtés d’une sortie de guerre” in Stéphane AUDOUIN – ROUZEAU & Christophe PROCHASSON (editors), *Sortir de la Grande Guerre. Le monde et l’après - 1918*, Tallandier, Paris, 2008, p. 248, [“S’y ajoutent, comme deux conséquences distinctes, l’apparition d’une contestation diffuse des élites traditionnelles issues du monde d’avant 1914, ainsi que l’émergence en 1918 - pour la première fois dans la politique roumaine - d’un “mythe du sauveur” à travers la figure du “général de la paix” Alexandru Averescu – point du départ d’une série de “sauveurs” – individus ou partis politiques - qui culminera en 1940 avec la figure d’un autre général, Ion Antonescu”].

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 248, [“qui entend rompre avec le système bipolaire libéraux – conservateurs qui dominait la politique roumaine depuis un demi-siècle”].

to left-wing party, as well as the defenders of the Romanians against the claims of the national minorities, while also taking advantage of the flaws of the democratic system currently in place, and of the generation conflict,²² the far-right movement built a strong support base.

For researchers such as Irina Livezeanu, granting civil right to the Jewish minority alongside the agrarian reform led to the replacement of the old social problem, fuelled by the lack of land property for countless peasant family in the rural area, by a so-called “national problem”, an identity issue for the newly expanded state.

“The unification, the land and the electoral reforms, with which it coincided, had unexpected effects on the social and educational structures of all the newly united territories. The Regat leadership formulated policies to unify the educational systems of the four Romanian provinces which combined traditional patterns of the Old Kingdom with changes brought by expansion. Ideologically, the Regat adjusted to becoming the core of a larger and more multi-ethnic state in part by turning to integral nationalism and an anti-Semitism that built on an older anti-Jewish tradition, and that was nourished after 1918 by the insecurities of expansion and ethnic dilution”²³.

In this climate of insecurity the one who will affirm himself as the leader of the far-right would be a Iasi University student, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu who in early 1920’s will start protesting and disrupting the university courses, while starting to attack his Jewish colleagues, seen as “responsible” for the social issues that followed the aftermath of the Great War. In January 1922, together with a University professor, Alexandru C. Cuza, he founded the National Christian Union that revamped itself as the League for the National Christian Defence on 23 March 1923. The internal divergence between the two, forced Corneliu Zelea Codreanu to found his own organization – the Archangel Michael League (1927), just to found its own military arm, the Iron Guard, at a later time (1930).

The great cultural debate – between “integration into Europe” and the dream of “tradition”

The great cultural debates of the 1920s would generate two major cultural camps, each with its own vision regarding Romanian development, a vision that would transcend communism in order to reappear in nowadays political landscape. On the one side where the so-called *Europeanists* who “treated Romania as a component part of Europe and insisted that it does not have a choice, that it had to follow the path of social and economic development, already taken by the urbanized and industrialized West”. The opposing side consisted of the so-called *Traditionalists* who “underlined the agrarian traits of Romania and search development models based upon its unique social and cultural heritage”²⁴.

²² For further references see Ioan SCURTU (coordinator), *Totalitarismul de dreapta în România. Origini, manifestări, evoluție 1919 – 1927*, Institutul Național pentru Studiul Totalitarismului, Bucharest, 1996, pp. 126 – 134.

²³ Irina LIVEZEANU, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania. Regionalism, Nation Building, and Ethnic Struggle, 1918–1930*, Cornell University Press, 1995, p. 190.

²⁴ Mihai BĂRBULESCU, Dennis DELETANT, Keith HITCHINS, Serban PAPACOSTEA, Pompiliu

For the Europeanists, such as Eugen Lovinescu, the main cause of the development of modern Romania is the exchange of ideas with the West – realizing their delay, when compared to the West, the local political elites try to imitate the western model in a process he called “synchronism”. “Yet,” he insisted, “synchronism is more than mere imitation; it was also integration.” He was convinced that “the entire Europe became more united as a result of the development of modern means of communication, underlining that the most diverse societies became homogenous faster than ever”²⁵.

On the opposite side, there are those who opposed this process of transformation. Attached to the rural traditions of the past, they opposed any western political, cultural and institutional imports, which they believed not to be appropriate for the local cultural heritage. Called either “neo-nationalists”²⁶ or “neo-traditionalists”²⁷, they try to find their ideological roots in “tradition”, an idealised version of the past where the peasants held all the wisdom necessary to have a better society, without any modern influence.

As the First World War ended the new world that was born would be influenced by the “14 Points” stated by the American president Woodrow Wilson in January 1918, which stipulated at the 14th point the creation of “A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike”²⁸. A new world was desired, a world of laws and principles. And in this new world the European Union projects came to life.

One such project was Richard N. Coudenhove-Kalergi’s *Pan-Europa*, which appeared in 1923. It was a challenge addressed to the European élites of that time, implicitly the Romanian ones. Having in mind the results of the First World War, Coudenhove-Kalergi spoke about the end of Europe’s domination: “the European world hegemony is irrevocably lost”²⁹. The only solution would consist in the union of the European states into a federation called *Pan-Europa* that would “contain the totality of

TEODOR, *Istoria României*, Corint, Bucharest, 2005, p. 347, [„tratau România ca parte componentă a Europei și insistau că ea nu avea de ales, că trebuia să urmeze calea dezvoltării economice și sociale, bătută deja de Occidentul urbanizat și industrializat”, „subliniau caracterul agrar al României și căutau modele de dezvoltare bazate pe moștenirea sa socială și cultural unică”].

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 348, [„Dar, insista el, sincronismul nu însemna doar imitare; el era, de asemenea, integrare. Era convins că întreaga Europă devenea tot mai unită ca urmare a dezvoltării mijloacelor moderne de comunicație, subliniind că societățile cele mai diverse deveneau omogene mai repede ca oricând”].

²⁶ The German historian Armin Heinen uses this denomination as he sees in their critics and in their doctrine “the support of a deeply pessimistic cultural critic”, Armin HEINEN, *Legiunea „Arhanghelul Mihail”. Mișcare socială și organizație politică. O contribuție la problema fascismului internațional*, translated into Romanian by Cornelia and Delia Esianu, Humanitas, Bucharest, 1999, p. 162, [„suportul unei critici culturale profund pesimiste”].

²⁷ The Romanian historian Florin Țurcanu uses this term as he perceives them as being the result of “the redefinition of the Romanian nationalism in the aftermath of the First World War”. See Florin ȚURCANU, “Neo-traditionalisme et politique dans la Roumanie des années '20”, *Studia Politica*, volume I, no. 3, 2001, p. 679, [« redéfinition du nationalisme roumain des le lendemain de la Grande Guerre »].

²⁸ Available online at <http://usinfo.org/docs/democracy/51.htm> Last visited on January 25th 2014.

²⁹ Richard N. COUDENHOVE-KALERGI, *Pan-Europa*, translated into Romanian by Mircea Suhăreanu, ProEuropa, Târgu-Mureș, 1997, p. 24, [„hegemonia mondială europeană este iremediabil pierdută”].

the democratic and partially democratic states of continental Europe”³⁰, a political definition that excluded Russia and Turkey, including, in exchange, Iceland.

In the same line of thought, the French Foreign Minister Aristide Briand would elaborate *The Memorandum on the Organization of a Regime of European Federal Union* in May 1930³¹ that proposed a federal Europe, a strong federation with a strong political integration. The new European Union would to be governed by a political body, the “European conference” composed of representatives of the national governments, with a rotating presidency. The executive body was called the European Committee assisted by a secretarial body. The *Memorandum* then detailed a series of organizational principles that would regulate the day to day activities.

This idea received a mixed appreciation in Romania of then that went from a positive tone to a very critical attitude. From the point of view of our paper of interest reception is the critical, as the anti-European arguments would transgress the years and would appear in the populist speech after 1989.

From the far right point of view, this supranational project was a menace for the newly created Greater Romania, as it sought to put an end to its independence. We were dealing, according to them, with a subversive movement, where the “financial” world would be promoting the European unity for purely mercantile reasons. “The true and only creators of PanEuropa are the bankers and they alone”. The Great Depression is seen as the instrument used by the bankers to expand their global domination. “Throughout the New-York stock exchange crash, the American bankers have succeeded in taking the movable properties out of the hands of the American people in order to have a free hand”³².

We are dealing here with a feeling of abandon and isolation that can be perceived also with nowadays populists. There is the intense fear that once more Romania would be left aside the decision-making process and that the others would decide for us. It is an intense feeling of lack of perspectives, of lack of promises for a better future. Speaking about the executive body envisaged by Aristide Briand, the Romanian critics would say that: “It must be noticed that this government or permanent political committee – as it has been called – because it is made up of a certain number of members, definitely our country will not be represented”³³.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 35, [„cuprinde totalitatea statelor democratice și parțial democratice ale Europei continentale”].

³¹ *Memorandum du gouvernement français sur l'organisation d'un régime d'Union fédérale européenne*, available online at <http://icp.ge.ch/po/cliotexte/annees-20-30-crisis-totalitarisme/europe.union.1930.html> Last visited on January 26th 2014.

³² N. CASIAN, *România și Statele-Unite ale Europei. Ce se pregătește Neamului și Statului nostru național prin înfăptuirea acestei confederațiuni*, Reforma Socială, 1931, pp. 9-11, [„[A]devărații și singurii născocitori ai Paneuropei, sunt numai bancherii și numai dâșii”; [...], „Prin crachul bursier din New-York, bancherii americani, au reușit să ia din mâinile poporului american valorile mobiliare spre a putea avea mâna liberă”].

³³ N. CASIAN, *România și Statele-Unite ale Europei. Ce se pregătește Neamului și Statului nostru național prin înfăptuirea acestei confederațiuni*, Reforma Socială, 1931, p. 30, [„Trebuie de remarcat faptul că acest guvern sau comitet politic permanent – după cum i-se mai zice – nefiind format decât dintr-un anumit număr de membri, cu siguranță că țara noastră nu va fi reprezentată”].

We see here the main lines of attack – for instance centralism, then perceived as a “fundamental” value, is affected by the talks on regionalization. The national history and the religion of the country are also under threat as they can represent an obstacle for the new European construction.

There is also the “colonization” theme, where the foreigners would come and take everything from the natives that would become slaves for the foreign capital. “Through the free movement of goods and capitals, and also by abolishing passports, all the rest that we still have, our entire national patrimony, would enter the hands of foreigners that would come to civilize and colonize us”³⁴.

III. The European elections in Romania. Local politics vs. European issues

Re-emergence of multi-party system in contemporary Romania. Brief overview

The 1989 Revolution brought back to Romania the political pluralism as well as the creation of a party system characterized in the early 1990’s by the strong domination of the National Salvation Front (created in the early 1990 and which later on would produce two offspring’s the current Democrat Liberal Party and the Social Democrat Party). Added to this there is the resurgence of the interwar parties such as the National Peasant Party (nowadays without Parliamentary representation) and the National Liberal Party (currently in power).

As a number of important papers have been dedicated to an in-depth analysis of the Romanian political parties, that doesn’t constitute the subject of this paper, two paradoxes have emerged that partially explain the results and the processes of the European Parliament elections in Romania.

Thus a *first paradox* “although the parties have played a significative role in the regime’s processes of change and are the actors that control the Romanian political life [...] the population trust in them is low”³⁵. Add to this a *second paradox* that, during the two decades of democracy, “the structure of the Parliament and of the Government have been surprisingly similar”³⁶.

Populism in the region after 1989. General traits

The difficulties to define populism have become evident while we were analyzing the situation in post-communist Romania as well as in the entire Central and Eastern Europe. Having suffered from

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 44, [„Prin libera circulare a bunurilor și a capitalurilor, precum și prin desființarea pașapoartelor, tot ce bruma ne-a mai rămas, întregul nostru patrimoniu național, va intra în mâinile străinilor care vor veni să ne civilizeze și să ne colonizeze”].

³⁵ Sergiu GHERGHINA, “Partidele politice postcomuniste: trăsături și evoluții generale” in Sergiu GHERGHINA (editor), *Voturi și politici. Dinamica partidelor românești în ultimele două decenii*, Institutul European, Iași, 2011, p. 22, [“deși partidele au jucat un rol semnificativ în procesul de schimbare a regimului și sunt actorii ce controlează viața politică românească [...] încrederea populației în acestea este scăzută”].

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 23, [“structura legislativului și guvernului a fost surprinzător de similară”].

a “conceptual stretching”³⁷, that has seen the term applied indiscriminately to the political movements of the region we are now faced with the difficulty to correctly identify its recipient. A way to solve this dilemma would be to use Andrew Janos distinction between “populism” and “neo-populism”, where neo-populism is built as a counter-reaction to globalism and the “Other”, a menacing others³⁸. Michael Shafir partially shares this idea while adding an extra-element, namely Giovanni Sartori’s distinction between “systemic politics” and “anti-systemic politics”³⁹.

In this context that we should consider Jacques Rupnik’s analysis regarding the rise of *Populism in Eastern Central Europe*⁴⁰. While analyzing the case of Eastern Central Europe he notices a return of the populism, as an accompanying partner of mainstream politicians. He carefully draws a series of traits of this current, which can be applied to all of the countries of this region, including Romania, as we are to see below.

First of all, Rupnik notices what can be called a “democratic fatigue” driven by the increasingly low confidence in the values and virtues of democracy: “Democracy today has no rivals but is losing supporters. Populist movements, to some extent, express that ambivalence and discontent”.

Secondly, the populist movements tend to be anti-liberal, both regarding the day to day life and the attitude toward economy. “They are not anti-democratic (indeed they claim to be the ‘true voice of the people’ and keep demanding new elections or referenda) but anti-liberal. If democracy means popular legitimacy and constitutionalism (the separation of powers), then the populists accept the former and reject the latter (i.e. the idea that constitutional norms and representative democracy have primacy over values and ‘legitimate’ popular grievances)”. Moreover the populists tend to favor polarization as in we do not have a “debate” but a “conflict” and you are facing enemies and not competitors.

In the third place, we tend to have an open conflict with the established elites and with what can be perceived as a common consensus – the European Union and NATO membership who were pivotal through the 1990s and 2000s. “The populist challenge to the modernizing political and

³⁷ For further information regarding this idea of over expanding a concept please read more in Giovanni SARTORI “Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics”, *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 64, No. 4. (December 1970), pp. 1033-1053 available online at

<http://www.sant.ox.ac.uk/people/knicolaidis/sartori.pdf> Last visited on January 27th 2014.

³⁸ For further reading please see Andrew C. JANOS, “Continuity and Change in Eastern Europe: Strategies of Post-communist Politics”, *East European Politics & Societies*, December 1993 8: 1-31

³⁹ Michael SHAFIR, “Neopopulismul în zodia postcomunismului” in Sergiu GHERGHINA, Sergiu MIȘCOIU, Sorina SOARE (editors) *Populismul contemporan*, Institutul European, Iași, 2011, pp. 401-408.

⁴⁰ Jacques RUPNIK, “Populism in Eastern Central Europe”, *Eurozine*, 10.09.2007 available online at <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2007-09-10-rupnik-en.html> Last visited on January 27th 2014.

technocratic elite that has prevailed in the 1990s comes in two guises: as an anti-corruption drive, on the one hand, and as ‘de-communicization’ on the other.”⁴¹.

Finally, we can add an increasing anti-European feeling: “reluctance or outright opposition towards European integration” that puts an additional stress upon the European idea. “Tired of being the European pupils, the populist nationalists have been longing to reveal at last the kind of Europe they have in mind: a ‘Europe of sovereign nation-states’, a ‘Christian Europe’ opposed to the materialist, decadent, permissive, supra-national one.”⁴².

When “party” becomes a “multitude”

According to Michael Shafir, we have witnessed since 2007 to an inclusive public speech that tends to replace the concept of “party” with another one, something more inclusive “through the syntagms of ‘movement’ or at least ‘union’ of forces of different ideological visions but united by the same social and national goals”⁴³.

One such sample of “systemic” speech, **that Shafir and anyone paying notice to the press articles of the time can observe**, can be found in the articles of, for instance, Traian Ungureanu, a Romanian MEP, PPE and an allied of the current president Traian Băsescu, who in 2007, an European electoral year, spoke about the fight with the system, after the referendum. On an almost biblical tone he spoke about the struggle of the president against the old system in eschatological terms. He clearly states the two opposing sides: the modern ones and the rest (communists, mobsters, etc.) that oppose progress.

“The pro-Băsescu electorate – anti-system – contains sympathizers of all the parties and diverse generations, from the frustrated veteran to the young invaders of the political scene. They have all left the party assignments and have imposed a new objective, civil and difficult: the modernization, meaning the improvement of the governance system”⁴⁴.

⁴¹ Jacques RUPNIK, “Populism in Eastern Central Europe”, *Eurozine*, 10.09.2007 available online at <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2007-09-10-rupnik-en.html> Last visited on January 27th 2014.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ Michael SHAFIR, “Neopopulismul în zodia postcomunismului” in Sergiu GHERGHINA, Sergiu MIȘCOIU, Sorina SOARE (editors), *Populismul contemporan*, Institutul European, Iași, 2011, p. 418, [“prin sintagma de “mișcare” sau cel puțin “uniune” a forțelor de diferite viziuni ideologice, dar unificate de aceleași țeluri sociale și naționale”]. **Michael Shafir analysis represents an excellent starting point for the analysis of the Romanian post-communism and the effects on populism on it.**

⁴⁴ Traian UNGUREANU, “Nașterea noului”, *Cotidianul*, June 4th 2007, available online at <http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-arhiva-1067683-nasterea-noului-traian-ungureanu.htm> Last visited on January 27th 2014. [“Electoratul pro-Băsescu - antisistem - cuprinde simpatizanți ai tuturor partidelor și generații diverse, de la veteranii exasperați la tinerii invadatori ai scenei politice. Toți au părăsit consemnele de partid și au impus un obiectiv nou, civil și dificil: modernizarea, adică îmbunătățirea sistemului de guvernare.”]

And what this new generation requires? He also offers the solution. “The solution: new must be met by new. The society can respond to a fresh project, under the guarantees of Traian Băsescu: an ample political movement, with a distinct name and a credible component”⁴⁵.

This idea will reverberate in the works of other assistants and supporters of the president as they have spoken in their press articles about a democracy without parties and a democracy without opposition. Thus Cătălin Avramescu spoke about the necessity to eliminate the political parties from the democratic game: “parties should be completely eliminated as institutions of power”. A “non-party democracy” is in his opinion the best solution for Romania: “because in this country, the parties, practically without any exception have become an impediment to democracy. Because our current system is designed to empower the party oligarchy and not the citizens”⁴⁶.

And if we do not need parties in order to be a democracy why do we need opposition at all? This is the next logical step the author is doing by suggesting that “modern democracy doesn’t necessary supposes the presence of a parliamentary opposition”. He states that what Romania would need is not a series of strong opposition parties but only one party government that would apply the principles of good governance not having to take into account other smaller parties’ complaints and demands⁴⁷.

Moreover he proves also to be reluctant to Romania’s EU accession as he believed that we should follow the Northern Europe model – mainly those countries who are not members of the EU, as the EU membership would sharply affect our competitiveness and economic efficiency. “A rigorous policy of tax reduction and unification at an absolute minimum is effectively impossible in the circumstances of Romania’s membership to a bureaucratic block dominated by socialists”⁴⁸.

2007 – First European Parliament elections. When local issues overcome European themes

The year of the first European election in Romania was a year of stark contrasts where the internal disputes held the front page of the newspapers whilst the European topics were sidelined at best. Thus a major topic that captured the internal attention was the first suspension of the Romanian

⁴⁵ Traian UNGUREANU, “Nașterea noului”, *Cotidianul*, June 4th 2007, available online at <http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-arhiva-1067683-nasterea-noului-traian-ungureanu.htm> Last visited on January 27th 2014. [”Soluția: noul trebuie întâmpinat cu nou. Societatea poate răspunde unui proiect proaspăt, girat de Traian Băsescu: o mișcare politică largă, cu nume distinct și componentă credibilă.”].

⁴⁶ Cătălin AVRAMEȘCU, “Democrație fără partide”, *Bursa*, November 6th 2007, available online at <http://www.bursa.ro/s=editorial&articol=18850.html> Last visited on January 27th 2014 [”partidele ar trebui eliminate complet ca instituții ale puterii. [...] : pentru că în această țară, partidele, practic fără excepție, au devenit mai degrabă o piedică în calea democrației. Pentru că sistemul nostru actual e gândit pentru a da puteri oligarhiei de partid, nu cetățenilor.”].

⁴⁷ *Idem*, “Democrație fără opoziție”, *Bursa*, December 12th 2007 available online at http://www.bursa.ro/democratie-fara-opozitie-20566&s=editorial&articol=20566&editie_precedenta=2007-12-17.html Last visited on January 27th 2014 [”democrația modernă nu presupune neapărat prezența unei opoziții parlamentare.”].

⁴⁸ *Idem*, “Peștele nostru”, *9AM News*, January 10th 2007, available online at <http://www.9am.ro/stiri-revista-presei/2007-01-10/pestele-nostru.html> Last visited on January 27th 2014 [”O politică riguroasă de reducere și unificare a impozitelor la un minim absolut e efectiv imposibilă în condițiile apartenenței României la un bloc birocratic, dominat de socialiști.”].

President by the Parliament and the impeachment referendum that took place in May 2007. This event generated a public outcry with a series of high-profile Romanian intellectuals signing a common statement for the defense of the rule of law claiming “the tendency of some authorities to avoid or violate the principles and the practices of the state of law and of democracy”⁴⁹.

This political crisis echoed at the European level as the operational capabilities of the Romanian authorities seemed to be affected as regards the reform of the state while also generating a supplementary pressure as regards the European Commission perceptions upon the judicial sector reforms and the fight against corruption.

The officials’ declarations were almost unanimously speaking about the need to progress upon the reforms path. European Commission president Jose Manuel Barroso called for the crisis to “be solved by the Romanian institutions in full respect of the democratic and constitutional principles as soon as possible”, stating that: “Romania knows it must go on with the reforms needed, namely the judicial reform and fight against corruption that were a commitment of Romania when it joined the European Union.”⁵⁰.

After the Referendum the same European official spoke about the need of progress: “I hope that this outcome will contribute to allow Romania, as a full member of the European Union, to move forward with the reforms that are needed, especially in the areas of judicial reform and the fight against corruption. To achieve these reforms, Romania needs a stable political and legal framework with all political actors working together to achieve the growth and social development of Romania.”⁵¹.

The European Commission’s Report regarding Romania’s progress on accompanying measures following Accession issued on 27 June⁵² generated a supplementary internal debate which led to the postponement of the first elections for the European Parliament for the second half of 2007⁵³. The first

⁴⁹ ”Apel pentru respectarea statului de drept și a democrației”, *Hotnews*, May 7th 2007 available online at <http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-arhiva-1082205-ple-su-liiceanu-apel-pentru-respectarea-statului-drept-democratiei.htm> Last visited on January 27th 2014. [”tendința unor autorități de a ocoli sau încălca principiile și practicile statului de drept și ale democrației.”]

As a result of this campaign a great number of participants rejected the impeachment of the president. For the final results please see <http://www.becreferendum2007.ro/document3/rez%20finale.pdf> Last visited on January 27th 2014.

⁵⁰ See “Romanian president faces impeachment poll”, *Euractiv*, April 25th updated on May 23rd 2007 available online at <http://www.euractiv.com/enlargement/romanian-president-faces-impeachment-poll/article-163364> Last visited on January 27th 2014

⁵¹ *Statement of President Barroso on the outcome of the referendum in Romania*, May 20th 2007, available online at http://ec.europa.eu/romania/documents/press_releases/21_05_cp_barroso_on_referendum_en_ro.pdf Last visited on January 27th 2014

⁵² Available online at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2007:0378:FIN:EN:HTML> Last visited on January 27th 2014

⁵³ In march 2007 the Romanian government led by the Prime-minister Călin Popescu Tăriceanu a former ally of the president Traian Băsescu postponed the elections trough a government emergency ordinance with the pretext that “in the context of the unsettling internal political climate, as this event is one of great importance, measure

ever elections would therefore take place on 25 November 2007. Then like nowadays the elections took place simultaneously with a referendum called by president Traian Băsescu which regarded the introductions of a uninominal voting system. It was a highly controversial decision that put the internal political issue in the forefront of an historic moment – the first ever European elections held in Romania.

The political polarization led to the confrontation of opposing sides – the president versus the parliament, a confrontation that was a mere continuation of the spring debate⁵⁴. We had a political agenda dominated by internal disputes on issues that never took a European approach, thus the European integration process as well as the European elections had a low level of interest among the public opinion. The information campaign was rather limited with few noticeable results⁵⁵.

The rather elitist approach of this type of elections was also evident through the monitoring of the mass-media articles related to those issues. Thus a study of ActiveWatch Media Monitoring Agency, a human rights organization that militates for free communication for public interest, show that there were mostly the journalists and the experts who were speaking about European issues and less those who would effectively run for MEP seats.

in accordance are necessary, meaning the postponement of the elections for the European Parliament for the second semester” For further information please read B. BLAGU, ”Alegerile europarlamentare, amânate prin decizie asumată de premierul Călin Popescu Tăriceanu”, *Hotnews*, March 12th 2007, available online at <http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-arhiva-1107477-alegerile-europarlamentare-amanate-prin-decizie-asumata-premierul-calin-popescu-tariceanu.htm> Last visited on January 27th 2014

[”în condițiile climatului politic intern necorespunzator, în condițiile în care acest eveniment este unul de maximă importanță, se impun măsuri în consecință, adică amânarea alegerilor pentru Parlamentul European pentru semestrul doi”.]

⁵⁴ In a press statement issued on October 23rd 2007 president Băsescu claimed that the referendum was only enforcing the European side of Romanian politics “in order to be Europeans we must have a reformed political class and I believe that the theme of the political class reformation of Romania is a purely european theme”. Available online at <http://www.presidency.ro/index.php?lang=ro> Last visited on January 27th 2014 [”pentru a fi europeni trebuie să avem o clasă politică reformată și cred că tema reformării clasei politice din România este o temă pur europeană.”].

⁵⁵ We should mention the research conducted by the former Agency for Governmental Strategies called the *Barometer of the European Integration* that indicated for March 2007 the fact that approximately 30% of the Romanian voters never heard about the 2007 European elections while 27% of the voters believed that the MEP were appointed by the Romanian institutions. For further details please see the report *Primul pas în Europa. Raport de observare a alegerilor pentru desemnarea reprezentanților din România în Parlamentul European*, Asociația Pro Democrația, Bucharest, 2007 available online at http://www.apd.ro/files/publicatii/raport_alegeri_PE.pdf Last visited on January 27th 2014.

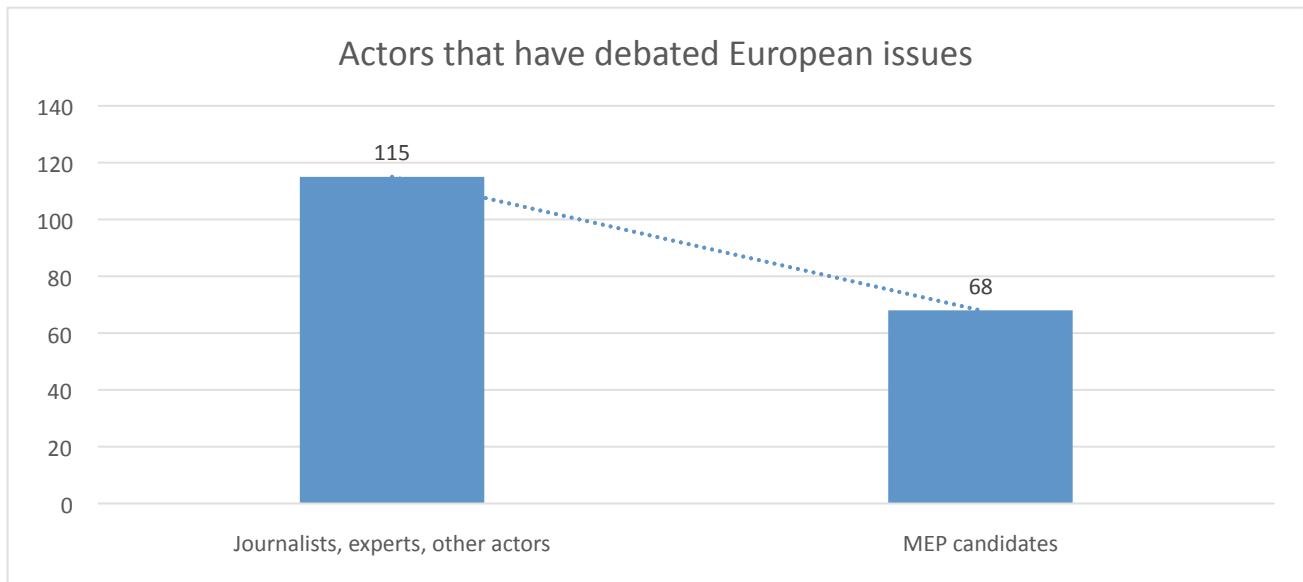


Figure 1 Type of actors that have debated European themes during the 2007 European Parliament elections⁵⁶

The referendum was invalidated as less than 50% plus one of the voters attended the referendum (only 26, 51% of the total voters). However an impressive number of those who attended it voted in favour of the two-round uninominal voting system proposed by the president and his followers (81.36%)⁵⁷.

As regards the European Parliament vote, seen by many as a crucial electoral test before the 2008 general elections, of the 35 available seats in 2007: the Democratic Party (PD) (the supporter of President Băsescu) obtained 13 seats, the Social Democratic Party (PSD) – 10 seats, the National Liberal Party (PNL) – 6 seats, the Liberal Democratic Party (PLD) – 3 seats while the Hungarian Democrats (UDMR) – 2 seats, while the independent candidate, the bishop Laszlo Tokes joined later one the EPP Group.

⁵⁶ *Temele europene și alegerile europarlamentare în presă*, ActiveWatch, Bucharest, 2007, p. 10, available online at http://media.hotnews.ro/media_server1/document-2007-12-12-2084959-0-raport-europarlamentare.pdf Last visited on January 27th 2014.

⁵⁷ See the final results at <http://www.becreferendum2007vu.ro/documente/rezultatefinale0001.pdf> (available only in Romanian). Last visited on January 27th 2014.

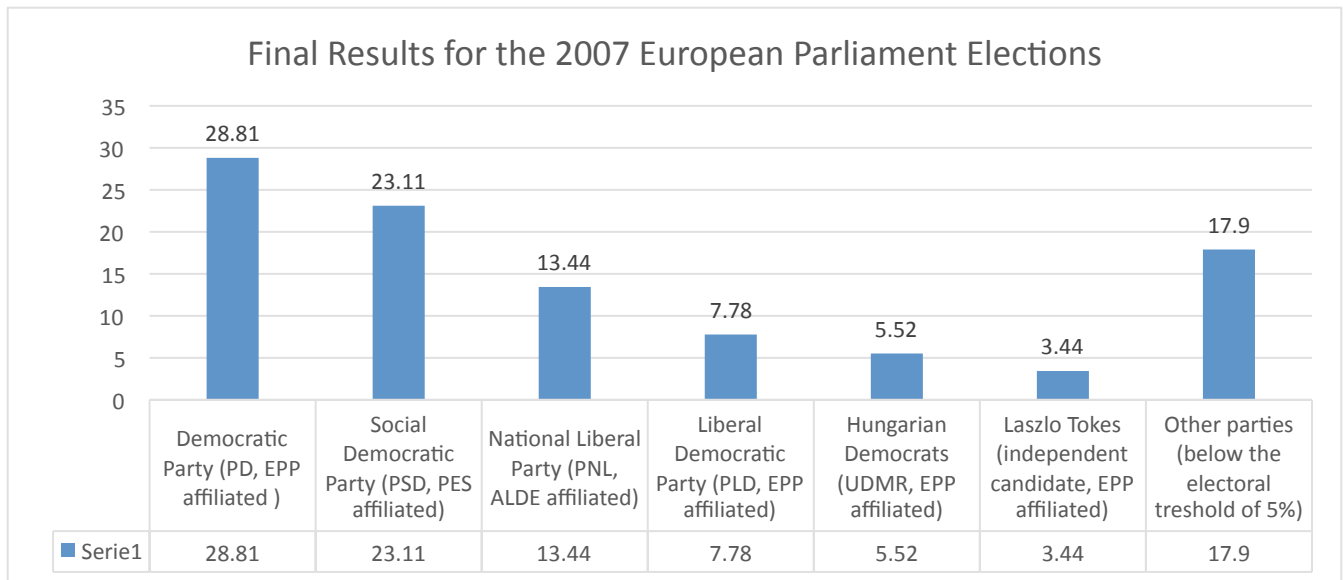


Figure 2 Final results of the 2007 European Parliament Elections⁵⁸

It was a hard won victory for the Democratic Party (and for the EPP as a matter of fact) since the then leader of the party, Mr. Emil Boc had the opportunity to assess his party strength after being forcedly put into opposition after a bitter row with their former allies, the National Liberal Party.

The 2009 elections. Between European synchronization and yet another local elections

The next European Parliament elections would represent from the Romanian point a view a symbolic event as we have achieved the so-called “synchronism” with the Western world, at least from the political point of view – on 7 June 2009, the Romanians alongside the other Europeans voted for the European Parliament. Unfortunately this symbolic moment would be shadowed by the already existing economic crisis and its impact upon the political and social landscape.

We were already living in a European Union where the pessimism and the concern for the future reached alarming quotas, as the economic issues came to the centre of the public interest. That diverted somehow the attention to the internal issues, to the government the opposition’s solutions to the national difficulties, much like the 2007 elections. These elections also came on the background of an important number of local elections (five elections rounds – parliamentary, referenda) that induced a feeling of fatigue amongst the Romanian electorate. The voters were tired for being called to the polling stations⁵⁹ whilst the echoes of 2008 parliamentary elections promises were still present in the public space.

⁵⁸ See http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alegeri_pentru_Parlamentul_European_%C3%AEn_Rom%C3%A2nia,_2007 Last visited on January 27th 2014.

⁵⁹ A percentage of 27.67% of the registered voter came to the polls. See <http://www.bec2009pe.ro/Documente%20PDF/Rezultate/Rezultate%20finale/Situatie%20voturi%20PE-date%20finale.pdf> Last visited on January 31st 2014.

As to the previous 2007 electoral campaign, what is to be noticed is the high degree of absence to vote, a situation that constitutes a trait of nowadays elections. The lack of communication as well as the internal agenda made these elections some of the least interesting from the voters point of view.

“The Romanian democracy sees itself menaced today by the absence of its main actors: the electors. The Romanian political parties satisfy themselves also this time to recruit candidates for the European Parliament elections and have not assumed their second role, that of communication. The electoral campaign was characterized by the absence of a real competitions, and the European themes were absent from the public agenda. On the background of this political abandon, the electors preferred not to present themselves to the polling places”⁶⁰.

Being at the time a coalition government, led by the Prime minister Emil Boc, formed by the Democrat-Liberal Party [PDL, formed by uniting the 2007 parties, Democratic Party (PD) and the Liberal-Democratic Party (PLD)] and the main socialist party Social Democrat Party (PSD) it started to show signs of internal disputes the European Parliaments elections counted from the point of view of the late 2009 presidential elections – “the stars of the electoral campaign were no longer the EP candidates but the candidates to the Romanian Presidency”⁶¹.

What was new in relations to the 2007 elections was also the active involvement of civil society figures in the electoral campaign – we have the notorious cases of personalities such as Monica Macovei, Traian Ungureanu or Cristian Preda who after having supported the current president received eligible seats on the PDL electoral lists⁶². It was then that Ms. Macovei distinguished herself by tackling the “corruption issue” a recurrent theme in the Romanian landscape of ideas, as the representatives of this party perceived themselves as anti-corruptions champions.

The main stream electoral topics were thus circumscribed to the upcoming presidential elections every one of the main candidates from the tree main parties trying to better identify themselves in the eyes of their constituency. It is a fact that was recognized even by the parties’ staffs who openly admitted their sole preoccupation for the presidential elections. Thus for PSD the most

⁶⁰ Irina BUJDER, Diana CONDREA, Madalina BUCHERU, Ana-Maria MOSNEAGU, Septimius PARVU, *Europene 2009. Raport de observare a alegerilor pentru desemnarea reprezentanților din România în Parlamentul European*, Bucharest, 2009, p. 2, [”Democrația românească se vede amenințată astăzi de absența actorilor săi principali: alegătorii. Partidele politice românești s-au mulțumit și de această dată să recruteze candidați la alegerile pentru Parlamentul European (PE) și nu și-au asumat al doilea rol, cel de comunicare. Campania electorală a fost caracterizată de lipsa unei competiții reale, iar teme europene au lipsit de pe agenda publică. Pe fondul acestui abandon politic, alegătorii au preferat să nu se prezinte la urne.”].

⁶¹ *Raport de analiză politică. Alegerile europene de la 7 iunie – amurgul democrației?*, ”Ovidiu Șincai” Institute, Bucharest, June 22nd 2009, p. 4, [”vedetele campaniei electorale nu au mai fost candidații la PE, ci candidații la Președinția României”].

⁶² See <http://www.alegeri.tv/alegeri-europarlamentare-2009/partidul-democrat-liberal-pdl> Last visited on January 27th 2014.

visible campaign “was that for the preparation of the presidential elections that have as main character Mr Mircea Geoană, seconded by some of the PSD ministers”⁶³.

What should be notice is the “dual” political language of the representatives of the Hungarian Democrats. Having reenlisted in their ranks Mr. Laszlo Tokes, they were divided between the so-called “moderates” and the “radicals”, represented by Mr. Tokes, who spoke about the use of the European Union for their local interests “through the EU they will obtain territorial autonomy on ethnical and cultural criteria”⁶⁴.

What was of interest was the important electoral score obtained by the Romanian nationalists under the umbrella of the Greater Romania Party. Having allied themselves with another marginal yet radical party, the New Generation Party (PNG), the creation of a controversial Romanian businessman George Becali, known for his open speech and discriminatory stance the PRM succeeded in reemerging in the eyes of the public opinion and thus obtaining an important electoral victory. The electoral message was void of any European issues, focusing solely on the image of the two leaders – Corneliu Vadim Tudor and George Becali that, having minimal resources emphasized their Christian attitude and their “resolution” to fight against corruption, but without ever proposing any concrete solution.

As for the independent candidates it was the president’s daughter, Elena Băsescu (EBA) who formally resigned from PDL only to announce that it would re-enter after the end of these elections. A socialite, she tried to appeal to those not interested in politics by attracting those who couldn’t identify with any of the current parties. It was an openly criticized campaign due to its perceived negative effects on the European scale. “For the European and Euro-Atlantic world, through the phenomenon EBA, Romania entered in the hated group of prey dynastical republics”⁶⁵.

The two elections cycles can be circumscribed to the dual relationship that the Romanians had with the idea of Europe after the fall of communism, as the Romanian professor Vasile Pușcaș noted the two main camps of those who said “We are in Europe” versus those who claimed “the return to Europe”⁶⁶, a Europe seen as a space of civilization.

We should add to this the general observations that the researcher Sorin Bocancea identified while analyzing the relations of the Romanian political parties with the European idea in the aftermath of the 1989 revolution:

⁶³ *Raport de analiză politică. Alegerile europene de la 7 iunie – amurgul democrației?*, ”Ovidiu Sincai” Institute, Bucharest, June 22nd 2009, p. 10, [”a fost cea pentru pregătirea alegerilor prezidențiale, care l-a avut ca protagonist principal pe Mircea Geoană, secondat de o parte a miniștrilor PSD”].

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 13, [”prin UE vor obține autonomia teritorială pe criteriul etno-cultural”].

⁶⁵ *Raport de analiză politică. Alegerile europene de la 7 iunie – amurgul democrației?*, ”Ovidiu Sincai” Institute, Bucharest, June 22nd 2009, p. 10, [”Pentru lumea europeană și euro-atlantică, prin fenomenul EBA România a intrat în grupul odios al republicilor dinastice de pradă.”].

⁶⁶ Vasile PUȘCAȘ, *Teme europene*, Editura Eikon, Cluj-Napoca, 2008, p. 32 [”Noi suntem în Europa”, ”reintoarcerii în Europa”].

- 1) the cleavage between crypto – and anti-communists: the first between located in the social-democrat area and the far right (Greater Romania Party) and associated with an ambiguity as regards Europe while the second (National Liberal Party) had a pro-European approach.
- 2) nationalism: manifest in the relationship with the Hungarian minority and the issue of Bessarabia (the way we should we react as to it as a European nation toward it).
- 3) self-preservation tendencies of the communist elite who opposed the opening of the country indirectly⁶⁷.

What characterised the electoral cycles of 2007 and 2009 and led to the almost total lack of interest for European issues was the conflict between President Traian Băsescu and the members of the main Romanian political parties – the National Liberal Party and the Social Democrat Party which led to serious political battles that destroyed anything in their path. It was a historical obsession that was named by the Romanian political sciences specialist Dan Pavel “personalisation” - “the political conflicts were between a leader (Iliescu or Băsescu) with his own political party, on the one side, and by the other parties, on the other side”⁶⁸.

That can also be noticed when we take a brief overview over the election slogans of the involved parties: and we analyse the electoral speeches. The main conclusion of the paper of Nicoleta Fotiade is that “European themes have been poorly represented”⁶⁹. We had mainly internal political issues that ignored the European realities focusing almost exclusively on local issues, such as the incoming presidential elections of the end of 2009.

⁶⁷ Sorin BOCANCEA, ”Partidele politice din Romania postcomunistă și ideea europeană. Poziționări politico-ideologice”, in Sergiu GHERGHINA (editor), *Voturi și politici. Dinamica partidelor romanesti în ultimele două decenii*, Institutul European, Iași, 2011, pp. 267 – 268.

⁶⁸ Dan Pavel *apud* Sorin BOCANCEA, ”Partidele politice din România postcomunistă și ideea europeană. Poziționări politico-ideologice”, in Sergiu GHERGHINA (editor), *Voturi și politici. Dinamica partidelor românești în ultimele două decenii*, Institutul European, Iași, 2011, p. 283, [”conflictele politice s-au dus între un lider (Iliescu sau Basescu) cu partidul său politic, pe de o parte, și celelalte partide”].

⁶⁹ Nicoleta FOTIADE, *Alegeri europene 2009. Discurs electoral în Campania electorală. Presa scrisă și TV*, Active Watch Agenția de Monitorizare a Presei, Bucharest, June 2009, [“temele europene au fost slab reprezentate”].

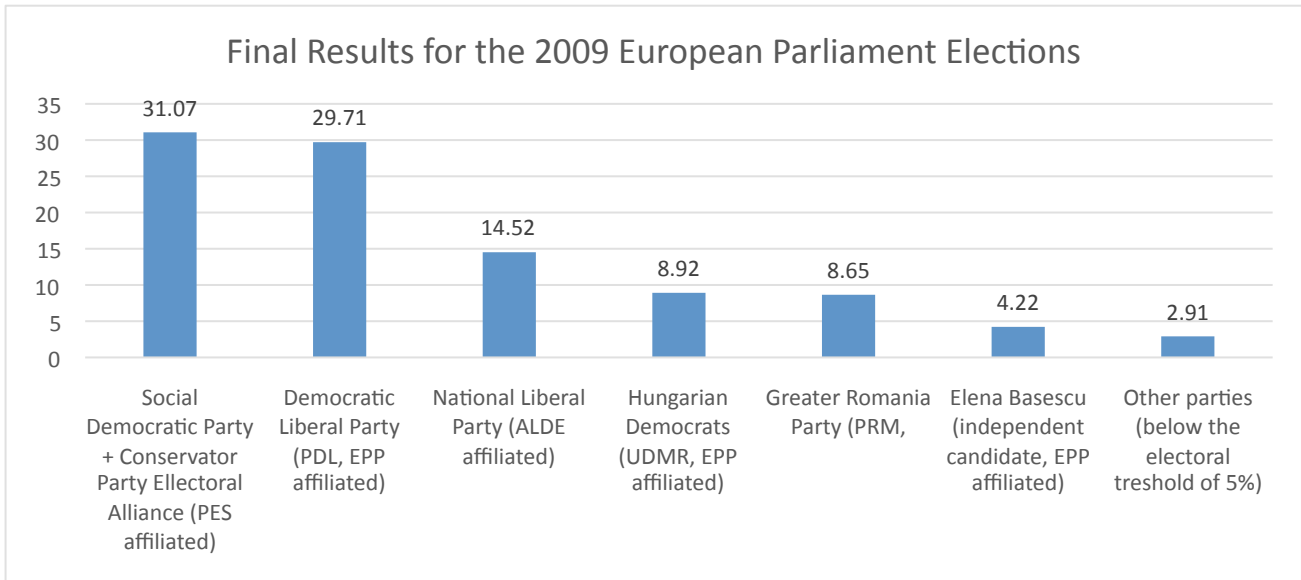


Figure 3 Final results of the 2009 European Parliament Elections⁷⁰

2014 European elections. History repeats itself? “The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.” (Ecclesiastes 1:9⁷¹)

As for the 2014 Parliamentary elections they are scheduled to take place on 25 May 2014. The latest estimates prove that it is yet difficult to envisage who the winner might be other than the estimate of the PSD taking the poll position as regards the percentage of votes it might receive. Another educated guess would regard the faith of minor parties, below the 5% electoral threshold – what are they going to do? Would they unite before the elections or wait the final results before deciding their future strategy.

⁷⁰ See

<http://www.bec2009pe.ro/Documente%20PDF/Rezultate/Rezultate%20finale/Situatie%20voturi%20PE-date%20finale.pdf> Last visited on January 28th 2014.

⁷¹ See <http://biblehub.com/wbt/ecclesiastes/1.htm> Last visited on January 28th 2014.

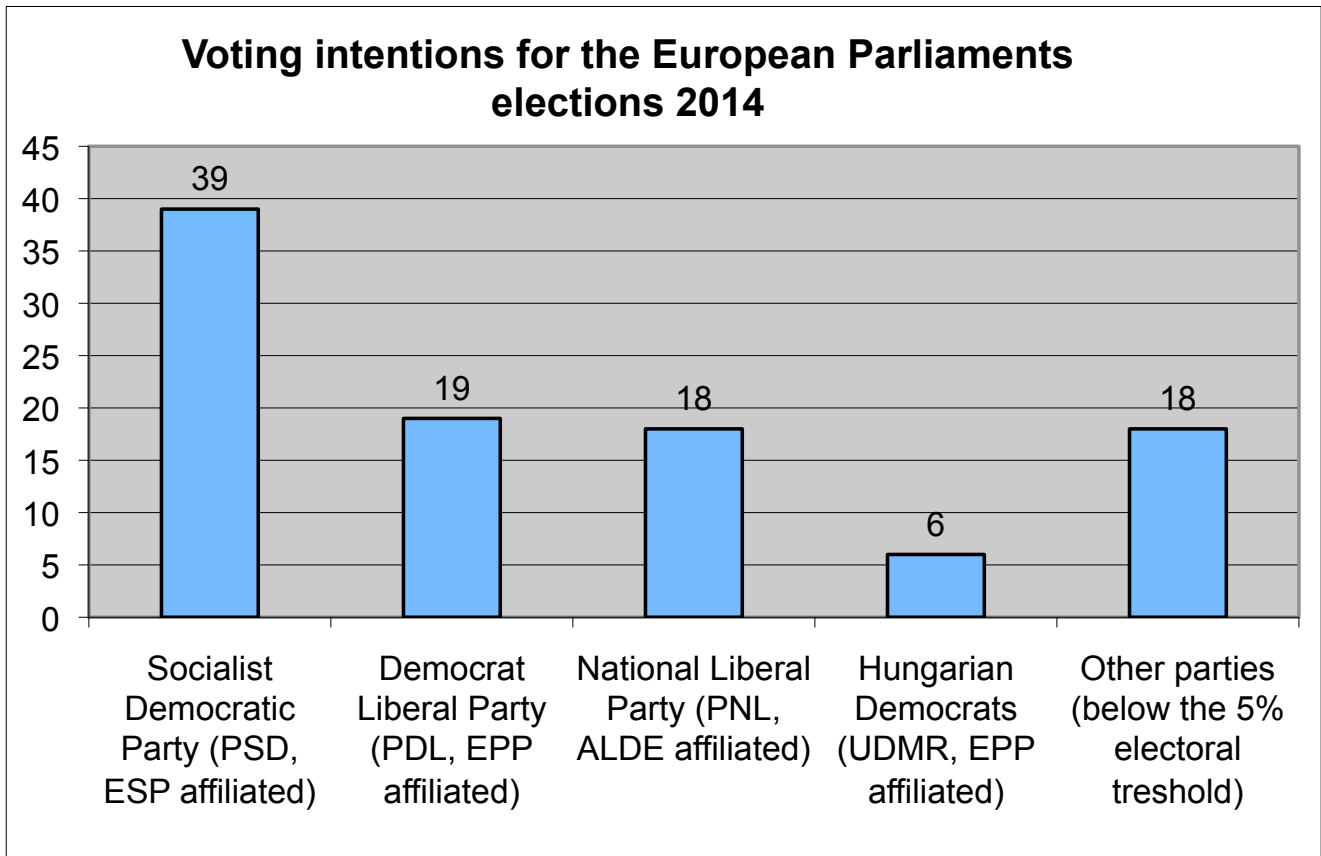


Figure 4 Estimates of the 2014 European Parliament Elections – December 2013 opinion poll⁷²

However, one recurring tendency of these elections would be once more the focus upon local and national issues as regards the European themes. We would have once again a referendum on proposal concerning the new Constitutions that raises the risk of focusing the debate on local political partisan positions. Thus in a recent 13 January 2014 news the Romanian electorate was just informed that: “The decision we have taken is to organize a referendum for the modification of the Constitutions at the same time with the European Parliament elections at the end of the month of May,” has stipulated Antonescu [the leader of the National Liberal Party and the official candidate of the governing coalition to the presidential elections, my note] in a press conference⁷³.

First of all we have to notice the logistical challenges this juxtaposition proves - two types of voting ballots, risk of electors losing their interest. Add to this the legal complexities that a two day referendum poses. and we have, in the words of the Romanian law professor Simina Tanasescu, "an

⁷²See <http://m.evz.ro/news/1074372> Last visited on January 31st 2014.

⁷³ See <http://www1.agerpres.ro/politica/2014/01/13/antonescu-decizia-usl-este-ca-referendumul-pentru-revizuirea-constitutiei-sa-aiba-loc-cu-europarlamentarele-12-11-53> Last visited on January 29th 2014 ["Decizia pe care noi am luat-o este de a organiza un referendum pentru modificarea Constituției odată cu alegerile europarlamentare de la sfârșitul lunii mai", a declarat Antonescu, într-o conferință de presă"].

extreme challenge" due to the very short time left until May as this may harm the transparency of the process and the decisional act in itself⁷⁴.

Moreover, other Romanian political scientists such as Ioan Stanomir underlined clearly the meaningless of the European Parliament elections of this year. "**The European Parliament elections shall have no stake!** They shall have a stake derived from the constitutional stake. If the PSD and PNL shall candidate on a common platform, it shall be a vote for the Social Liberal Union (USL) and a political vote for USL at the constitutional referendum. In a practical manner, the European Parliament elections shall be void of the European stake and they shall have entirely a 'domestic stake'"⁷⁵

We should add to this constitutional issue the newly reopened theme of the nature of relations that Romania has with the Republic of Moldova. After the decision to facilitate the regaining of the Romanian citizenship for all those Moldovans that had relatives with the Romanian citizenship in the period of Greater Romania, a political move that caused a series of headaches to Bruxelles and other major European capitals as it was perceived as a *de facto* enlargement of the European Union we nowadays are witnessing to the creation of a new national Romanian project.

Thus the Romanian president Traian Băsescu clearly stated that "Romania has the obligation to unite with the Republic of Moldova for the latter to be able to continue its European road"⁷⁶. It is a controversial statement that generated a lot of attention yet its impact is still to be defined on the Romanian political scene.

From this brief analysis we can say that the good thing as regards the Romanian attitude toward the European Parliament elections is just the lack of interest for populist themes with an European impact. We are still dealing with a very parochial debate, where the accent is put mainly on domestic and local issues that don't have a European impact.

The European elections are more seen as a role rehearsing for "greater" internal elections either presidential or parliamentary or for referendums. The Romanian political class as a whole is less concerned on European scale issues being focused on internal feuds.

⁷⁴ Elena-Simina TĂNĂSESCU, Interview, January 2014, available online at <http://www.ziare.com/politica/constitutie/expert-in-drept-constitutional-se-doreste-esecul-referendumului-interviu-1277632> Last visited on January 29th 2014. ["**provocare extrema**"].

⁷⁵ Ioan STANOMIR, "Europarlamentarele isi pierd miza. E riscant sa fie suprapuse cu un referendum obligatoriu", January 13rd 2014 available online at <http://www.ziare.com/politica/constitutie/i-stanomir-europarlamentarele-isi-pierd-miza-e-riscant-sa-fie-suprapuse-cu-un-referendum-obligatoriu-1277245> Last visited on January 29th 2014. ["**Alegerile europarlamentare nu vor mai avea o miza!** Vor avea o miza derivata din miza constitutională. Dacă PSD și PNL vor candida pe o platforma comună, va fi un vot pentru USL și un vot politic pentru USL la referendumul constitutional. Practic, alegerile europarlamentare vor fi lipsite de miza europeană și vor avea în întregime o miza 'domestică'"] Last visited on January 31st 2014.

⁷⁶ President Traian Basescu statement on January 6th 2014 available online at <http://www.b1.ro/stiri/eveniment/traian-basescu-romania-are-obliga-ia-de-a-i-reda-republicii-moldova-parcursul-european-prin-unire-video-72906.html> Last visited on January 31st 2014 ["că România are obligația de a se uni cu Republica Moldova pentru ca aceasta din urmă să își poată continua parcursul european."] Last visited on January 31st 2014.

Moreover if we analyze all the most recent opinion polls we can see that the far right Greater Romania Party is below the 5% electoral threshold which guarantees that it shall not have any seat into the European Parliament.

If the PSD domination on the left side is assured we have a fierce competition for the right – between the PNL and the PDL as they struggle each other to become the one and only party representing the Romanian right. The time is short before the European Parliament elections and the main actors movement might risk becoming more chaotic as the local issues and the opinion polls tend to favour or to punish this or that electoral stance.

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