

GREEN DEAL IN FOCUS: REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON ELECTORAL INCOME

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Abstract. *European Green Deal policies and strategies has sparked vivid debate in the European Parliament in the last EP mandate, especially after a row of world-wide and regional crises, such as COVID-19, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and high energy prices. There was registered disagreement in terms of fulfilling the EGD desiderates at a fast pace. If the Greens have lately received less support, the far-right, very vocal when it comes to Green Deal strategies and legislation, seems to be more appalling to voters throughout Europe. The 2024 EP elections were to a discourse level a mirror for all the above-mentioned aspects. Our article analyzes if EGD themes are present in the electoral programs of the main parties and independent EP parties/ independent candidates in Romania and if they are also present in the electoral discourses reflected on the main media platforms during the campaign.*

Keywords: *European Green Deal, EP elections, Romania, electoral discourse.*

Introduction The European Green Deal is a package of policy initiatives, which aims to set the EU on the path to a green transition, with the goal of reaching climate neutrality by 2050. It supports the transformation of the EU into a fair and prosperous society with a modern and competitive economy. It underlines the need for a holistic and cross-sectoral approach in which all relevant policy areas contribute to the ultimate climate-related goal. (European Commission, 2019) The package includes initiatives covering the climate, the environment, energy, transport, industry, agriculture and sustainable finance – all of which are strongly interlinked. To be able to reach these targets on time, the European Commission created a dedicated action plan known as the EU Green Deal which covers a wide range of policy areas. (European Commission, 2019)

The flagship European Green Deal project created a legal commitment for the EU and its member states to become the first net-zero continent by 2050. The Green Deal orchestrated a series of proposals to revise and create new laws aimed at efforts to reduce emissions in all sectors. Action plans on chemicals, the circular economy, transport and agriculture set out a host of ambitious initiatives to ensure that all sectors of society play their part in protecting the planet. (Ciot, 2021:1-2) For example, the 2021 Fit for 55

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Package set a target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030 through legislation, including revised renewable energy directives and the emissions trading system and a new mechanism adjustment of the carbon border. Most of these files have now been agreed and are being transposed at national level and represent a success for Von der Leyen and the Commission (Hilff, 2024).

While mainstream parties still make up more than 60 per cent of the 720-member body, the far right was the election's biggest winner, claiming around a quarter of seats. Far-right parties won the plurality of vote in several member states, including France, Italy, and Austria. This electoral success will give the far-right a chance to influence EU decisions more than ever before. (Hurrellmann, 2024)

Climate change mitigation may be one of the policy areas where the far right's growing clout is most painfully felt. The EGD — a package of measures to turn Europe into “the first climate-neutral continent” by 2050 — will stay in place, but greater far-right influence is likely to result in less ambitious climate policies. (Hurrellmann, 2024)

Following a succession of crises (COVID-19, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and high energy prices), disagreement over the speed of Europe's climate transition is fueling the rise of far-right parties in Europe, at the expense of the Greens, who did well in the 2019 election but are now receiving less support from voters. This has led to the reduction or, in some cases, cancellation of legislative initiatives, especially files impacting the agricultural and chemical sectors. The agricultural sector has been one of the most vocal when it comes to attacking the Green Deal, with farmers' protests causing chaos in Brussels and other European capitals. Meanwhile, falling public funding for the climate transition risks undermining the development of new clean technologies in Europe, which could also threaten the EU's global standing as competitors such as the US and China step up development of solar, battery and hydrogen power, backed by serious funding. (Hurrellmann, 2024)

The next five years will be crucial for determining whether Europe achieves its 2030 climate change targets. Three more or less simultaneous processes will be defining for the future of the EGD in the next 5 years - the negotiations in the European Parliament regarding the priorities of the coalition, the "strategic agenda" that will be adopted in the European Council at the end of the month, and the program of work of the European Commission - which is defined by the end of the year. The new coalition in Parliament is likely to focus on making the transition to an economically viable and socially just net zero economy, reducing energy dependency, promoting green jobs and ensuring competitiveness. (Metalucci, 2024)

In Romania, local elections were held on the same day as the EU vote, which has meant that issues related to Brussels have been left on the back burner, with voters focusing on topics such as the housing crisis and corruption at the municipal level, reports the mentioned publication. The country's two largest parties - the center-left Social Democratic Party and the center-right National Liberal Party - governed together in a grand coalition and ran together in elections at the alliance level. The idea was to ensure stability in Romania's turbulent political climate, with the war in Russia raging near its border, and to fend off the rising far-right party, Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR).

Our study aims at depicting the presence of EGD themes/components in the electoral programs of the Romanian parties or independent candidates and, at the same time, the presence in the electoral discourse, whether on a positive or critical approach.

Research design

The study investigates how Romanian perspectives on the Green Deal influence electoral outcomes of the European election of 2024, uncovering the relationship between national priorities and European approaches. The narratives regarding the negative effects of European Green Deal and their impact on the welfare of the European citizens were differently used in electoral purposes.

We have two main research questions:

- Are EGD components/themes present in the 2024 EP electoral programs of the Romanian parties/candidates?
- Are EGD components/themes present in the 2024 EP electoral discourse of the Romanian candidates?

The methodological approach is qualitative, using the study case and discourse analysis. The findings emphasize the importance of acknowledging differences when promoting the Green Deal. This detailed understanding of Romanian perspectives not only enriches the debates on sustainable development, but also provides valuable insights for political campaigns and policy development in the realm of climate action.

The investigation period is May 10, 2024 (the beginning of the electoral campaign) - June 9, 2024 (the elections for the European Parliament in Romania). During this period we daily accessed the main online journals: Adevărul, Calea Europeană, DC News, Europa Liberă, Gândul, Hotnews, Realitatea, as well as the parties/candidates official webpages.

Findings and Discussions

The PSD-PNL Alliance for the 2024 European Parliament elections had 12 major objectives for the 2024 European Parliament elections (PSD-PNL 2024). A first one relates to attracting funds in Romania. The campaign highlighted that PSD and PNL European representatives negotiated 30 billion EUR allocated to Romania through the PNRR and 1.4 billion EUR through the REPowerEU program, aiming to increase energy independence. A successful negotiation for 2 billion EUR with the European commission will financially support the transition to a green economy, without carbon emissions. In relation to this objective, comes the goal of Romania's energy independence by using European funds and increasing the production of renewable energy, because Romania has all the prerequisites to become a major producer and an important regional energy node. In addition, the coalition promises the most effective measures to protect the environment and the promotion of European directive that increases the penalties for crimes against the environment. (PSD-PNL Alliance, 2024)

Another important aspect in the electoral platform was a profitable agriculture, by increasing the subsidy per hectare. This decision improved the economic performance of every Romanian farmer. In addition, the electoral program underlined the Romanian farmers' protection by rejecting unjustified targets for reducing pesticides and cultivated land. (PSD-PNL Alliance, 2024)

A component of the PSD-PNL program considered the Romanian economy through the promotion of Romanian products in Europe and the protection of the Romanian economy by strengthening the national companies to fight on an equal footing with any external competitor or to face any international challenge. Innovation should be a key-factor for the companies' success, therefore the intention of the PSD-PNL alliance is to support Romanian research and make the necessary steps to double the allocations

from European funds and from the state budget for research and innovation. (PSD-PNL Alliance, 2024)

Other objectives of the platform relate to the important issue of Romania in Schengen – considered a symbol of Romanians equal rights in Europe, the digitization of public services with the help of European funds, the social protection of disadvantaged categories, the support of young people toward a European personal and professional development, especially through ERASMUS, the support of diaspora citizens willing to return in Romania, and the support of the Republic of Moldova by advocating for the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU, as soon as it meets the conditions required by the European Commission. (PSD-PNL Alliance, 2024)

We observe that the PSD-PNL Alliance has a Green Deal component in the electoral program. Let us further observe the presence of this component in the electoral discourses of the candidates for the European Parliament.

In the case of the PSD-PNL Alliance, the topics regarding the EGD were mainly supported by Mihai Tudose (PSD), who opened the list of the coalition for the European Parliament. A HotNews editorial on May 20, 2024 cites Tudose's social media posts showing possible concerns for the future of Green Deal together with the hope for new ways and strategies in its implementation:

“The war in Ukraine risks turning the Green Deal into a sci-fi fad, light years from reality. But as a war means not only losses but also opportunities, the green transition quickly gained a new momentum: REPowerEU”. (HotNews, 2024)

Tudose's intention of supporting Green Deal is also presented by Free Europe Romania, which cite him as follows: “supporting Romanian industry in the decarbonization process and industries that produce clean energy” (Manolache, 2024) and “it is necessary to activate and finance more than one billion euros from the Innovation Fund for support regarding decarbonization at the level of Romanian companies” (Manolache, 2024). Also belonging to the PSD-PNL Alliance, Vasile Dîncu, (PSD) discusses “the European funds to support the smart economy and start-ups working with high technologies” (Manolache, 2024) and promises that “Transylvania will become Romania's locomotive in Europe, and Cluj a European smart city” (Manolache, 2024). In the same political alliance, Siegfried Mureșan (PNL), without directly mentioning Green Deal, shows support towards related objectives: “We are ready, with our candidates, to offer solutions on the topics that will be serious, difficult in the coming years: citizen safety, security, economy, increasing living standards, industry development, jobs, European funds that are safe for Romania until 2027”. (Bădulescu, 2024)

Other candidates for the European Parliament in 2024 come from another political alliance, The United Right Alliance, made of USR, PMP and the Force of the Right, with a set of 12 priorities in their political vision of Romania as a Member State: Romania as part of Schengen; economic stability through the transition to the EUR currency, prosperity through industrialization, trade and innovation; the continuation of state reform and anti-corruption fight; the protection of the rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights, as opposed actions to the PSD-PNL Alliance, health and education to European standards; the attraction of EU funds for the country's modernisation; financing the agriculture and protecting the rural areas inhabitants and activities; the support of the Republic of Moldova in the EU accession; Romania contribution to EU reform, the defence of the Romanian workers throughout EU, a clean environment and European armies better integrated in NATO. The clean environment priority states:

The need to phase out highly polluting energy sources and transition to less or no polluting energy sources is an unquestionable necessity. This transition can no longer be postponed and should be carried out at a balanced pace, considering the specifics of each state. Investments in the production of renewable energy are the key for Romanian citizens to benefit from energy at affordable prices. At the same time, it is necessary to make the energy transition considering the national energy resources, including production capacities in the band - nuclear and natural gas, green transition fuel. (Dreapta unită, 2024)

Number 11 on the list of 12 priorities, the clean environment or any other EGD topic appeared during our research period only in one statement made by Cristina Prună, as a signal for the necessity of change in the field of energy production and stocking:

“We see the effects of the acute lack of investment in the energy system. Renewable projects advance at snail's pace, and prosumers have become the enemies of the people at ANRE. The energy system needs storage, but it is almost completely lacking. There are legislative solutions, some of which I submitted and promoted myself, but Mr. Burduja has other concerns. This while the market is blocked, waiting for the European money that comes hardly to none, because of the bureaucracy of the governors. And so energy production stagnates and, as such, prices skyrocket”.(USR Editorial, 2024)

The Alliance for the Romanians' Union (AUR) comes with a large proposal for Romania's presence in EP, structured on 11 chapters: Romania in relation to EU, reduced poverty and social assistance, education and youth's future, access to EU funds, health services for all citizens, agriculture and rural development, the development of Romanian companies, culture and identity, defense and external relations, tourism, and environment and energy. In terms of Green Deal themes, the platform mentions in the last chapter the importance of environment, sustainability and protection of biodiversity for Europe to a legislative level in 2019-2024. AUR expresses its support for a green circular economy, at the same time with the opposition to the tendency coming from Brussels that tries to destroy the country's energetic autonomy and to the “so-called ‘environmental’ measure that has aim impoverishment of the middle class, limitation of the right to free movement of citizens and the imposition of new aberrant rules”. (AUR, 2024) The energetic independence appears to be supported by the exploitation of all local resources, without any expressed preference for green energy, some even in contradiction with the EGD desiderates:

“Romania is a country rich in natural resources, which are valuable not only for their own economy, but also for the European Union. These unbeatable resources such as the Black Sea, the Danube, the forests, the waters geothermal, coal, oil fields and many more others must be exploited and processed by companies Romanians to ensure the strategic independence of this country”. (AUR, 2024)

AUR also proposes in the same chapter a responsible exploitation of resources. The chapter dedicated to the Romanian companies also includes the promise of supporting the funding with priority of solar and photovoltaic panels. (AUR, 2024)

To a discourse level, any reference related to EGD is in fact virulently critical to the green policies and considered in total contradiction with the national interests. Cristian Terheș, AUR's candidate attacks Green Deal in his discourse, considering it a utopia and questioning alternative renewable energy sources:

“My position on the issue of gas emissions is that you cannot destroy society and the way we live today, based on such a utopia [green energy]. If you look, they want to stop wood stoves. You can no longer heat yourself with gas because we pay more. We

asked what the solution was, and they told us 'you heat yourself with electricity'. Very good, but what do you produce electricity on? 'On renewable energy'. Ok, how is that energy produced? 'Well, through wind and solar'. Very good, but what do you do if it's not windy or sunny outside? Now they want to put nuclear energy in a register where it is not green". (Vasile, 2024).

The same candidate to EP declares that green energy is a disguise for other practices and, in the process of applying it, Romania is forced by a coalition of the EU Commission President and USA to renounce to its natural resources:

"And not just for that! But also because mining in Romania is disappearing, at the behest of the EU and globalist bureaucrats! The EU wants so-called green energy, which is not green at all, to replace traditional sources such as coal. Thus, Romania is obliged by Ursula von der Leyen, and the "coalition" of the united states, to close its thermal power plants and mines". (Realitatea, 2024)

Another AUR candidate, Claudiu Târziu, also criticizes the steps Romania has taken toward meeting the EU objectives, including EGD in this regard, considering such steps are in the disinterest of Romanian economy and social measures. Therefore, his discourse is not only against EGD, but mostly against EU desiderates:

"Romania is the first to comply with all the measures coming from Brussels against the national interest: Green Deal, PNRR, Pact on migration... The results are measured in disastrous figures for the economy and in degrees on the social earthquake scale". (AUR Editorial, 2024)

To the same pole against the EGD comes the discourse of the S.O.S. Party candidate Diana Șoșoacă. The party's program regarding the elections for the European Parliament includes four chapters: measures to directly improve the lives of all Romanians, the defense of rights and freedoms, the achievement of peace and prosperity, as well as the defense of tradition and faith. (Partidul S.O.S., 2024) The party's objectives are in contradiction to the EGD objectives, as follows: "The S.O.S. Party Romania defends the right of Romanians to use firewood and gas plants, and we will reopen the coal mines". (Partidul S.O.S., 2024)

The Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) had the following objectives for the EP elections program: the support of the EU rules for the protection of minorities; EU funds accession; EU contribution to new jobs for youth in Romania, not abroad; the support of the principle of the EU minimum wage; the decision-making process in the management of migration within the competence of the Member States; EU support for the Romanian agriculture and not for the export of Ukrainian cereals; more support for small and medium enterprises; less bureaucracy; Bruxelles revision of the protected species directive as soon as possible and the removal of the strict protection status of the brown bear; stronger actions against extremism; Europe relevant in the world; a fair not forced ecological transition (point 10 in the program):

"The EU should adapt its ambitious climate goals to the economic potential and social tolerance of the member states. The EU leadership wants to impose regulations that are not only inconsistent with reality, but also impose huge burdens on citizens, on farmers, increase their costs, and reduce their competitiveness. Eliminating internal combustion engines and forced electrification of mobility are major mistakes. We, on the other hand, are in favor of technological diversification: synthetic fuels, hybrid technologies, with strong support for research and development. The introduction of a European carbon tax will destroy the competitiveness of the industry and drive away investors. Instead, we support high-tech factories, sustainable industrial production and

exports that create good-paying jobs. Abandoning nuclear power and natural gas threatens energy security, instead we support new sustainable technologies where nuclear power and natural gas can continue to play a long-term role". (UDMR, 2024)

Although the green component appears in the electoral program, we did not find any UDMR statement EGD related during the research period.

An independent candidate, Nicolae Ștefănuță, currently a Vice-President of the European Parliament, presented to the electorate a program with the following objectives: youth housing, free public transportation, a percentage of 30 of green spaces in each district, free mental therapy (up to 30 therapy sessions), 100% green energy, 6% of Romanian GDP allocated to education, a guaranteed right to abortion for women, stopping discrimination against LGBTQIA+ individuals and couples, forbidding dangerous pesticides, and forbidding cutting trees in protected areas. (Ștefănuță, 2024)

To a discourse level during the campaign, Nicolae Ștefănuță acknowledges two directions in his political activities, the green component and progressivism. He states that his priorities in the European parliament are "The environment, obviously. Continuation of the Green Deal, which is both an environmental and an economic policy". (Dinu, 2024) He also identified the necessity and extension of EGD components in areas beyond environment:

"I don't like to be the only green MEP in Romania, I would like to be more, but someone has to start somewhere, seriously, assumedly. (...) The environment and the quality of life are concerns for Romanians. People don't want to get sick from bad air, they don't want their children to get sick, to develop all kinds of ailments. They don't like eating food with pesticides and using bad public transport. Romanians care about all these elements and that is why these issues are part of my program, which is a purely green program after all". (Dinu, 2024)

A party who has no representatives in the European Parliament after the elections in REPER. Still, we identify EGD as significant for the party, by presenting on the official site the guide *Money for the Romanian Energy: A Comprehensive Guide to Funding in the Energy Field for the Authorities, the Private Environment and Consumers*, which was achieved at the initiative of REPER member and EP Ramona Strugariu. Still, to a discourse level during the research period, we did not find anything EGD-related on the platform we observed. (Renew Europe, 2023)

Conclusions

The new European Parliament and Commission will play a pivotal role in shaping the future of climate policy. The newly elected Parliament shifted further to the right, but this does not mean that climate policy will be removed from the agenda. Right-wing and populist parties gained strong votes, particularly across the bigger member states Germany, France, and Austria, while Green parties have seen the biggest losses. However, even with a smaller Greens mandate, Europe's climate agenda will likely stay on course as climate impacts remain high on voters' minds. The Conservatives are among the biggest winners of the elections and are supporters of the EU Green Deal, paving the way for some continuity for the next five years.

These policies are unlikely to be withdrawn. But the new post-election setup raises questions about the future of the EU's wider environmental agenda. Even as the continent faces record heat, drought and floods, and polls show most Europeans favor doing more to tackle climate change, analysts warn that several parties are using climate policy as a political scapegoat, blaming it for higher energy prices and rising living costs.

The upcoming negotiations on the next European Commission president and her/his policy agenda will be decisive for Europe's capacity to address the severe impacts and risks of climate change for Europe and EU's global climate leadership.

The big takeaway from the European Parliament elections: the center has held, but a trend of far-right gains continues. This means that Europe's fight against climate change can continue, but it faces a more complicated political landscape at a time when big decisions need to be made. A fair and environmentally friendly industrial/competitive agreement still seems within reach in the negotiations for the future European Commission. However, EU leaders will face a major test in securing sufficient funding to make it a reality.

In general, the key thesis about the European parliamentary elections, based on the analyses, is that these elections are not necessarily about European issues, as we might imagine. Because everyone says there are European Parliament elections, we are thinking about what will happen to the Green Deal, what will happen to the European defense industry, how Europe will position itself vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine, how we will try to increase competitiveness. Most of the time, in practice, these European elections are what are called second-order elections. Voters use this opportunity to send a signal as to whether they are satisfied with the election in office. In Romania, people do not vote on what Ursula von der Leyen has done in the last five years or on the future of the European project, but if, for example, they are satisfied with what PSD and PNL have done in the last years in government.

The European elections in Romania were overshadowed by the overlap with local elections. 52% of Romanians voted in the European Parliament elections. The percentage has increased with each election round since 2016, when 39% voted. From our country, 19 MEPs from the PSD-PNL Coalition (48.7%), six from AUR (15%), three from the United Right (8.6%), two from SOS (5%), two from UDMR (6.5%) and the independent candidate Nicu Ștefănuță (3.1%). (BEC, 2024)

The juxtaposition of the local elections and EP elections cast shadows on the EP dedicated discourse, most of the time the EP candidates endorsing the local candidates by mentioning funds accession and local development. Still, because Romanians are much more interested in local elections, there was also an increased presence in the European Parliament elections. In conclusion, the merger has also reduced the little interest in the European Parliament elections, but at the same time it makes us have a higher turnout including in the European Parliament elections.

As answers to our research questions, we conclude that all the candidates present programs which include EGD components, both in terms of support and rejection of the EU Green Deal objectives. At the same time, even if present in the programs, the EGD related statements are rarely present in the electoral statements.

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