



Identity vs Alterity? Constructing Europe as Alterity during the Elections for the European Parliament in 2014¹

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Abstract

The paper explores the way European Union is being constructed during the elections for the European Parliament in 2014 in Romania by addressing the relationship identity-alterity. It proposes an analysis of the election posters released online by the political parties in Romania, considering a double dimension: text and visual elements. The different ways of constructing Europe have in common a very interesting way of referring to the European Union: by all means it is pictured as the other.

Keywords: identity, alterity, national identity, European identity

1. Introduction

The overwhelming body of research on identity focuses much on its fluidity (Mead, 1934; Jenkins, 2004; Leerssen, 2006; Wintle, 2009) and constant changes, by pointing the elements that influence it, thus referring to religion, group, gender, age, region and nationality (Castells, 2004). Seen as a multiple and continuously changing self, identity envisages the relation that individual has with groups in terms of ethnicity and nationalism throughout history (Hall, 1996; Wodak et al., 2009). Still, scholars argue that it should be noted the significant difference between identity as category of practice and identity of category of analysis (Brubaker, 2004) and the absence of this distinction would generate a confusion and theoretical contradictions. Despite this solid debate on identity, the paper acknowledges identity as a construction process and looks at it through its relation with otherness. By doing so, the paper is somehow grounded on phenomenology and imagology and considers the inner connection between image and identity (Wintle, 2006; Leerssen, 1991, 2007). Extensive work has focused on the European identity construction by inquiring the cultural heritage of Europe, the common myths and symbols and the elements that might generate social cohesion (Wintle, 1996, 2005; Delanty, 2005; Bruter, 2005). Thus, the discussion of a European identity has emerged from the research on individual and national identity, and has set it up as a transnational identity (Herrmann et al., 2004, Bruter, 2005, Guibernau, 2011). Considering the evidence from previous research that have pointed out that the national topics prevail over the European topics, the paper analyses the 2014 Romanian election posters for the European parliament, by inquiring the picture of Europe and by

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investigating the recurrence of the national and EU-related topics conveyed in the posters. The aim is to decipher the representation of Europe spread-out by the election posters and to see whether Europe is pictured as the other.

2. Identity and alterity

The first theoretical assumptions on identity can be rooted in the philosophical perspective of sameness (Plato, 1989; Aristotle, 1965; Heidegger, 1969), which encompasses both the ontological and the process approach of identity. By stating that one is and is not (Plato, 1989, VI, 137b), one, and implicitly oneself, belong to both the historical and archetypal time. Still, Heraclitus and his statement about the impossibility of man's stepping twice into the same river, admits the thesis of becoming and thus of identity as a process. Later on, scholars have emphasized on the inner relationship between identity and alterity, and have considered identity as a process of defining oneself through otherness (Odermatt, 1991; Lévinas, 1999; Afloroaei, 1994; Iacob, 1996), and have referred to them as processes throughout history (van Alphen, 1991; Castells, 2004, 2010; Wodak et al, 2009) and with a significant cultural dimension (Leerssen, 2006; Wintle, 2009; Smith, 2008). The dynamics of identity and alterity reveal a permanent interaction between oneself and other, thus conveying the idea that they cannot exist separated (Lévinas, 1999; Neculau, 2002). Consequently, one referring to identity, should consider the substantial relations described by myself/non-self; myself/others and me-us/others (Daba-Buzoianu, 2013). These relations depict the construction of identity throughout the interactions with the other and the influence that they have among alterity. Among its interaction with alterity, identity is connected with image, as self-perception influences the image of the other. Therefore, by adhering to the phenomenology of identity, alterity and image, this paper considers both the issue of oneself becoming other and of the other becoming oneself (Lévinas, 1999). Previous studies that focus on identity construction, reveal that there is a strong connection between the social context and its perceived meaning by the individual in the development of one's identity (Jenkins, 2004; McGinty, 2006; Daba-Buzoianu et al., 2014). Research show that although identity changes in order to help the individual to adapt to new social contexts, we encounter a negotiation of self-levels in order to avoid the dissolution of self (Jenkins, 2004; Todorov, 1994).

The historical phenomenological perspective of identity acknowledges its permanent reference to alterity (Afloroaei, 1994; Iacob, 1996). To this we may add the fact that other is evaluated according to the collective identity (Spiering, 1996; Iacob, 1996), which influences the acceptance and rejection. This is why the perceived differences between self and other are the key element of the identity process. Let us not forget that through their permanent interaction, identity and alterity are constantly changing (Ferréol, 1996). Compared with the borders of two countries, identity and alterity act as two boundaries that influence each other, where a permanent exchange takes place (Ahrweiller, 1985).

2.1. Europe on the margins of national identities

It is not surprisingly that the discussion about Europe in terms of European identity is nevertheless grounded in the debates on national identities. Evidence show that people are referring to aspects of their social and economic life through a domestic perspective. Eurobarometer and other surveys constantly show that it is difficult to discuss about a clearly defined European identity. Rather, studies show that a better approach would be to address the matter of national identities in cross cultural contexts and to see the result of multicultural experiences in Europe. By doing so, we would refer to Europe through a national and transnational perspective, which generates new problems in terms of identity and alterity. By addressing the social perspective of identity, scholars have come to inquire its connection to the national ties and implicitly national identity (Wodak et al., 2009). All human identities are socially based (Jenkins, 2004) and are built through sameness and differentiation. By looking into the social perspective of identity, we see that it somehow leaves behind the perspective of sameness in favor of a socio-psychological construction which is connected with the strong beliefs of people and their past (Wintle, 2009). Scholars question the sameness criterion due to the constant changes that individual faces, which leads to the idea

that identity may never be referred to as something static (Mead, 1967, Wodak et al., 2009). By linking the social identity with the beliefs, historical past and territory, scholars inquire the national identity as a complex and multidimensional construction which is grounded in the individual's self-discovery (Smith, 1991). Unlike cultural identity or other types of identity, national identity refers to a territory and land, which is transformed into a symbolic space.

Contrary to Western Europe, where the civic model prevails in the model of the nation, in Eastern Europe we encounter the vernacular culture, where language and culture are constructing the ethnic model (ibid.). The ethnic dimension is inner to the issue of national identity (Durkheim, 1995), although scholars argue that by identifying the nation with state, ethnicity and history seem to lose importance (Georgiu, 1997), although there is an inner relationship between ethnic and political unity (Gelner, 1997). All these generate a controversial debate on the matter of European identity, as the political and economic construction of the European Union does not deal with the issue of cultural and ethnic identities. The multitude of cultural identities in Europe generates serious difficulties in shaping a certain European feeling and implicitly a European identity. Scholars suggest an interesting distinction between European idea and European identity:

“we acknowledge that ideas of Europe and European identity are often confused with each other; analytically they can perhaps be separated as ways in which Europe might be organized (ideas) and European self-perceptions of their collective characteristics, nature and strengths (identity)” (Spiering & Wintle, 2011, 2).

Nevertheless, we must underline the fact that Europe overlaps with the European Union, thus being restraining and generating different forms of alterity in Europe (Guibernau, 2011; Bruter, 2005).

3. Method

The paper addresses the issue of Europe as alterity during the elections for the European Parliament in 2014 in Romania. In doing so, the paper analyses the posters released during the electoral campaign by the political parties running for the European Parliament. The unit of the analysis is represented by the posters of the Romanian political parties addressing the vote for the European Parliament in 2014. During the electoral campaign, we have encountered online a number of thirteen posters, which the current paper analyses in order to investigate the way Europe is being constructed and its connection to national elements. The paper analyses the text, images, the possible comparisons, and the symbols used in the elections papers, in order to see how Europe is being pictured and whether its image comprises a connection with the national elements. Therefore, the paper does not intend to address the visual communication, but rather to investigate if Europe is considered to part of the domestic perspective, or it is pictured as a form of alterity. In this respect, the analysis looked into the relationship between Europe and European Parliament, on one hand, and the domestic and national issues, on the other hand.

The election posters considered for this analysis have been released online by five Romanian political parties, from which four are members of the Romanian Parliament. From all the parties, only one represents the socialists – PSD (Social Democratic Party), whereas PNL (National Liberal Party), PDL (Democratic Liberal Party), PMP (Popular Movement party), and PNȚCD (National Christian Democratic Party) belong to the centre-right political organizations.

4. Discussion

The Romanian election posters released online during the campaign for the European Parliament pointed out that the national elements have a significant role in political communication. In this respect, from the thirteen posters that the current papers analyses, all of them have used elements that are direct or indirect connected with Romania,

emphasizing a national perspective. The messages spread out by the posters are significantly addressing national and domestic issues and seldom refer to European ones. Moreover, the European Parliament is not mentioned at all in the text messages and the word euro-deputy is rarely used. The national topics overlook the European and EU-related ones, as the political parties have pictured Europe as a distinct entity and not as a natural construction. In other terms, Europe is being presented as a political construction, where Romanian politicians go either to defend the home country or to help it. Therefore, the representation of Europe swings from hostile to providential, remaining in all cases the other.

4.1. Defending Romania in Europe

In a very interesting way, Europe is quite far from being pictured as a union of which Romania is part of, as there are no elements that point on the relationship between Romania and European Union. Rather, the election posters construct Europe as the other and foster the idea that Romania is only formally part of the European Union. In this respect, the election posters belonging to the PNȚCD clearly stating we defend your Romania and the ones belonging to PDL saying we defend your rights in Europe therefore emphasize on a defensive perspective. By addressing the idea of defending Romania in Europe, it seems obviously that Europe is pictures as enemy, as a political and economic entity that represents a certain threat to Romania. This way of picturing Europe as the other is actually using a particular form of othering: the other is seen as enemy of the group. Consequently, the message promotes a conflicting reality structured by the fact that political parties ask for the vote and promote the European project in order to defend Romania. We are facing an interesting relationship between self and other, as Romania (referred to as the self) enters into a political, economic and administrative relationship with the other not in order to develop together projects, but in order to prevent a possible negative effect against Romania.

Mostly interesting, the election posters belonging to PNȚCD, did not use any word, symbol or icon that might refer to European Union. Instead, the posters use the picture of the Romanian map, by showing its boundaries and two significant elements: the Christian cross and a historical land. In add, in the text there are three words that induce the idea of national defense and not the idea of partnership, cooperation or union: faith, law and dignity. This latter word, dignity enforces a conflictual relationship and fosters the idea of Europe as alterity.

By pointing out the accomplishments of its candidates, PNL uses the word fight, in order to underline the efforts that they have done for Romania as euro-deputies. It is worth mentioning that the European Parliament is not mentioned, instead there are used the words euro-deputy and euro-champion. All the accomplishments are being presented in relation to domestic issues, as the messages show how much they have changed positively the daily life of the Romanians.

4.2. Europe as the providential other

Besides the negative representation as a possible enemy enhanced by the message we defend your Romania, Europe is also pictured as a powerful entity. Europe in every home belonging to PDL significantly swifts towards a positive representation of the European project, by revealing the benefits of the relationship Romania-Europe. Through both text and image, the election posters enhance protection. The hands pictured in the posters line up a house and generate the idea of a European household. Europe in every home refers to a Europe as a providential other, as the other that Romania was looking for. Europe in every home is also connected with the fight against poverty and corruption, thus meaning that Europe may have a protective role and is rightfulness. Through colors used in the posters, it is obviously the intention to endorse the candidates with the same powers that the European Union is considered to have. Europe and the name of the candidates are written using the same blue color, and thus meaning that there is a solid relationship between them.

The posters represent the European project not only as an entity capable of saving the country, but it also seems to empower Romania, as PSD states Romania powerful in Europe. In some way, we might say that this is a pragmatic representation of the other, Europe being pictured as a helpful entity.

4.3. Europe between national ties

The analysis shows that EU-related topics are not present on the agenda of the political campaign in Romania. The role of the European Parliament, the role of its members and the European project are not addressed in the election posters in Romania. Europe, at large, is pictured as a distinct organization, whose interests differ from Romania's. PSD uses the collocation proud to be Romanian, and implicitly addresses a national perspective. In all its election posters, PSD uses national symbols, folk elements and pictures that are representative for the Romanian homeland. In doing so, it pictures a Europe caught in between national ties, a Europe that has to deal with a strong cultural identity. The message released by this party reveals that Romania goes to Brussels with a solid national and cultural identity. Proud of being Romanian means that the national identity prevails and that it is not the case to speak about being European.

Conclusion

Unlike the Western European campaign, which is dominated by messages that refer to EU measures or to domestic issues generated by EU activities, the Romanian campaign refers mainly to national related topics and is less interested in issues regarding the European Union. The national perspective is enforced by national symbols and folk elements. Moreover, the messages released through the election posters picture a Europe that is both dangerous and protective, being constructed both as an enemy and as a providential other. In all cases, the relation between self and other, largely described at the beginning of the study, can be easily discovered in the election posters that the paper analyses. Europe is in no doubt constructed as the other, and in all cases it seems to remain far from the cultural and national identity. The idea of defending Romania in Europe and the idea of having Europe in all homes describe Europe away and distant.

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