The SOE Redux: The 2024 European Parliament Elections in the Romanian Context

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Abstract: *The present article analyses the 2024 European Parliament (EP) election from the perspective of the Romanian political parties and their approach to the electoral campaign preceding the elections from June 2024. For this purpose, the analysis reassesses the Second Order Election (SOE) model in light of the Romanian electoral patterns emerging across five cycles of EP elections (2007-2024), noting that while in the last two cycles turnout exceeded 50%, the second order dynamic remained an electoral constant since the parties failed to centre their agenda on European themes and on the role that the prospective candidates will play in their capacity as members of the European Parliament. The article finds that what accounts for the turnout outlier is influenced by domestic issues both in 2019 and in 2024, since parallel electoral contests were organised at the same time with the European elections on both occasions, namely, the referendum on the issue of corruption in 2019 and the local elections in 2024.*
Keywords: *2024 European elections, Europeanisation, European Parliament, Romanian political parties, politicisation, second order elections (SOE) model, party manifestos*

INTRODUCTION

In Romania, 2024 was what can be referred to as a super-electoral year, since all types of elections – local, European, parliamentary and presidential – converged to take place throughout the year. The coalition government comprised of the social-democrat and liberal parties (PSD-PNL) decided to merge the local elections with those for the European Parliament (EP) which would take place on June 9th, 2024, while the parliamentary elections were to be interspersed between the two rounds of the presidential election. The latter decision, combined with the unexpected results of the first round, will prove to have a significant impact for the stability of the Romanian political system[1]. On the topic of European elections, the merge could have provided an opportunity to rise the salience of EU affairs – imbuing them with first order supranational potential, however, the parties' overwhelming focus on the local elections proved to be detrimental and, as such, maintained the former solidly in the Second Order Election (SOE) register. In this sense, Carp and Matiuță observe that, as a general rule, the electoral campaign "has been devoid of European themes", remarking that all parties preferred to focus on issues of national importance to the point that there was an overlap in messaging, while no consideration was afforded to EU themes[2]. In the authors' view, this electoral overlap confuses the voters and estranges them from current European topics and debates happening in the EU[3].

In the aftermath of the elections, we have seen that political centre received the backing of a majority of voters (PSD-PNL coalition obtained 48.55% of the votes). However, this would prove to be double-edged,

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[1] George Arun, „Analiză: Valul extremist și nevoia de reformă a partidelor", *DW*, 11.12.2024, https://www.dw.com/ro/valul-extremist-%C8%99i-nevoia-de-reform%C4%83-a-partidelor/a-71019603.

[2] Radu Carp, Cristina Matiuță, „Cinci runde de alegei pentru Parlamentul European în România: scurtă privire retrospectivă", în Radu Carp, Cristina Matiuță (ed.), *Alegerile europene din România 2024. Clivaje, coaliții, consecințe*, Institutul European, Iași, 2024, p. 26.

[3] *Ibidem*.

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on the one hand, because it was a by-product of the ruling coalition, whose candidates ran on shared party-lists, on the other, because the support would collapse come November 2024. Notably, for the first time in the five European elections in which Romanians voted, protest votes cast for radical right parties totalled nearly 20% (AUR obtained 14.93% of the votes, while SOS crossed the electoral threshold with 5.03%). Meanwhile, though the turnout was higher than the European average (52.40% compared to 50.74%), this was influenced, as mentioned, by the local elections that were organised at the same time with the European ones.

Based on these preliminary observations, though the focus on domestic topics is not isolated to the Romanian case, the persistent intrusion of unrelated national issues during a period where the focus should be on the state of Romania's Europeanisation process, coupled with the quasi-general misunderstanding or misapplication of European policy-making[4], is indicative of a broader holding pattern in the country's integration process[5]. This situation has several implications for both the national and European electoral frameworks. Firstly, as concerns Romania, the dynamic identified has corrosive outcomes for the democratic process, in general and for the electoral one, in particular, leading to electoral passivity and a lack of trust in political institutions, which should not be confused with docility and non-participation. Secondly, traditional parties' disengagement from European affairs opens the field for radical alternatives[6] to make inroads with critical sectors of the voting pool. Until 2024, Romania had only sparse encounters with such actors – parties that would cross the electoral threshold for a cycle and afterwards fade into insignificance or independent politicians who were dismissed as political oddities – but after 2024, neither these new radical right-wing parties (AUR, SOS, POT) nor candidates (Călin Georgescu) can be disregarded by the political establishment. Lastly, due to their SOE handicap, EP elections act as a canary in the coalmine, as illustrated by the multiple right-wing surges witnessed by various Members States between 2014-2024, that spill over in the national elections to various degrees of success.

Building on previous research[7], the present analysis revisits the persistence of the SOE model in the Romanian electoral context, by developing a comparative framework that juxtaposes the 2024 European political parties' manifestos for the EP elections with those of the Romanian parties. The article comprises of the following sections: typology of European elections (SOE versus EU issue voting model versus salience, etc.); methodology (qualitative document analysis); comparative framework (European versus national political parties' manifestos); discussion and conclusions.

EUROPEAN ELECTIONS: A TYPOLOGY

To support the claim that the 2024 Romanian elections for the EP fall under the SOE model, we classify European elections according to several factors: (1) supply-demand (party-voters) trends; (2) electoral cycles

[4] Michel Labori, Simion Costea, *Le management des politiques de l'Union Européenne*, Editions Prodimultimedia, Paris, 2011.

[5] Maria Costea, Simion Costea, (coord.), *Integrarea României în Uniunea Europeană: provocări și perspective*, Institutul European, Iași, 2007; Aliona Balan "European integration as a historical desideratum of the elites in the Central and Eastern European states", *L'Europe Unie / United Europe*, no. 16, 2020, pp. 50-59.

[6] On the challenges posed by the trends of radicalisation in the EU, see: Mihaela Ivănescu, Luiza-Maria Filimon, "Mainstream Fringes or Fringe Mainstream? An Assessment of Radical Right (Re) Alignments in the European Parliament after the 2014 and 2019 Elections", *European Review*, Vol. 30, No. 1, February 2022, pp. 96-114, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798720000976; Mihaela Natea, Simion Costea (coord.), *L'Europe Unie. Special Issue: EU Law and Politics at the Crossroads: Navigating the Complexities of AI, Digitalization, Data Protection, Security, and Radicalization,* No. 20, 2023.

[7] We have covered the SOE theorisation in: Mihaela Ivănescu, Luiza-Maria Filimon, "What Do National Parties Campaign on during European Elections? Trends from Romania", *L'Europe Unie / United Europe*, vol. 20, 2023, pp. 119-135; Mihaela Ivănescu, "An Electoral Outlier or Second Order Business as Usual? A Decade of European Elections in Romania (2009-2019)", *Revista de Științe Politice. Revue des Sciences Politiques*, No. 70, 2021, pp. 153-166; Luiza-Maria Filimon, "Beneficiaries of the Second Order Election Model: Radical Right Parties in the European Parliament", *Europolity*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2015, pp. 193-223. Mihaela Ivănescu, Luiza-Maria Filimon, „Între irelevanță politică și indiferență electorală: impactul partidelor mici și al candidaților independenți din România asupra alegerilor europene din 2024", in Radu Carp and Cristina Matiuță (eds.), *Alegerile europene din România 2024. Clivaje, coaliții, consecințe*, Institutul European, Iași, 2024, pp. 193-230.

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trends; (3) European governance trends. In the first group, we find *the second-order election (SOE) framework* – arguably, the most entrenched perspective in the literature – and, at the opposite end, *the EU issue voting model*, along with *the Europe Salient Theory.* In the second category, we place *the critical election variant* – a more recent, yet increasingly dominant approach. Finally, in the third case, we consider *the first-order supranational hypothesis*. These trends are interconnected and there are points of commonality between them, especially as it concerns the SOE framework and the resulting particularities of electoral supply-demand trends. As Weber notes, the SOE framework operates on two core elements: *the general 'multi-level' argument* (where EP elections are tied to national politics) and *the specific 'protest argument'* (which highlights the importance of the national factor on EP election results)[8]. Furthermore, we can also account for geographical differences in voting patterns, between Western and Central-Eastern European member states, between North and South, as well as between different regions of the same country[9].

Two paradigms have dominated the literature on European elections: the SOE framework and the Europe Salience model[10]. For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on the more recent key findings in the literature on European elections. In the case of SOE, the traditional account states that European elections are theorised as second-order relative to the national elections, which are regarded in first-order terms, since, as Reif and Schmitt hypothesize, "there is less at stake" in these contests[11]. Where first-order elections are symptomatic of democratic functioning[12], SOE are characterised by: (1) depressed turnout; (2) improved electoral results for new or smaller parties; (3) higher rates of spoilt votes; and (4) a loss of support for the national government parties[13]. Additionally, Hobolt and Wittrock found that voters tend to prioritize national preferences, specific to first-order elections, at the European level as well[14], meaning that the "national preference" is the one that determines the result of the (second order) European elections.

Clark and Rohrschneider argue that a process of transference occurs whereby "individuals presumably apply their evaluations of national-level phenomena to the EU level when voting in EU elections"[15]. According to Donatella Viola, a fifth characteristic that must be accounted for involves a temporal determinant and refers to the period when EP elections are held, relative to the national electoral cycle: immediately after the completion of a parliamentary election, the ruling party would still have a considerable hold on the electorate ("the honeymoon period"), mid-point through the electoral cycle or towards the end of it, the party in power would register a drop in approval, which, in turn, would impact the degree of support received by the party in the EP elections[16]. This approach tends to focus to on the demand side of the electoral process, shedding light on the European voter, dissecting its voting attitudes and behaviour, in search of an ever-elusive electoral profile. Viola distinguishes three types of voting behaviour drawing from studies conducted over the last forty years:

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[8] Till Weber, "Campaign Effects and Second-Order Cycles. A Top-Down Approach to European Parliament Elections", *European Union Politics*, 8, No. 4, 2007, p. 510.

[9] Christian Vandermotten, Pablo Medina Lockhart, "An electoral geography of Western Europe", *GeoJournal*, 52, 2000, pp. 93-105; Lech Haydukiewicz, "Historical and geographic regionalization versus electoral geography", *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 19, 2011, pp. 98–111; Eveline S. van Leeuwen, Solmaria Halleck Vega, "Voting and the rise of populism: Spatial perspectives and applications across Europe", *Policy & Practice*, 13, no. 2, April 2021, pp. 209-219.

[10] Donatella M. Viola, "European Parliament Election Theories", in Donatella M. Viola (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of European Elections*, New York, Routledge, 2016, pp. 39-48.

[11] Karlheinz Reif, Hermann Schmitt, "Nine Second-Order National Elections – A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results", *European Journal of Political Research*, 8, No. 1, March 1980, p. 9.

[12] Jonas Lefere, Peter Van Aelst, "First-order, second-order or third-rate? A comparison of turnout in European, local and national elections in the Netherlands", *Electoral Studies*, 35, September 2014, p 159.

[13] *Ibidem*; John Hajner, "Understanding European voting behavior: An examination of ticket splitting in European elections", prepared for delivery at the European Community Studies Association Seventh Biennial International Conference, Madison, Wisconsin, May 31 – June 2, 2001, p. 1, http://aei.pitt.edu/2096/1/002237_1.PDF.

[14] Sara Binzer Hobolt, Jill Wittrock, "The second-order election model revisited: An experimental test of vote choices in European Parliament elections", *Electoral Studies*, 30, No. 1, March 2011, p. 30.

[15] Nick Clark, Robert Rohrschneider, "Second-Order Elections versus First-Order Thinking: How Voters Perceive the Representation Process in a Multi-Layered System of Governance", *Journal of European Integration*, 31, No. 5, 2009, p. 645.

[16] D.M. Viola, *op. cit*., p. 42.

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(a) "Voting with the head" – these are the *strategic* voters that instead of opting for their personal preferences, support candidates with compatible political views that have better winning odds.

(b) "Voting with the heart" – these are the *sincere* voters who cast their votes in support of the party advancing "their own ideological preference".

(c) "Voting with the boot" – the *protest* voters, most visibly associated with the SOE elections, who sanction the ruling party without endangering the national status quo[17].

If the citizens display a certain disinterest in European elections, are the political parties exhibiting a similar electoral *ennui*? Are they also treating these elections on second-order considerations? According to Brunsbach, John, and Werner, three factors are indicative of whether this process of depreciation occurs: candidates, campaigns, and election manifestos[18]. In analysing the German case, the authors found that the parties do exhibit second-order tendencies: "a second-order nature of European manifestos can be found in all German parties in varying degrees from weak to strong"[19]. Weber posits that the voters are not the ones who shape European outcomes single-handedly – that they "do not produce second-order cycles at their discretion" – but that their choices are driven by "first-order campaign effects", since parties are less invested in these elections[20]. At the supply end, we can reframe the electoral dynamic that creates seconder-order effects by focusing on party behaviours. Weber distils the proposed theorisation into three elements:

(a) Campaign mobilisation in first-order contests shapes the electoral cycle.

(b) Parties need to develop well-defined policy positions to generate effective mobilisation.

(c) These positions are difficult to articulate by government parties midway in the electoral cycle, since "policy outcomes are subject to retrospective evaluation"[21].

What about the mobilisation and policy positions of smaller parties? In an article from 2023, Jan-Eric Bartels assessed whether smaller and marginal parties approached European elections from a first-order imperative, since they might have more at stake compared to the main parties: they can gain exposure, win a ticket (or more) to the EP, and from there have a pulpit from where they can reach a wider audience[22]. Bartels looked at Germany to test this hypothesis, since the absence of an electoral threshold in the 2019 EP German elections could have provided an extra incentive. He found that even in such favourable circumstances, small parties still regarded European elections as second-order, both in terms of participation and party manifestos – noticeably shorter compared to those on which they campaigned in federal elections[23].

Schakel and Romanova problematise the SOE model by providing an in-depth review of the literature that distinguishes between three generations of regional election studies, to arrive at a comprehensive frame of reference for understanding the mechanics underpinning European elections. This research allows us to move beyond the traditional second-order trappings in which one might be tempted to use data in service of preconceived notions. As the authors remark, "finding SOE-effects may support a SOE-model interpretation but does not exclude the possibility that these effects are (co-)produced by other causal mechanisms"[24].

The Europe Salience (ES) theory stems from the repoliticisation trend that has latched on European integration in the last twenty years. Netjes and Binnema define salience as "the extent to

[17] *Ibidem*.

[18] Sandra Brunsbach, Stefanie John, Annika Werner, "The Supply Side of Second-Order Elections: Comparing German National and European Election Manifestos", *German Politics*, 21, No. 1, 2012, p. 91.

[19] *Ibidem*, p. 109.

[20] T. Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 510.

[21] *Ibidem*, p. 513.

[22] Jan-Eric Bartels, "Are European Elections Second-Order Elections for Everyone", *Swiss Political Science Review*, 29, No. 3, September 2023, pp. 290-309.

[23] *Ibidem*, p. 306.

[24] Arjan H. Schakel, Valentyna Romanova, "Moving beyond the second-order election model? Three generations of regional election research", *Regional and Federal Studies*, 33, No. 4, 2023, p. 402.

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which the party leadership considers an issue as vital for electoral appeal", being a good indicator of how parties interact with each other in electoral contests[25]. In the EU, the topic of European integration tended to increase its salience with parties by way of depoliticisation[26], which used to be the trend in EU-15. Moreover, at the national level, EU issues were considered to have a low salience since prior to the 2004 enlargement and the unfolding of several global crises, the overall party consensus supported the integration process[27].

Not a rebuke of SOE-centred studies, approaches drawing on ES theory highlight how voting behaviour can be shaped by citizens' views on the EU. Viola explains this development by arguing that parties have started to invest more in electoral campaigns for the EP once voters became more attentive to the European elections. In other words, this meant that the EU elections were becoming more salient[28]. In the early studies on the EU issue voting model, Catherine de Vries looked at the outcome of British, Danish, Dutch, and German general elections and found that European issues were able to disrupt their outcomes, "conditional upon the salience of the issue for voters and the extent of partisan conflict"[29]. If the SOE framework favours the demand side of the electoral equation more, ES theory builds on the supply counterpart – mapping the parties' key policies at a given time. According to Maria Mendrinou, it does so by instrumentalising a set of five variables concerning: (1) the position of a party towards the EU; (2) the degree of intensity of a party's positioning towards the EU; (3) the positioning of the political parties in the left/right scale; (4) left/right intensity; (5) the impact of EP elections on new political parties, particularly if these elections are the first ones in which they compete[30].

An ES-based approach would focus on tracing the presence of EU-related topics in party agendas and talking points, to determine the parties' relation to the EU. Are they Euro-enthusiasts, advocating for policies that advance integration? Or do they profess to be Eurosceptic? If so, what type of Eurosceptic? After all, in the last decade, the articulation of a Euro-critical agenda has led to radical and anti-European electoral breakthroughs that can be used as an indicator to predict future electoral trends.

In support of this assessment, three hypotheses accompany the ES theory:

(a) Green parties perform better in EP elections, when compared to the last national cycle.
(b) Radical parties from both ends of the political spectrum register gains.
(c) Anti-European parties obtain favourable results[31].

Citing the work of Ferrara and Weishaupt, Viola stresses that voters are drawn to parties that have a clear stance on the EU, regardless of whether this position is pro-EU or against it, noting that parties exhibiting "Euro-divisions" will be sanctioned at the ballot: "any ambivalence or ambiguity on European integration may well lead to significant vote losses"[32]. However, there is an additional

[25] Catherine E. Netjes, Harmen A. Binnema, "The salience of the European integration issue: Three data sources compared", *Electoral Studies*, 26, 2007, p. 40.
[26] *Ibidem*. See also: Peter Mair, "The limited impact of Europe on national party systems", *West European Politics*, 23, No. 4, 2000, pp. 52-72.
[27] *Ibidem*.
[28] D.M. Viola, *op. cit*., pp. 43-44.
[29] Catherine E. de Vries, "Sleeping Giant: Fact or Fairytale? How European integration affects national elections", *European Union Politics*, 8, No. 3, 2007, p. 379. For other relevant discussions on issue voting model, see also Catherine E. de Vries and Sara B. Hobolt, "EU Issue Voting in National and European Parliamentary Election", in Wouter van der Brug, Claes H. de Vreese (eds.), *(Un)intended Consequences of EU Parliamentary Elections Get access Arrow*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 101-124.
[30] Maria M. Mendrinou, "Greece", in Donatella M. Viola (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of European Elections*, New York, Routledge, 2016, p. 317.
[31] D.M. Viola, *op. cit*., pp. 43-44.
[32] *Ibidem*, pp. 44-45. See also: Federico Ferrara, J. Timo Weishaupt, "Get your Act Together: Party Performance in European Parliament Elections", *European Union Politics* 5, No. 3, 2004, pp. 283-306.

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element that needs to be considered in an ES framework and that is "[the] correlation between citizens' propensity to go to the polls, their personal knowledge of EU institutions, and their country's attitude towards European integration"[33]. In other words, voters will participate in EP elections if they have positive views of the EU, a strong connection to the European project, or if they regard themselves to some degree as European citizens.

If there is a *build-up* of salience around the idea of Europeanness, so it becomes more than an abstract construction or idealised condition, then EP elections can be assessed from a first-order supranational perspective. This would entail that *Europeanness* has been internalised by European citizens, and European institutions have furthered their institutionalisation in search of greater democratic consolidation (see the failed *spitzenkandidat* endeavour). According to Fabian Willermain, for the first-order supranational hypothesis to become reality, certain aspects would need to be addressed first, like the formalisation of European parties that need to liaison between citizens and European institutions, the existence of a European electoral law, or the implementation of a European communication campaign[34]. If in practice the viability of a transnational European party might be open to debate, let alone the existence of multiple such parties, one can control for *first-orderness* at the European level by considering the following: higher levels of turnout (similar to national ones), the presence of concrete EU policy proposals in the party platforms, seats gained by pro-EU parties campaigning on EU issues, and minimal mentions of topics pertaining to domestic debates.

On the Critical Election front, Schmitt and Teperoglou find that in the aftermath of the 2014 EP election, while the SOE framework reconfirms its priors in the six countries analysed across Southern Europe, a critical dimension of the election emerges when considering the electoral behaviour on display[35]. Coming on the backend of the economic crisis and of a period of austerity measures cutting into social spending and other public expenditures, the voters used these elections as a sounding board to vent their negative views of national and European institutions[36]. The Critical Election model posits that the SOE framework is becoming inadequate, failing to capture the fluctuations in public attitudes stemming from a volatile socio-political landscape that carries potentially dire economic implications. This gives rise to *abrasive* electoral behaviours that are more than a passing fade, instead they become reflective of "lasting political change and durable political realignments", as the examples from Southern Europe illustrate[37]. If voters feel that their representatives no longer properly represent their interests – regardless of whether this perception is real or imagined – they will be drawn to *partisan alternatives* that project themselves as being the better, more reliable electoral choice[38]. With regard to the 2019 EP elections, Plescia, Wilhelm and Kritzinger found that while prior to the election period, a higher percentage of citizens engaged in discussions about European issues, from the monetary union to the refugee policy, the campaign did not conduce to an increase in such discussions, the focus, at best, being redirected towards the

[33] *Ibidem*, p. 45.
[34] Fabian Willermain, "European elections: from 'second-order' elections to 'first-order supranational' elections. How can a 'first-order supranational' European election be created?", European Policy Brief, No. 34, April 2014, Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations, http://aei.pitt.edu/63566/1/EPB34.pdf.
[35] Hermann Schmitt, Eftichia Teperoglou, "The 2014 European Parliament Elections in Southern Europe: Second-Order or Critical Elections?", in Hermann Schmitt, Eftichia Teperoglou (eds.), *The 2014 European Parliament Elections in Southern Europe. Still second-order or critical contests?*, Routledge, Oxon and New York, 2016, pp. 1-23.
[36] *Ibidem*, p. 6. See also: Felix Roth, Felicitas Nowak-Lehmann D., Thomas Otter, "Crisis and trust in national and European Union institutions: panel evidence for the EU, 1999 to 2012", Working Paper, EUI RSCAS, 2013/31, EUDO – European Union Democracy Observatory, https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/26975.
[37] *Ibidem*.
[38] *Ibidem*.

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election itself[39]. Underwhelming engagement also resulted from "elite-level discussion about structural reform of the EU" – with the authors characterising the impact of the campaign as being "rather shallow" and the 2019 EP elections as "clearly not first-order breakthrough contests"[40].

In the 2024 elections, multiple issues straddled the threshold between the national and the European spheres, and though, once more, the national lead the agenda, this time, the reasons laid with the impact of global crises on the EU. This is remarked by Laurie Beaudonnet et al. who state that "in the 2024 EP election campaigns, issues specifically linked to the EU came to the forefront: the war in Ukraine and defence and security[41] in general, the Pact on Migration and Asylum and migration issues, and finally the Green Deal and the environment"[42]. When coupled with higher turnouts on average, the SOE model would appear to no longer be the primary explanatory vector for electoral behaviours in the European elections[43]. We would argue that despite this crossover, the parties and voters' preoccupation with the national remained dominant since the ties to the EU issues – to the various degrees they were present – mattered in so far as they were perceived to have a negative impact on the Member States.

Examining the case of Spain and Portugal, Arribas, Outeda and Cacheda point to further fracture in the SOE analytical framework since it failed to adequately account for "contexts of change and recomposition in the party systems"[44] – particularly as concerns cases with strong ties to the EU. In the case analysed, the voters are aware that European elections represent an opportunity to influence the direction of the EU, therefore overcoming the traditional SOE behaviour where the vote reflects the citizens' degree of "satisfaction (reward) or dissatisfaction (punishment) with national governments, a central feature of their classification as second-order elections"[45]. By comparison, in the Romanian case, we also find parties (REPER) and voters that exhibit a non-SOE behaviour, that, arguably, could fall under the incidence of the ES framework, however, due to a combination of electoral rules (5% threshold) and poor electoral strategies, they were unable to derive sufficient electoral support. Consequently, as seen in the 2024 elections, the over 300.000 votes that went to REPER were scrapped when the party failed to cross the electoral threshold, and in turn, this cancelled out the intent of the party's supporters.

METHODOLOGY

In adopting a methodological approach based on qualitative document analysis, we are interested in whether national parties affiliated to the European families integrated the themes in their national electoral manifestos, addressed them during the election campaign or rather failed to do so altogether. Research on manifestos concerning the EU represents a valuable resource in

[39] Carolina Plescia, James Wilhelm, Sylvia Kritzinger, "First-order breakthrough or still second-order? An assessment of the 2019 EP elections?", in Sylvia Kritzinger, Carolina Plescia, Kolja Raube, James Wilhelm, Jan Wouters (eds.), *Assessing the 2019 European Parliament Elections (eBook version)*, Routledge, Oxon and New York, 2020, https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780367816926-9/first-order-breakthrough-still-second-order-carolina-plescia-james-wilhelm-sylvia-kritzinger?context=ubx&refId=f2457f62-a960-4c83-a717-b3cebd2190b7.
[40] *Ibidem*.
[41] On developments regarding the EU security policy, see the coordinated volume by: Mihaela Natea, Simion Costea (coord.), *L'Europe Unie. Special Issue: The EU Foreign Policy and Security Dilemmas in a Challenging World*, No. 19, 2023, https://leuropeunie.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Nr-19-SPECIAL-1.pdf.
[42] Laurie Beaudonnet et al., "The Second-Order Model Revisited: Lessons from the 2024 European Elections in the 27 Member States", *Politique européenne*, 2025, p. 12, https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04837978v1/file/SI_ResearchNotes_Introduction_FINAL.pdf.
[43] *Ibidem*.
[44] Fernando Martínez Arribas, Celso Cancela Outeda, Bruno González Cacheda, "Are European Elections Still Second-Order? A Study of Spain and Portugal", *População e Sociedade*, Vol. 42, December 2024, p. 16.
[45] *Ibidem*, p. 17.

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identifying party and voter trends, for the purpose of better understanding electoral outcomes. Hackermann's study on the congruence of national and Euro-party manifestos assessed the programmatic rapports between the two categories of parties, in relation to three perspectives on integration:

(a) the maximalist model – federal democracy – involving top-down policy "downloading";

(b) the medium model – delegated democracy – characterised by "uploading" national interests at the European level; and

(c) the minimalist model – regional democracy – which involves a process of "crossloading", where the Euro-party has limited impact on the policy direction of national parties[46]. Our analysis will show that the minimalist model applies to the Romanian case.

At a national level, Kiratly proposed an approach that corresponds to these three models, through a textual analysis of party manifestos from three countries (Germany, UK, the Netherlands). The author examined how views on integration (more integration, intergovernmentalism, supranational cooperation) impacted the national political culture. If parties contribute to the construction of political identity, then their views on the EU are not a mere affectation, but a fundamental indicator for "the construction and reproduction of political discourse towards European integration […] embedded in a given polity"[47].

On the topic of Euro-manifestos, Jadot and Kelbel's analysis of the European debate with the occasion of the 2014 EP elections used a lexicometric approach to compare the positions of Euro-parties in search of commonalities and divergencies. They used textual statistics to recreate "the discursive universe shared by Europarties", grouping relevant segments of text based on their semantic proximity, and found that "the discourses of Europarties both represent the aggregation of national parties' priorities – reflecting domestic cleavages, and Euro-parties' own discursive universes"[48].

According to Hani Morgan, qualitative document analysis presupposes the selection of documents based on four factors: authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning[49]. For the purposes of this research, the documents selected consist of party manifestos at both the European and Romanian levels, that meet in our assessment three of the four criteria enumerated:

(a) They are authentic because they are genuine.

(b) They are representative because they are typical for the situation analysed.

(c) They have meaning because the significance of the documents is relevant to electoral analysis.

(d) As concerns the credibility criteria, given the context and purpose for which they are created, the presence of errors – premeditated or inadvertent – is something that we can control for, but do not reject out of hand.

In analysing the documents, we account for Bowen's observation of identifying themes in the electoral manifestos that act as stimuli for "pattern recognition within the data", hence the need for the attentive re-reading of the data in the pursuit of unearthing themes relevant to the analysis[50].

[46] Phil Hackermann, "Congruence of national and Europarty manifestos in the EU elections 2019", *Comparative European Politics*, 21, 2023, pp. 379-399.

[47] Osman Sabri Kiratli, "Political discourses on Europe and European integration in national election manifestos and party programmes", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 29, No. 2, 2016, p. 638.

[48] Clément Jadot and Camille Kelbel, "*Same, same, but different*: Assessing the politicisation of the European debate using a lexicometric study of the 2014 Euromanifestos", *Politique Européenne*, No. 65, 2017/1, pp. 67-69, p. 80.

[49] Hani Morgan, "Conducting a Qualitative Document Analysis", The Qualitative Report, Vol. 27, No. 1, 2022, pp. 70-71.

[50] Glenn A. Bowen, "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method", *Qualitative Research Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 27-40.

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THE SALIENCE OF EU ISSUE IN THE MANIFESTOS OF THE EUROPEAN FAMILIES

Prior to the campaign period, all European political parties had presented their manifestos in view of the EP elections held in June 2024[51]. In 2022, the Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations (APPF) validated ten European political parties: 1) The European People's Party (EPP); 2) The Party of European Socialists (PES); 3) The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE); 4) The European Conservatives and Reformists Party (ECR); 5) The European Democratic Party (EDP); 6) The European Green Party (EGP); 7) The European Free Alliance (EFA); 8) The Identity and Democracy Party (ID Party); 9) The Party of the European Left (PEL); and 10) The European Christian Political Movement (ECPM)[52]. For the purpose of this analysis, we reviewed the manifestos of four groups – EPP, PES, ALDE, and ECR. Our criteria for selection were based on two variables: 1) for Romanian political parties to be members of these groups (PNL – EPP, PSD – PES, USR – ALDE, AUR – ECR); 2) for the Romanian political parties to have passed the electoral threshold in the European elections from June 2024.

The 2024 EPP manifesto, titled "Our Europe, a safe and good home for the people", advocated for "the European way of life", "a strong Europe", "a competitive Europe", "a citizens-oriented Europe", and "a democratic Europe"[53]. Throughout the 25 pages long document, the word "policy" is mentioned only twice, in relation to EU competitiveness and asylum policies. In the first case, the emphasis is put on boosting economic performance and job creation, while maintaining support for the euro and the single market as a critical support framework for economic performance. The manifesto supports the need "to streamline regulations" and cautions against over-regulation[54]. It also proposes a Competitiveness Strategy for Europe and an EU Competitiveness Check that would foster entrepreneurship and support small and medium-sized enterprises[55]. On asylum, the language calls for an overhaul of European asylum law, stressing that "the EU, together with its Member States, must have the right to decide to whom and where is it granted", introduces the concept of "safe third countries" for the processing of asylum requests, and proposes setting up quotas at the EU level of admitting "vulnerable individuals"[56]. Notably, the manifesto supports full Schengen admission for Bulgaria and Romania, including the lifting of land border controls[57].

In the case of the PES manifesto – "The Europe we want: Social, democratic, sustainable" – twenty commitments are identified in support of the European ideal for a free, fair, and secure Europe, that are rooted in the following decalogue: 1) the right to quality jobs and fair wages; 2) a new Green and Social Deal for a just transition; 3) strong democracy rooted in the rule of law; 4) a strong and competitive European economy; 5) a protective Europe defending the wellbeing of European citizens; 6) a feminist Europe, protecting women's control over their lives and bodies, and ending all forms of gender-based violence and discrimination; 7) a Europe for young people; 8) a

[51] Similarly, this applies to the 2019 European elections: Pascal Lamy et al.'s analysis of the Euro-parties' agenda, focused on the documents that resulted from the EPP congress (Helsinki, November 2018); the manifestos adopted by PES (Madrid, February 2019), ALDE (Madrid, November 2018), and the European Greens (Berlin, November 2018); and the programme issued by ECR (Brussels, November 2018). (Pascal Lamy et al., "The campaign for the European elections: Theme and divides", Policy Brief, 11.02.2019, Jacques Delors Institute, p. 1, https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ThemesandDivides-Groupedetravailelectionseuropennes-Feb19-1.pdf).

[52] Nathalie Brack, Wouter Wolfs, "European political parties: Poorly identified political bodies?", Jacques Delors Institute, Study – May 2023, pp. 23-24, https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/E_230522_Partis-politiques-europeens_Brack-et-Wolfs_EN.pdf.

[53] EPP, "EPP 2024 Manifesto", March 2024, p. 2, https://www.epp.eu/files/uploads/2024/03/Manifesto_2024.pdf.

[54] *Ibidem*, p. 6.

[55] *Ibidem*.

[56] *Ibidem*.

[57] *Ibidem*.

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Europe providing decent and affordable housing for all; 9) a strategically independent Europe; and 10) a strong Europe in the world, able to safeguard peace, security and human rights[58]. At the policy level, the manifesto identifies various directions of action such as establishing a Roadmap for Quality Work and Well-paid Jobs; a need for EU to prioritise "a secure affordable and reliable energy supply for all" and reform the energy market; or creating a "Made in Europe" Strategy to strengthen the Single Market. As concerns the asylum policy, unlike the EPP manifesto, PES is against forms of EU border externalisation, emphasising the need for fair procedures and safe and legal pathways for asylum[59]. At the social level, the manifesto identifies and priorities the European Youth Guarantee, widening access to Erasmus+, or advocating for an EU Strategy on Age Equality[60]. A priority for the EU identified in both the EPP and PES manifestos stresses the need to strengthen European defence, with PES supporting the development of the European defence industry and "strengthening EU's capacity to act in an enlarged Union".[61]

The ALDE manifesto, titled "Your Europe, your freedom: Delivering change for you", identifies three priority directions: 1) keeping Europe free, safe and democratic by enhancing Europe's defence capabilities and economic security in pursuit of Europe's increased independence (helping Ukraine win the war is mentioned from the onset as a first actionable priority); 2) boosting economic growth to support European citizens' freedom, with a focus on "digital and sustainable technologies to create jobs, reduce our dependencies"; and 3) earning the trust of European citizens through action and reform which ALDE as "Europe's centrist force of liberal and democratic parties" would be best equipped to do[62]. When considering actual policies that directly impact European citizens, it is interesting to remark that this topic is fourth in order of relevance, the manifesto beginning with a focus on European security, EU defence policy and the development of military industrial capabilities. This is followed by a section on EU's enlargement policy and the need to consolidate the European Political Community. A third priority focuses on trade ("push for EU trade and investment agreements with open, market-based economies […] based on international commitments")[63]. The sections on economic growth and a competitive European market include provisions ranging from the consolidation of European budgetary programmes to shortening the wait time for EU funds to reach the communities to providing municipalities with direct access to EU programmes, allocating more resources for the Emissions Trading System, prioritising cross-border EU investments, assisting industries across varied economic sectors and ensuring equal taxation opportunities for companies[64]. On asylum, the ALDE manifesto identifies the need to reform the Common European Asylum System, and again, of note is the idea of developing "EU-managed common facilities outside the EU borders for asylum seekers" that will streamline the application process[65]. From the electoral perspective, a section on institutional reforms advances a bold vision for the EU, that would stimulate more citizen engagement in relation to EU decision-making process[66].

[58] PES, "PES manifesto for the 2024 European elections", adopted at the 2024 PES Election Congress, Rome, March 2024, p. 4, https://pes.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/2024_PES_Manifesto_EN.pdf.
[59] *Ibidem*, p. 15.
[60] *Ibidem*, p. 16.
[61] *Ibidem*, p. 19.
[62] ALDE, "Your Europe, Your Freedom: Delivering change for you Our 2024 Manifesto", adopted at ALDE Party's Extraordinary Congress, Brussels, March 2024 p. 2, https://www.aldeparty.eu/web/content/16745?unique=7d15e2d8b2c98c4ec639829e93565373051e87ce&download=true.
[63] *Ibidem*, p. 4, p. 6, p. 7.
[64] *Ibidem*, p. 10, p. 11.
[65] *Ibidem*, p. 24.
[66] *Ibidem*, p. 21.

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Finally, in the case of ECR, the manifesto identifies ten main themes: 1) Preserving National Identity, centred on reforming the EU and strengthening state sovereignty; 2) Safeguarding our citizens, based on consolidating European defence; 3) Securing our borders, by adopting a Comprehensive Migration Strategy; 4) Harvesting tomorrow, with a focus on sustainable farming and fishing; 5) Revising the Green Deal; 6) Igniting economic growth through the consolidation of the Single Market and European small businesses; 7) Energise and innovate, with an emphasis on energy security, innovation and EU connectivity; 8) Driving global economic growth; 9) Smart spending, smart future, addressing the need to reform the EU Budget; 10) Charting Europe's course, intended to strengthening global security and support further enlargement in the current geopolitical environment[67]. We can remark that the manifesto shares common themes, which are even framed in a similar style with those of EPP and ALDE. This is less indicative of a change in ECR's Euro-pragmatic agenda, rather it reflects an adjustment in the approach of the other two groups based on what they perceive as relevant topics for the European citizens, which have the potential to attract votes.

ROMANIAN PARTY MANIFESTOS AND EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

A discussion on the Romanian trends emerging from the analysis of their manifestos can begin with a comparative overview of the party slogans used during the campaigns for the 2024 and 2019 EP elections (see Table no. 1). Though the campaign for 2019 EP elections remained staunchly focused on the usual domestic issues, the slogans made an attempt to mention Europe to one degree or another, however, in 2024, we can note an even stringent shift, that focused single-handedly on Romania ("stability for Romania"; "modern Romania"; "patriots in Europe"; "sovereign Romania"). We can also observe that in 2019 the slogans citing the EU belonged to smaller parties, that broke away from PSD and PNL: "Proud to be Romanians. Proud to be European" (PRO Romania) and "United in Europe" (PMP). Another small party which defected from PNL – the Romanian ALDE[68], campaigned on two slogans that were in the same vein as above: "In Europe with Dignity" and "Romania, Respected in Europe".

In 2019, the two main government and opposition parties led the charge with two slogans that centred solely on Romania: "Patriots in Europe. Romania Deserves Better" (PSD) and "Romania First" (PNL). In 2024, they ran together on common candidate lists, and their slogan seemed more appropriate for the local elections than for the European ones ("Stability and development for Romania"). Another outlier was the case of the Alliance for the United Right (ADU), a nominally pro-EU coalition that, where USR was the largest party. ADU continued the trend from the last European elections campaign: if in 2019, 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"), in 2024 their slogan was "Don't let them steal your future!", holding on to their anti-corruption discourse. USR's choice was peculiar, since the party boasted the most Europeanised membership of all: not only was one of the party's co-leaders, Dacian Cioloș, a former European Commissioner, but, in the 2019 EP group configuration, he would become the leader of Renew Europe, the group that succeeded ALDE.

Considering these slogans, we examine the political manifestos to identify the broader vision that the parties embraced in the runup to the European election. In the case of PSD and PNL, the

[67] ECR, "ECR Party Manifesto", 24.04.2024, https://ecrparty.eu/2024/04/24/ecr-party-adopts-manifesto-for-european-elections-decides-not-to-put-forward-a-lead-candidate/.

[68] The party failed to pass the electoral threshold (4.11% < 5%) and did not obtain any seats in the EP. In 2022, it would rejoin PNL.

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general theme invoked by the candidates was centred on the need to reduce the differences between Romanians and other European citizens, which was linked to the need to increase the absorption capacity of European funds. The two parties presented themselves as the alliance for stability and development, and stated that, in the current uncertain international context, Romania needed balance and security. To achieve this, experienced MEPs who knew how to defend the country's interests in Brussels were needed, their main mission being to bring more European funds in Romania, required for reforms and investments[69]. This was a common discourse theme, that was used by PSD candidates both in 2024 and 2019: sending to Brussels patriots who would support the interests of Romania and who would "work every day to bring European money for the development of the country"[70].

EP Elections			
2024 Party Slogans		**2019 Party Slogans**	
PSD + PNL	*Stability and development for Romania*	**PSD**	*Patriots in Europe. Romania Deserves Better*
		PNL	*Romania First*
ADU (USR + PMP + FD)	*Don't let them steal your future! Choose a modern Romania!*	**USR-PLUS**	*Without Theft We Get Far*
AUR	*Patriots in Europe* or *Defenders of the Romanian motherland*	**Pro Romania**	*Proud to be Romanians. Proud to be European*
Socialist Romania Alliance	*A sovereign Romania in a sovereign Europe*	**PMP**	*United in Europe*
PRM	*For a dignified Romania in Europe*	**ALDE**	*Romania, Respected in Europe*

Table no. 1 – Slogans for the EP elections from Romanian political parties and independent candidates (2019-2024)

The two parties' campaign manifesto contained mentions to important European issues, such as 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. Other EU-adjacent themes included the parties' 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. In the campaigns for both the 2024 and in 2019 European elections, the political programs of PSD and PNL focused an important part of the discourse on the rights of Romanian consumers and the issue of products of an inferior quality commercialised to Eastern EU countries[71]. The parties emphasised the idea of existing double standards in several areas of the single market, dividing the citizens of Western and Eastern Europe. In an electoral document encompassing five promises of the coalition for the European elections, the parties advocate for: 1) stability and development; 2) attracting European funding, stressing that the rate of absorption rose from 25% to 96% under their leadership; 3) strengthening Romania by coming together despite the differing

[69] Alina Manolache, „Cenușăreasa alegerilor din 2024. Europarlamentarele și promisiunile neauzite ale candidaților", *Europa Liberă*, 24.05.2024, https://romania.europalibera.org/a/alegeri-europarlamentare-promisiuni-candidati/32955009.html. For the 2019 European elections, see: M. Ivănescu, L.M. Filimon, *op. cit.*, p. 126; Digi24, „Rovana Plumb: PSD este cel mai pro-european partid, trebuie să trimitem în PE patrioți", 17.03.2019, https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/rovana-plumb-psd-este-cel-mai-pro-european-partid-trebuie-sa-trimitem-inpe-patrioti-1099229.

[70] *Ibidem*.

[71] *Ibidem.*

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ideologies of the two parties; 4) advocating the cause of Romania in the name of Romanian entrepreneurs and farmers and against the rising tide of extremism; 5) emphasising that the coalition represents the best option for the country that can commit to the modernisation projects sought by the Romanian citizens[72].

The Save Romania Union (USR) was at their second participation in an EP election in 2024, once again as member of a coalition – the United Right Alliance – that also included the People's Movement Party (PMP) and the Force of the Right (FD). Though USR came third and maintained its ranking from 2019, it had suffered a significant loss in support, obtaining only three seats (as opposed to 10 seats in 2019) and dropping nearly 15 percentage points, which translated in a loss of approx. 1 250 000 votes cast from the last election. In 2024, even though their slogan was a continuation of the one used in 2019, focusing on the corruption of Romanian institutions, ADU promoted more European-focused campaign themes and objectives. These concerned Romania's full accession to Schengen, including the land borders, after joining Schengen in 2024, but only with air and sea borders; Romania's accession to the Eurozone; a more efficient spending of European funds and attracting more funds for agriculture; better trained and better integrated European armies into NATO; supporting the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU (an older objective that was present in 2019 in the electoral manifesto of PMP); state reform and anticorruption; or the fight against illiberal slippages[73]. These last three were all themes that were also used in 2019 by PMP and its main candidate, former Romanian President Traian Băsescu, and, like then, 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 fell within the purview of the national government while the campaign for European elections was centred on the internal dimension even when USR was, arguably, more attached to a European identity.

In 2024, on the radical right front, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) participated for the first time in European elections and declared itself a euro-realist and sovereigntist party. The themes expressed in its campaign platform focused on: opposition to globalism; the defence of Romania's national sovereignty in the EU; support for fair and decent access conditions to European funds, by combating the double standard that prevents Romania from accessing them; or agricultural subsidies that should be equal to those of other countries, so that Romanian farmers can face the economic competition on the single European market[74].

Further to the right of AUR[75], the SOS Romania Party, which was also at its first participation in European elections, formulated its manifesto by recycling themes used by other parties in 2019, with Eurosceptic ideas characterising the party: the right of Romanians to healthy food, the elimination of double standards for products and the protection of Romanian farmers and agriculture; encouraging the use of cash and simplifying fiscal rules; reducing labour taxation for all Romanians; reducing the retirement age to 60 years[76]. In relation to the EU, SOS vowed to defend Romania's

[72] *Ibidem*.

[73] USR, „Angajamentul Dreptei Unite pentru România Modernă", 2024, https://usr.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Angajamentul-Dreptei-Unite-pentru-Romania-Moderna.pdf; Digi24, „12 puncte care transformă România într-o țară cu adevărat europeană și modernă. Ce propune alianța Dreapta Unită la europarlamentare", 29.01.2024, https://www.digi24.ro/opinii/opinie-si-promovare-politica/12-puncte-care-transforma-romania-intr-o-tara-cu-adevarat-europeana-si-moderna-ce-propune-alianta-dreapta-unita-la-europarlamentare-2667859.

[74] Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor, „Planul AUR pentru Parlamentul European", 2024, https://media.hotnews.ro/assets/document/2023/07/22/26414219-0.pdf.

[75] The party's leader, Diana Șoșoaca being first elected as a senator on AUR's candidate lists back in 2020 and expelled from the party shortly after.

[76] Europa Liberă, „Programul S.O.S. România pentru alegerile europarlamentare", 22.05.2024, https://romania.europalibera.org/a/program-sos-alegeri-europarlamnetare/32958925.html.

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sovereignty and restore the supremacy of the Romanian Constitution over any other international or European institution[77].

The last party analysed, REPER (Renewing Romania's European Project) failed to cross the electoral threshold and was the main loser of the European elections. REPER's performance, while plagued by the traditional fragmentation of the right[78] and muted electoral tactics, reflected the descending trajectory of Renew at the European level (the European political group to which REPER belonged). In REPER's political program, the references to the EU refer to Romania's place in the European development hierarchy, to the good governance models that could be adopted by Romania (e.g.: the EU staff selection model), as well as to Romania's objective to be integrated into the "hard core of the EU", by joining the Schengen area and the Eurozone[79]. The fact that the party formerly known as the Freedom, Unity and Solidarity Party (PLUS) did not reconfirm any of the members who won MEP mandates in 2019, not even Dacian Cioloș – the European politician par excellence, former European Commissioner and the president of the Renew group in the EP between 2019 and 2024 – indicates a serious deficiency of the party. This is typical of small parties, even of those that have reached political maturity, and is centred on the parties' capacity to ensure political continuity from one electoral cycle to another.

DISCUSSION

Due to the EP election coinciding with the local ones, Romania registered the highest turnout (52.40%) in a European election since it became a member and the tenth highest in the EU. The citizens' interest in the local elections' topics meant that not only was turnout in the European elections vastly improved, but also, that the governing political parties also benefited from it, gaining a greater number of votes that they would have otherwise received. National parties promoted issues concerning the EU during the campaign only in a limited capacity, and, due to the second-order nature of the EP elections, their campaigns focused mainly on internal issues (on account of the electoral distortions created by the merger with the local elections).

In addition, the analysis of the 2019 and 2024 EP elections reveals a series of constants and differences. The political centre wins in both cases, but in 2019, PNL and PSD are opponents (2019: centre-right – first place, centre-left – second place), and in 2024 they are part of the PSD-PNL electoral alliance, obtaining almost half of the total votes validly expressed. The score of the PSD-PNL alliance, of 48.55%, was below one percentage point (0.95%), compared to the combined score obtained by the two parties in 2019. If there was a feeling of partisan dissatisfaction on the part of citizens because of the formation of this alliance, it did not translate into a distinct electoral behaviour. Moreover, these two coalition parties were nearing the end of their government mandate, yet they maintained their support among citizens (in the parliamentary elections of 2020, PSD obtained 28.90% of the votes and PNL, 25.19%), representing a deviation from the secondary order model. By November 2024, when the first round of the presidential election would take place, this sense of tranquillity would prove to be the calm before the storm.

On the issue of merging local and European elections, the main argument that both presidents of the ruling coalition parties presented the public, after being criticised for their decision to merge the local and European elections, was that there were other EU countries where local or regional

[77] *Ibidem*.

[78] Votes were dispersed into four directions, at the level of two parties (USR as a member of the United Right Alliance and the REPER Party) along with two independent candidates (Nicolae Ștefănuță and Vlad Gheorghe).

[79] For REPER's EP electoral program, see: Alexandru Costea, „Dacian Cioloș deschide lista de candidați REPER pentru Parlamentul European", *Digi24*, 11.03.2024, https://www.digi24.ro/alegeri-europarlamentare-2024/dacian-ciolos-deschide-lista-de-candidati-reper-pentru-parlamentul-european-2719189.

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elections were set to take place in parallel with the EP elections, stating that the precedent had already been created[80]. However, as several opposition parties showed, the difference was that those countries had not amended the electoral legislation just a few months before the elections, as Romania did, and in some cases the regulations regarding the organisation of local and European elections in the same day were stated in the Constitution (i.e.: Belgium and Hungary). Furthermore, in most of those countries, the election period had been the same for years (even when they overlapped with the EP elections), so the decision to hold them at the same time was not one isolated only to 2024, like in Romania. In addition to these arguments, this merger would favour the big, traditional parties, that would gain more votes reflected in local or MEP seats, and would disadvantage smaller or newer parties, some of which could have more local or regional electoral agendas. In this regard, the electoral system used for the EP elections – proportional representation on closed party lists – usually favours parties or electoral alliances which obtain a larger vote share, in the redistribution process. Even if a much-invoked argument in favour of merging the elections was the decrease of the costs of organising the elections, this was more of a strategic move, used to give the impression to the electorate that the government tried to keep the costs low and allocate the money elsewhere. However, according to the legislative provisions, there would have to be separate polling stations for local and EP elections, so, in the end, the cut in costs would not be so significant.

Another possible explanation for the PSD-PNL coalition's decision to merge local and EP elections would be that both ruling parties were trying to minimise AUR's results in these elections. AUR, a radical right party that adopted a rhetoric which made use of all the major concepts that nationalist far right parties have used and made known over the years (family, fatherland, faith, freedom) had been the surprise of the 2020 Romanian parliamentary election, receiving almost 10% of the votes cast at their first participation in a national election (more than UDMR, a constant member of the Parliament in the last decades, or than former parliamentary parties, like ALDE or PMP). Of the over half a million votes it received, 30% came from the Romanian diaspora, where the discourse of AUR's candidates had even more success than at home. Notably, in 2024 European elections, AUR received 14.90% of the votes, more than doubling its vote share (upwards of 1.300.000 votes).

CONCLUSIONS

During the 2024 electoral cycle, the chronic lack of themes about the EU was not an accident. In the case of the major parties, this was reflected in their eschewing of electoral debates and confrontations as well as in the absence of related projects highlighting the importance of European elections. Regarding this display of disinterest for European affairs, we can surmise that the responsibility is split between the politicians and the voters themselves. Politicians are to blame because they have always mainly addressed domestic issues and rarely touched upon European topics (an exception in this regard may be accession to Schengen). Neither topics related to agriculture, nor those related to migration[81], the European Green Deal, or the EU budget were of interest to Romanian politicians. In recent years, especially after the pandemic, many broached the topic of European funds in connection to the post-pandemic National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) but failed to provide the public with sufficient details about the policies they would implement. As for the citizens, most of them feel disconnected from what is happening in Brussels and understand only to a small extent the European institutional dynamics or the relations that are

[80] Those countries are Belgium, Germany, Italy, Ireland, Hungary, Cyprus, and Malta.

[81] On the issue of migration see: Maria Costea, Simion Costea, "Challenges of the EU in the Migrant/Refugee Crisis in 2015*",* in *Discourse as a form of multiculturalism in literature and communication. History and cultural mentalities*, Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu-Mureş, 2015, pp. 166-175.

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established between the European institutions and the national government, and these aspects, in turn, contribute to their lack of interest for the European elections. Thus, a cycle of Euro-apathy is generated and maintained, to the point that not even the campaign dedicated to the European Parliament can reset the dynamic.

In 2024, merging the EP elections with the local ones represented an additional reason why European themes were hardly discussed. The governing coalition (PSD + PNL) knew that the local elections would be in the foreground and had a vested interest in this setup since the votes it would have received if only European elections would take place, would have failed to match the voting potential of the local elections (incumbent mayors who wanted a new mandate played a crucial role in this regard). The turnout for previous EP elections, except for 2019, would appear to confirm this hypothesis (2007 – 29.47%; 2009 – 27.67%; 2014 – 32.44%)[82].

On the relation between SOE and radical right parties, AUR managed to gain around 14% of the votes (a notable result given that the party was as its first participation in this type of election), but it still came short of the alarming 20% threshold, which polls predicted in the first months of the year. This electoral breakthrough happened even though the ruling coalition included in their campaign program for the European elections the commitment to contain the radical right. This underperformance can be attributed to the increased turnout. Even so, with PSD and PNL opting to run together on a single candidate list, AUR placed second, outcompeting the recently created electoral alliance, ADU, which comprised of moderate centre-right pro-EU parties: USR, PMP, and a newly formed party Force of the Right (FD). From this we can conclude that the decision to merge the elections extinguished what little interest the average Romanian voter had in the European elections, even though, at first glance, the increased turnout would seem to tell a different story.

Finally, we cannot end without an assessment of the political manifestos of EU and national political parties as concerns the validity of the SOE model. Our analysis of the European parties' agendas revealed that even at this level, a paradoxical second order dynamic was present. Raunio and Johansson's analysis of the manifestos states that these documents lack "concrete proposals" and do not focus on "institutional questions", arguing that this might potentially be a sign of broadening internal divisions within the ranks of the European political parties[83]. While Europe and strengthening the EU were at the centre of the manifestos, little consideration was afforded to the needs of European citizens and what benefits they might derive from the outcome of European elections. As the manifestos showed, the undecided European voter was not an issue of concern neither for the European parties, nor for the Romanian ones, the parties being satisfied only with preaching to the converted. Such electoral approaches, combined with the number of votes (approximately ten million) that were cancelled because numerous parties failed to cross the electoral threshold, denotes not just the traditional second order patterns we came to expect from these elections, but a broader crisis that affects Europe and enables illiberal actors to take advantage of this inherent weakness, potentially setting the EU on a path towards an uncertain, de-Europeanised future.

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