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Lessons from Election Marketing During the Pandemic. The Case of Pro Romania Party

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Abstract: The article addresses the issue of electoral marketing communication in the context of the medical crises caused by SARS-COV-2 virus. The declaration of pandemic has led, in all countries, to the adoption of restrictive measures aimed at limiting the spread of the virus. These measures have affected all spheres of economic and political life, including the electoral field. In this context, the political parties had to adapt to the multiple constraints imposed on the election campaign, but also to the tense context generated by the expectations and dissatisfaction of voters. The paper presents the context (legislative, political, medical) in which the parliamentary elections in Romania took place in 2020 and analyzes in detail the situation of one of the parties which, although credited with safe chances of entering parliament, failed to obtain minimum threshold in elections. The research is based on the case study method and addresses the entire electoral process of the analyzed party, from the elaboration of the campaign strategy, to the concrete aspects of implementation. Particular attention is paid to the means of electoral communication used and which in this campaign, tipped the scale in favour of the online, indicating the trend towards which electoral communication is heading in the case of Romania as well.

Keywords: *electoral marketing; online communication; pandemic; parliamentary election; Pro Romania.*

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I. Introduction

The year 2020 is marked, from the very beginning, by the first signs of the spread of the SARS-COV-2 virus in different regions of China and then around the world. In Romania, the first case was confirmed in February 2020, and on March 16, 2020, the President of Romania issues Decree no. 195 on the establishment of a State of Emergency for 30 days. This was followed by the extension of this State of Emergency for another 30 days (starting with April 15, 2020), then the establishment of the Alert State (from May 15, 2020) by Government decision 24/14 May 2020, renewed every 30 days. The adoption of these measures has led to the limitation of the exercise of individual rights, from the right to free movement to that related to freedom of assembly. As a result, the organization of the elections and implicitly, of the electoral campaign was carried out in special conditions, totally different from any previous democratic experience in Romania and was a real challenge both for the institutions and for the political forces involved.

The organization of the election campaign called for the approach of new or even revolutionary strategies for the message of the candidates to effectively reach the target audience in the short time allotted and respecting the restrictions imposed.

In this context, we propose a realistic analysis of the electoral process for the 2020 parliamentary elections in Romania, given the challenges posed by the pandemic, the existing political context, population expectations and economic development in the country under the auspices of restrictions imposed on SARS-CoV-2 virus isolation. The analysis will be customized by presenting in the form of a case study the situation of Pro Romania party for which the entire electoral process will be followed, from the elaboration of the campaign strategy to the evaluation and explanation of the obtained results.

II. FRAMEWORK FOR THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN FOR THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN ROMANIA IN 2020

The main legislative regulations based on which the electoral campaign for the 2020 parliamentary elections were organized are Law no. 288/2015 on voting by mail, Law no. 208/2015 on the election of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies and the functioning of the Permanent Electoral Authority, Law no. 91/2020 and Law no. 202/2020 on amending or supplementing normative acts in electoral matters. The parliamentary elections took place on December 6, 2020, and the electoral campaign lasted 30 days, from November 6, 2020, until December 5, 2020, at 7:00.

As for the restrictions imposed due to the pandemic, they have greatly limited the conduct of the election campaign, from the program of travel of campaign teams in the territory, led by candidates registered in the electoral competition, to the style of electoral materials developed both centrally and locally. Once the traffic and contact restrictions were established, the actors involved had to adapt their promotion strategies so as to comply with the rules established in the Alert State and to protect themselves from Covid-19 virus infection or its spread through election campaign actions.

In the case of meetings held indoors, the limit of participants was set at a maximum of 20, and in the case of those held in open spaces - at a maximum of 50. Regarding actions on the street, it was imposed to limit the number of people travelling in group to maximum 6, and in the case of door-to-door actions – limiting the composition of teams to a maximum of 2 people.

The joint order signed by the Ministers of Health and Home Affairs established a set of mandatory public health measures for the safe of all events, gatherings, or actions specific to the election campaign for parliamentary elections. These measures referred to general precautions applied in all circumstances (wearing a protective mask by all participants, actions to inform participants about the rules of access to events, separate inflows/outflows, rules on disinfection of surfaces/objects and collection of masks/disposable gloves, triage of persons) and additional requirements applicable to rallies and elections actions: minimum distance between participants in events, including those held on the street or from door to door (1 meter), duration of rallies (maximum 2 hours indoors), the use of self-service points for the distribution of electoral propaganda materials, respectively their placement in the mailbox (Ministry of Healts and Ministry of Internal Affairs of Romania, 2020).

III. IMPLICATIONS OF THE MEDICAL CRISIS ON ELECTORAL MARKETING

Due to the restrictions imposed on the organization of the election campaign, the conduct of classical-style electoral actions was much limited or difficult, especially in term of events and physical meeting with the electorate, ***the candidates had to move much of their communication in the virtual environment***, choosing to invest in paid promotion on social networks (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) and/or using the Google Ads platform for placing static or dynamic visuals.

Thus, the electoral campaign for the 2020 parliamentary elections underwent an important transformation, through an abrupt digitalization, the travels in the rounded territory and the distribution of printed electoral

materials knowing an appreciable limitation and being replaced with a greater concern for the image in the online environment. Following the financial analysis of the electoral campaign for the parliamentary elections, a greater emphasis was noticed by the participating political parties for online promotion than the classic form through televisions. Compared to other previous campaigns, online has won the battle with television and radio. According to an Expert Forum study 34% of total campaign spending was allocated by parties to the online environment, 20% to radio, press and TV promotion, 25% to prints (brochures, flyers) and 7% to election posters. The largest share for online campaign was registered in the case of USR-PLUS party, respectively 60% of the total funds used by this party in the campaign (Bian, 2021).

Another form of "remote" promotion was the sending of materials through the postal services, thus avoiding the involvement of campaign teams in the actual distribution, a way to avoid the public disgrace estimated to manifest itself if the campaign were carried out in the classical manner. This method was used by small parties or those that failed to gather enough activists to involve them in "door-to-door" promotion, to cover/compensate for these shortcoming campaign leaders preferring to pay for postal services.

Another feature of this campaign refers to the ***presence of topics related to the medical crisis in the electoral discourse.*** The most debated topics in the public space, both during the pre-campaign period and during the election campaign were the following:

- The opportunity to organize parliamentary elections in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic;
- The efficiency with which the Ministry of Health administered the medical crisis caused by SARS-COV2 virus;
- Lack of measures to actively prevent the spread of the virus, due to the Government's refusal to organize mass testing campaigns;
- Direct acquisitions made by the Government during the State of Emergency.

The only party that did not use the data for attack on opponent during the election campaign was, as usual, the one in power, the National Liberal Party. Even his relatives, USR-PLUS, violently and unreservedly addressed the hot topic of the pandemic, the crises of available places at ATI (Romanian abbreviation for Anaesthesia and intensive care unit), the lack of effective campaigns to educate the population about the signs of infection and the conduct to be followed in the first days of at the onset of the first symptoms.

Strict issues such as solutions to the economic crisis, the allocation of European funds, the pensions increase, the situation of corruption and justice

reforms, as well as other important issues have been downgraded. The public agenda was almost entirely occupied with pandemic management, image of full hospitals, vaccination or other coronavirus topics.

IV. THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE 2020 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS AND THE POSITION OF THE PRO ROMANIA PARTY

Any analysis of the political context in the run-up to a new election must start from the results of the previous exercise, which led to the establishment of parliamentary groups, alliances and the government. In Romania, the Parliament is bicameral, the members of the Senate and of the Chamber of Deputies being elected for 4 years, mandates that can be extended in case of war, siege, State of Emergency, according to art.63 of Constitution (Romanian Constitution, 2003).

The result of the 2016 parliamentary elections is presented in Table 1 (Digi24, 2016), and following this score, PSD formed a governing coalition with ALDE. The misunderstandings within the ruling parties, at the level of political alliance, but also the pressure of the opposition regarding certain governmental measures generated the frequent change of government. Thus, the government of Sorin Grindeanu (2016-2017) was replaced by the government of Mihai Tudose (June 2017 – January 2018), followed by the government of Viorica Dăncilă (January 2018 – October 2019). By dismissing this last government, PSD loses the government, being replaced by PNL, with the government of Ludovic Orban.

Table 1. Distribution of parliamentary mandates following the 2016 elections

Party	Chamber of Deputies		Senate	
	Number	%	Number	%
PSD (Social Democratic Party)	154	45.47%	67	45.67%
PNL(National Liberal Party)	69	20.04%	30	20.41%
USR (Save Romania Union)	30	8.87%	13	8.92%
ALDE (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats Party)	20	5.62%	9	6.00%
PMP (People's Movement Party)	18	5.34%	8	5.65%
UDMR (Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania)	21	6.18%	9	6.24%
Minorities	17			

Note: we kept the abbreviations used in Romanian as they appear in all studies and articles in the political field

Source: Author's own conception

The Pro Romania party was created in 2017 at the initiative of the politician Victor Ponta, by separating from the PSD group. Daniel Constantin, the former co-chairman of the ALDE party, was also associated with the new party leadership. The party received legal personality in February 2018 and positioned itself as a progressive, centre-left party, an alternative to the Social Democratic Party.

For the 2020 parliamentary elections, 35 parties registered, of which 11 newly established (did not exist in the previous election): the PRO Romania Party (which has meanwhile concluded a merger protocol with ALDE), the Freedom, Unity and solidarity Party (PLUS) (in alliance with USR, but which merged with this party), the Maniu-Mihalache National Peasant Party, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians, the Romanian Nation Party, the New Right Party, the National Renaissance Alliance, etc.

The number of candidates registered in the competition for 2020 parliamentary elections increased to 7,136, compared to the 6,476 candidates in 2016; among them, a number of 4,659 candidates for the Chamber of Deputies and 2,477 for the Senate. Of these, 42 were independent candidates.

Regarding the positioning of the parties in the voting preferences of the voters, we can say that the year 2020 was marked by significant fluctuations. Thus, according to a study conducted by INSCOP Research through the CATI method (telephone interviews), between May 15-20, 2020, at the request of Pro Romania, made public on May 25, 2020, PNL led with 38.5% in the intention to vote for elections parliamentary, followed by PSD with 25.8%, USR-PLUS Alliance (10.2%), PRO Romania (9.4%) and UDMR (6%). ALDE (3.6%) and PMP (3.5%) were below the electoral threshold, and 0.7% of respondents intended to vote for another party. The sample volume was 1,132 persons and the maximum permissible error was ± 2.9%. It should be noted that his survey was conducted only 2 months after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of the measures taken by the Government at that time having no echo in the answers provided by the electorate (INSCOP, 2020).

Four months later, in September 2020, the barometer study conducted by IMAS Marketing and Surveys commissioned by the radio station Europa FM indicates the evolution of voting intention and the situation two months before the elections: 34.7% PNL (upward trend compared to August), 19.6% PSD (decreasing trend compared to the previous month), 17%, USR-PLUS Alliance, 9.5% Pro Romania, 5.35% UDMR. PMP (4.5%) and ALDE (3%) were mentioned below the electoral threshold, while 22.3% of respondents say they are undecided. (Europa FM, 2020). Therefore, according to pre-

election polls, the Pro Romania party has a significant and relatively constant percentage of electoral preferences.

V. THE CAMPAIGN STRATEGY OF THE PRO ROMANIA PARTY

The campaign strategy adopted by Pro Romania was based on the results of the polls on voting intentions as highlighted above, as well as other studies made public. One of the ***political decisions*** was to merge with the ALDE party which, according to estimates, had no chance of exceeding the electoral threshold for entering Parliament. The merger was announced on October 8, 2020, the new party having the name of PRO Romania Social Liberal party (for which we will continue to use the name with which it was also presented in the media, respectively Pro Romania).

Although many analysts considered this decision inspired, it generated dissatisfaction from several leaders of both parties, because it caused some previous calculations related to (theoretically) eligible places to be overturned; PRO Romania had to cede to its new colleagues in the ALDE chain some positions on the lists of candidates. Thus, some cracks were formed between the "authentic" members and the newcomers less than 2 months before the election date.

The Pro Romania party registered in the electoral campaign with a complete number of candidates to cover all available seats and thus obtain the right to have representatives in the polling stations. About 20% of the candidacies were handed over to the newcomers from ALDE. The division of candidacies by constituencies began with Bucharest, where the two former prime ministers, Victor Ponta and Călin Popescu Tăriceanu, opened the lists for the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. Furthermore, priority on the PRO Romania lists for each county had the parliamentarians of both parties, followed by an internal top of the political activists, other experiences politicians and who have held public positions with visibility in the past, local businessmen, teachers, doctors, journalists, but also young people at the first political experience.

Following the merger, ***the objective*** of PRO Romania was to reach a score of at least 8% and to attract the supporters of both parties under the same umbrella. Also, PRO Romania aimed to form a Post-Electoral Alliance with PSD, UDMR and minority parliamentarians, in order to form a government to get Romania out of the crisis caused by Covid-19 pandemic.

The main slogan of the election campaign was "***VICTOR PONTA. An anti-crisis Prime Minister***", elected and promoted in order to attract old fans of the PRO Romania leader, who appreciated the period when he was

Prime Minister (2012 – 2015). It results as a ***target audience*** approximately the same PSD electorate. The fact that the governments led by him (Ponta 1, Ponta 2, Ponta 3) took Romania out of the economic crisis started in 2009, after the fall of Lehman Brothers, replenished the budget revenues and pensions previously cut by the Boc Government (PNL), made him to be considered qualified to get the country out of the economic crisis caused, this time, by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Naturally linked to the target audience, the priority categories in the party's communication were represented by the "former victims" of the Boc Government, employees of state institutions, health, education, whose incomes were reduced by 25% to 40% in 2010, the pensioners whose pensions were cut during the same period, but also the victims of the Orban Government, which, through the uninspired measures from the pandemic period, thwarted many efforts of the private environment to survive in an uncertain economic environment.

Regarding the ***electoral themes***, the opposition parties tried to capture the attention of the electorate more through criticisms brought to those who ruled in recent years, than through concrete solutions to daily or systemic problems of Romania. The big parties, PNL and PSD did everything possible to dominate the public discourse and to hide from the public opinion the players with potential both from the right, USR-PLUS, and from the left, PRO Romania. The Liberals tried to avoid direct collisions with USR-PLUS, in order not to give it more importance in the eyes of the electorate and not to advertise it indirectly. The same thing happened between PSD and PRO Romania parties that, at least theoretically, competed for the votes of the same category of electorate. The similar game of PSD and PNL was designed primarily for activists and supporters, in which both parties tried to radicalize, in order to exclude small parties in the struggle for power.

The liberals, led by Ludovic Orban, dedicated their campaign to a message focused on Romania's development. They organized dozens of inaugurations and cuts of ribbons, for parts of the belt or highway. The PSD led by Marcel Ciolacu tried to change its image from a party accused of corruption to a party of professionals. The Social Democrats exploited the liberals' hesitations and mistakes in managing the pandemic and attacked the government, including for the controversial decision to hold elections on December 6. In addition, the party included numerous doctors on the candidate lists. Measures of a social nature proposed for disadvantaged categories (pensioners, children) are added, these being strong arguments in the PSD campaign.

Pro Romania came into election campaign with only five themes: minimum crisis income, economic crisis support (for Romanian companies), a national testing program, pandemic education, respect for military workers. The decision to limit the electoral themes was taken so that, in the short period available and taking into account the resources much inferior to the senior parties, these main themes and the solutions assumed by the party can reach the target audience.

VI. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CAMPAIGN AND THE MEDIA USED

For Pro Romania party, the first week of campaign was the peak, in terms of organizing advertising production and scheduling the next actions. Once the composition of the candidate lists was established, the production of advertising materials began, elaborated according to a common model decided at national level and customized for each constituency, through the contribution of the campaign teams. There were two major categories of materials – those for printing and those for online environment – priority in the production process had those for printing which follow a longer path from concept to the finished product and its distribution to the display sites (Pro Romania, 2020).

The National Permanent Bureau of Pro Romania took the decision to organize the election campaign in the spirit of measures to prevent infection with the Covid-19 virus, allocating an increased percentage for online advertising and media presence, to the detriment of classic posters, leaflets, banners, promotional products, T-shirts, caps, vests, etc.

The campaign communication was based on the media and the online environment, with priority given to participation in electoral promotion programs of central and local television stations, radio stations, or the creation of promotional materials on news sites. To a greater extent than the classic channels, this time the promotion through social media and paid advertisements was used. Over 30% of the total available funds was allocated only for making JPEG graphics and GIF animations, MPEG videos, for placement on election promotion sites, ***social networks*** and the positioning system of advertising materials offered by ***Google Ads***.

One of the disadvantages of the online campaign was the emphasis on promoting the image of central leaders, so that the branches did not benefit from graphics models and materials ready to use for county organizations. Each PRO Romania subsidiary had to develop these materials on its own, often resorting to "piracy" of those made at headquarters, just because some editable were not delivered in the territory.

Another form of communication using the social networks Facebook and YouTube, was represented by the LIVE Campaign, by making LIVE broadcasts by the leader Victor Ponta on the official page on the PRO Romania page and on all pages of the county party organization and also the official You Tube channel. This broadcasting system, provided by social networks, was one of the peculiarities of the PRO Romania campaign, compared to other political parties. The leader of the party was not the only one who organized such LIVE sessions on social media. Adrian Ţuţuianu, vice-president of PRO Romania, former Minister of Defence, also used the Facebook network for LIVE sessions with his fans in which he answered all the questions asked in real time in the comments section of the broadcast. Unfortunately, compared to another newly established party, the LIVE broadcast strategy did not generate so much "engagement" in the case of PRO Romania, despite the celebrity of its leaders. The star of this election campaign was the Alliance for the Union of Romanians, whose leaders managed a much more efficient mobilization of Internet users, with whose help they had a major impact on the online environment that attracted and a surprise in the election results.

Another category of expenses was allocated for the payment of TV appearances of party leaders, both nationally and for local television stations. In the end, the classic form of promotion was not ignored, but the resources allocated this time for the elaboration, production and distribution of electoral materials on paper -posters, leaflets, hangers, personalized clothing with party logo – was much less than in the campaigns organized a year before, for the European elections and the presidential elections.

The printed materials used by Pro Romania were the following: Electoral poster with candidates for the Chamber of deputies; Electoral poster with candidates for the Senate; Poster "Vote for PRO Romania on December 6!"; brochure with 8 pages with the presentation of the candidates and the main measures proposed by PRO Romania since the first day of governing.

The materials were handed out by the teams divided into areas of competence. Each county organization made a plan of trips by days and localities to be covered. In most cases, teams of 12 people were established who reached 4 rural localities per day, having as objective the execution of the display on the panels specially arranged by the town halls and the distribution of leaflets from door to door. In the urban localities, these actions were carried out repeatedly, in the sense that in the four week of the campaign the teams made two visits on each street or building staircase. During the middle two weeks of the election campaign, the teams of volunteers/activists of the party went through the localities to distribute all the materials received from the

printing house. Due to the pandemic, field actions were considerably limited, instead of 10 hours a day/7 days a week, as it would have been under normal conditions, with the campaign program allocated 2-3 hours on weekdays and 4-5 hours on weekends.

In the case of materials intended for the online environment, once the campaigns with objectives, target audience and total budget were set, images were published daily from field visits or from TV stations to which candidates were invited for debates.

Presence in the press and television was assured by organizing press conferences at party headquarters, sending press release to publications and scheduling candidates for attendance at election promotion shows hosted by central and local television stations. The press conferences organized in the party headquarters were hybrid, having, depending on the size of the available space, between 20% and 50% of physically present journalists, the rest watching the events through broadcasts made through the Zoom platform and intervening at the end with questions to interlocutors through the sound system.

As in the case of the order on the lists of candidates, the party's parliamentarians had priority in communication, due to their communication experience. It should be noted that the greatest presence in the media space was assured by the party president, Victor Ponta, both during the campaign and in the pre-campaign period. Also, the promotional materials developed for both online and print had the party president as a central figure, guarantor of the proposed solutions and supporter of the other candidates, by joining his image to each candidate in the constituencies in the county. All the shows in which the party president, Victor Ponta, was present were taken over in real time and broadcast live on the Pro Romania network, online by the Facebook pages, Instagram and official You Tube channel, generating an organic impact of up to 1,000,000 of spectators per transmission. Other leaders present in the TV studios were: Călin Popescu Tăriceanu, Corina Crețu, Adrian Țuțuianu, Mircea Titus Dobre, Otilia Sava, Silviu Predoiu, Cătălin Nechifor, Gabriela Podaşcă.

The distribution of ***electoral promotion expenses*** of the PRO Romania party can be analyzed based on the detailed report of electoral revenues and expenditures, rectified, prepared as a result of the electoral campaign for the Senate and Chamber of Deputies on December 6, 2020 (according to art. 47 para. (3) of Law 334/2006), submitted to the Permanent Electoral Authority, a synthetic situation being highlighted in table 2.

Table 2. Pro Romania's electoral promotion spending structure (2020 parliamentary elections)

	Expenditure objective	**Total amount (RON)**	**Percentage of total budget**
1.	Expenditure on production and distribution of election ***propaganda materials on radio, television and in the print media***	5,374,170.29	19.2%
2.	Expenditures for the production and distribution of ***online election propaganda materials***	8,940,162.53	31.9%
3.	Expenditures for sociological research	221,138.05	0.8%
4.	Expenses for ***election posters***	446,855.94	1.6%
5.	Expenditure on ***brochures, leaflets and other printed election propaganda materials***	11,093,343.59	39.5%
6.	Expenditure on renting space and equipment and protocol Expenses for organization of political, economic, cultural or social events, transport and accommodation, legal assistance and other consultancy	1,958,149.83	7%
7.	Expenses for bank fees	6,860.41	0.02%
	TOTAL	28,040,680.64	

Source: Author's own conception

Going further with the analysis of expenditures, we can isolate the amounts dedicated to the production and dissemination of election promotion materials from the rest of the expenditures. This results in a total of expenditures dedicated to electoral marketing of 25,854,530 RON, divided as can be seen in Figure 1 (Pro Romania, 2021).

The structure of promotion expenditures has undergone a drastic change in favour of those for presence in the media and online environment, compared to the election campaigns organized only a year ago. This was due both to the growing interest of the population for online information sources and to the fears related to the physical contact required in the case of the classic organization of the campaign, with organized meetings and the sharing of printed materials door-to-door.

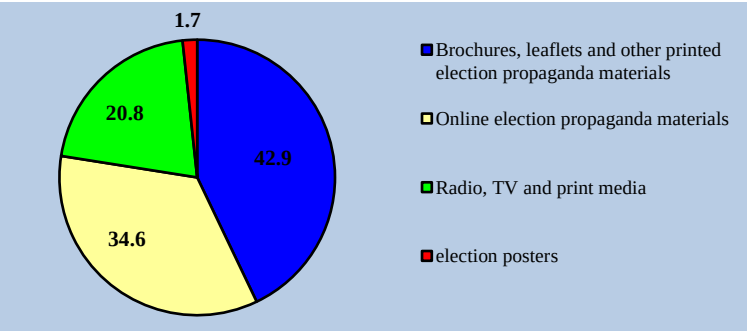

Figure 1 – Distribution of the Pro Romania campaign budget by communication media (%)
Source: Author's own conception

It should be noted that all parties had a communication approach in which they tried to minimize direct contact with voters, and electoral event were reduced, even eliminated. Candidates have moved to television sets and have invested more resources than ever in online, social networking, dedicated applications for mobile phone operating systems, email marketing. According to the financial analysis of the expenditures made by the political parties in the 2020 campaign, the ratio between the expenditures on online communication, on the one hand, and the communication through television, radio and written press, on the other hand was 1.7/1 (Andrei, 2021). This trend of going online will be maintained in the future (Toader, 2017), even if there will be no threat of viruses. We must not ignore that the press has also changed its form, being present online, and the purchase of printed press materials has been replaced by online subscriptions.

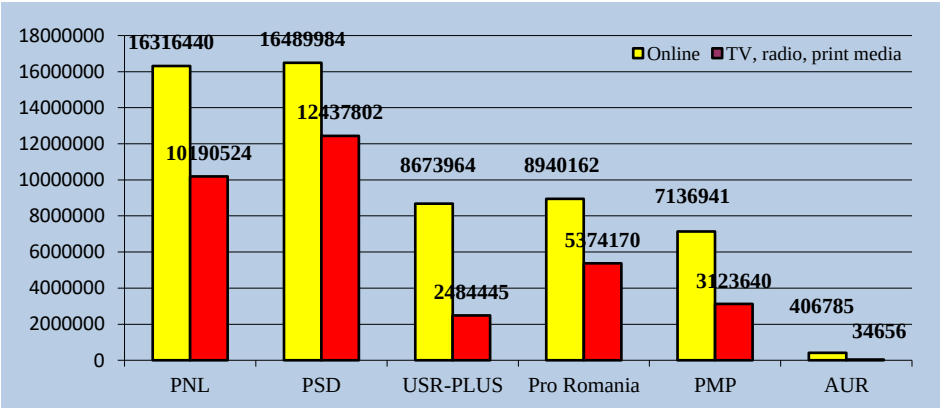

Figure 2 – Amounts paid by the main parties in the electoral campaign for the 2020 parliamentary elections, by media (RON) (Andrei C., 2021)

VII. RESULTS OBTAINED AFTER THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Following the centralization of votes in the parliamentary elections of December 6, 2020, only five political parties exceeded the minimum threshold of 5% to enter parliament – Table 3 (Digi24, 2020). After counting all the votes, two parties previously present in the Romanian Parliament did not cross the electoral threshold: PMP and PRO Romania. They obtained for the Chamber of Deputies 4.82% and 4.09%, respectively for the Senate 4.93% and 4.13%. The big surprise of this election was the Alliance for the Union of Romanian (AUR), a party consisting of merger of several nationalist parties, which obtained a fabulous score of 9.8% in the Chamber of Deputies and 9.17% in the Senate.

This was followed by the distribution of seats for the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, by reallocating the votes of all parties and independent candidates who did not cross the electoral threshold.

Table 3. Final results on the December 2020 parliamentary elections

Party	Chamber of Deputies		Senate	
	Number	%	Number	%
PSD	1,705,777	28.90%	1,732,276	29.32%
PNL	1,486,401	25.19%	1,511,225	25.58%
USR-PLUS	906,962	15.37%	936,862	15.86%
AUR	535,828	9.08%	541,935	9.17%
UDMR	339,030	5.74%	348,262	5.89%
PMP	284,501	4.82%	291,484	4.93%
PRO Romania	241,267	4.09%	244,225	4.13%
PER	65,807	1.12%	78,654	1.33%
PPU-SL	59,465	1.01%	70,536	1.19%
PRM	32,654	0.55%	38,474	0.65%

Source: Author's own conception

Starting from the final results of the parliamentary elections of December 6, 2020, we can consider the electoral campaign of the PRO Romania party an inadequate or insufficient one to convince electorate.

Given the very low turnout in the voting process, of only 5,793.135 votes validly cast, compared to 7,052,966 in the previous election in 2016, we can consider a failure from the point of view of organization. We are dealing with the lowest presence in the last 31 years (**31.84%)**, revealing both the low interest of the population and the fear of infection with the SARS-COV2 virus, due to the fact that the period of two months before the election date coincided with the steepest increase in the number of new infections.

The final results do not coincide with sociological research prior to the election date and because of the organizational peculiarities of the parties and the ability to mobilize party activists and supporters. In the case of PSD and PNL, the large number of members and their seniority in politics made the two major parties have a strategic advantage over the newer parties, with inexperienced members in the electoral battles. On the other hand, USR-PLUS recorded an unexpected score, even after the fall of "Dragnea regime" from whose attempts to change the penal codes the party had the highest image gains, organizing the largest street protests in the last decade. The fourth party to enter Parliament was AUR, a party resulting from merger of several nationalist parties and which had a niche campaign with populist accents. Finally, the UDMR score remains stable, predictable, almost secure. The Hungarian communities in Romania manage an exemplary mobilization, even in the context of a health threat, their goal always being to ensure a stable majority, in exchange for some strategic advantages obtained through parliamentary representation.

In order to understand the reasons for the failure of PRO Romania in this election, we need first of all an analysis of the election campaign, the decisions taken before and during it, the direct communication of party leaders, candidates in eligible seats, etc. (Table 4).

Table 4. SWOT analysis of the electoral campaign of the Pro Romania party (2020 parliamentary elections)

Strengths that were wanted to be exploited in the campaign	***Weaknesses manifested in the campaign***
- powerful leaders with political and administrative experience - the image of a new party, dedicated to changing the political class from the ground up - concrete results in previous governments - plan of 5 measures applicable from the first day of government -since the establishment, PRO Romania has positioned itself as a replacement for PSD and continued this "crusade"	- poor internal organization regarding advertising production, campaign schedule, synchronized communication - promoting on the list of candidates people with a dubious past or who have not identified enough with the party's image - the past of some of the leaders and the attachment of their image to PSD -attaching on the last hundred meters of ALDE, a measure insufficiently explained internally/ externally

Opportunities that wanted to be fruitful	***Threats considered***
- attracting a young electorate that has not vote before - reactivation of the nationalist fiber of the electorate - convincing those who benefited from the measures of the Ponta Governments to reallocate the salary rights cut in the financial crisis of 2010 by the Boc Government - concrete plan for overcoming the medical and economic crisis, based on the previous experience in the Executive of the leaders V. Ponta and C. Popescu Tăriceanu	- too conventional, routine and cumbersome style of communication - sustainable attacks by the local press, stimulated by the generous contributions of political opponents - the persistent problem of positioning in public communication due to the common target audience with the PSD -demotivation, in some places, of party activists due to the appearance of new colleagues, ALDE, who occupied eligible places on lists

Source: Author's own conception

VIII. CONCLUSION

Taking into account the details resulting from the SWOT analysis, we are entitled to consider that both the strategy and the electoral campaign of the PRO Romania party were inadequate to the political situation at the time of the elections. The party's messages, even if they reached the electorate, both through the door-to-door campaign and online, did not convince potential voters. Also, the decision taken on the last hundred meters of joining the ALDE left many interpretations both within the party and in the public space.

Factors that led to failure to meet the assumed objective are:

- Organizing the election campaign and the elections in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic;
- To conservative campaign style, which failed to activate wider number of supporters;
- The ambiguous strategy of positioning the party, with alternative attacks both on the PSD and on the PNL;
- Lack of activists for enlarged campaign teams, to perform more efficiently the specific actions of displaying and distributing leaflets;
- Poor communication between branches and headquarters;

- The appointment of controversial candidates, who in some cases were not related to the PRO Romania doctrine or did not previously support the party;
- The continued existence of prejudices, especially in the case of the young electorate, regarding the PSD past of the leader Victor Ponta and the recent alliance with PSD through which Călin Popescu Tăriceanu held ALDE in PSD Government (of Viorica Dăncilă);
- Lack of adequate responses to the concerned attacks of close journalists of current of former PSD leaders;
- The creation of some gaps between the PRO Romania members and the recently transferred ALDE members, which endangered the development of the campaign activities in good conditions;
- Insufficient argumentation in the public communication about the need to give a PRO Romania vote in exchange for PSD.

The lessons to be learned from this failure stem from the lack of a stable electorate of the PRO Romania party and the need for predictability on the part of the leaders in order to convince the population in the long run to support a new party.

Since its establishment in 2018, PRO Romania has participated in 4 electoral elections, in as many formulas:

- European Parliamentary elections 2019, on its own account;
- Presidential Elections 2019, support for the candidate Mircea Diaconu within the "UN OM" Alliance, together with ALDE;
- Local Elections 2020, on its own account in the territory and in the PRO Bucharest 2020 Alliance in the Capital, together with Bucharest 2020 Party;
- Parliamentary Elections 2020, on its own, but hosting lists of candidates "imported" from ALDE, the party with which it merged.

The score obtained in the first elections, those for European Parliament, has not been reached since then. One of the causes may be the disappearance immediately after that election of the declared enemy, Liviu Dragnea, due to which most of the party leaders left PSD and joined PRO Romania. The former PSD president, accused of his dictatorial leadership style and of hijacking the party in order to save him from criminal cases that threatened his freedom, was imprisoned the day after the European Parliamentary Elections. Or the lack of a clear objective, assumed and desired by a large part of the electorate, makes the whole effort of participating in the election campaign useless.

In 2012, USL won the Parliamentary Elections with the promise of re-granting the salary rights cut following the 2010 financial crisis by the Boc Government and with the objective of dismissing President Traian Băsescu.

In 2016, PSD won by promising to increase salaries and pensions, lower VAT, lower income taxes, 0 tax on worked land, build regional Hospitals and a Republican Hospital.

In 2020, PSD also ranked first in the Parliamentary Elections, with the same type of promises (although it did not achieve half of what it had promised in the previous term): increase pensions by another 32% and the minimum wage by 57%, exemption tax on the minimum wage on the economy and meal vouchers, the reduction of the tax for salaries below 6,000 RON, the realization of a strategic investment fund or the introduction of performance contracts in state institutions, financial incentives for employees with children, including the increase of the reintegration incentive in work, increase the child raising allowance or the introduction of nursery vouchers.

The PRO Romania party promised only 5 measures in its program, did not present very effectively details on these proposals and was not transparent enough on how to implement them. In other words, the electorate did not understand why should vote a party credited in the poll with a maximum of 9% and was not told what post-election alliance the party could realize once it reached Parliament for a new 4-year term. It is what theorists call the promotion of the idea of the Useful Vote, and this approach was missing from PRO Romania's campaign strategy for these elections.

Another conclusion that emerges from this analysis is that in" electoral mathematics" 1+1 ≠2. A hasty, late announcement about collaboration, merger with another party can do more harm than good.

A last lesson regarding this time the entire Romanian political spectrum is that of the influence of conjuncture factors, such as the medical crisis, on any type of election. The new party that entered the Parliament, AUR, bit the electorate of all the other parties, having a conjuncture doctrine and channelling the popular tension created as a result of government constraints and inconsistent anti-pandemic measures. The low turnout only exacerbated the favourable outcome of this new political party.

The article is built around a case study designed to analyze in detail an electoral approach of a political party, in the context of elections marked by the manifestation of the covid-19 crisis. As a result, the research has the advantage of investigating the electoral approach through the lens of various aspects that influenced it: the history of the party, the changes on the Romanian political scene, the legislative changes, the influence of the medical crises on the electoral rules, on the way of communication with the voters and

on voter's expectations. The analysis is of a qualitative nature, with the specific limits of such a method by which we did not intend to measure the influence of the medical crisis on the electoral result, but only to highlight the new challenges that such a crisis raised for the electoral campaign strategy.

"What would have been the result obtained by Pro Romania Party if it had not been the covid-19 medical crisis?" is a question that we cannot answer because the electoral result is strictly linked to the complex context in which the elections are held, a unique and non-repetitive context from electoral point of view. Although the research can be deepened, by carrying out a quantitative study to evaluate, for example, the opinion of voters regarding the various electoral communication actions undertaken, the qualitative analysis allowed us to formulate some conclusions regarding the way in which the covid-19 medical crisis influenced the electoral agenda and electoral communication tools in Romania. Moreover, from this case study we derived a series of useful lessons not only for the Romanian political environment, but also for any current political party, given that an electoral campaign strategy must take into account nowadays not only internal political developments, but also the social phenomena manifested at regional or global level.

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