**What Do National Parties Campaign on during European Elections? Trends from Romania**

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**Abstract:** European elections generally arouse less interest from voters compared to national elections, often because during the electoral campaigns the topics of debate of national interest end up receiving more attention than those focusing on the European Union. The discourse on Europe thus becomes marginal and the essence of the European elections is diluted by local debates or driven by inter-party ideological disputes. In Romania, 2019 marked a peak moment in the turnout during the country’s fourth European election which saw more than 50% of the voters participate in the polls. However, this should not be confused with a sudden increase in Romanians’ interest in European politics. Using discourse analysis, this paper analyzes the political platforms that the main political parties in Romania campaigned on during the 2019 European elections as we attempt to answer the following question: How much did the Romanian parties focus on messages emphasizing the idea of Europe and how much did they cling to the usual national arguments?

**Keywords:** EU, European elections, electoral campaign, European themes, party manifestos, political discourse, Romanian parties

**Introduction**

With a new election cycle at the European level unfolding in 2024, this paper takes the opportunity to observe how national parties view the elections for the European Parliament (EP), using Romania as a case study[[3]](#footnote-3). In this sense, we analyze the trends exhibited by the Romanian political parties during the 2019 elections, by trying to ascertain if the parties campaigned on topics of interest at the European level such as the EU budget, the multiannual financial framework of the EU, the future EU energy policy, “green” objectives, debates on a European defense policy. Did they include in their political manifestos references to the main EU common policies that are of interest to Romania (agriculture, regional development, transportation)? Or did they more likely stick to the same old domestic inter-party agenda?

For the 32 seats allotted to Romania in the European Parliament, a number of 33 political formations and independent candidates initially registered in the electoral race for the elections held on May 26, 2019. According to Romanian legislation, a minimum number of signatures of support from the electorate had to be obtained first in order to be able to run: 200,000 signatures for political formations and 100,000 for independent candidates. This condition thinned down the field to just half of the initial contenders, with 16 competitors managing to collect the necessary number of signatures of support to be able to run (12 political parties, one alliance, and three independent candidates)[[4]](#footnote-4). Meanwhile, the electoral threshold dismissed the non-competitive actors and the 32 seats allotted to Romania were split between the six parties that obtained minimum 5% of all the votes cast.

That European elections have often been characterized as second-order electoral competitions is well known, from the classics[[5]](#footnote-5) to some of the more recent reassessments[[6]](#footnote-6), and, in this regard, Romania does not stray too far from this tradition. If 2019 looks like an outlier in terms of turnout, that is because it actually was since what massively contributed to the high turnout was the fact that, at the same time as the European elections, Romanians were called to a referendum initiated by the president and aimed at a topic of maximum interest to the Romanian society: the fight against corruption.

Notably, in 2019, Romanian voters were out of step with the right-wing populist swing that had characterized European electoral trends since the 2014 elections. Their voting preferences erred towards traditional center-right (the National Liberal Party – PNL – won ten seats) and center-left parties (the Social Democratic Party – PSD – won nine seats) or more recent iterations of the center-right borrowing from Western liberal rhetoric (the Save Romania Union – USR – in coalition with the Freedom, Unity, and Solidarity Party (PLUS) won eight seats). When considering which party was the target of the anti-corruption referendum, a point can be made that PSD attracted negative votes, castigated by a prominent category of voters for its record of poor governance and numerous corruption scandals. In the meantime, the emergence of Romania’s very own domestic radical right party – the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) – in September 2019, leads us to believe that the country caught up to the right-wing radical steamroller which for the last decade became a mainstream affair in various others Member States of the European Union[[7]](#footnote-7).

This paper analyzes the party platforms of seven parties from Romania that participated in **the electoral campaign for the European Parliament in 2019** in order to identify what are the prevalent topics that political parties instrumentalize during a period that should be dedicated to European issues. Do their campaigns foster a sense of deeper integration of the state in the EU, seek to bring awareness about European programs and funding opportunities at local, regional, and national levels, or try to showcase how the livelihood of citizens both at home and in the EU can be improved through the institutionalization of European good practices? As the slogans of the main parties indicate – “Romania Deserves Better”, “Romania First”, “Without Theft We Get Far”, “In Europe, with Dignity”, “Proud to Be Romanians, Proud to Be Europeans” – the Romanian politicians embrace a national-centered approach, that is unintendedly Eurosceptic in some cases, entirely opaque to European matters in others, and more or less influenced by the ideological orientation of the actors involved. However, the draught of EU themes that characterized the election did not stem from an anti-EU animus, but from a recurrent and self-defeating cycle of petty rivalries, flaunting the same wooden language used for the last three decades (and counting) by (most of the) Romanian political elite.

We develop a framework that maps how party rhetoric shapes electoral turnout with respect to the European Union. In this sense, we provide a comparative review of the platforms of European political families and of the national parties and conclude with a discussion on the 2019 European elections from a Romanian perspective. Our analysis seeks to highlight what part of the Romanian example is illustrative of domestic dysfunction and what references a more systemic issue that concerns the European electoral framework as a whole. From a methodological perspective, our research design is based on a discourse analysis framework consisting of two analytical levels: one which analyzes the parties’ political manifestos and another focusing on the speeches of party leaders, regarded as electoral vectors, capable of mobilizing turnout.

**Methodology**

We analyzed the **electoral manifestos** of the Romanian political parties that participated in the 2019 European elections, with a focus on those that won seats in the EP: PNL, PSD, USR PLUS alliance, PRO Romania, PMP (the People’s Movement Party), and UDMR (the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania). To arrive at a detailed picture of the national political landscape in the context of European elections, we have first examined the themes advanced by the Euro-parties in their manifestos.

Our paper documents the agenda for EU elections of the main political parties from Romania through a discourse analysis approach of party manifestos[[8]](#footnote-8) and political speeches. An additional support document that we referenced was the “Guide for informed Romanian voters” published by Europuls, a Romanian center specialized on European expertise[[9]](#footnote-9). The research framework will trace the themes identified in order to assess the second-order patterns present in the Romanian case and how the deviations from the SOE model are, at best, a reflection of *pro forma* Europeanization démarches. For these purposes, we have operationalized the research questions into three working hypotheses:

1. *national parties will promote issues concerning the EU during the campaign for European election.*
2. *national parties will promote issues concerning the EU in accordance with the priorities set by the Euro-parties in their manifestos.*
3. *due to the second-order nature of the EP elections, national parties will campaign on topics concerning internal issues.*

In addition to the party manifestos, we also accounted for the position of party leaders during the campaign, since they are representative of a certain party consensus at a given time and, as such, could have an influence not only on the direction of the campaign, but on the voters as well. The 2019 elections provide the best example in this matter, since none other than the president himself, Klaus Iohannis, highjacked the campaign for European elections and turned it, inadvertently, into an electoral vehicle against the ruling party, the Social Democrats. This interference was not limited only to advancing topics critical of PSD, but it involved its very own electoral dimension, since the president initiated a referendum centered on the fight against corruption that was held on the same day as the European elections. Consequently, an argument can be made, that in this case, the SOE model was vitiated and, paradoxically enough, as Ivănescu argues, the election crossed into national first order territory on account of these extraordinary circumstances:

“If we were to exclude the discussion about the role that the national political events played in the electoral results that those parties obtained at the European elections, it could be argued that this outcome supports the second thesis of the SOE model [authors’ note: new or smaller parties register better electoral results]. The contextualization is, however, necessary and it leads us to conclude that, as Hobolt and Wittrock argued, voter choice in the European elections is based more on the national specific preferences (Hobolt and Wittrock, 2011: 30)”[[10]](#footnote-10).

Furthermore, the first order characterization does not result only from the referendum overlap but needs to be considered in light of the fact that presidential elections were going to be organized in November 2019. Arguably, the two elections from May 2019 acted, therefore, as indirect campaigns for the upcoming presidential contest.

**Parties, Politics, Manifestos: European and National Perspectives**

We assess the manifestos of the **Euro-parties** – the European political families populating the EP, which Hix, Noury, and Roland characterize as “the key agenda-setters in the European Parliament”[[11]](#footnote-11). The same authors characterize them as having quasi-monopoly on the legislative agenda which they shape through various levers, such as overseeing “the allocation of committee positions, finances, speaking time”[[12]](#footnote-12). Jabot and Kelbel underline that Euro-parties might not be “fully-fledged supranational partisan structures”, but they play a significant role in the politicization of the EU[[13]](#footnote-13). This likely happens through a spillover effect, since their view of the European construction and of its future should trickle down to the national parties and from there, to the voters by way of *Euro*-manifestos. For example, in the elections from 2019, the main political families promoted eleven campaign themes (see Figure no. 1), each initiating different debates, depending on which side of the four divide they were on: (1) left wing – right wing; (2) openness – protectionism; (3) strong Europe – light Europe (meaning pro-European sovereignty versus a union of European nations); (4) progressive Europe – reactionary Europe[[14]](#footnote-14).

These **themes** could be grouped into two categories – “positive” and “controversial”. *Abstract* and *personal* would be two other terms that can be associated with this split. In the former case, the themes focused on the future, citing issues that would be better articulated at the European level or in which the EU should play a bigger role. These included: (1) energy, climate, and environment transition-related policies; (2) combating external threats; (3) pursuit of “Social” Europe; (4) an EU tax system; (5) digital Europe; (6) increasing the efficiency of the EU[[15]](#footnote-15). In the latter group, the “emotionally-charged themes” were driven by past, present, and recurrent crises and contentious issues. They centered on: (1) migration, the closing of external frontiers, and the distribution of migratory flows; (2) the nature of the European project – technocracy or democracy; (3) continuing or foreclosing on enlargement policy; (4) who pays and who spends the European budget; (5) the economic policy, austerity, responsible decision-making[[16]](#footnote-16).



Figure no. 1 Themes advanced by Euro-parties during the 2019 campaign for the EP (Source: Pascal Lamy et al., “The campaign for the European elections: Theme and divides”, Policy Brief, 11.02.2019, Jacques Delors Institute, https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ThemesandDivides-Groupedetravailelectionseuropennes-Feb19-1.pdf )

Where do the main European parties fall on these topics? Cooper, Dunin-Wąsowicz, and Milanese’s analysis of the Euro-groups’ manifestos found that the European People’s Party focused on security and identity issues with an emphasis on migration, while the Party of European Socialists prioritized the fight against inequality, economic reform, and sustainability. Notably, ideologically related groups of the Big Two campaigned on even more ambitious terms, which would require in-depth reform of certain policy areas: *migration, the Eurozone, and climate change*[[17]](#footnote-17). In this sense, a brief comparison of the topics promoted by the five largest groups in the EP is illustrative:

1. The European People’s Party (EPP) painted Europe as **“a community of values”**, that has a unified global voice, whose borders are protected, and security is consolidated by pursuing real defense capacity. A strong emphasis on mitigating the migration crisis[[18]](#footnote-18).
2. The Social Democrats (S&D) proposed a **“new social contract for Europe”**, centered on social and ecological progress, quality public services, democracy promotion, social justice, and equality. In the pursuit of creating or consolidating various common policies, we find the idea of more Europeanization through integration[[19]](#footnote-19).
3. Alliance for Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) advocated for **“a more liberal Europe”** that fosters entrepreneurship, prosperity, sustainability, which is rule-based and pro-free trade, which *should play a more global role*. A managerial Europe, in other words[[20]](#footnote-20).
4. The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) envisaged EU **as a community of nations**, predicated on reducing barriers in the Single Market, private enterprise as a driver of positive change, transparency, and accountability of EU institutions. Notably, EPP’s stated vision was that “neither federalist fundamentalists nor anti-European abolitionists offer real solutions to the problems faced by Europe today”[[21]](#footnote-21).
5. The Greens promoted the idea of “**A union that leads the world** by protecting people and the planet”; emphasizing the importance of the environment and the climate policy (the future is Green / Green New Deal); social and labor protections were another core issue. The key idea – doing much more together towards an ever-closer union[[22]](#footnote-22).

In what capacity does the agenda promoted by the families of European parties trickle down at the national level? We see that Europeanization and anti-Europeanization are the driving forces behind most of the themes identified, where the former is understood as what Ladrech defined twenty years ago: the “incremental process re-orienting the direction and shape of politics to the degree that EC political and economic dynamics become part of the organizational logic of national politics and policy-making”[[23]](#footnote-23). Since then, studies have further analyzed this phenomenon, determining the role of country characteristics in shaping EU issue voting[[24]](#footnote-24); assessing the content of political discourses on Europe and European integration[[25]](#footnote-25); considering the necessity of Europeanized elections and parties[[26]](#footnote-26); or debating whether Europeanization matters after all[[27]](#footnote-27). Jurado and Navarrete found that “EU issue voting is more intense in bigger European countries” that have a leading role in the EU not only because of how they act within the supranational institutions, but also because the voters in those Member States are more interested in the European agenda of their national parties[[28]](#footnote-28). In the case of Romania, we have a situation where the political parties and the citizens have long held pro-European views[[29]](#footnote-29), yet where the process of Europeanization is understood and implemented in a flawed manner, and this, in turn, leaves the national scene vulnerable to radical insurgencies and electoral defections from nominally centrist voters.

**Party Platforms and European Elections: A Discussion on Romanian Trends**

The 2019 European election marked the emergence of several concerning trends regarding the state of the party system and of what this spelled for the future of the democratic enterprise altogether. These developments could be labelled as **Non-Enthusiastic Participation**(N.E.P. – Nationalism, Euroscepticism, Politicization).

The appeal to **nationalism** was one trend that made a return after the collapse of smaller, fringe parties in previous years. While in Western Europe, parties waving nationalist tropes were by this point already entrenched on the political arena[[30]](#footnote-30), in Romania, parties coopted the quasi-nationalist rhetoric in the absence of a more policy-oriented alternative.

The other trend was a mild iteration[[31]](#footnote-31) of **Euroscepticism** that did not profess to reject the EU, instead, it was a symptom of the country’s rocky integration journey. Twelve years after Romania became a member of the EU, it still was not any closer towards adopting the Euro or being included in the Schengen Area. Meanwhile, the Mechanism for Cooperation and Verification was still in place (and it remained active until September 2023), making Romania, along with Bulgaria, the only two Member States to be subjected to this measure. The national parties (see PSD) could easily blame those internal deficiencies in these policy areas on the arbitrary whims of Brussels’ supranational institutions.

 Finally, **the (re)politicization of the EU**was the accompanying trend to the nationalist and Eurosceptic undercurrents. The European decision-making process has long been characterized by *de*politicization[[32]](#footnote-32) – a direction that the majority of political parties in the EP had acquiesced to, in a rather proactive manner. The reverse – often framed in critical terms – is defined by De Wilde as “an increase in polarization of opinions, interests or values and the extent to which they are publicly advanced towards the process of policy formulation within the EU”[[33]](#footnote-33). Similarly, in the case of Romania, the politicization of the EU is, while in an inchoate phase, has manifested under the guise of grievances, with the parties pledging to seek a better deal for the Romanian voters.

The **slogans** are a good entry point to determine how these trends were articulated by the parties during the campaign. The two main government and opposition parties lead the charge with two slogans that centered solely on Romania: “Patriots in Europe. Romania Deserves Better” (PSD) and “Romania First” (PNL). The slogans of two smaller parties, which broke away from PSD and PNL, echoed similar sentiments: “Proud to be Romanians. Proud to be European” (PRO Romania) and “United in Europe” (PMP). Another small party which defected from PNL and was, at the time, the junior coalition partner in government – the Romanian ALDE – campaigned on two slogans that were in the same vein as above: “In Europe with Dignity” and “Romania, Respected in Europe”[[34]](#footnote-34).

There were two exceptions that broke away from this approach: the nominally pro-EU alliance (USR-PLUS) and the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR). However, USR-PLUS focused on an issue of national interest: “Without Theft We Get Far” (a continuation of an earlier USR initiative “No Criminals in Public Office”). USR’s choice was peculiar since the party boasted the most Europeanized membership of all: not only was one of the co-leaders, Dacian Cioloș, a former European Commissioner, but, in the upcoming EP group configuration, he would become the leader of Renew Europe – the group that succeeded ALDE. Meanwhile, UDMR lead with a regional, pro-European slogan: “Prosperous Transylvania, Strong Europe”.

Considering these slogans, we looked at the political manifestos to see what was the broader vision that the parties embraced. In the case of PSD, the party did not issue an electoral program for the EP elections, so we derived the themes from electoral materials and the speeches of party leaders or candidates held at electoral rallies. The general theme invoked by the candidates was centered on the need to reduce the differences between Romanian citizens and other European citizens, which was linked to the need to increase the absorption capacity of European funds. Regarding this aspect, Rovana Plumb, the first name on the list of PSD candidates, criticized the European legislation that regulated Romania’ access to funds from the EU budget on respect for the principles of the rule of law[[35]](#footnote-35).

Even if the language used in PSD’s campaign documents was moderate, during the electoral rallies the speeches of PSD leaders had, at times, a nationalist undertone. The targets were “Europeans” and “multinationals”, who, in the view of the party’s president, Liviu Dragnea, wanted to destroy Romania and eliminate PSD from political life. On the occasion of an election rally held in Craiova, in April 2019, Dragnea stated that “For too long we have been told that the interests of the EU are more important than the interests of Romania. Every German, Belgian, Dutch person thinks first of all about his country, because that’s normal”[[36]](#footnote-36). Dragnea complained that the European institutions mistreat Romania: “We have seen European officials criticizing us. Did they help this country with anything? They scold us for nothing, for something we didn’t do. Why are they not interested in how the PSD government had a positive impact on the people? Maybe they do not like it”[[37]](#footnote-37).

This critical position was paired with the idea of sending to Brussels patriots who would support the interests of Romania and who, according to Rovana Plumb, would “work every day to bring European money for the development of the country”[[38]](#footnote-38). With another occasion, though, she stressed the pro-European character of PSD[[39]](#footnote-39). From this, we can observe that, when European themes were mentioned (EU budget, EU funding programs), they were filtered through a national lens that referenced internal politics and government activity, rather than linking them to PES, the Euro-party PSD belonged to (many of the themes promoted by PES would have resonated with the PSD electorate).

In the case of PNL, there was some disconnection between the rather nationalist slogan (a bastardization of Donald Trump’s slogan, “America First”) and the campaign manifesto which contained mentions to important European issues. PNL’s political program, entitled “Professionals in the EP”, included a series candidate pledges in support of: Romania’s accession to the Schengen Area and the Eurozone; increasing the amount of European funds that Romania could access; or attracting European funds for the construction of highways and hospitals[[40]](#footnote-40).

The party also touched upon the issue concerning the future of the EU, advocating for the idea of a “single-speed Europe” where Romania would be “part of the core that will advance towards greater EU integration”[[41]](#footnote-41). On this topic, the PNL also supported the need to initiate debates on the revision of the EU Treaties, “which will lead, by 2024, to a new institutional architecture that will result in a Union stronger and more integrated Europe”[[42]](#footnote-42). Other EU-adjacent themes included the party’s support for the future enlargement of the EU that would include the Republic of Moldova (seen as the highest priority) and the region of the Western Balkans.

A common theme shared by the European political programs of PSD and PNL revolved around the idea of the existing **double standards**, in several areas of the single market, **dividing the citizens of Western and Eastern Europe**. In this sense, PNL dedicated an entire chapter of its political program to this theme, campaigning for the application of the same standards across the EU: “We must reject double standards in the EU; Romanian citizens are not second-class citizens”[[43]](#footnote-43).

 The program also included many references to internal politics, ranging from the introduction of electronic voting for the Romanian diaspora and digitalization as a national priority, to investments in education, the energy field, or health services. These priorities might have been closely related to the issue of European funds distribution, but they were the priorities of a future national government and did not directly concern the activity of EP members. Indicative of the emphasis on internal politics are the statements made by the president of the party, Ludovic Orban, at the time of the European elections: “We beat PSD in the collection of signatures and also, on May 26, we will beat PSD in the elections for the European Parliament. I call on all Romanians to come and vote, to express their political option, to use this opportunity to vote for us, because a vote for PNL has the value of a vote for a no-confidence motion against the current government”[[44]](#footnote-44).

Moving to the small parties, the Save Romania Union participated for the first time in the EP elections from 2019, as part of a coalition that also included the Liberty, Unity, and Solidarity Party (USR-PLUS). From a SOE perspective, the coalition proved successful, winning 22.36% of the votes and coming in the third place[[45]](#footnote-45). As mentioned earlier, the case of USR-PLUS is curious when considering the themes on which they campaigned and the context of the campaign. As the slogan indicated, USR-PLUS focused on addressing national issues such as the fight against corruption and the independence of the judiciary.

 This direction is reflected in their electoral program, which encompassed **three main objectives**: (1) a more credible representation of Romania in the EP; (2) the economic development of Romania by attracting investments and European funds; (3) increasing the standard of living for Romanian citizens by providing public services to European standards[[46]](#footnote-46). Dan Barna, the party’s leader, commented on the USR-PLUS’ Manifest for the Future of Europe, noting that it contains provisions to improve the livelihood of Romanians and to address the country’s position in the EU: “Erasmus scholarships for high school students […], more funds for highways and hospitals, an MCV for all states. We want Romania’s position in the European context to be visible, to matter, and the benefits [of membership] to spread to the citizens”[[47]](#footnote-47). Aside from this, Barna also took the opportunity to criticize PSD for poorly managing the country and for sidelining it to “the margins of Europe”[[48]](#footnote-48). In conjunction with the referendum, both PNL and USR-PLUS used the European elections in pursuit of national gains.

In addition, a recurrent theme that PSD, PNL, and USR-PLUS had in common concerned the need to protect the rights of Romanian consumers, rooted in the debates about the differences in the production standards of food and non-food items distributed in Western and Eastern Europe.

On the topic of the offshoot parties, Pro Romania Party (PRO) and the People’s Movement Party (PMP) were founded by politicians who had previously held governing positions in Romania: the former Social-Democrat, Victor Ponta, had occupied the prime-minister office between 2012-2015, while Traian Băsescu served two terms as President between 2004-2014. In the former case, PRO Romania framed itself as a pro-European party, critical of PSD, as could be seen from their electoral slogan (“Proud to be Romanians. Proud to be European”). Similar to PSD, PRO did not launch an electoral program dedicated to the European elections. From the speeches of the party leaders and candidates, we identified the main themes which focused on the need to increase investments (especially in the field of innovation and IT) and improve the capacity to attract European funds.

PSD was again the predilect target for electoral attacks, which were used as a springboard to campaign on domestic policy positions (corruption, justice, government performance, etc.). In an interview with *Euractiv*, Ponta stated that: “I cannot be on the same table and on the same page with people who every day criticize and demonize the European Union, like the actual leadership of PSD”, which he compared to illiberal figures and parties (Viktor Orban, Matteo Salvini, the Polish conservatives, etc.)[[49]](#footnote-49). In another interview, Ponta addressed his views on the EU, stating that “The current European model is far from being perfect, but it is, without a doubt, Romania’s only chance to develop [as a country] and improve the livelihood of its citizens”, underlining once again the anti-European rhetoric adopted by the leadership of PSD[[50]](#footnote-50). On the topic of European elections and why citizens should go to vote when they do not understand the European decision-making process, Ponta framed his answer in anti-PSD terms, arguing that voting for PSD would worsen the lives of Romanians, who would find themselves isolated in Europe[[51]](#footnote-51).

In the case of PMP, the party issued a Plan for Parliamentary Action for MEPs. The general message promoted by the candidates during the elections was one of unity, which can be analyzed as being directed both towards the future development of the EU and towards one of the key issues promoted by this party, namely the union of Romania with the Republic of Moldova. This two-folded direction was reflected in the party’s priorities for the EP: (1) to support the United States of Europe project, therefore embracing a federalist vision for the future of the EU; (2) to support Romanian workers who are employed in EU Member States; (3) to advocate for the union of Romania with the Republic of Moldova.

The candidates’ speeches and, in particular, those by Traian Băsescu, also brought attention to other topics, such as: Romania’s entry into the Schengen Area, the adoption of the euro currency, or the need to pursue justice reform. However, no concrete solutions were proposed to achieve these objectives. Once again, most of these themes had less to do with the activity of the MEPs, since they were within the purview of the national government. Occupying the first position on the party’s list of candidates, Băsescu remarked that the campaign for European elections was centered on the internal dimension instead of focusing on European topics, warning that this lack of transparency in relation to the EU could have dire repercussions in the future, as had happened with the Brexit[[52]](#footnote-52). On European issues, the former president advanced an anti-immigration rhetoric, describing himself as “an implacable opponent of turning Europe into a mosque”[[53]](#footnote-53). He stressed that EU needed to adopt “a regulation on migration applicable throughout the EU territory, on the premise that Christianity, European culture, and our customs must be defended”[[54]](#footnote-54).

Taking a more personal approach, Eugen Tomac, the president of the party, appeared to reduce the stakes of the European elections to the figure of Traian Băsescu, stating that the party’s aim in the elections is to send the former president to Brussels: “ever since Romania became a member, there has been an immense void [in Brussels]. No one managed to impose their point of view and explain to the Europeans that we might have entered the EU later, but we are a large nation, with a strong culture, with huge resources and we are eager for a better life, for salaries like in Europe, of pensions like in Europe, of a life we deserve”[[55]](#footnote-55).

Finally – the case of ALDE. While the party failed to gain any seats in the EP, we included it in our analysis because they were the junior coalition partner, and their electoral manifesto was relevant to our discussion. The document referenced a series of European themes (cohesion policy, education, or health), with the focus being on the development of these fields in Romania, by accessing European funds. As part of the governing coalition, ALDE shared a theme with PSD: the defamation of the country within the European institutions by politicians from other political parties. In this sense, at the launch of the ALDE candidates for the EP, the leader of the party, Călin Popescu Tăriceanu, declared that: “We want to send people to Brussels who know how to fight for our rights. We have had and have in the European Parliament people who defamed Romania. Let’s not do this anymore”[[56]](#footnote-56). On the issue of the European Union, Tăriceanu advocated for a fairer Europe: “the future European project cannot be a Europe with multiple speeds, a Europe that leaves part of the states behind. I want it to be a Europe of solidarity, of cohesion, in which all countries are treated on an equal footing. This is the Europe I thought Romania was entering on January 1, 2007”[[57]](#footnote-57).



Figure no. 2 Themes advanced by the Romanian parties during the 2019 campaign for the EP.

**Discussion**

Following the analysis of the electoral programs of the main political parties that ran for the 2019 EU parliamentary elections, we identified a large number of areas where the Romanian political parties had similar visions, listing approximately the same area problems (see Figure no. 2), or even proposing the same solutions. Even if their programs included references to European themes (the most detailed being those of PNL and USR-PLUS), during the electoral campaign, in the speeches of the candidates or during electoral rallies, the political parties tried to mobilize voters mainly by referring to domestic political issues. Among these, the fight against corruption and the need for justice reform were the most important, since they were the subject of the referendum held on the same day as the European elections. Due to this first-order election, Romania registered the highest turnout (51.20%) in a European election since it became a member and the 12th highest in EU. The citizens’ interest in the referendum topics meant that not only was turnout in the European elections greatly improved, but also, that the political parties which supported the referendum (USR-PLUS and PNL) also benefited from it, gaining a greater number of votes that they would have otherwise received.

Regarding our three hypotheses, we found that the *(H1)* *national parties will promote issues concerning the EU during the campaign for European election* is partially confirmed – topics concerning the future of European integration, the development policy, immigration, or agriculture were brought up (if only in a limited manner). However, these were presented as areas where Romania should improve over the next multiannual framework and contained few provisions about the parties’ intended course of action in the EP.

In the case of *(H2)* *national parties will promote issues concerning the EU in accordance with the priorities set by the Euro-parties in their manifestos* – we could not confirm this hypothesis, finding no mentions about the Euro-groups and how the parties interacted with the broader supranational structure or their peers in other countries. European politicians visited Romania during the campaign, showing their support for the national parties (EPP figures like Manfred Weber, candidate for the presidency of the European Commission, backed PNL, while PES representatives did not come, having earlier criticized the direction of the PSD), but proposals on the broader Euro-parties’ agenda were absent. This disconnect between the national and the European levels of campaigning was indicative of a systemic failure to Europeanize the Romanian institutions. After all, prior to the election, with the occasion of Europe Day (9 May), an informal European Council was held in Sibiu to discuss the outcome of the coming EP elections. At the end, the heads of state or government adopted the Sibiu Declaration on the future of the EU, pledging to “reaffirm our belief that united, we are stronger in this increasingly unsettled and challenging world. We recognize our responsibility as leaders to make our Union stronger and our future brighter, while recognizing the European perspective of other European States”[[58]](#footnote-58). This was not referenced during the elections.

Finally, *(H3) due to the second-order nature of the EP elections, national parties will campaign on topics concerning internal issues* is partially confirmed and the conditions for SOE are only partially met, on account of the electoral distortions created by the anti-corruption referendum[[59]](#footnote-59). Opposition parties were critical of government policies and of the direction in which PSD had taken the country after three years of governing. They pursued a negative campaign, where policy alternatives did not need to be fully articulated, surfing on the idea that, simply on the merit of being anti-PSD, they would be a net improvement. In this way, the EP election gained a first order dimension (though not of the supranational type), being used as an opportunity to strengthen the national consolidation of the opposition parties and of the newer / smaller parties that were building their base at that time.

**Conclusion**

In 2024, in Romania, the context for the European elections will be one substantially changed from previous cycles. Throughout the year, aside from the European ones, all the other types of elections (local, parliamentary, and presidential) are going to be organized one after the other. Since the EP elections are the first to open the cycle, they could very well be an indicator of things to come. Aside from the electoral circumstances, the pandemic also played a role in changing the political landscape to a fundamental degree from the days of the 2019 election, since PSD (with a new leadership) and PNL are now coalition partners, overseeing the country’s post-pandemic recovery. Speaking of fundamental changes, Romania has now a radical party of its own – AUR[[60]](#footnote-60) – which like other European predecessors is poised to make inroads in the 2024 elections. Mainstream parties do not seem particularly willing to engage in substantial debates, hoping to marginalize AUR on account of their nationalist rhetoric[[61]](#footnote-61). Much rests on the performance of AUR in the EP elections, as it could lead (once again) to a populist backsliding by PSD (and others). Referring to this possibility, Pârvulescu posits that “Next year, it will all depend on the results from the European elections. In Romania and in Europe. And if the result is a complicated one, unfavorable to the pro-European parties, then we can expect a total change”[[62]](#footnote-62). In the meantime, when it comes to the EU issues, it is business as usual for the national parties that once again are distracted from engaging with the substance of European debates by the extraordinary national circumstances in which they find themselves.

In the five years that have passed, the world went through a pandemic, witnessed a war of aggression at the Eastern border of the EU, and is still coping with the aftereffects of multiple global crises[[63]](#footnote-63). As such, the political landscape is irreversibly changed, if not where the parties are concerned, then with the larger constellation of voters. The **2024 EP elections** will be a test of resilience for the EU: will the foundations hold, or will they bend to the pressure from within (and without)? The 2019 trends carry early warnings of an unfolding European crisis that should be properly understood and not dismissed as merely a populist storm in a glass that will soon abate. Mainstreaming fringe actors and pursuing respectable marriages in some misguided search of electoral influence jeopardizes the stability of the political system and alienates the more moderate elements of the voting pool. Romania is one case where this process is currently unfolding...

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31. When compared to other cases. See: Michael Kaeding, Johannes Pollak, Paul Schmidt (eds.), *Euroscepticism and the Future of Europe: Views from the Capitals*, Palgrave Macmillan, Springer Nature, Cham, 2021; Oliver Treib, “Euroscepticism is here to stay: what cleavage theory can teach us about the 2019 European Parliament elections”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 28, No. 2, 2021, pp. 174-189; Alessandro Nai, Mike Medeiros, Michaela Maier, Jürgen Maier, “Euroscepticism and the use of negative, uncivil and emotional campaigns in the 2019 European Parliament election: A winning combination”, *European Union Politics*, 23, No. 1, March 2022, pp. 21-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Understood as “the technocratic modes of operation” that govern the EU, Robert characterizes depoliticization as “a way of conducting public policy [that] is, more or less explicitly, likened to a substantial transformation of the issues or activities that it affects, leading them to automatically “lose” their political and conflictual dimension”. See: Cécile Robert, “Depoliticization at the EU Level: Delegitimization and Circumvention of Representative Democracy in the Government of Europe”, in Claudia Wiesner (ed.), Rethinking politicization in politics, sociology and international relations, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2021, p. 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
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39. Sebastian Pricop, „ Rovana Plumb, la mitingul PSD de la Craiova: „Am adus în doi ani de guvernare miliarde de euro în ţară” (Video)”, *B1*, 12.04.2019, https://www.b1tv.ro/politica/rovana-plumb-miting-psd-craiova-271476.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. PNL, „Profesioniști în Parlamentul European – Program politic”, 2019, p. 3, https://www.euractiv.ro/documente/PNL\_PROGRAM\_POLITIC\_20x20\_BT\_SMALL%20(1).pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. *Ibidem*, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *Ibidem*. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. In support of this, the program included references about the EU’s cohesion policy and the need to eliminate the development gaps between Member States. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Alexandra Loy, „Ludovic Orban, după depunerea semnăturilor pentru alegerile europene: ,,Votul pentru PNL are valoarea unui vot pentru o adevărată moțiune de cenzură împotriva actualei guvernări și va repune România pe un loc de egalitate între statele membre ale UE””, *Calea Europeană*, 27.03.2019, https://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/liderul-pnl-ludovic-orban-dupa-depunerea-semnaturilor-pentru-alegerile-europene-votul-pentru-pnl-are-valoarea-unui-vot-pentru-o-adevarata-motiune-de-cenzura-impotriva-actualei-guvernari-si-va-rep/. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
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51. *Ibidem*. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
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53. *Ibidem*. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. *Ibidem*. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Digi24, „Tomac: Cu Traian Băsescu primul pe lista pentru europarlamentare, vrem să obţinem un scor de 10%”, 17.03.2019, https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/tomac-cu-traian-basescu-primul-pe-lista-pentru-europarlamentare-vrem-sa-obtinem-un-scor-de-10-1099282. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
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59. See the conclusions on a decade of EP elections in Romania, drawn by M. Ivănescu, *op. cit.,* pp. 163-164. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Notably, George Simion, currently the leader of AUR, had campaigned as an independent candidate during the 2019 EP elections, where he garnered 1.29% of the votes. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. In 2023, the idea of a “Democratic Bloc” was touted by PNL and PSD, which was supposed to be an electoral mammoth, meant to ensure that the two parties would sail through to victory in all four elections from 2024. (See: Andreea Pora, „Analiză: Blocul Democratic, noua invenție a Coaliției PSD-PNL, folosește AUR și echipei Ciucă-Bode-Iohannis”, *Europa Liberă*, 17.09.2023, https://romania.europalibera.org/a/alianta-electorala-psd-pnl-aur-ciuca-bode-iohannis-/32594467.html). [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
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63. See, for example: Mihaela Daciana Natea, *Reshaping European Security in a Post COVID-19 World,*L’Harmattan, Paris, 2023; Maria Costea and Simion Costea, Simion (coord.), *Diplomație și actori geopolitici în epoca interdependenței complexe/Diplomacy and Geopolitical Players in the Age of Complex Interdependence*, Cluj-Napoca, Napoca Star, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)