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PANDEMIC SIDE-EFFECTS OR SAME OLD ELECTORAL APATHY? THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS ON THE 2020 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN ROMANIA

Abstract

The year 2020 was an electoral year in Romania, with local and parliamentary elections being held in September and December. In the midst of the pandemic crisis, with new rules to be followed, both during the electoral campaign and at the polls, none of the two electoral moments seemed to be visibly influenced by the sudden changes of the social context. Neither the turnout, nor the main electoral themes saw much change compared to previous elections. This paper seeks to analyze the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the 2020 parliamentary elections in Romania, with an emphasis on the electoral turnout and the legislative changes that the pandemic has provoked and that contributed to maintaining parliamentary instability and fragmentation. Yet rather than being Covid-related complications, the fragmentation of the political right, the inability of the political left to form a majority despite winning the elections, the flaws of the electoral law, the apathy of the voters were all a by-product of the same old dysfunctions that haunt the Romanian political system. In this sense, we can argue that the pandemic continued to enable them further.

Keywords: Romania, parliamentary elections, turnout, electoral legislation, fragmentation, Covid-19 pandemic

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INTRODUCTION

Since the very beginning, the coronavirus pandemic changed the way people live their lives, the way they carry out their daily activities, but also the way they make political decisions, at local, national, and international level. This health crisis has affected not only the national health systems, but also politics in general, with governments being forced to make quick, often unpopular decisions in certain areas. Thus, in most countries, the COVID-19 pandemic forced governments to institute various legal and constitutional measures in their attempt to control the crisis. One of the areas where governments were forced to come up with solutions has been the electoral process (both local and national), which proved to be quite challenging, given that elections represent one of the core tenets of any democratic political system.

In 2020, Romania organized both parliamentary and local elections (the latter had been postponed as a direct consequence of the pandemic). In both cases, turnout was lower than in the previous elections, in 2016. The main working hypothesis of this paper is that this decline in turnout was not mainly due to the sanitary crisis, but rather part of a persistent trend that has been going on in Romania for the last two decades. Using the data on electoral turnout and the election results, we argue that electoral absenteeism is a phenomenon rooted in the Romanian society rather than one generated by the pandemic context. This is more noticeable in the case of the parliamentary elections, where turnout fell to just under 40% in three of the last four elections (2008, 2016, 2020) and only slightly exceeded this level in 2012.

Indeed, the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has only aggravated some of the dysfunctions that the Romanian political system was facing anyway, but it was not the main reason for the collapse of voters' interest in the electoral process. On the contrary, on the day of the parliamentary elections, the authorities decided to temporarily relax some of the measures which had been implemented at that time, in order to facilitate and encourage electoral participation. Paradoxically enough, the effects of relaxation were practically non-existent. In this paper, we analyze the changes to the electoral legislation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and, by looking at official data on turnout and electoral results and comparing them to previous electoral moments, we argue that the effects of the sanitary crisis on the electoral turnout have been overshadowed by the same old electoral apathy that characterizes the electoral landscape in Romania in recent years.

ELECTIONS ACROSS EUROPE IN 2020 AND 2021. HOW DID DIFFERENT GOVERNMENTS RESPOND TO THE PANDEMIC?

Perhaps there is nothing that better defines democracy than the fact that it is a regime in which free and fair elections are held regularly. Robert Dahl (1971), Giovanni Sartori (1987), Joseph Schumpeter (1947), Arendt Lijphart (2012), Larry Diamond (1999) or Philippe Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl (1991), to name just a few, have analyzed the concept of democracy from multiple theoretical perspectives and, no matter how different their views and approaches were, they all acknowledged the essential role that elections and political participation play in the proper functioning of any democracy. However, as has been the case in many states, the crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic called into question the very process on which the electoral systems are based.

From February 2020 until the end of 2021, according to a continuously updated report of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), at least 80 countries and territories around the globe had decided to postpone certain national or local / regional elections, as well as special elections like referendums (IDEA 2022a). In Europe alone, at least 27 local, parliamentary, and even presidential elections were postponed. As it can be seen from Table 1, most of these elections were originally scheduled to take place in the first part of 2020, that is in the first months of the pandemic, when most European states had instituted a state of emergency or other extremely strict measures to manage the pandemic. We have chosen to present only the information about parliamentary, presidential, or local elections and nationwide referendums, excluding the results from by-elections or local referendums.

Table 1. Local, general, and presidential elections and national referendums postponed in Europe in 2020 and 2021.

Country	Election type	Originally scheduled	Postponed to
Armenia	Referendum on changes to the Constitutional Court	5 April 2020	Summer 2021
BiH	Local elections	4 October 2020	15 November 2020
Finland	Municipal elections	18 April 2021	13 June 2021
France	Second round of local elections	22 March 2020	28 June 2020
France	Regional and departmental elections	March 2021	20 June 2021
Italy	National referendum	29 March 2020	20/21 September 2020
N. Macedonia	Parliamentary elections	12 April 2020	15 July 2020
Poland	Presidential elections	10 May 2020	28 June and 12 July 2020
Romania	Local elections	May-June 2020	27 September 2020
Russia	Nation-wide Constitutional referendum	22 April 2020	1 July 2020
Serbia	General elections	26 April 2020	21 June 2020
Switzerland	Federal vote	17 May 2020	27 September 2020

Source: the author's analysis

On the other hand, in many cases, the elections took place according to the initial calendar. It should be noted, however, that these electoral processes fell in two categories: either scheduled to take place during February or in the first part of March 2020, when the pandemic had not yet been officially declared and Europe was not facing a large number of cases, or were elections scheduled after the first two waves, when the level of infections was plummeting (IDEA 2022a). IDEA kept track of all those cases on a specific section of their website, dedicated to the pandemic impact on elections worldwide. Nevertheless, between April and May 2020, no European state respected their pre-pandemic electoral schedule and only from the second half of June, the electoral processes resumed in several states. The decision to postpone the elections came,

therefore, as an absolute necessity, especially in the first part of the health crisis, when governments around the world lacked information about COVID-19 and feared that by moving forwards and holding the elections, the population would be subjected to additional risks. As such, they preferred to reschedule them at a later time, once the situation began to improve. But had the health crisis affected the electoral process? Did the pandemic have any other effects on the election, beyond those concerning the additional safety measures that had been put in place? Did it cause a drop in electoral turnout? Did the political parties change their discourse and approach during the election campaigns?

The novel socio-political and sanitary situation had a major impact on the electoral processes, forcing governments, political parties, and candidates not only to change their approaches to election campaigns, but also the very way in which elections were going to be organized. Aside from this, however, the influence of the pandemic must be analyzed on a case-by-case basis, at national or local levels and compared to previous recorded trends of those countries' electoral processes.

An analysis from IDEA indicated that in most states where elections were held between February and August 2020, there was a noticeable drop in turnout, which raised many questions about the legitimacy of those elections. However, in some cases (including Poland, Slovakia, Montenegro, etc.), turnout increased compared to previous elections (2008-2019), which means that other factors influencing turnout also need to be considered. Among them, we can identify such aspects as: the adoption of complementary measures on electronic or postal voting; the political context; or the perceived high stakes of elections considered crucial for the population (especially where the differences between candidates were very small as was the case in Poland or Montenegro) (IDEA 2022b).

THE ROMANIAN CASE. PANDEMIC-RELATED CHANGES IN THE ELECTORAL LEGISLATION FOR THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

In 1990, immediately after the fall of the communist regime, Romania adopted an electoral system of proportional representation (PR) for the election of members of Parliament. Initially, there was no electoral threshold, later (in 1992) a threshold of 3% was set and only after 2000, the threshold of 5% was established. PR has been used in Romania from 1990 until the 2004 elections and after several electoral cycles, was once more reinstated in 2016. For the 2008 and 2012 parliamentary elections,

Romania used a “particular” type of mixed system, which was supposed to be a “uninominal” voting system (similar with the first-past-the post voting) (Law no. 35/2008). Why do we consider it to be a “particular” type of mixed system? Because even though the electoral process involved the election of individual candidates in uninominal constituencies, the system included two different stages of vote redistribution, at county (representing the constituency) and national level, using proportional procedures. These redistributions were in place because a candidate could only directly obtain the deputy or senator mandate if they managed to win at least 50% + 1 of the valid votes cast in the electoral college in which they were running. In all other colleges where no candidate was able to obtain at least 50% + 1 of the votes, the mandates would be redistributed. Because the effects of this electoral system proved to be more negative than positive, it was abolished and from the 2016 parliamentary elections, the country returned to the PR system (for more details see: Ivănescu 2015a, 111-117; Ivănescu 2015b, 151-158; Ivănescu 2014, 180-189; Ivănescu 2013, 159-173).

Currently, the parliamentary elections in Romania are held in accordance with Law no. 208/2015 and are still based in a PR system, covering 43 electoral constituencies (41 counties, the Municipality of Bucharest and one constituency for the Romanian citizens residing abroad). The representation rate is one deputy to 73.000 inhabitants and one senator to 168.000 inhabitants (Law no. 208/2015, art. 5) and the electoral threshold is 5% of the total number of valid votes cast at national level or 20% of the total number of valid votes cast in at least four electoral constituencies for the political parties, and between 8% and 10% for alliances, based on the number of members (Law no. 208/2015, art. 94).

In order to hold the parliamentary elections in December 2020, the Parliament had adopted earlier, in September, Law no. 202/2020 which amended and completed certain normative acts concerning electoral matters. In essence, this legislative act proposed several changes regarding the conduct of the electoral process in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, art. IV of this new law specified a series of measures regarding the hygiene procedures in the polling stations and identified the Ministry of Internal Affairs as the institution responsible for ensuring that the members of the polling stations had access to all the necessary sanitary materials. The law also contained clarifications regarding the conduct of the electoral process abroad. For the first time in Romania’s electoral history, the voting process in the parliamentary elections would take place over a two-day period (Law no. 202/2020, art. I. 1).

The law also stated that in countries where, for safety reasons related to combating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the authorities would not allow polling stations to be set up in the headquarters of diplomatic missions or consular offices (Law no. 202/2020, art. VII). In light of these circumstances, Romanian citizens with the domicile or residence abroad could vote by post – this facility had been granted prior to the pandemic, beginning with the 2016 parliamentary elections (Law no. 288/2015). However, it is notable that this right did not extend to the Romanians back home: the authorities did not provide access to postal voting at national level, not even in view of the elections from December 2020.

Scheduled to take place in late November or early December 2020, the electoral process was not postponed a second time even though the data indicated that the country was undergoing a surge in Covid cases and hospitalizations. However, certain authorities sought to undertake various measures that – if successful – would have had the effect of postponing the elections. In one instance, the President challenged before the Constitutional Court the law on the organization of parliamentary elections, adopted by the Parliament on July 27, 2020 (being of the opinion that in the event of an exceptional situation that would have legally extended the mandate of parliamentarians, the modification of the law would have become problematic and criticized the Parliament for acting discretionary in adopting the legislative act; he argued that, according to the law, it was the Government that sets the date of elections which then brings it to the attention of all citizens by publishing in the “Official Gazette of Romania” with at least 90 days before the election) (Europa Liberă 2020a).

In another case, the independent deputy Adrian Dohotaru (elected on the USR lists in 2016) presented to the Parliament, on October 1, a bill that contained provisions for the postponement of the parliamentary elections until March 2021, on account of the epidemiological context. His argument was based on the idea that people from disadvantaged backgrounds were more exposed to the virus and that by holding elections in December, their access to the voting process would be restricted, which, in turn, would be discriminatory (Europa Liberă 2020b). Along the same line, Marcel Ciolacu, president of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) declared several times that the party was also in favor of postponing the elections. As none of these attempts were successful, the election date remained set for December 6, 2020, as had been established by Government Decision no. 744 from September 3, 2020 (Romanian Government Decision no. 744/2020).

Like many other countries, Romania too adopted special campaigning and voting arrangements, aimed at ensuring social distancing, reducing crowds and, hopefully, lowering the risk of infection. On the issue of the electoral campaign, there had been many debates about the restrictions that should be imposed in order to protect public health. Consequently, a joint Order was issued by the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Order no. 1850/157/2020), which contained the following provisions:

- limiting the number of participants to a maximum of 20 for indoor public gatherings and to a maximum of 50 for outdoor meetings;
- limiting to a maximum of 6, the number of people traveling in groups for electoral actions carried out on the street; and
- limiting to a maximum of 2, the people who made up teams for door-to-door campaigning.

Compared to other European countries, the measures taken in Romania were somewhere in the middle of a so-called “restrictions axis”. On one end of the spectrum, in countries like Northern Macedonia, Montenegro, or Poland, the restrictions had not been very drastic (even if in Poland all public gatherings had been banned at some point during the electoral campaign for the 2020 presidential election). In Northern Macedonia, the maximum number of participants allowed to attend public meetings was 1000 (OSCE 2020a: 13); in Montenegro a maximum of 50 people could attend indoor gatherings and 100 outdoor meetings (OSCE 2020b: 11); while in Poland, the number was limited to a maximum of 50 participants, indoor, and a maximum of 150, outdoor (OSCE 2020c: 12). At the other end, authorities banned public events and political rallies altogether: Croatia (OSCE 2020d: 10-11), Serbia (where the campaign was suspended) (OSCE 2020e: 12), but also Poland, between 31 March and 29 May 2020, when public gatherings were officially prohibited (OSCE 2020c: 12).

The measures imposed in the polling stations were the subject of another joint order of the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Order no. 2009/166/2020) and concerned social distancing, mandatory masks for all voters entering the polling stations, temperature checks, mandatory use of hand sanitizers, disposable pens for each voter, limited number of people allowed in the polling station (no more than five voters in the voting room).

As mentioned, postal voting was available only for Romanian voters living abroad. Although the expansion of the postal voting would have perhaps allowed for a larger participation, such a measure was not

taken into consideration, most likely due to the fact that it would have been too difficult to implement in a short period of time and would have likely led to further blockages. On the other hand, the experience of Poland, which extended postal voting during the pandemic, shows that such a measure, although extremely useful at first glance, failed to attract voters, being sparsely used (less than 200,000 postal ballots were returned) (OSCE 2020c: 8).

In Romania, the day of the parliamentary elections also came with the relaxation of some measures. Voters were able to travel without restrictions on December 6, 2020, from 05.00 AM until 01.00 AM the next day (Mediafax 2020). This decision sought to facilitate access to polling stations, especially in localities where, due to an incidence rate higher than 6%, freedom of movement was restricted – only a limited number of activities were allowed, and travel was permitted only on the basis of a sworn declaration. As it will be shown below, this decision did not produce the intended effect, with turnout remaining very low.

THE 2020 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN ROMANIA: POLITICAL CONTEXT, ELECTORAL TURNOUT, CAMPAIGN TRENDS

In 2020, both local and parliamentary elections took place in the context of the extraordinary situation caused by the coronavirus pandemic, being organized in special conditions, which involved the application, during the election campaign and in the polling stations, of many security measures. Despite the challenges, the electoral process went smoothly, even if the restrictions on freedom of movement affected the conduct of the electoral campaign. In this regard, the report of the OSCE Special Election Assessment Mission to the December 2020 parliamentary elections notes that the elections were “professionally organized”, “competitive” and “fundamental freedoms were respected”, even if they were “marked by political fatigue” (OSCE 2020f: 1). This was due to the fact that over a period of 18 months, Romania had held no fewer than four electoral contests: European elections (May 2019), presidential elections (November 2019), local elections (September 2020), and parliamentary elections (December 2020).

The local elections held on September 27, 2020 were seen as a test run for the parliamentary elections. The turnout was 46,62%, a slight decrease from the 2016 local elections, when the turnout was 48,17% (Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority 2016a; 2020a). This decline in turnout should not be seen, however, as a direct effect of the COVID-19

pandemic. It is in line, instead, with a decade long general trend, marked by steadily declining interest in the electoral process.

The turnout for the parliamentary elections from December 6, 2020 was much lower than even that from the local elections held just two months before. Only 31,94% of the citizens voted, marking a new low in terms of turnout in the Romanian parliamentary elections (Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority 2020b). Also, the differences between the turnout from the 2016 elections were noticeably higher, in many counties – over 10%. The pandemic context could have played a bigger role than in the case of the local elections (the rate of infection being higher at the beginning of December than at the end of September), but we cannot say its impact was equally major, if we consider the general turnout trend characterizing these elections. Some of the lowest turnout rates were registered in counties where on the day of the elections the cumulative incidence rate, calculated per 1.000 inhabitants, was below the national average. For example, as Table 2 shows, the lowest turnout was recorded in Vaslui county, where the incidence was 2,20‰, the national average being 3,14‰. Other counties where the turnout was below 30% though the infection rate was less than 3‰ were Bacău, Botoșani, Brăila, Caraș-Severin, Iași, Maramureș, Neamț, Suceava, Tulcea. Interestingly, some of the highest turnout rates were registered in the counties with the highest infection rate: Constanța, Ilfov, Sibiu, Cluj, or Brașov.

Table 2. Romanian Parliamentary Elections 2020 and 2016 (Turnout rate + COVID-19 incidence of infections in the election day of 2020)

County	Turnout (%)	Turnout (%)	Infections (cases per ‰ inhabitants)
	2016	2020	
	11 Dec. 2016	6 Dec. 2020	6 Dec. 2020
National average	39.79	31.94	3.14
Bucharest	41.76	30.85	5.80
Alba	39.76	33.84	4.02
Arad	36.53	28.97	4.55
Argeș	40.27	32.47	4.50
Bacău	35.98	27.37	2.52
Bihor	43.61	35.83	3.48
Bistrița-Năsăud	36.66	30.95	2.45
Botoșani	39.13	28.33	2.42
Brașov	39.02	31.22	5.02
Brăila	39.03	29.33	2.89
Buzău	41.78	33.79	1.95
Caraș-Severin	37.22	29.02	2.44
Călărași	37.67	30.43	2.86

Cluj	40.36	32.89	5.58
Constanța	40.64	31.00	7.17
Covasna	38.17	30.63	2.27
Dâmbovița	42.84	32.35	3.20
Dolj	44.50	35.16	2.41
Galați	38.97	29.27	3.40
Giurgiu	41.43	35.66	3.03
Gorj	41.71	35.75	1.20
Harghita	44.58	36.34	1.09
Hunedoara	42.56	32.06	3.29
Ialomița	35.67	25.69	3.20
Iași	34.32	26.23	2.64
Ilfov	41.66	34.23	7.26
Maramureș	31.74	28.31	2.23
Mehedinți	43.18	39.33	2.18
Mureș	38.24	31.02	3.00
Neamț	36.80	28.52	1.53
Olt	46.58	35.78	1.17
Prahova	40.15	29.48	3.60
Satu Mare	34.95	28.60	3.14
Sălaj	43.48	35.41	1.93
Sibiu	37.01	31.02	5.00
Suceava	37.03	28.41	1.65
Teleorman	45.63	35.54	2.25
Timiș	35.28	29.61	3.94
Tulcea	34.86	27.14	3.47
Vaslui	33.03	23.09	2.20
Vâlcea	41.00	32.79	2.47
Vrancea	39.96	32.12	1.74

Source: Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority 2016b, 2020b; Știri oficiale.ro 2020.

In the midst of the pandemic, the election campaign focused more on issues related to the rising rates of illness, the situation of hospital beds, especially those in intensive care units, and the restrictive measures taken by the government: movement restrictions, lockdown of large cities, or markets closure (a strongly contested government measure by PSD and especially by AUR – the Alliance for the Union of Romanians, a nationalist, populist newly formed party). Beyond the issues related to the pandemic, the main political parties rehashed the major economic issues omnipresent throughout all the other previous campaigns (salaries, pensions, infrastructure investments, measures of economic growth and inflation reduction), only few novel themes were addressed.

In its government program for the period 2021-2024, the Social

Democratic Party (PSD) focused on reducing labor taxation, especially for low- and middle-income employees, increasing pensions, doubling child benefits, creating new jobs and increasing investment for regional development and road infrastructure, which would lead over the next 4 years to a decrease of about 20% in the development gap between rural and urban areas (PSD 2020). Following a similar line, the National Liberal Party (PNL) proposed through its government program the creation of over 560.000 new jobs, the highest economic growth in the EU over the next 4 years, with a growth rate of over 6% in 2024, salary and pensions increases, about 1.000 km of new highways and expressways, and a reduction in annual inflation below 2% (PNL 2020). As a social measure in the context of the pandemic, PNL proposed postponing the payment of bank installments until July, 1 2021 and postponing the tax obligations for the next 12 months after the elections. Regarding the electoral reform, PNL reopened the debate about the election of mayors in two rounds and proposed extending postal voting to the national territory. USR-PLUS Alliance also supported the reintroduction of the electoral law on the election of mayors in two rounds. Additionally, in line with the anti-corruption and anti-system discourse, USR-PLUS revisited the issue concerning the 2009 referendum, where a majority of voters decided that the maximum number of parliamentarians should be limited to 300 (it was held in 2009 and its results have yet to be implemented) (USR-PLUS 2020).

More than in any other previous election, the campaign took place mostly online (and mainly on Facebook). As a result, important issues related to economic and social reforms fell into the background, and the debates between the candidates became less and less interesting when considering the issues directly related to the health crisis. In a report on parliamentary election observation, Expert Forum (a think tank set up by experts in administration and public policy) and Observatorul Electoral (a platform that provides information and resources for observers) said the same thing, noting that the political discourse in the election campaign was “largely dominated by the conflict between the parliamentary majority and the minority government and by reciprocal attacks by the parties, to the detriment of the debate on electoral programs” (Krause & Pârnu 2020, 19). This, in turn, further diminished the public interest in the campaign.

It cannot be said, however, that absenteeism was caused only by the COVID-19 pandemic, although it is clear that it factored in the decline in turnout, especially in large cities, where the incidence rate was higher. We can identify other causes behind this phenomenon,

three of which are crucial to our understanding of the issue: a declining trend in turnout in recent years (characterizing especially parliamentary elections), a general disinterest in elections, which citizens no longer perceive as representing a stake in itself, as well as political fatigue – the December 2020 parliamentary elections represented the fourth electoral contest over a brief period of time – just one and a half years – and with each electoral contest, citizen interest in political participation gradually decreased. Table 3 shows the turnout for all presidential, parliamentary, local, and European elections held in Romania after 1990, and it allows us to observe how the parliamentary elections have become, over time, Romania's second order elections: the ones for which the voters show the least interest.

Table 3. Electoral turnout for the local, parliamentary, presidential, and European elections held in Romania between 1990 and 2020

Year	Turnout in local elections	Turnout in parliamentary elections (Chamber of Deputies)	Turnout in presidential elections (first round)	Turnout in presidential elections (second round)	Turnout in European elections
1990	-	86.18%	86.18%	-	-
1992	65%	76.29%	76.29%	73.23%	-
1996	56.47%	76.01%	76.01%	75.90%	-
2000	50.85%	65.31%	65.31%	57.50%	-
2004	54.23%	58.51%	58.51%	55.21%	-
2007	-	-	-	-	29.47%
2008	48.81%	39.20%	-	-	-
2009	-	-	54.37%	58.02%	27.67%
2012	56.26%	41.76%	-	-	-
2014	-	-	53.18%	64.11%	32.44%
2016	48.17%	39.49%	-	-	-
2019	-	-	47.66%	49.87%	51.20%
2020	46.62%	31.94%	-	-	-

Source: Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority 2022.

Analyzing the possible reasons for the low turnout, which was anticipated when it came to the elections of December 2020, Romanian

sociologist Ovidiu Voicu argued that “these elections do not have a real stake, because there is no major difference between PSD and PNL, and URS-PLUS has lost much of its anti-system and anti-elite discourse, it is harder to present itself as a new party” (Europa Liberă 2020c).

In this context, AUR was the unintended beneficiary of the voters’ disinterest, especially of those comprising the traditional electorate of the main political parties. Taking advantage of this favorable electoral context, AUR focused on an election campaign conducted mostly online. The main electoral tool of AUR and its leader George Simion was the latter’s Facebook page, which became the most important communication channel of the party, drawing huge audience figures compared to the Facebook pages of other political leaders (Recorder 2020). Amid the volatile atmosphere that resulted from a combination of unpopular governmental sanitary measures, the widespread exasperation with the pandemic in general, and the restrictive measures that had lasted for more than half a year, AUR centered its political messaging on several topics with great emotional impact: the corruption of the political class, the excessive politicization and inefficiency of state institutions, and, especially, the criticism directed at the main government measures taken during the pandemic – closure of markets and restaurants, traffic restrictions, lockdown. These populist messages had a major impact on voters, distrustful of the political class and skeptical of the idea that the traditional parties can bring positive change. Once all votes were counted, they revealed an unexpected result – AUR obtained 9,08% of the votes and 41 seats in the Parliament. By comparison, two months earlier, in the local elections, AUR had obtained an overall score of less than 1% of the votes.

CONCLUSIONS

Local elections marked a weakening of PSD’s dominance as a result of an election campaign that both PNL and the USR + PLUS Alliance directed almost exclusively against this party. Meanwhile, the parliamentary elections maintained the same downward trend for PSD, however they did not mirror entirely the outcome registered two months earlier. Furthermore, the ruling party, PNL, failed to retain the first place. These elections marked a major decrease in the number of votes obtained by PSD, which lost over 15% of the votes received four years earlier. Thus, although PSD gained the first place in the parliamentary elections (with 28,90% of the votes for the Chamber of Deputies and 29,32% of the votes for the Senate, compared to PNL’s 25,18% for the Chamber of

Deputies and 25,58% for the Senate) (Romanian Central Electoral Bureau 2016; 2020), it was in a visible decline. This was further confirmed when it failed to form a parliamentary majority and a government in the aftermath of the elections, becoming, instead, the main opposition party. The majority was formed by PNL and the USR + PLUS Alliance, which ruled together for a short period of time, the government led by PNL's Florin Cîțu being dismissed by a no-confidence vote on October 5, 2021. As a result, after several days of difficult discussions and negotiations, PNL formed a government alongside PSD, the party against which it had fought in the election campaign less than a year earlier.

Despite all the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic brought for democracies in general and for the electoral processes in particular, in Romania both electoral contests held in 2020 took place without registering major problems. Even if delays were observed in the decision process, regarding the amendment of some legislative acts, or the adoption of new pandemic-related legislation, the parliamentary elections were held according to schedule, avoiding new political tensions overextending the term of office of the parliamentarians. Beyond the sanitary crisis, the biggest challenge was centered around the imperative to rekindle people's interest in the electoral process, as absenteeism has constituted the main concern in all the electoral processes that Romania organized in the last decades. The drop in turnout in parliamentary elections cannot be, hence, attributed solely to the pandemic situation, since it had been afflicting the electoral contests for a long time. It just so happened that the most significant drop in the last decade and a half was registered with the occasion of the elections analyzed in this study.

It can be argued that, after 1990, every electoral moment in Romania showed, with few exceptions, a decrease in turnout. However, in the case of the parliamentary elections, this decrease was accentuated after 2004, in direct connection with the amendment of the Romanian Constitution (2003) which increased the term of office for the President, from 4 to 5 years. If until 2004, in Romania the parliamentary and presidential elections were held simultaneously, and the turnout remained above 50%, with the amendment of the Constitution, the participation in the parliamentary elections began to collapse. In the parliamentary elections from 2008, the first ones that did not coincide with the presidential elections – the turnout was only 39,20%, the lowest in Romania's parliamentary history at that time. Therefore, this situation confirms the general low interest in this type of elections and a higher interest in presidential and local elections. Most likely, in 2024, when, for the first time after the amendment of the Constitution, the parliamentary and

presidential elections will be held once again at the same time, it will be possible to observe a significant increase in participation rates for the parliamentary elections, given that in Romania, the presidential elections are the ones that have always aroused the greatest interest from voters.

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