

THE 2014 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS IN ROMANIA. TRANSLATING LOW MEDIA SALIENCE INTO ELECTORAL "SILENCE"?

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Abstract:

European Elections are often perceived as "second-order" elections, thus enjoying lower visibility and turnout than national/presidential elections. According to the specialized literature, this might be due to the fact the EU is usually seen by the electorate (i.e. citizens of the member states) as a far away issue, out of its core area of concern, a phenomenon rooted, for example, into a low degree of europeanization of the national public spheres (Delanty, 2007) or poor European leadership (Habermas, 2012). This paper aims at exploring how European Elections have been approached by the five most popular TV channels in Romania: TVR1, PRIMA TV, Antena 1, Kanal D, and PRO TV. Our paper builds on an extensive content analysis of all of the 3257 prime time news broadcasted by these TV channels between April 25 and May 25 (i.e. during the electoral campaign). Our research focuses on media salience of European Elections, as well as on the key actors present in these news.

Key words: *European Elections, media salience, agenda-setting, priming*

JEL classification: D72

1. INTRODUCTION

Interviewed in April 2013, after giving a lecture on democracy, solidarity, and the European crisis, about the then coming European Elections, Jurgen Habermas answered:

"I'm curious for the 2014 European elections. Will European issues really be addressed in the campaign, rather than national issues with a small European ingredient? The population is faced with tangible problems that could lead to division. This is where populist anti-European parties are reaping benefits. I find that a dangerous trend because the feeling of disconnectedness with the European whole can lead to increasing distance among the member states." (Habermas, 2013)

In J. Habermas' view, the acute crisis that Europe has been facing is, above all, a crisis of legitimacy, a crisis of solidarity, or a crisis of confidence. Political elites are lacking the "decisive leadership" that could make them see that "established boundaries have shifted", which "calls for a new mode of politics capable of transforming mentalities" (2012, x).

Taking place in a moment of overlapping crises and growing euroscepticism, the 2014 European Elections have often been seen as a supreme test that Europe had to pass. Unfortunately, it has not. Apart from the lowest turnout in the history of European Elections, these elections consecrated the public eroding trust in the EU through the high number of seats obtained by the

representatives of eurosceptical parties, such as UKIP in the Great Britain and Le Front National in France.

According to communication scholars, media plays a significant role in shaping citizens' opinions and in influencing their electoral choice. However, in European elections, national media focuses on the national proxies, where the local political context takes the lead. One theoretical explanation for this phenomenon resides in the second-order character of the European Elections, which are often perceived as having low to moderate stakes. Thus, we aim at quantifying how Romanian TV media has approached the European elections in May 2014, in terms of salience and key actors involved. We pose that Romanian media contributes to the second-order character of the European elections, by emphasizing national politics and by favoring a rather local stance. We content analysed all the political news broadcasted by the top five TV channels in Romania during the European elections.

2. THE 2014 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS - SECOND ORDER ELECTIONS

The Lisbon Treaty (2009) has increased the decision-making prerogatives of the European Parliament, assigning it with the responsibility to elect the future President of the European Commission. Thus, the European elections from May 2014, had a much more important stake than the previous European elections. Moreover, according to the Eurobarometers, from 2008 to 2013, the May 2014 elections were undeniably dominated by the shadow of the discontent with the present and future performances of the EU, caused and/or amplified by the economical and socio-political crisis of the Union. The May 2014 European elections encompass multiple, complex communicational dimensions, which are best explained through the lenses of the second-order elections model.

The second order election model implies that voters' perceptions of what is at stake (Reif and Schmitt, 1980) is a strong predictor of the vote and voters' turnout. In line with this model, first-order elections are perceived by citizens to have the highest stakes, whereas second-order elections are usually perceived as having low to moderate stakes. In Western Europe, where the second-order elections model was first developed and successfully tested, first order elections are mainly the general national elections that are organized, directly or indirectly, by the governments that owe the executive power. In these elections voters decide who has the power and what policies should be followed nationally (Schmitt & Van der Eijk, 2007).

European elections are a typical example of second-order elections. According to Schmitt and Van der Eijk (2007), electors use the European elections to express their dissatisfaction with the national government. European elections are second-order because they are dominated by national agendas, parties run on domestic platforms and voters punish or reward parties based on the national political climate (Hobolt et al., 2008). This implies that European elections do not usually revolve around questions concerning the process or the result of European integration or to the membership status of the country, but they usually reflect national traditional political platforms minimizing the differences generated by the integration itself (Hix, 1999). According to Follesdal and Hix (2006, 536), "European Elections are fought on domestic rather than European issues, and parties collude to keep the issue of Europe off the domestic agenda".

In Romania, European elections were soon followed by national elections. Oppenhuis et al. (1996) demonstrated that the temporal succession of the two elections (first order and second-order) have some peculiar implications. Oppenhuis et al. (1996) differentiated between wasted and stability making elections arguing that the degree in which the national political actors consider the elections to be an adequate reflection of their party relative popularity predicts whether the voters will cast a sincere or a strategic vote

3. METHODOLOGY

This research is part of a research endeavour designed to identify and analyse the eurosceptic and europopulist tendencies, in Romania, in the timeframe of the 2014 European elections (2014).

For achieving the proposed objective, the research team has used a methodology consisting of both quantitative methods (content analyses of the online resources and TV news) and qualitative methods (interviews, focus groups and discourse analyses).

Our assumption is that, in general, the main actors in the Romanian public sphere (mass-media, public actors) approach European topics in a national logic and use the European elections as an opportunity for making internal political conflicts more salient and for discussing “hot topics” situated in the very proximity of their electorate.

This paper covers the extensive content analysis of the audio-video outlets in the eve of the European elections (April 25 – May 25). The news outlets that were chosen are: TVR 1, the public television, and the first four private TV channels, according to the audience share (Pro TV, Antena 1, Prima TV and Kanal D). The recordings of the TV news bulletins were provided by the National Council of Audio-visual, to the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration – Faculty of Communication and Public Relations research team. Our measuring and context unit is the television news. The research corpus comprises 3257 news, this meaning all the news broadcasted in prime time by TVR 1, Pro TV, Antena 1, Prima TV and Kanal D between April 25 and May 25.

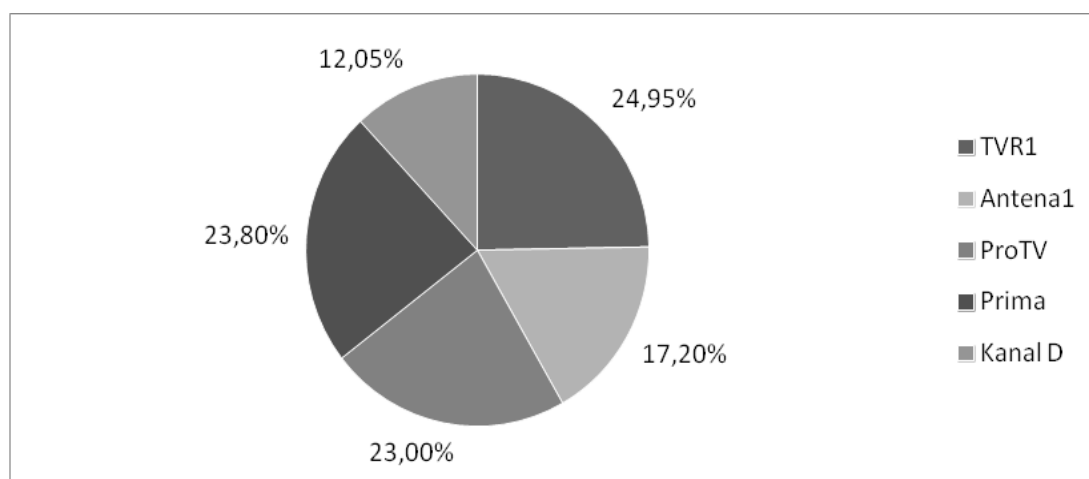


Figure 1. Distribution of news based on the TV channel

The news were coded by eleven students of the College of Communication and Public Relations – NUPSPA. They were trained in several stages concerning the coding methods. We created as well a group of discussions, to cover all the issues concerning the analysis and the grid used. The coding grid was pre-tested; the final version included all the reviews made after the pretesting phase.

The research refers to *the visibility* of the elections for the European Parliament.

We have prepared and used a coding grid organised in four sections:

1. Section A: General information, covering information about: TV channel, place in the news bulletin, topic and duration. Only political news were coded in the following sections.

2. Section B: sub-topics for the news that had as a main topic the European Parliamentary elections.

3. Section C: Actors that were present in the news. We aimed to identify the candidates and representatives of both national and other member states parties.

4. FINDINGS

The most significant number of news were part of "social" and "trivia" news topics. The volume of news with a political topic was covered only by 10.5% within the analysed period. (Fig.2)

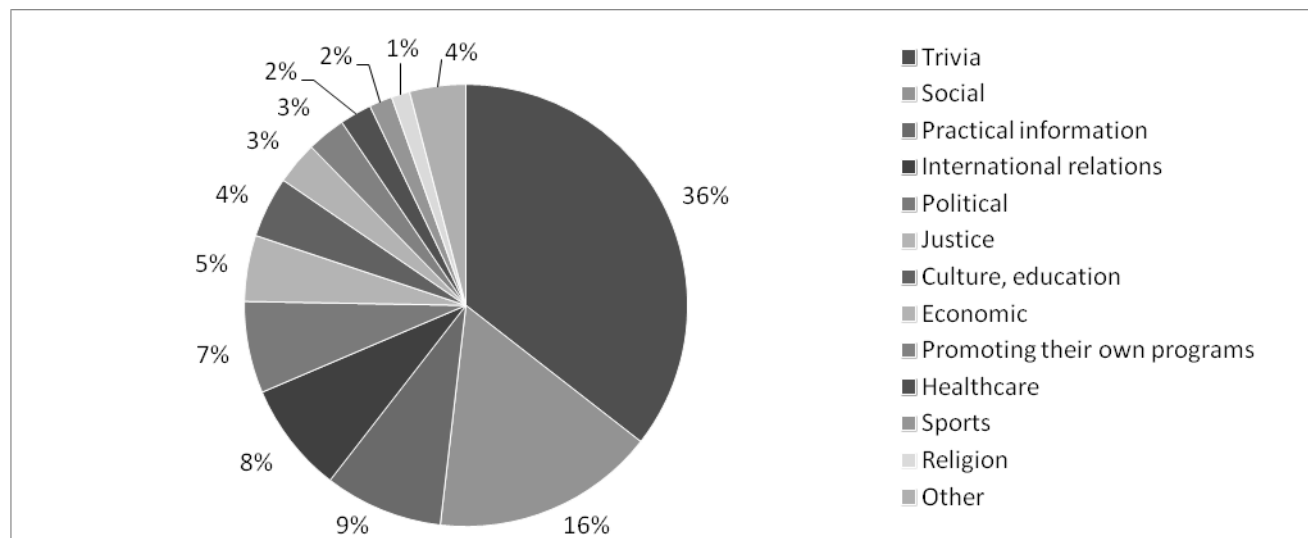


Figure 2. Distribution of news based on the domain

Most political news were broadcasted by the TVR 1 (19%) and the least by Kanal D (1%) (Fig. 3).

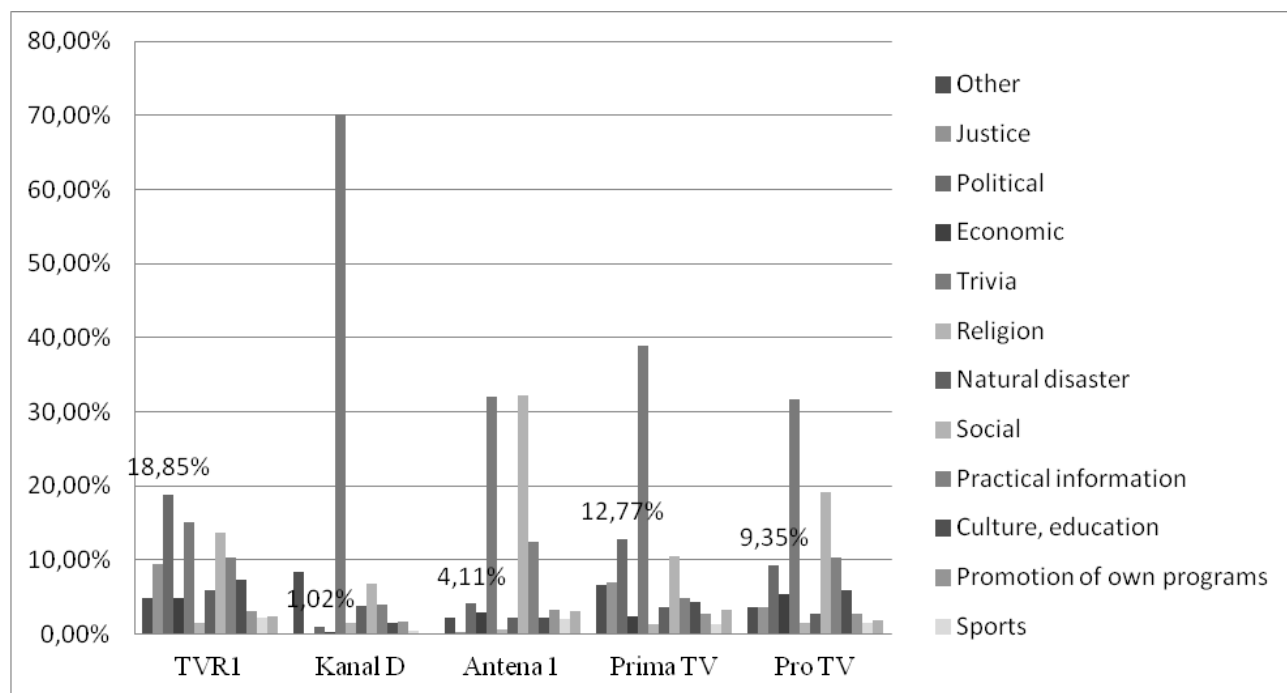


Figure 3. The distribution of news based on the their topic

The political topic had, as we seen, an average coverage of 10.5% (341 items of news) within the analysed period. Televisions, in general, awarded a limited airtime for the political topics, and an even smaller space for the topics of the Euro-Parliamentary campaign and elections.

The most political items of news were broadcasted on TVR 1 (18.8% of the total number news broadcasted by this channel in the analysed period), and the least items by Kanal D (1% of the total of total number of news broadcasted by this channel), Prima TV was also the only one to score above a 10% margin, with 12.5%. Antena 1 had a salience of political news lower than 5%, with a score of 4.1%. (Table 1)

Table 1. Salience of political news

TV Channel	TVR1	Antena1	ProTV	Prima	KanalD
Political news	18.8%	4.1%	9.3%	12.5%	1.0%

More than 50% of news approaching the European elections were positioned in the first part of the journal which gives them a relatively good prominence, taking into account their low visibility. Generally, the presentation of a topic in the first third of the news time ensures a high prominence, the item of news being perceived, symbolically speaking, as important. At the same time, a symbolic prominence is given by placing the item of news among the first 3-4 news, the so called headline, which are presented at the beginning of each journal as being breaking news.

Political news had a relatively balanced distribution among the first third, the second third and the last third portion of the news bulletin, 61% of the analysed news being positioned in the first or in the second third (Fig. 4).

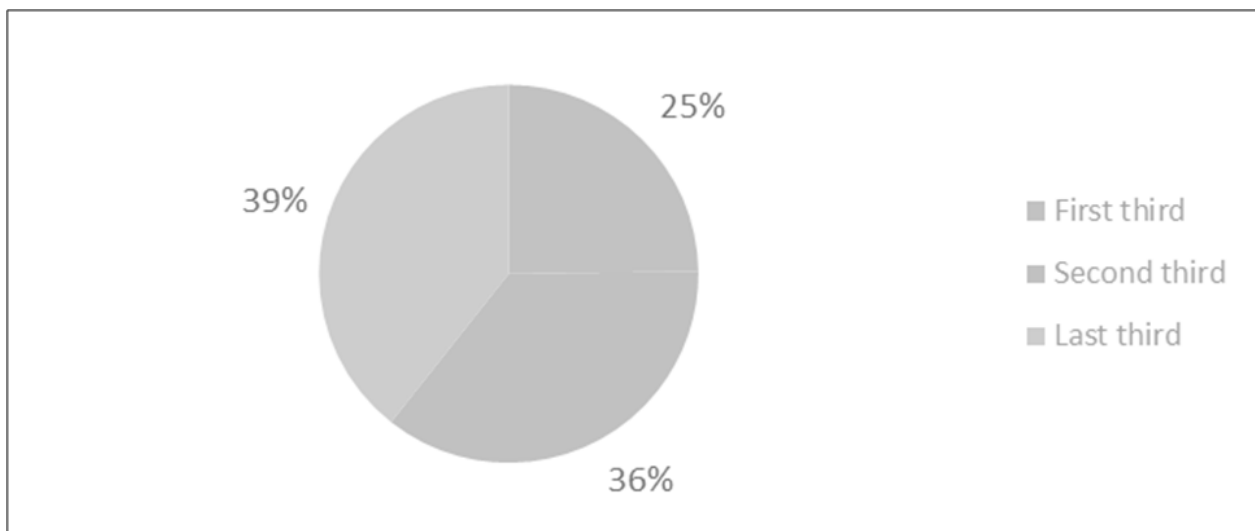


Figure 4. The position in the journal of the political news

TVR1 placed the biggest number of political news in the first third, while PRO TV placed most of them in the last third. (Fig. 5). We noticed that the importance given to the political news is low taking into consideration their position in the journal. TVR 1 distributes almost balanced the political news within the journals while PRO TV keeps them for the end of the journal giving priority to trivia news.

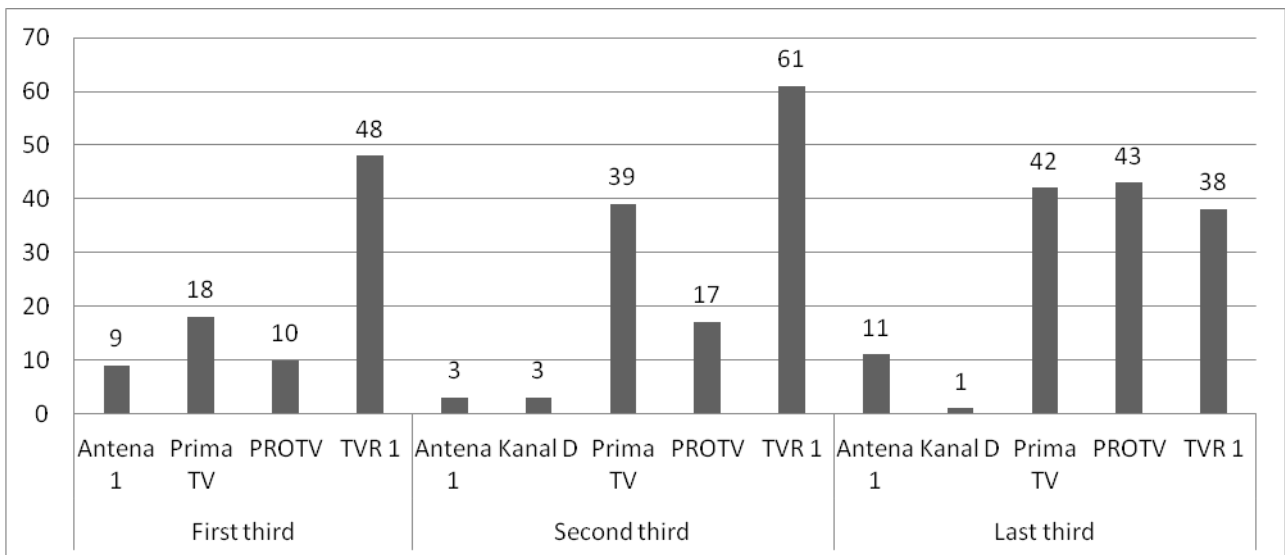


Figure 5. Distribution of political news based on their location and channel

From the total number of political news, only 4% were headline, which account for a very low prominence in the news bulletin. In the same time, most of the political news presented as headline were broadcasted by Prima TV (Fig. 6), which shows a slightly increased prominence of the political domain on this channel. However, such a small number of political news among the key news of the day reflects a lack of interest for this subject.

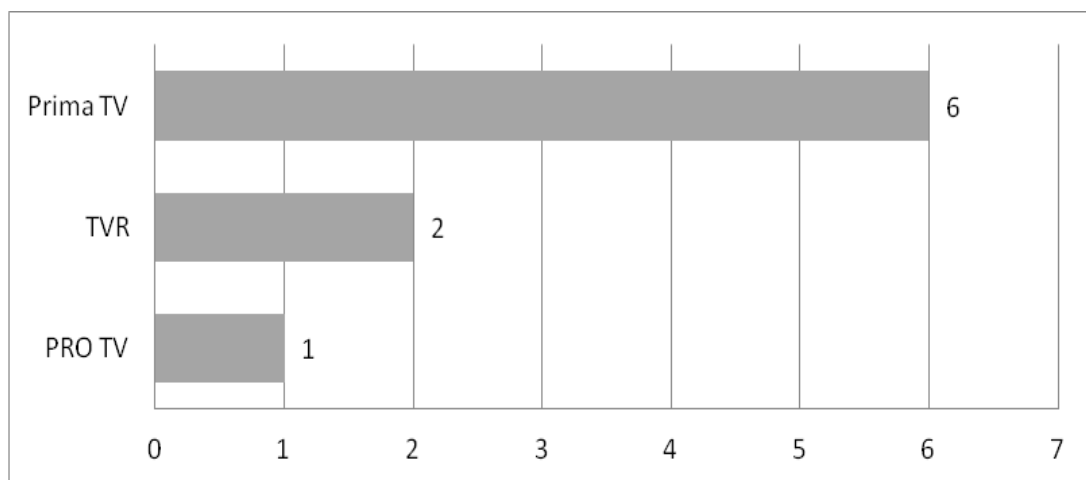


Figure 6. Headline political news

Most of the 341 political news addressed national or international topics, but with no connection to the EU elections (e.g. the crisis in Ukraine). Only 4% of these news focused on European topics, a very low share considering that the electoral campaign for the European Parliament was at its peak; only 1% focused on the relations between Romania and the EU (Fig.7). In other words, the agenda of the news in the electoral campaign for the euro-elections is mainly set on national topics, with an emphasis on the Ukraine crisis (which explains the high number of political news with non-EU topics). Most EU topic news (9 out of 15) have been broadcasted by TVR1.

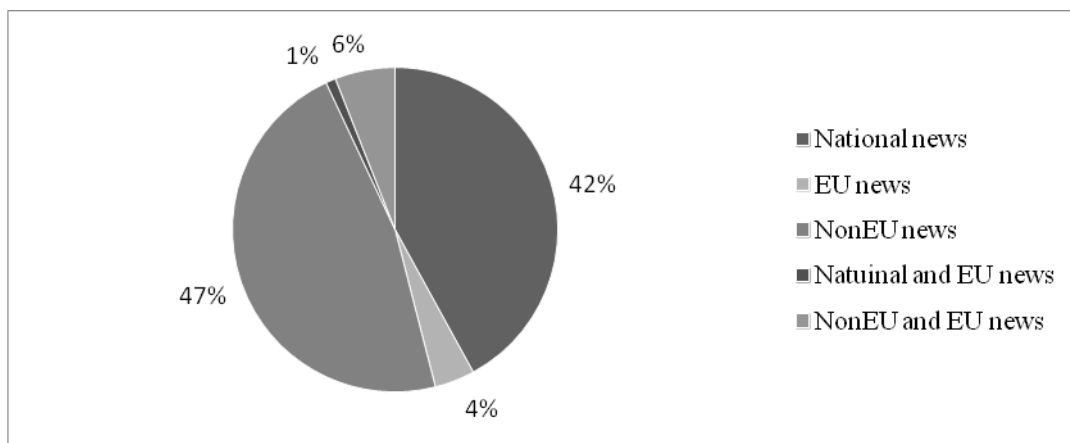


Figure 7. Categories of political news from the reviewed time frame

Out of a total number of 341 political news from the corpus, 63 have addressed the topic of the European Parliament elections, which represents a visibility lower than 2% for the European elections, as compared to the total number of political news that were content analysed. This translates into an average visibility of 18,42% relative to the total number of the analysed political news (Fig. 8).

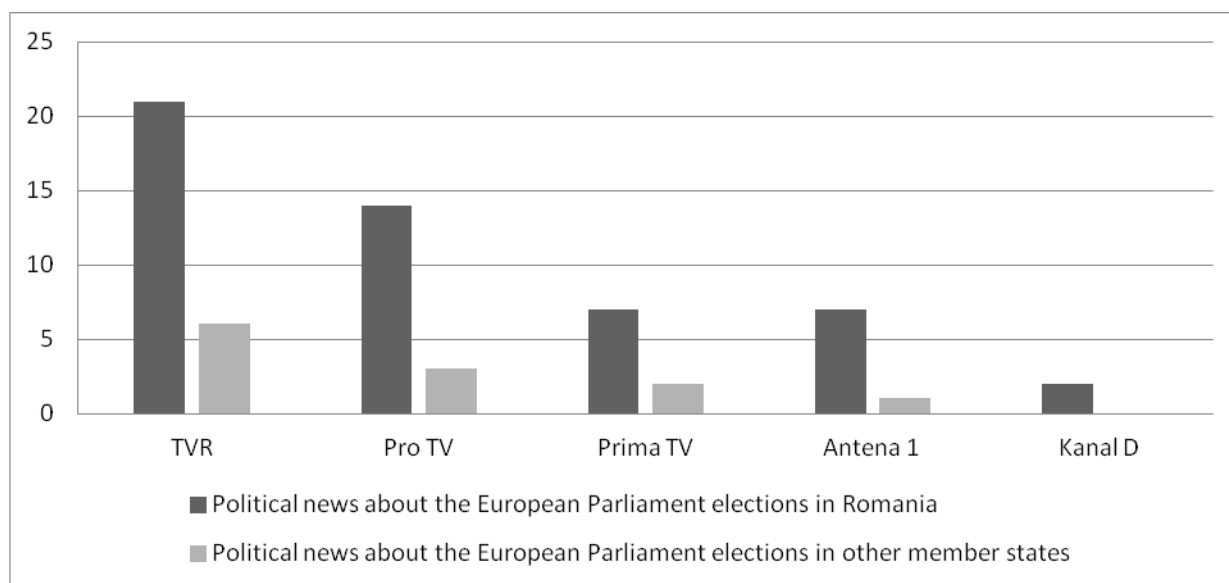


Figure 8. Political news about the European elections

In Figure 9 we outline the visibility of political news in comparison with the visibility of news on euro-election topics from the reviewed time frame. We can distinctly observe that news on euro-election topics are not prominent at all, one might say they are almost invisible.

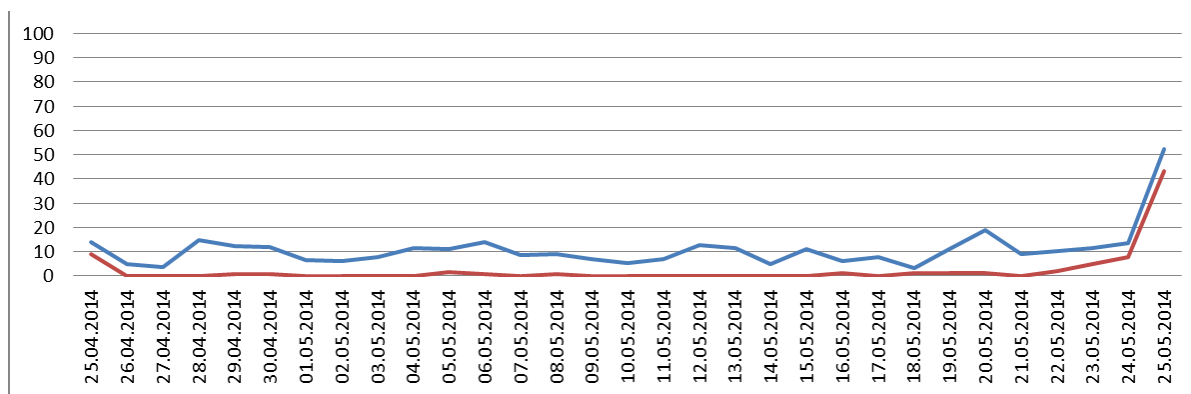


Figure 9. Visibility of political news, a comparison with the visibility of the news on euro-election topics

Most of the news covering the European elections focused on the turnout and the exit polls. The topics have been discussed mainly in a national context, the turnout being the most prominent topic in the euro-election news. Only one piece of news approached the power and duties of a MEP. (Figure 10)

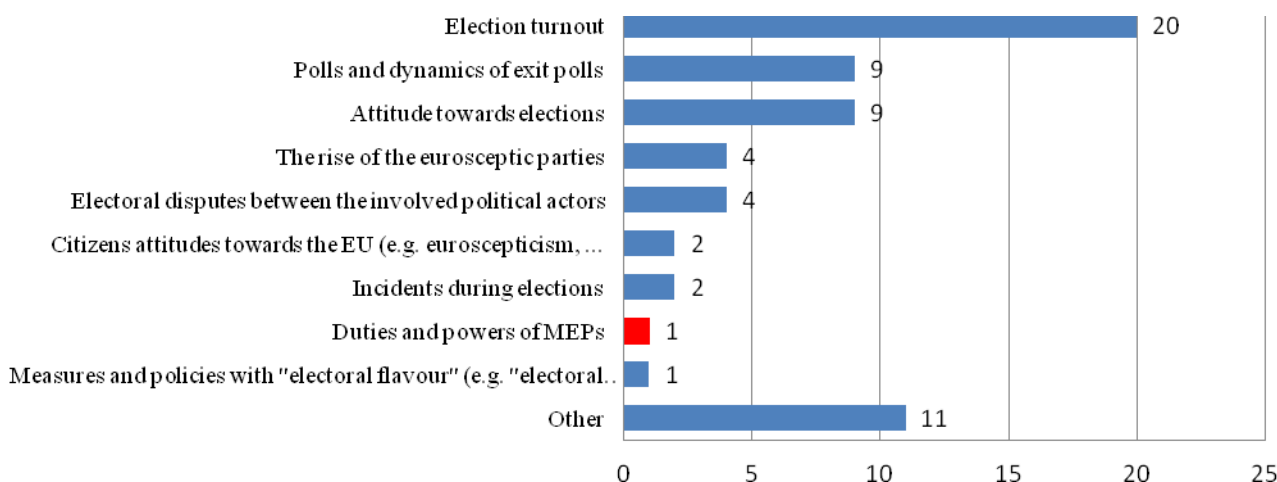


Figure 10. Distribution of news on euro-election topics

The lack of interest for the European elections can be explained by the specific focus on national topics, which appears to be a state of mind not only for Romanians but as well for the national news agencies, confirming, therefore, the theory of second order elections.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The media salience of the 2014 euro-election (about 2%) is well below the European average reported by researchers Schuck, Xezonakis, Elenbaas, Banducci and de Vreese for the euro-elections in 2009, when the average media salience for the 27 member states was calculated at 20,16% (Schuck et. al., 2011, p. 46). The same research team reported for the Romanian TV media, an average visibility of European elections of about 13%. This phenomenon is complemented by a notable erosion of the prominence, of political news in favour of social news and trivia. This is happening, as we have noted, even in an electoral campaign context.

In general, the topic of the euro-election is rather invisible in mass media, the only visibility pikes being identified on the election day, when the TV stations have included in their editorial agenda news on exit polls. Even so these stories had a national stance, focusing on the competition

between the national parties. The TV channel that ensured the highest visibility of the euro-elections topic is TVR1, the Romanian publicly-funded TV station.

In regards to media effects, considering the somewhat slightly higher presence to the polls in Romania in comparison to other member states where the vote is not mandatory, the present research could not identify a relevant correlation between the low media visibility of the European elections, on the one hand, and the decisions of the electorate to go to the polls, on the other hand. (In the 2014 Romanian, Parliamentary, European elections the presence at the polls was 32,44%, while in the 2009 the presence to the polls was 27,76%.)

However, our research partly validates the "second order election" model in what concerns the agenda-setting function of mass-media. Our quantitative analysis revealed that, in the context of the European elections, Romania mainstream media built its editorial agenda in an essentially national logic. Thus, genuinely European topics (e.g. duties and powers of MEPs, the prerogatives of the European Parliament) were not brought forward by the Romanian media and were rather invisible in the electoral campaign. This pinpoints that media lacks interest for political topics, which are not directly related to national proxies. It also indicates a very low visibility of European topics even in an European context, such as the one shaped by European elections.

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