

Mediatization of European Parliamentary Election News in Romania

Andra, Seceleanu⁺

"Andrei Saguna" University from Constanta

Abstract. The 2009 European Parliament Elections offered a particularly interesting case to study. Research has shown that the process of European integration is accompanied by a democratic deficit, reflected by a lack of popular support for the idea of European integration as well as for the EU institutions and also by a low rate of participation among voters. In order to investigate the mediatization and also the framing of the European Union during the 2009 EP election campaigns, a quantitative content analysis was conducted. In terms of media, the content analysis includes three main television news programs and two main national broadsheets. The unit of analysis consisted of single articles (newspapers) or thematic TV news (television). All in all, the content analysis includes 208 news stories. Newspapers covered the election campaigns more extensively than television news did.

Keywords: 2009 European Parliament Elections, media coverage, mediatization, political campaign

1. Introduction

The decisional scheme in elections is very complex, being conditioned not only by the rational/affective element, but also by various factors that characterize this process— researchers mention the attitudinal-value components, the perception, the objective expectations determined at the level of common knowledge, but also the subjective ones that are conditioned according to value and affection, the conceptions regarding the vote and the rules that regulate the electoral system.

Electoral campaigns demonstrate that the media-politics sphere begins more and more to feel the influence of political marketing, being understood as a set of actions directed towards promotion through mass media, in the given case, of the political "product": the object of the political marketing consists in the obtaining of an "agreement" between "the producers" of political images and their "consumers" for the optimization of the relation between supply and demand (1995, p.51), and it does not have, according to Phillippe Maarek, "nothing in common with the increase of political participation or the civic attitude of the electorate," being more pragmatic and more precise, oriented towards the providing of influence on electoral options of the auditory.

In accordance with the laws of marketing, as Vance Packard shows in his reference work *I persuasori oculti*, "the elector, entering the voting booth, hesitates just as she/he would if she/he found herself/himself in a drugstore having to choose between two toothpastes.

2. Europarlimentary Electoral Campaign and Media Practice

The first Europarlimentary elections gave rise to certain problems that the parties did not have to deal with in the previous elections: how to manipulate the electorate using European themes, or, more exactly, with what to buy it off? The second problem was related to the necessity of redefining the position of every party on the political scene, under the conditions of a turmoil year, with many changes of situation.

⁺ Tel.: + (40722680646); fax: +(40241662520).
E-mail address: (andraseceleanu@andreisaguna.ro).

Although the stake of these elections was high, considering that the score of these elections could signal the trend for the 2008 elections, *the themes of the campaign were vague* and there were not any themes of public debate to draw attention and increase the interest. The *informational element of the campaign* was insufficient, people stating that they did not know what they had to vote for and that happened because there was not a pre-campaign that could prepare the public from an informational point of view.

Mass media made efforts, but it alone could not animate an informational campaign, the direct interest being that of the institutions of the state, of the politicians and of the parties. *It counted on leaders and not on the message.*

In this context, the 2009 European Parliament Elections offered a particularly interesting case to study. Research has shown that the process of European integration is accompanied by a democratic deficit, reflected by a lack of popular support for the idea of European integration as well as for the EU institutions and also by a low rate of participation among voters.

Analyzing the features of the mediatization of elections to the 2009 European Parliament Elections, the researcher considered the following characteristics of media environment in Romania:

- Political communication is very personalized. The success depends rather on the qualities and the personal image building, than on the represented political body;
- Political agenda is more distinctive than that of the population. The lack of direct and efficient mechanisms of communication makes the interest for politics dependent of the media influence;
- Lately, mass-media have interfered on the political process scene, implying debates and conflicts for power distribution;
- Mass-media have changed from a simply intermediate channel to a part of the power system. The media authority is accepted even by the political class, the latter trying to develop collaboration activities with media;
- Mass-media have become a mediator between politicians and electors, and also a disruption form for direct communication. That is why the political class departed the electors, and the latter seem to be represented by media than the political class. We use mediatization as a concept which refers to a process of increasing media influence (Asp, 1986; Hjarvard, 2008; Mazzoleni, 2008a, 2008b; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Strombäck, 2010; Strombäck & Esser, 2009).

This process of increasing media influence consists of several dimensions (Asp, 1986; Strombäck, 2008, 2010; Strombäck & Esser, 2009). The first dimension is concerned with the media's importance as a source of information and channel of communication. The second dimension is concerned with the media's independence from other social and political institutions. The third dimension focuses on media content, and more specifically the extent to which media content is shaped by the media's own needs, requirements and logics rather than those of other social and political institutions and actors (Brants & Praag, 2006; Mazzoleni, 1987; Patterson, 1993). The fourth dimension focuses on political institutions and actors, and the extent to which those are governed by media logic as opposed to some kind of party.

3. Methodology Data and Hypotheses

In order to investigate the mediatization and also the framing of the European Union during the 2009 EP election campaigns, a quantitative content analysis was conducted.

In terms of media, the content analysis includes three main television news programs and two main national broadsheets. In terms of content, the content analysis includes all news stories published in these media during the last three weeks before Election Day, ending the day before Election Day. The news stories explicitly referred to the 2009 EP election, including stories about voters or the candidates themselves. The unit of analysis consisted of single news stories (newspapers) or thematic news stories (television).

All in all, the content analysis includes 208 news stories. Television covered the election campaigns more extensively than newspapers did.

As a basis for the content analysis, the codebook "The Mediatization and Framing of European Parliamentary Election Campaigns", by Stromback and Dimitrova (2009), was used. Overall, the main hypotheses were:

H1. Media were not very interested in covering the campaign; EP election was treated as a second-order national election.

H2. The media coverage EP election was shaped by strong journalistic interventions

The Romanian mediatization of the 2009 EP election campaigns did not provide a very substantial coverage. The researcher identifies just 75 news story in newspapers and 133 in TV news, considering that first form of mediatization of media content identified. The lack of interest of media was reflected in a lack of presence in a they of vote: just 27,67% was voted at EP election, percent down from 2007.

Table 1. Number of news stories on the 2009 EP Elections Campaigns

| Newspapers | Television news | N |
|------------|-----------------|-----|
| 75 | 133 | 208 |

To investigate journalistic visibility in TV news, three measures were used: whether the journalist covering a story does a stand-up, whether the anchor interviews the journalist covering a story live on location, and whether the anchor interviews a journalist, acting as an analyst, in studio. The results are presented in Table 2, which also shows the mean journalistic visibility on an index created by summoning the various forms of journalistic visibility.

Table 2. Journalistic visibility in 2009 EP Election news (%)

| Journalistic stand-up | Journalist interviewed live | Journalist interviewed in studio | Mean journalistic visibility | N |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|-----|
| 18.0 | 13.5 | 29.3 | 0.60 | 133 |

Note: Only television news stories included.

The results show that the most common form of journalistic visibility is the journalistic stand-up, where a journalist stands up interviewed in studio by the news anchor in studio, acting as a news analyst event. Just 18% of all news stories included a journalistic stand-up.

If we make reference to the high presence of journalist interview in studio, the second form of mediatization, this is related with romanian journalist desire to take control, become a proactive actor on the political scene, implying debates and conflicts for power distribution.

The third form of mediatization of media content identified above was the extent to which journalists are granted the wrap-up, that is, the concluding sound bite in TV new stories. Journalists were granted the concluding sound bite in more the 60% of the stories.

The fourth indicator of mediatization of media content to be investigated here is related to the framing of politics, and more specifically the framing of politics as a strategic game. This framing of politics has often been criticized, partly because it is conceived of as crowding out the issues and substance of politics (Patterson, 1993), and partly because research suggests that this framing of politics may contribute to political distrust (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). To investigate the extent to which the media framed the 2009 EP election campaigns as a strategic game, two variables will be used. The first asks if the news story deals extensively with politicians or parties winning or losing elections, legislative debates, governing negotiations, or winning or losing in politics generally (sub-frame 1). The second variable asks if the news story deals extensively with polls and politicians' or parties' standing in the polls (sub-frame 2). The results are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Framing of of politics as a strategic game in 2009 EP Elections news (%)

| Focus on winning and losing (sub-frame 1) | Focus on opinion polls (sub-frame 2) | n |
|---|--------------------------------------|-----|
| 34.6 | 14.4 | 208 |

The results show that a focus on winning and losing in politics was more common than a focus on opinion polls. The last aspect to be investigated here is the framing of the European Union and whether there is a correlation between the journalistic style and the overall framing of the EU. To explore the framing of EU, three pro-EU and three anti-EU sub-frames were investigated. Briefly, the variables used to identify the pro-EU sub-frames asked: does the story cast the EU as contributing to peace and freedom; does the story cast the EU as contributing to economic development; and does the story cast the EU as contributing positively to the member states. The variables used to identify the anti-EU sub-frames asked: does the story cast the EU as an organization incapable of addressing important problems facing the member states; does the story cast the EU as an overly bureaucratic and inefficient organization, costing too much in relation to what it delivers; and does the story cast the EU as a threat towards national sovereignty.

The results are displayed in Table 4, where the first column reports the share of news stories with a pro-EU frame present, the second the share of news stories with an anti-EU frame present, and the third the dominance of a positive or negative overall framing of the EU.

Table 4. Pro- and Anti- EU Framing in 2009 EP Election News (%)

| Pro-EU frame present | Anti-EU frame present | Overall EU framing | N |
|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|-----|
| 25.5 | 1.9 | 0.057 | 208 |

The overall framing of the EU was significantly more positive in news stories where a descriptive ($m = 0.748$) as opposed to an interpretive ($m = 0.185$) journalistic style was dominant ($F(1, 206) = 11.758, p = .001$).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the politician's obsession to make an image, the TV tends to become the substitute of the parliamentary debate and to conquer the entire public space. So, as we can easily notice, the debate takes place only on television and the government acts seem to be generated only by the TV journalists. Without a TV camera, it seems there is no reality, because without television there is no public space.

In the minds of both audience and politicians was inoculated the idea that only opinions transmitted by the mass-media represent the real interlocutor for the government. For the first it was suggested that they do not need to form an opinion anymore and for the later, that they don't have a choice.

So, the trinomial "Press-Society-Political class", which is mandatory for a normal modern society, has transformed into the unbalanced formula "Press-Political class", from which the society, as a legitimate source of the public opinion, was eliminated.

Mediatic practice proves the importance of at least two elements that condition the success of a political message transmitted through mass media channels, able to produce the wanted electoral effect: its concordance with the expectations of the electorate, in the first place, and its adjustment according to the mediatic requirements. Precisely, the observance of these conditions determines the candidates' eligibility.

The data have shown a high degree of journalistic visibility in the Romanian election news coverage. The content of the TV news programs mainly reflected their own needs and media logic rather than the logic of the political. The media promoted a more or less favorable image of political actors.

5. References

- [1] K. Asp, *Måktiga massmedier. Studier i politisk opinionsbildning*. Stockholm: Akademilitteratur, 1986
- [2] J.N.Cappella, & K.H. Jamieson *Spiral of cynicism. The press and the public good*. 1997, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- [3] P. Maarek *Political Marketing and Communication*. London: John Libbey.,1995
- [4] G. Mazzoleni, *Mediatization of Politics*. In W. Donsbach (Ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Communication* (pp. 3047-3051, pp. 3052-3055). Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008

- [5] G. Mazzoleni & W. Schulz, *Mediatization of Politics: A Challenge for Democracy? Political Communication* 16(3), 247-261, 1999
- [6] V. Packard, *I persuasori occulti*. Einaudi, 2005
- [7] T.E. Patterson, *Out of Order*. New York: Vintage, 1993
- [8] J. Strombäck, *Mediatization of Politics: Towards a Conceptual Framework for Comparative Research*. In E. P. Bucy & R. L. Holbert (Eds.), *Sourcebook for Political Communication Research: Methods, Measures, and Analytical Techniques*. New York: Routledge, 2010
- [9] J. Strombäck, & F. Esser, *Shaping Politics: Mediatization and Media Interventionism*. In K. Lundby (Ed.), *Mediatization. Concepts, Changes, Consequences* (pp. 205-223). New York: Peter Lang., 2009
- [10] J. Stromback, M. Maier, L.L. Kaid, *Political communication in European Parliamentary Elections*, Ashgate, 2011, pp.161-175
- [11] L. Kaid, *Measuring Candidate Images with Semantic Differentials, Candidate Images in Presidential Election Campaign*, ed. Kenneth Hacker, Westport, CT: Praeger, 131-134, 1995
- [12] L Ricolfi, *Elezioni e mass media. Quanti voti ha spostato la tv*. Il Mulino, a. XLIII n. 356, 1994
- [13] A. Seceleanu *Mediatization of political life in conditions of electoral campaign - a retrospection of the elections in Romania*, *Central European Journal of Communication*, 3, 267-279, 2009
- [14] G. Mazzoleni. *Media Logic and Party Logic in Campaign Coverage: The Italian General Election of 1983*. *European Journal of Communication* 2(1), 81-103, 1987
- [15] K. Brants, K., & P.V. Praag, P. V, *Signs of Media Logic. Half a Century of Political Communication in the Netherlands*. *Javnost-The Public* 13(1), 25-40, 2006
- [16] S. Hjarvard, *The Mediatization of Society. A Theory of the Media as Agents of Social and Cultural Change*. *Nordicom Review*, 29(2), 105-134, 2008.