

BOOK REVIEWS

Radu Carp, Cristina Matiuța (editors), *2019 European Elections: The EU Party Democracy and the Challenge of National Populism*, Leiden: Brill, 2020 ISBN 9789004435148, 278 pages

Review by Irina POP

Part I - Comments in line with the authors proposals of the book

Authors

The book includes studies signed by political sciences academics – in vast majority from Romania. To the Romanian authors, some other experts joined, signing analysis on their own countries. In order, in which the editors arranged the contributions, the authors are: for the *Part I*: V. Naumescu; A. A. Iancu; R. Ivan; M. Sebe; R. Carp; S. Bocancea; for the *Part II* (case studies): S. Mișcoiu; a team composed by G. Piccolino, L. Puleo and S. Soare (to analyze the Italy case); a team composed by T. Spöri and J. Stadlmair (to analyze the Austrian case); a team composed by P. Sula and M. Madej (to analyze Poland's case); a team composed by J. Dúró and D. Bókay (to analyze Hungarian case); a team composed by J. Ušiak and P. Jankovská (to analyze Slovakia's case); a team composed by J. Bíba, T. Dvořák and M. Štefek (to analyze Czech Republic' 2019 elections). In the end, we have two individual analysis on Romania signed by C. Matiuța and A. Radu. The authors, larger part, are specialized in topics that merged in the elections process, constitutional studies, and political parties. A. Radu is well known for his expertise in Electoral Studies.

The Book

The book is conceived in a classical manner: *Introduction*, a First Part devoted to theoretical approaches, a Second Part with some studies case, and the

Conclusion. That is why it is highly readable for any researcher in the field as it is instructive for the interested students. Of course, we recommend it in the Kindle version or the printed one.

A brief *Introduction*, signed by editors, is presenting: a) the main thesis of the book; b) the methodological principles; c) a brief view of the contributions' content. The main questions addressed in the general research on the EU elections 2019, would have been useful in these introductory lines. They would provide from the very beginning of the book what we would learn from it.

Part I. Theoretical Approaches

More of the Romanian researchers – 7 out of 10, promised new ways of looking to the 2019 elections for the European Parliament and devoted their analysis to the theoretical frameworks. Among them, for now¹, we look to those which analyze the results in an optimistic perspective: Ruxandra Ivan - *Electoral Engineering for a European Demos: Building European Identity through Elections*; Mihai Sebe - *Towards a More Democratic European Union: How to Use the Elections for the European Parliament to Create a True Pan-European Constituency? Old Debates, New Challenges* and Radu Carp - *The Citizens' Perceptions ahead of the 2019 European Parliament Vote ...*

Ruxandra Ivan² started her research for the European *demos* with the old question on the role of the European elections: *Are they "second-degree national elections"* or, by contrary, they are a powerful tool in constructing a European civil identity?

She identified two effective instruments for enhancing European identity via electoral engineering: the transnational lists and leading candidates. Historically, the two tools were abandoned as a result of the opposition of the Member States governments, feared to lose their prominence in the institutional architecture of the

¹ We plan, for the next issue, a second view. We like to develop there some comments on the xenophobia revealed in the studies on the EP 2019 elections.

² Ruxandra Ivan (2020): *Electoral Engineering for a European Demos: Building European Identity through Elections*, in in Radu Carp, Cristina Matiuța (editors), (2020): *2019 European elections ...* pp. 39-51.

EU³. In the continuity of her suggestions, we outline that: a) the increasing role in the mentioned architecture of the European Council; b) together with the pressures from the grounds to up of the new European generations will result in: “more Europe” in the institutional design, and in a genuine European identity at the grassroots.

We also conclude with the author, that the European *demos*’ building is slow, but enduring. The favorable electoral tools’ invention and use will keep pace with reality and will contribute more and more to it.

Mihai Sebe⁴ addresses quite the same issue: more Europe and a more democratic one, through electoral tools.

The challenge underlined in this study is about the President Macron proposal – endorsed by Germany too -, namely the transnational lists for the EP 50 seats. It means more democracy in the European Union and a new system of the ballot (with one voter/ 2 ballots to cast, one in the national constituency, the other in the European one) leading to European *demos*. The decision to use this new electoral tool, in the EP 2024 elections, will be a big step forward in the process of constructing the European identity, the EU *demos*.

The study signed by Radu Carp⁵, *The Citizens’ Perceptions ahead of the 2019 European Parliament Vote ...* draws our attention because of the author’s approach. The study is different from the others in the same category, because it does not propose a new theory but simply questions the perceptions of 2018, as they are captured by the mentioned special Eurobarometer. Carp’s study is composed as a comment to it, to its predictions, and on the main political question of the moment: “Which are the factors that could increase participation but without a significant increase in votes for the populist/anti-system parties?”⁶

The dynamic of the national elections 2014-2018 seemed to be: the votes gained for traditional parties have decreased and the populist parties gained more

³ It is the concern to lose the role of the Council of the European Union, where national governments decide.

⁴ Mihai Sebe (2020): (*Towards a More Democratic European Union: How to Use the Elections for the European Parliament to Create a True Pan-European Constituency? Old Debates, New Challenges.*) in Radu Carp, Cristina Matiuța (editors), (2020): *2019 European elections ...* pp. 52- 65.

⁵ Radu Carp: (2020): *The Citizens’ Perceptions ahead of the 2019 European Parliament Vote – The Accuracy of the Eurobarometer Democracy and Elections*, pp. 66-79 in Radu Carp, Cristina Matiuța (editors), (2020): *2019 European elections ...*

⁶ Radu Carp, *The Citizens Perceptions ...* in Carp, Matiuța (2020), p. 87.

votes. In the continuity of professor Carp's ideas, it is to add that a decreasing interest of the voters for the electoral process. That is, at the national level, the mainstream parties faced difficulties to made governmental majorities free from extremist influences and stable enough to ensure coherent policies and faced also decreasing legitimacy for their policies. The Brexit – as an output of nationalistic and populist propaganda deployed by Nigel Farage's party⁷ - gave to the 2019 elections a crucial position in the EU's construction process.

In such a context, the elections for the EP raises questions as to whether or not the pro-European trends will continue; concerns for the legitimacy of the EU leadership elected in conditions of limited turnout; fear for coherence in the EU policies, formulated in a Commission with extremist participants ... Indeed, an increasing turnout logically leads to greater fragmentation of the electoral support of the different parties running in the elections. The "traditional" political groups represented in the EP in the 8th legislature, seemed to be in danger, to lose not only their positions but even their identity as political groups. The mentioned Special Eurobarometer did not provide answers to such questions. Eurobarometer.

The method of the study started with the concerns listed above. It compared the Special Eurobarometer Democracy and Elections' picture on the "electoral intentions for 2019 process" with the *de facto* results. In the real process, the turnout tendencies reversed from decreasing to increasing tendencies, and the electoral process brought to the European Parliament fewer populists members and fewer parties with populist agenda, which were predicted in the Special Eurobarometer 477 Democracy and elections, September 2018.

The way professor Carp explains the encouraging tendencies for the EU's consolidation is to be learned in the mentioned study.

Part II: The case studies provided

As for Part II, we like to salute all the contributors' efforts and their valuable and well-documented analyses, being them analyses of the electoral process *per se*, or on the electoral results' political consequences. We also like to express to them the gratitude for providing us - the academic field- with updated instruments. In this section of the book, we have focused on two case studies: the French 2019 EP

⁷ Nigel Farage was a member and leader (2006-2009 and 2010-2016) of the UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party). In 2019, he launched the Brexit Party.

elections, and Romanian EP elections. Therefore, the studies of Sergiu Mișcoiu and Cristina Matiuța raised some very interesting points, from the same optimistic perspective.

Sergiu Mișcoiu⁸, in his research *Back on Track: the French Far Right's (Narrow) Win in the 2019 European Elections* is searching for explanations in the case of the French voters' preferences for the National Rally (Rassemblement Nationale). His hypothesis, tested in a historical-contextual analysis and a focus group research, is: *Does the RN consolidated its position because of the twisted effect of the massive contestation wave against Macronism and this anti-Macronism radicalization (August 2018- February 2019)?* He concluded that since the mid2010s, the new French societal context characterized by the prevalence of feelings of insecurity and uncertainty and by the search for immediate answers pulverated the hegemony of party-politics and forced the politicians to respond to the genuine social needs. The mover was the Yellow-Vests' protests and riots. In such, a context the Marine LePen speculated over the public fears and discontents and refilled the party reservoir. In brief, he ensures the readers: it is only a conjecture. The structure of French voters is a pro-democratic EU.

From our point of view, the Radical Right success in France, raise, also, new questions: *To what extend the new European xenophobia fueled the support for RN and let her party's leaders assume the role of "les veritables patriotes"? Will lead such electoral success to more xenophobia, in the near future?*

That is why we will try to submit in a future issue of JIMS a Part II of marginalia to the book edited by Carp and Matiuta. There we will try to come back to the roles as electoral and political drivers of the new European populism and xenophobia, and to re-analyze the French case too, calling the views provided by Miscoiu.

Similarly, Cristina Matiuța's study - *The European Elections Campaign in Romania: Between Contesting and Embracing the EU* - is underlined the positive part of the electoral process. She focused on the electoral campaign: Romanian competitors engaged in the campaign for the EP; EU themes significant for the Romanian voters and the competitors' messages between EU meanings and Romanian voters' interests; the electoral results. The analysis' method is cross-

⁸ Sergiu Mișcoiu, *Back on Track: the French Far Right's (Narrow) Win in the 2019 European Elections* in Radu Carp, Cristina Matiuța (editors), (2020): *2019 European elections ...* pp. 99-112.

comparison: Romania - EU in the 2019 elections for EP compared, one level; and Romania - EU in 2014 (the previous ones). Within her study, she opted for a structure in three sections: *1 The Political Context of the European Elections; 2. The Parties' Electoral Programs and Messages; 3. Epilogue: Significance of the Elections' Results.* The most challenging and larger division is second.

The Romanians contenders in the race for EP in its 9th legislature were: 13 parties /alliances + 3 independent candidates. Only they fulfilled entirely the legal conditions to be registered in the race. (The Electoral Central Office ascertained that more others 10 parties/alliances and were interested and 4 independents to participate, but they were not validated, because they did not meet the eligibility criteria imposed by the law.) She interpreted the large interest for EP elections 2019 as a pro-EU and pro-democratic interest.

Romania sends MEPs, along with all the elections, 2019 included, in the main EP groups: Right, Left, and the Center-Left. (In terms of the EU political color, the Light Blue (PNL, Popular Movement Party and Democratic Union of Hungarians of Romania), the Red (Social Democrats), the Yellow (ALDE). In the 2019 elections, a new force emerged in Romania: the new alliance, USR+PLUS (part of the Political Family *Renew Europe*, the senior member being the *New Europe* set up in France, by President Macron).

The *political themes of the campaign* investigated by the author after the slogans and Political Manifestos published by the Parties were atypical in Romania. In an EU context, politically concerned with: a) on the "migration crisis", and behind it, the worries on the EU identity for the next generations; b) with the youth unemployment, the Romanian voters gave priority to the other two issues. According to the EU Barometer (*Survey 91.1 of the European Parliament, "Closer to the Citizens, Closer to Ballot the Ballot"*, published in April 2019, available at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/>) quoted by the author, in Romania the main topics were: a) the fight against corruption – underlined by the USR+PLUS and PPE members (Liberal Party, PMP) in and b) the socio-economic issues, (Leftist Parties). (Migration, Youth employment or Terrorism did not capture the voters' attention and did not become priorities in the Parties Manifestos or slogans in the campaign for the EP.)

Similarly, the issues as nationalism, identities, populism were not openly embraced by specific parties in the EU elections 2019, in Romania. (Exception, being UDMR which campaigned with an identitarian slogan: "*Strong Europe, Prosperous*

Transylvania!” covered by the popular theme of the Council of Europe: needs for the minorities protection under the EU umbrella, with a specific EU agency having this role.) Paradoxically, the agenda of the Romanian leftist parties introduced such issues in their agenda. Some Leftist parties included in their discourses, nationalist messages or, appreciations, for Hungarian and Poland’s leaders famous for their anti-migration or nationalistic messages.

The results in Romania confirmed the main-stream parties’ positions in the electoral preferences⁹:

- the Blue color in the EP gained from Romania 14 members, (NLP 10, PMP 2, UDHR 2);
- the Red color 8+2 MEP¹⁰ (8 SD + 1 after Brexit and 2 Pro-Romania),
- the Yellow (8 the Alliance USR+PLUS the key positions of the main competitors.

There were not extremist parties electorally supported by the Romanian voters. (No Far Right Nationalists MEP No Radical left- Communists¹¹; No Eurosceptics and Identitarians were sent by Romanian electorate in the EP in its 9th legislature. It provides, the evidence for a non-fragmented spectrum¹² of the political options in today Romania as well as for a firm pro-European attitude.

In the last section of her study, *Epilogue: the Significance of the Elections’ Results*, Cristina Matiuța concluded on three major features on the 2019 elections for the European Parliament.

She underlines the substantial increase of the Romanian voters’ turnout 51,07%. Compared to the previous rounds of the European elections - 29,47% in 2007; 27,67% in 2009; 32,44% in 2014 – the increasing is substantial. It is for the first time comparable with the average European one.

The results indicate the voters gave grounds – as generally in the EU – to the new parties/alliances against the traditional ones. They also let us learn, that for the

⁹ For the seats for every parties there is to be seen the *Table 14.2* provided by Cristina Matiuța at the page 236.

¹⁰ Christian Terhes elected on the Socialist List, individually quitted the Socialist Political Group and relied to the Conservative and Reformists (Dark Blue color).

¹¹ Such a party is forbidden by law in Romania.

¹² In 2019 for EP, in Romania, we saw also no interest in the Greens and Regionalists group. In Romania, the surprising winner was this alliance USR+PLUS, which replaced in the electorate’s preferences the old liberals, ALDE, members of the EU family with the similar name. It proves a discontent with the previous parties which represented the Romanian citizens, but also a support for the centralist forces pro-European parties.

public the justice and the rule of law matter. (The campaigns of the winners – NLP and USR+PLUS parties/alliance - were focused on the corruption issues.) Nevertheless, we must add to the facts underlined by the author, one more. Romania's President, Klaus Johannis, disputably introduced in the public agenda of the elections, the corruption issue as an institutional message. The President called a referendum simultaneously with the turnout for EU Parliament Elections. It had two questions reducible to one: *“Do you want a corrupt person as your representative in the EU Parliament? That is to force the agenda in such direction.”* On the other hand, it is to see against Professor Matiuța's analysis, that the EP political spectrum preserved its colors Light Blue, Red, Yellow; that the main three groups are the same as in the last legislatures: EPP, S&D, and RE (ex-ALDE); that the parties of Romania that won seats in the EP in the 9th legislature are members in these pro-European groups and they exhaust the entire share of the Romania seats in the EP, 32 of seats.

Professor Matiuța saw in the peculiarities of the 2019 Romanian elections for EP an important European significance: *“The definite victory of the pro-European parties can be seen as a sign of trust in the EU and as the desire to belong to the EU, in the context of sovereignties', nationalist and Eurosceptic messages from the governing coalitions.”*

The Book's Conclusions

The questions that arose around the European elections 2019 cannot be answered by a single volume – the editors concluded.

The merits of the present are obvious. It uses a schematic version focused on the party groups and their role in constructing a United Europe. This simple perspective allows the readers to understand that despite of the centrifugal tendencies represented by the nationalists and populists, the pro-European tide is the major one in the final results.

It is right, the analysis confirmed the national and populist discourse in the electoral campaign and in the political agenda have been a driver. The results of the 2019 elections show the accession of the extreme rights in the EP. The national populist traces contaminated the mainstream parties' agenda. The editors call to not underestimate that the EP in this 9th legislature is the most “fragmented” European Parliament. Such fragmentation may impact the functioning of the EU institutions and on the continuity of the European identity-building process. However,

comparatively, with the alerts of the surveys, the results of the elections indicated strong pro-European trends.

Reflections on the book

Critically thinking, some details on the methodologies chosen are to be added. More clarifications, for the thesis of EP's "fragmentation" would be necessary. A simple comparative view on the charts of the parliamentary groups after the EU elections - from 2009 up to 2019 - does not support the EP's fragmentation thesis. Contrary, they indicate that the number of the parliamentary' groups is constant: 7 plus Non-Affiliated; more than this, quite the same groups – representing the same "political colors/positions" are conserved alongside the most recent three elections, (They are: EPP, S&D; ALDE; Greens & EFA; ECR, GUE/NGL; EFD and Non-Affiliated; the first three main ones – as votes and seats – are the same. Or these main groups decide on the Parliament presidency and vice-Presidencies; on the Commission President, on the EU policies. The volume is highly recommended for studies and future academic and political parties' analysis.