

2014 European elections. History repeats itself?¹ A brief overview of the Romanian case

By Mihai SEBE²

Voting turnout

Romania, has always been a contradiction *per se* if we take into consideration the differences between the size of its population (the seventh largest country in the EU), the number of the deputy seats it has (32) and the turnout for the European Parliament elections.

With a low turnout, we are dealing with what can be clearly defined as a low interest of the Romanian electorate in the European elections, perceived as being of a low interest for the great majority. Add to this the fact that all the elections took place in a year with a highly volatile internal political climate and we have the conditions for a "perfect storm" as regards the interest.

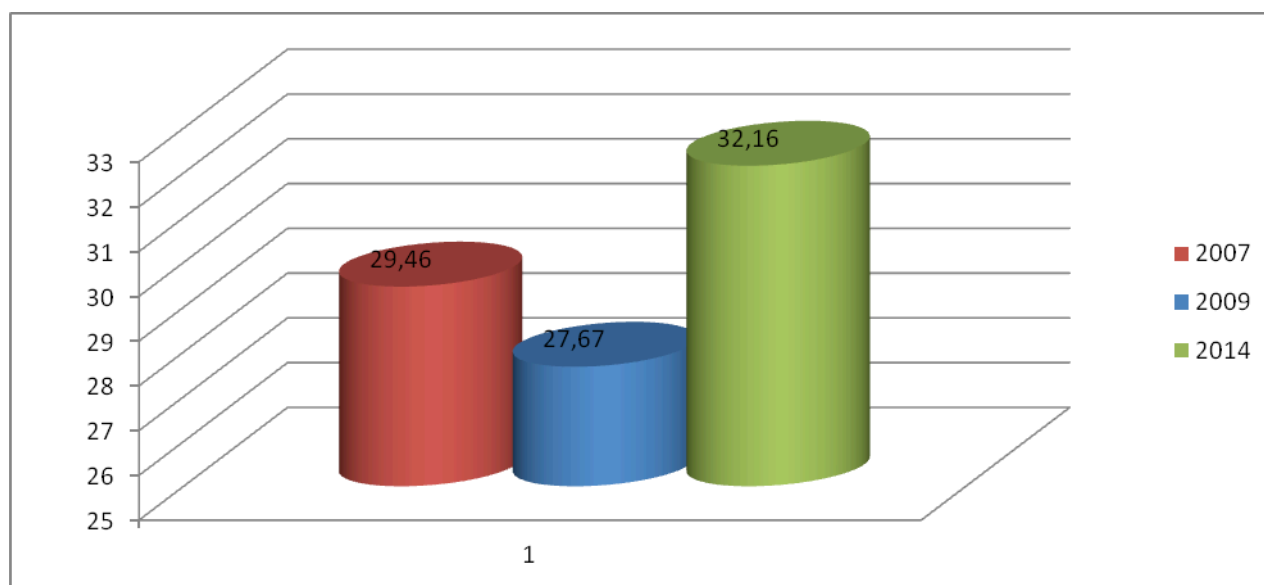


Table 1. Turnout to the European Parliament elections during 2007, 2009 and 2014³

¹ The premises of these articles were published earlier in Mihai SEBE, *The Risks of growing Populism and the European elections: A brief overview of the Romanian case*, pp. 24-25, IED, 2014. Available online at <http://www.iedonline.eu/publications/2014/rising-populism-and-european-elections.php>

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The views hereby expressed are the author's alone and do not involve in any way his institutional affiliation.

³ For 2007 please see

http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alegeri_pentru_Parlamentul_European_%C3%AEn_Rom%C3%A2nia,_2007

For 2009 please see

http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alegeri_pentru_Parlamentul_European_%C3%AEn_Rom%C3%A2nia,_2009

For 2014 please see http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-europarlamentare_2014-17349526-harta-interactiva-prezenta-vot-judetete-romaniei.htm Last visited on July 22nd 2014

However the estimates for the 2014 were quite good if we take into consideration the relatively low interest as for many Romanians the European elections are quite a distant topic, a non-local topic, with issues that are currently debated. If we add to this the relatively low interest and knowledge of EU affairs by the national politicians and the perception of many of the candidates as feasting at the public crib we have a general picture of the show⁴.

Competing candidates

The start for the official European elections campaign took place on 25 April 2014, with 15 political parties and political alliances competing in the Romanian elections for the European Parliament. These were the *PSD-UNPR-PC* alliance, *PNL*, *UDMR*, *PDL*, *PPDD*, *Partidul Mișcarea Populară* (Popular Movement Party / *PMP*), *PNȚCD* and *Forța Civică* (Civic Force) etc. Moreover there were 11 independent candidates, one of them being *Mircea Diaconu*, succeeded, its case being later on analysed⁵.

Financial and brand resources

The costs of the elections for the European Parliament are supposed to be transparent yet the estimates often vary being based more or less on educated guesses rather than on concrete figures. The estimates vary, but there is a consensus among specialists that each major party has paid up to 1.2 million euros for this type of campaign – on consultancy fees, opinion polls, flyers, etc. We have to add to this the amounts of money each candidate had to bring, the sources saying that for instance the *PNL* candidates bringing up to 50 000 – 60 000 euros each plus sponsorships⁶.

Beside the financial aspect many parties, especially those with a serious political background also had the tendency to use flagship candidates for attracting extra attention over them. We have had the tendency to capitalise the governing policies (in the cases of the governing coalition) the image of the acting president (the case of the *PMP*, who associated

⁴ See “Campania cu miza zero si uriasa in acelasi timp” (2014), available online at <http://www.ziare.com/alegeri/alegeri-europarlamentare-2014/campania-cu-miza-zero-si-uriasa-in-acelasi-timp-1295529> Last visited on July 22nd 2014.

⁵ See “Alegeri europarlamentare 2014. 15 partide și 11 candidați independenți s-au înscris la BEC” (March 27th 2014), available online at http://www.romaniatv.net/alegeri-europarlamentare-2014-15-partide-si-11-candidati-independenti-s-au-inscris-la-bec_134773.html Last visited on July 22nd 2014.

⁶ See “Costurile partidelor în campania pentru europarlamentare” (May 5th 2014), available online at <http://www.evz.ro/alegeri-europarlamentare-2014-costurile-partidelor-in-campania-pentru-europarlamentare-.html> Last visited on July 22nd 2014.

itself with the president) or the image capital of the acting MEP's that are perceived as protecting the national interests. For instance the PDL leader, Mr. Vasile Blaga emphasised the experience of their current MEP's such as Theodor Stolojan, Monica Macovei, Marian Jean Marinescu, Traian Ungureanu. Add to them younger people and you have an excellent mix of youth versus experience⁷

The opposing forces and their campaign slogans. The “Grand Army” of centre left

The governing **PSD**, allied with **PC** and **UNPR**, covered centre-left spectrum. With opinion polls decisively favouring them, the PSD president, Prime-Minister Victor Ponta spoke repeatedly about the need to obtain far better results for the European Parliament envisaging a score of no less than 35% after the end of the elections⁸. The centre left candidates tried to capitalise the accomplishments of the government in creating a better society, speaking about the need to achieve higher economic and social objectives.

The main slogan of the socialists was “Proud to be a Romanian” a rather national and European one who spoke about their desire to appeal to the feeling of national pride. It was a campaign centred upon the need to ensure that the Romanian rights were respected across Europe, in the context of some anti-migrant rhetoric in countries such as United Kingdom.

The need to reduce disparities between Romania and the EU as well as the hot topic of EU funds was another key issue in the campaign. They spoke about the need to reindustrialise Romania using EU funds. As Victor Negrescu, a current S&D MEP said:

“I strongly believed in the fact that there is a priority to create new workplaces, and the key word is represented by industrialisation. We need to find mechanisms through which, using European funds, we can allocate special funds for creating companies in the area of production”⁹.

As it is worth, we also have to mention the fact that Martin Schulz took part in the official opening of the of the Romanian Social Democrats' European elections campaign in

⁷ See “Care sunt democrat-liberalii in carti pentru europarlamentare” (2014), available online at <http://www.ziare.com/alegeri/alegeri-europarlamentare-2014/care-sunt-democrat-liberalii-in-carti-pentru-europarlamentare-1268124> Last visited on July 22nd 2014.

⁸ See “Alegeri europarlamentare 2014. 15 partide și 11 candidați independenți s-au înscris la BEC” (March 27th 2014), available online at http://www.romaniatv.net/alegeri-europarlamentare-2014-15-partide-si-11-candidati-independenti-s-au-inscris-la-bec_134773.html Last visited on July 22nd 2014.

⁹ See “**Alianta PSD-PC-UNPR: promisiuni electorale și declarații de campanie pentru europarlamentare 2014**” (May 19th 2014), available online at <http://www.paginaeuropeana.ro/promisiuni-electorale-campanie-europarlamentare-psd-pc-unpr/> Last visited on July 22nd 2014.

Bucharest on April 26th. It was a statement of support on behalf of the Romanian for the then candidate at the presidency of the European Commission who was meant to restore Europe to the path of solidarity and development¹⁰.

The rag-tag forces of the centre-right

What can be described as the main characteristic of these European Parliament elections would be the fragmentation of the centre-left forces that at that time seem more preoccupied with civil wars rather than ideological debates.

The main political conflict was the disappearance of the early 2014 governing coalition the Social-Liberal Union (USL) when the **National Liberal Party (PNL)** decided to leave the government having in mind the autumn presidential elections, in an attempt to strengthen its chances for obtaining the seat of President. The PNL entered into campaigning hoping to obtain no more no less than 25% of the votes, and if that wasn't the case the then president of PNL, Mr. Crin Antonescu promised to resign, a thing he has done since then¹¹.

Their slogan “EuroChampions to facts” tried to induce the idea of an elite party that delivers what it promises, in an attempt to reach to a wider spectrum of citizens. It was about ideals, about the need to change and to persevere in order to obtain the long awaited victory¹². Their campaign agenda focused on the need to obtain additional financial resources for areas such as agriculture and infrastructure. They spoke about the need for more European and internal coherence as well as the need to reduce bureaucracy¹³.

With more than non-expressive slogan “Europe in every house”¹⁴, the main opposition party **PDL** leadership was hoping to win at least 20% of the vote at the European elections, approximatively 7 or 8 seats¹⁵.

¹⁰ See “Ponta: Cine e dusmanul lui Basescu e prietenul nostru. Martin Schulz, presedinte CE!” (2014), available online at <http://www.ziare.com/victor-ponta/traian-basescu/ponta-cine-e-dusmanul-lui-basescu-e-prietenul-nostru-martin-schulz-presedinte-ce-1295806> Last visited on July 22nd 2014

¹¹ See “Alegeri europarlamentare 2014. 15 partide și 11 candidați independenți s-au înscris la BEC” (March 27th 2014), available online at http://www.romaniatv.net/alegeri-europarlamentare-2014-15-partide-si-11-candidati-independenti-s-au-inscris-la-bec_134773.html Last visited on July 22nd 2014

¹² See “Cum vânează partidele la europarlamentare: PSD are cel mai bun slogan, PDL e lipsit de viață. TOPUL celor mai tari sloganuri” (May 5th 2014), available online at <http://econtext.ro/analize/cum-vaneaza-partidele-la-europarlamentare-psd-cel-mai-bun-slogan-pdl-e-lipsit-de-viata-topul-celor-mai-tari-sloganuri.html> Last visited on July 22nd 2014

¹³ See “PNL: promisiuni electorale și declarații de campanie pentru europarlamentare 2014” (May 19th, 2014), available online at <http://www.paginaeuropeana.ro/pnl-promisiuni-electorale-si-declaratii-de-campanie-pentru-europarlamentare-2014/> Last visited on July 22nd 2014.

¹⁴ See “Cum vânează partidele la europarlamentare: PSD are cel mai bun slogan, PDL e lipsit de viață. TOPUL celor mai tari sloganuri” (May 5th 2014), available online at <http://econtext.ro/analize/cum-vaneaza-partidele-la-europarlamentare-psd-cel-mai-bun-slogan-pdl-e-lipsit-de-viata-topul-celor-mai-tari-sloganuri.html>

The party tried to use the good image that one of its flagships MEP Monica Macovei, who was speaking about a moral agenda, mainly her intention to fight corruption. Another issue was that of the Roma communities and the need to integrate them, as well as the energy independence¹⁶.

Yet PDL found itself in a rather difficult situation generated by the conflict between the PSD and the PNL and the latter one claiming that it represents the one and true opposition to the Social-Democrats.

This only aggravated the “haemorrhage” of party members toward the newly established rising star of the centre-right parties, the presidential backed party **Popular Movement Party (PMP)**. Relying on the President Traian Basescu support, the party tried to attract as many as possible of the PDL members and local structures in order to enforce itself before the elections. It was often an open conflict for the centre-right electorate and for the available resources. Although lacking a power base in the rural areas the party had a good visibility in the urban areas while being entrenched in internal issues rather than European ones.

Having attracted the direct support of EPP MEP’s such Cristian Preda, the party dreamt about approximately 10%¹⁷. With a rather nationalistic slogan “Raising Romania” the party focused on the topics of fighting corruption, creating jobs for young people and attracting more European funds¹⁸

Another competitor on the right side was the **Civic Force (FC)**, which had the same problems of logistical and administrative infrastructure ahead of its first electoral test. Led by Mihai-Răzvan Ungureanu, former Foreign Affairs Minister and Prime-minister, the party tried to capitalize his fame while facing serious administrative and financial shortages.

The **Hungarian Democrats (UDMR)**, affiliated to the European Popular group, used this opportunity to be co-opted in the governing alliance. Limited to internal claims, they

[europarlamentare-psd-cel-mai-bun-slogan-pdl-e-lipsit-de-viata-topul-celor-mai-tari-sloganuri.html](http://www.paginaeuropeana.ro/pdl-promisiuni-electorale-si-declaratii-de-campanie-pentru-europarlamentare-2014/) Last visited on July 22nd 2014.

¹⁵ See “Alegeri europarlamentare 2014. 15 partide și 11 candidați independenți s-au înscris la BEC” (March 27th 2014), available online at http://www.romaniatv.net/alegeri-europarlamentare-2014-15-partide-si-11-candidati-independenti-s-au-inscris-la-bec_134773.html Last visited on July 22nd 2014

¹⁶ See “PDL: promisiuni electorale și declarații de campanie pentru europarlamentare 2014” (May 19th, 2014), available online at <http://www.paginaeuropeana.ro/pdl-promisiuni-electorale-si-declaratii-de-campanie-pentru-europarlamentare-2014/> Last visited on July 22nd 2014

¹⁷ See “Alegeri europarlamentare 2014. 15 partide și 11 candidați independenți s-au înscris la BEC” (March 27th 2014), available online at http://www.romaniatv.net/alegeri-europarlamentare-2014-15-partide-si-11-candidati-independenti-s-au-inscris-la-bec_134773.html Last visited on July 22nd 2014

¹⁸ See “PMP: promisiuni electorale și declarații de campanie pentru europarlamentare 2014” (may 19th, 2014), available online at <http://www.paginaeuropeana.ro/pmp-promisiuni-electorale-si-declaratii-de-campanie-pentru-europarlamentare-2014/> Last visited on July 22nd 2014

spoke mainly on technical issues such as funds. One interesting note was the desire to transfer the minority issue to the European level by creating a European legislation regarding the national minorities¹⁹.

As for the nationalistic party **the Greater Romania Party (PRM)**, which gained two seats in the 2009 elections, it had a very low profile. Affected by internal power struggles between its members²⁰, the party is silently fading into oblivion with lower and lower number of votes.

The 2009 maverick, **Elena Basescu**, the President's Basescu daughter and a member of the PMP decided not to run for another office claiming the need to reinforce the party and to eliminate any possible lines of attack by the political enemies²¹.

The 2014 rising star of independence was the former actor and PNL politician **Mircea Diaconu** who by his attitude of calculated “rebellion” against the restrictions imposed to him by the National Integrity Agency who spoke about a conflict of interest and his fervent anti-Basescu attitude as well as open criticism against the PNL decision not to remain at the government gained the media support. He had a low profile campaign which finally granted him a seat in the European Parliament.

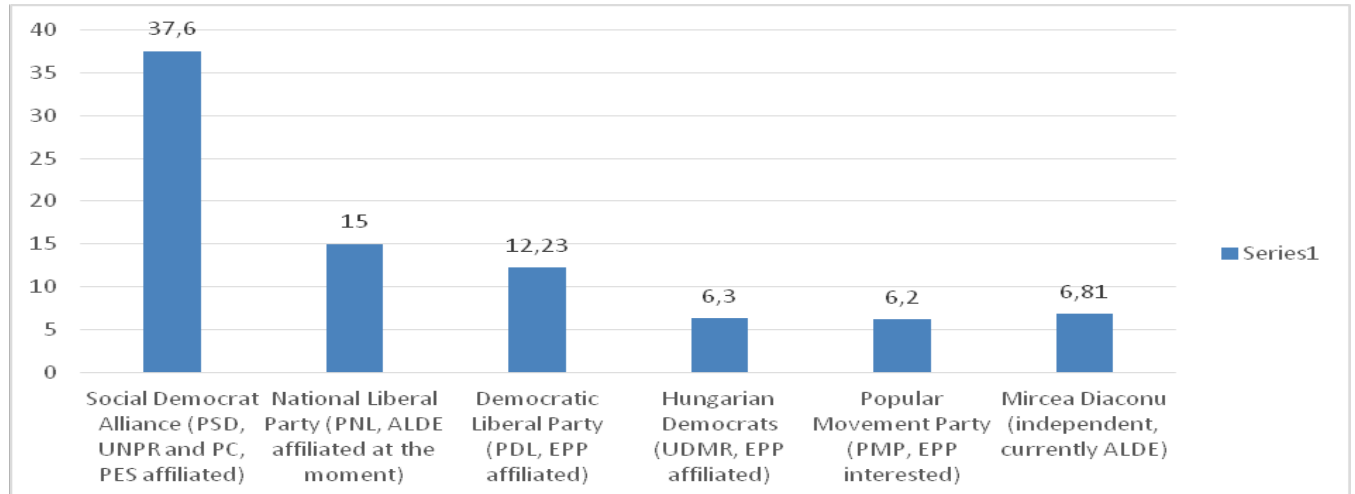


Table 2. 2014 European Parliament elections results²²

¹⁹ See “UDMR: promisiuni electorale și declarații de campanie pentru europarlamentare 2014” (May 19th 2014), available online at <http://www.paginaeuropeana.ro/udmr-promisiuni-electorale-si-declaratii-de-campanie-pentru-europarlamentare-2014/> Last visited on July 22nd 2014

²⁰ See “Alegeri europarlamentare 2014. 15 partide și 11 candidați independenți s-au înscris la BEC” (March 27th 2014), available online at http://www.romaniatv.net/alegeri-europarlamentare-2014-15-partide-si-11-candidati-independenti-s-au-inscris-la-bec_134773.html Last visited on July 22nd 2014

²¹ See Elena Udrea laudă gestul Elenei Băseșcu de a se retrage din cursa pentru europarlamentare (March 28th, 2014), available online at http://www.obiectiv.info/elena-udrea-lauda-gestul-elenei-basescu-de-a-se-retrage-din-cursa-pentru-europarlamentare_36248.html Last visited on July 22nd 2014

Preliminary conclusions

1. The Social-Democrats gained most votes. They outnumber by far the centre-right parties which offers them a significant advantage in next Presidential elections this autumn. Yet this result must not be taken lightly as the envisaged union of the centre-right forces can turn the tide in autumn.

2. The Social-Democrats also had the best electoral slogan which emphasized the need for a local and national community that would offer to the greater audience a sense of belonging²³.

3. President Traian Basescu came defeated after these elections and the party he had backed up becomes less and less relevant on the political scene. His appeal to voters tends to shrink and we can expect for this tendency to accentuate during the remaining months before the presidential elections.

4. The centre-right parties had suffered a defeat that has forced them to the start talks about unification. The most important one is between the PDL and the PNL. They plan to merge into a single party under the name of PNL by January 1st 2017. They shall have a common candidate to the presidential elections this autumn²⁴. Moreover the PMP party has not been invited to these talks in a sign of an open defiance.

5. The absence of the Eurosceptic or extremist Romanian parties or representatives in the European Parliament. This validates my previous paper conclusion regarding the absence of an Eurosceptic current in Romania. The nationalistic parties such as the Greater Romania Party are no longer a force to be reckoned in the current political landscape.

“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 a 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.

²² See “REZULTATE FINALE BEC ALEGERI EUROPARLAMENTARE 2014. Lista oficială a europarlamentarilor români” (May 29, 2014), available online at <http://www.gandul.info/politica/rezultate-finale-bec-alegeri-europarlamentare-2014-lista-oficiala-a-europarlamentarilor-romani-12661387> Last visited on July 22nd 2014

²³ See “Cum vânează partidele la europarlamentare: PSD are cel mai bun slogan, PDL e lipsit de viață. TOPUL celor mai tari sloganuri” (May 5th 2014), available online at <http://econtext.ro/analize/cum-vaneaza-partidele-la-europarlamentare-psd-cel-mai-bun-slogan-pdl-e-lipsit-de-viata-topul-celor-mai-tari-sloganuri.html> Last visited on July 22nd 2014.

²⁴ See “Numele noului partid rezultat din fuziunea PNL-PDL anunțat oficial” (2014), available online at <http://www.ziare.com/pnl/pdl/numele-noului-partid-rezultat-din-fuziunea-pnl-pdl-anuntat-oficial-1311592> Last visited on July 22nd 2014.

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 with European-scale issues being focussed on internal feuds.

Moreover if we analyse 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 will not have any seat in the European Parliament.”²⁵

6. The voting turnout continues to remain limited to those who are “politically motivated” to take part in the elections.

7. There is still a large percentage of voters > 10% that are yet “uncounted” for, in the sense that they have cast their ballot for small parties, who haven’t obtain the 5% threshold. They are yet to be reclaimed by the larger parties in the event of the presidential elections of the autumn of this year.

8. Each election tends to bring out a maverick. This time we had a popular actor who obtained more votes than the last two political parties that went into the European Parliament. This in my opinion is a signal that any independent candidate with enough media coverage has the ability to attract the votes of the disenchanteds, a signal that must be taken into consideration by further analyses²⁶.

²⁵ Mihai SEBE, *The Risks of growing Populism and the European elections: A brief overview of the Romanian case*, pp. 24-25, IED, 2014. Available online at <http://www.iedonline.eu/publications/2014/rising-populism-and-european-elections.php> Last visited on July 22nd 2014.

²⁶ For further analysis see Adrian NASTASE, “Ce au adus, de fapt, alegerile europene. 10 Concluzii” (June 1st, 2014), available online at <http://nastase.wordpress.com/2014/06/01/ce-au-adus-de-fapt-alegerile-europene-10-concluzii/> Last visited on July 22nd 2014.



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