

**The Europe we voted for:
National and European topics of the
2014 elections for the European Parliament**

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Europe as seen from East – Representations of Europe and Romanian media

Since 1979, every five years, all member states of the European Union are experiencing a sort of ritual related to a rather particular electoral campaign. On one hand, political parties and politicians are launching themselves in yet another nation-wide campaign. However, this campaign will land the winners in offices that belong neither to local administration nor to regional or national structures, but to a supra-national institution, outside their country of origin: the European Parliament. In this way, local-elected politicians will work and regulate matters concerning not only their own nationals but people from all over the EU.

If we look at the matter in hand from a citizen perspective, the regular folk are asked, once in every five years to vote their representatives to a European Parliament in which, at least during the last couple of years, they had not much confidence. For example, since 2011, the European Parliament registered a rather low rate of confidence on the behalf of its constituency; it was only in 2015 that 43% Europeans (+1 percentage more than in autumn 2014) declared they are confident in the EP meanwhile 41% of them were expressing the opposite (Standard Eurobarometer 83, p. 106). However, the level of knowledge on EU institutions is slightly progressing as in spring 2015 it reached its highest point during the last 10 years: 54% of Europeans have the feeling that they understand the functioning of the European Union meanwhile only 42% are thinking the opposite. A constant 4% choose not to express their opinion on this matter (Standard Eurobarometer 83, p. 128). Although important, this is only a subjective appreciation on the EU knowledge because when it comes to the objective knowledge (measured by a true / false quizz), the level of knowledge is lower, and rather constant as the years are passing by: only 36% of Europeans are capable to answer correct to all three questions included in the quiz (Standard Eurobarometer 83, p. 130). It is worth mentioning that, amongst those three questions, one was related to the European Parliament: “The members of the European Parliament are directly elected by citizens from every member state”. 62% Europeans (no changes since the previous Eurobarometer in autumn 2014) are familiar with this aspect. This specific detail is highly relevant, pointing that the level of knowledge on the European Parliament was influenced by the 2014 elections: in spring 2014 this question registered its highest rate of correct answers ever. Afterwards, even if the percentage of correct answers dropped, it had however reached a stable level higher than before 2014. One might consider this a positive effect of the 2014 European electoral process.

Also since 1979, the European Elections have become a topic of research, being thus analyzed as the time went by as the European Union gradually enlarged, as a higher degree of European integration was reached amongst its member states and as the European institutions were performing, according to the common regulations and the common treaties.

Being an object of academic research since the beginning of its existence, one might consider the European elections at least in two ways. On one hand, the very fact that a theory regarding this electoral process was formulated so early (Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt's second-order national elections 1980) has influenced not only the academic approach to this matter, but also any insight politicians might had regarding the behavior of their voters or the expectations of the electorate. On the other hand, European Union successive waves of enlargement, especially its eastern enlargement and the accession of the so-called "new democracies" to the EU, has challenged the previously established model of analysis, as new data had to be taken into consideration when discussing elections within EU28.

Every five years, before the elections for the European Parliament, one can notice a spike in the level of interest manifested both by politicians and academia into this subject, other way rather neglected, or at least not to visible.

This book is the result of such a preoccupation for understanding how European elections are influencing the way in which a specific public – in our case the Romanian public – is exposed to a specific content: European themes approached within the context of European elections. What exactly is that "European content" to which the Romanian public is exposed to? How are the European themes approached in relation with what one considers to be themes of national interest? Is it Europe really a consistent discussion topic or is merely yet another way of approaching the same old "national" agenda?

The first part of this book presents the result of a research that aimed precisely to point out how European and national topics are approached within the TV broadcasts shows during the electoral campaign. A team of young researchers and students worked together in order to analyze prime-time shows broadcasted by four national TV posts in Romania (TVR1, Antena 3, B1 TV and Romania TV) using the same analysis grid. Their results are presented separately, in chapters 2, 3, 4 and chapter 5. Those chapters are exploring national and European themes and the use made of them by all the actors involved in the electoral campaign. Which themes were favored in this campaign and how were they framed? Which strategies were employed in order to correlate the national and the European dimension of this particular electoral campaign? Is the profile of Euro-candidate rather „national" or "European"? Are the European elections generating new themes for the political debate? Are they favoring the ascension of new political formation and new political figures and is this phenomenon to be observed within the very theme approached during the campaign?

The second part of this book is actually approaching the young voters, from different perspectives: their views on European Union and the European elections (chapter 5), the way they are experiencing European identity within the context of European elections (chapter 6), their decision to vote and to make use of one of their rights as European citizens (chapter 7). The last two chapters are approaching topics that were very high on the discussion agenda during the last weeks before the elections. Chapter 9 deals with the way electoral campaigns are influenced by social media like Facebook, meanwhile chapter 10 is focused on European elections in Greece.

* * *

The first chapters published within the present volume (chapters one to four) are the direct result of a research project four young researchers funded by SNSPA (National University Political Studies and Public Administration).

Started in spring 2014, when the electoral campaign for the European Parliament elections was at its beginnings, the project was constructed around two main ideas. First, that Europe and, consequently, European Union is a flexible concept, or, as French scholars often put it – a variable-geometry concept. Second, that social representations are to be found at the core of the way in which Europe is “seen” / talked about / broadcasted and, a time when Europe is much talked about, such as an European electoral campaign, is a good opportunity to have a closer look on how Europe is “constructed” by media channels, since media is an important actor of this construction.

As it already said in the introduction, this first part of the book is concerned with the way in which Romanian media broadcasted the electoral campaign for the European Parliament in 2014. Each chapter, elaborated by a young researcher, is focused on a specific television. The analysis grid used when monitoring the broadcasted TV shows was the same. In the following pages we present the way in which this research was designed and conducted, the main difficulties we have encountered, as well as some context particularities that determined our method choices. Thus, we will first focus on the different shapes of Europe and on the reasons that determined us to favour the use of a grid analysis based on the distinction between national and European themes approached during the electoral campaign. Then we will present, in its broader aspects, the way media is broadcasting an electoral campaign in Romania: which are the main legal regulations and in what way they are actually shaping an electoral campaign as it is seen on TV. The final part of this chapter concerns the way this research was organized and the way in which the final reports were elaborated, with a focus on method choices but also on the data analysis.

Europe, European – variable-geometry concepts

It is not our intention to dwell on the ongoing debate about how is Europe defined, but for the purpose of this research, it seems important to talk about Europe within a context, and, hence, to define what Europe means, and in what context.

As Thomas Diez pointed out (Diez, 2001, p. 87), the role of language in the construction of Europe is paramount, as names are not merely used for describing realities, but they contribute to the very construction of those realities. Thus, it is important to distinguish between Europe on one hand, and the content one use to associate with this idea – and between European Union on the other hand. Since the whole history of European integration can be understood as a history of speech acts, establishing a system of governance (Diez, 2001, p. 88), being aware of those speech acts is a step further towards having a thorough knowledge of Europe.

During the mid 1990, a series of studies were designed in order to make a point about the state of development of what was to become the European Union. If we take a look to the topics scholars were interested in, we can measure how much “Europe” as a project, and “Europe” as a political and social construction has changed. If we take for example S. Martin’s collections of essays on *The Construction of Europe: essays in honour of Emile Noël* published in 1994 and

the 2011 *Sociology of the EU*, coordinated by A. Favell and V. Guiraudon, V. we could easily observe that, although they are both rooted in a multidisciplinary treatment of the development of the European Union, the topics approached give us the measure of EU development. From 1994 discussions about the political economy of European unification, the role of French-German relations, the implications for Europe of German reunification, the Structural Funds, the role of the European Commission and the prospects raised by the possibility of expansion into Eastern Europe – we see that in 2011 studies on Europe are integrating such issues as social class and identity, mobility (both spatial and social), social movements.

Nowadays, the broad umbrella of European studies is reuniting research inspired by culture, identity, social theory, sociology, political sciences and international relations, approaches to public opinion. However, there is an ongoing debate on what Europe is, which are its borders and where the EU enlargement to should stop, as it has reached its frontiers in terms of a single market, monetary union, common values and shared objectives for future development.

In 2014, when the EU celebrated the 10th anniversary of its first enlargement to include states in Central Europe, Herman Van Rompuy, as President of the European Council, talked about the reunification of Europe in terms that are evocative both for East-European views regarding the accession of the ex-communists states to the EU and that are also relevant for the way in which “older” members of the EU are seeing the enlargement process: *“A decade ago at midnight, the European Union changed like never in its history. It wasn’t as sudden as it sounds; after all, that day came after fifteen years of countless steps, of arduous preparation. But from fifteen – suddenly there were twenty-five, and finally, Europe had become “Europe” again, and a page was turned, for good. For the Czech Republic, and for the other nations of the region nations of the region that took part in this great “enlargement”, becoming full members of the European Union, was not a return to Europe though. They had always been – always will be – European, and had it not been for four decades of Iron Curtain, they would have been part of the earlier chapters of EU integration, too. There was history and culture – there were deep ties. (...) It was always meant to be”* (Van Rompuy, 2014). This speech and the representation about Europe that it reveals are not only about the Czech Republic, or about the Central Europe, but about the differences between EU15 and EU28. In addition, ending the division of Europe is, yet again, just a figure of speech: before the Cold War Europe was not at all a united Europe and today differences between South and North, or between West and East are actually consequences of political, cultural and social borders that were in place long before the Iron Curtain. However, if we think the division of Europe in terms of political regimes, then, all members states belonging to the organisation founded in 1957 and which is now known as the European Union, are able to share a certain level of “stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities” (The European Union’s enlargement policy, 2007).

It follows that, for those EU member states that have experienced the recipe of “popular democracy” there is a sense of belonging to Europe, but, nevertheless, a different representation on Europe, since they were not involved since the beginning in the process of establishing the Union and they had a different start in terms of democratic exercise, economic organization, cultural patterns etc. As Z. Milutinovici (2011) is arguing, this situation is actually rooted in Europe seen as a plurality of social images, identities and representations, rather than an area of civilization that is strictly delineated or as a political and geographic entity. Moreover, the fact that European Union effect on governance quality in Central and Eastern European countries, based on accession conditionality (Ugur, 2013) were actually

more effective before the accession than after membership was attained, generated a series of expectations within the society of new member states, specially related to the quality of life and to the overall economic development.

There are precisely those specific features within representations about Europe and about European Union that are the main topic of this section, taking into consideration that most studies on EU construction (M. Sutton, 2011) (Christiansen, Jorgensen & Weiner, 2001) are tackling issues specific to an Europe as seen from Bruxelles and they tend to forget about the Europe as seen from Bucharest, Athena, Sofia or Budapest.

Investigating representations about Europe during a time when Europe / EU is highly present on the public agenda will bring useful insight towards a better understanding of how European events and European politics are forging Europe and its citizens. This is particularly important, given the initial spirit of euro-enthusiasm specific to recent member states of the EU but also its later development and the downsides of EU accession as experienced by nations from the East (Beacháin, Sheridan, Stan, 2012), especially within the context of the economic crisis.

A broadcasted electoral campaign and its main actors

In order to have a better comprehension of the results of this study it is important to draw a context for the entire electoral campaign. This is why, in this section we will first present laws and regulations related to media services and then we will briefly introduce the main issues related to the way in which Romanian media, and specially televisions, is understanding and fulfilling its mission to inform the public.

As broadcasted on radio and TV, the campaign for European elections is mainly regulated by the broader principles referring to the liberty of expression comprised in the Romanian Constitution (art. 30), by a specific law referring to broadcasting (Law no. 504/2002) and, since 2007 by the European Directive concerning the provision of media services. The National Audiovisual Council is the main institutional body that, based on this laws and regulations, has a broad authority to regulate the domain of radio and television broadcast.

The National Audiovisual Council

The National Audiovisual Council, whose mission is to guarantee that public interest is served. Amongst others, its mission is also to ensure that the liberty of expression is respected and that broadcasters are responsible to their publics for the content they deliver. In order to fulfill its mission, the Council is acting according the Law no. 504/2002 that we previously mentioned and in compliance with the Audiovisual Media Services Directive, the European Directive concerning the provision of media services within member states. The Council issues decisions, recommendations and instructions in order to make sure that providers of media services are meeting certain standards regarding the content they propose to their audiences. According to its status, the Council is autonomous, being controlled by the Parliament of Romania and managed by a committee of eleven members, appointed for six years by the Parliament, after propositions have been made by the two chambers of the Parliament (6 members), the President of Romania and the Government (2 and respectively 3 members). This organizational formula arose, within mass *media*, a number of discussions