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Debating Europe in Romanian Parliament

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Abstract

After Romania's adhesion to the European Union, in 2007, the discursive actor Europe acquires new dimensions in Romanian political debates. This paper analysis the way Romanian political discourse uses the previous metaphors on Europe, in order to place European Union in the national political context. The methodological framework of this paper focuses on political discourse analysis, having as starting point an exhaustive corpus of Parliamentary debates between 2007 and 2013. The transversal aim of our study is to identify different hypostasis of Europe in Romanian political discourse and to classify associated European terms and concepts that define the way contemporary Romanian political discourse relates to Europe.

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1. Introduction

The development of new research perspectives in the social sciences and humanities field, with emphasis on the recent evolution in the democratization process, has created new concepts such as *participatory democracy* and *deliberative democracy*. Actually, the main reference point is the sense of democracy in Ancient Greece, just as the latest approaches on concepts such as *debate*, *dialogue* and *participation* are closely linked to *democracy*. The terms and phrases we have mentioned above underlie also any public communication approach at central European level, and at the central level of any democratic state, as well. Having as starting point a perspective that integrates the theoretical and methodological approaches on the deliberative-competitive axis in the structure of the political

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discourse, we identify in the present paper the hypostasis of Europe (both in its institutional dimension – European Union, and its symbolical dimension – of social and cultural space with its identity features) and the discursive features that the concept acquires on the deliberative-competitive-participatory axis in the parliamentary debates of the two chambers of the Romanian Parliament between 2007 and 2013, namely, since Romania was integrated into the EU until present. We have examined an entire corpus of debates from the 161 plenary meetings (in ordinary and extraordinary sessions) throughout a period of seven years. From a thematic point of view, the two main reference points are the annual adoption of the state budget and the budget of social insurance (on the axis of the deliberative discourse) and, respectively, proposing, debating and adopting/rejecting the censure motions against different governments (on the axis of the competitive-participatory discourse); the two topics are the most representative due to the time allocated annually to plenary debates. In this context, Europe/European Union becomes an omnipresent discursive actor that marks all the parliamentary plenary debates and acquires various dimensions depending on the social, economic and political context and the type of the topic debated.

2. Approaches of parliamentary discourse

The Habermasian Anglophone literature (Elster, 1998; Risse, 2000) in the field of political sciences has established since the early 90s' that the political debate – which has been named this way from a procedural standpoint, but, from a conceptual viewpoint, the phrase is unsuitable – is an endless string of communication acts where each participant in the political dialogue intervenes in order to change the interlocutors' opinion (stand). From a conceptual point of view, the political debate is based on two specific communicative action verbs: *to argue* (to support an idea based on arguments) and *to bargain* (to negotiate, to trade). While the first concept is defined as “knowledge-based mode of interaction” (Neyer, 2002, p. 12), the second phrase is known as a negotiation based on (political) offers and counteroffers which can help establish a common decisional variant based on the model of a “bazaar” (Jönsson, 2001, p. 218).

From a linguistic perspective, the phrase “parliamentary discourse” is preferred and the phrase “parliamentary debate” is avoided, while the parliamentary discourse is understood and analyzed as a sub-division of the political discourse. For L. Treimane (2011), the various definitions offered by the researches indicate three fundamental features of the “parliamentary discourse” as follows: “It is the most formal and institutionalized variety of political discourse; it displays fixed, recurrent communication patterns which both shape and restrict the mode of communication; it requires a contextual approach of analysis.” (p. 79). B. E. Rasch (2011) provides a scheme representing the differences that separate the real debate from deliberation, which emphasizes the temporal restraints and the procedures specific to parliamentary sessions; therefore, the so-called “parliamentary debates” are “ritualized and rigid” (p. 8), excluding thus the rational dimension that a debate needs, and rather developing a register of mere explanations on a given topic. Therefore, “In parliamentary debates, information on policy positions is provided and made public, but the debates are not autonomous mechanisms for information aggregation” (p. 10). After analyzing the debates in the European Parliament, which were organized on the model of the legislative debates in European national parliaments, J. B. Slapin and S. O. Proksch (2011) continue the paradigm of the authentic debate which is far from reaching its goals during the legislative sessions; its objective is rather to convey and create a favorable personal image for the person intervening, and to allow a direct address to the voters through mass-media.

From the perspective of rational debate, Calvert and Johnson (1998) operationalize the concept of “political argument”, which is used in the authentic debate where participants with equal status are involved and conduct their own argument with sincerity. The applicable paradigm is that of communication-action (in the sense of performative discourse, cf. Austin, 1970), which is based on the premise that the political act is made of infinite sequences of communication, and the force of the argument used in the communication acts of the political actors comes from its social and societal applicability (decision making, starting projects with social impact etc.), accompanied by the legitimacy invested in the political actor. According to the two authors, the parliamentary sessions are merely a “ritualized version of the political argument” (Calvert & Johnson, 1998, p. 10), which are constraint by the official, formal and procedural features of the parliamentary session itself; thus, talking during a parliamentary session is merely an act of communication with political features, which are used to support or reject a given topic.

Based on the definition proposed by Przeworski (1998) for the concept of deliberation („form of discussion intended to change the preferences on the bases of which people decide how to act”, Przeworski 1998, p. 140), the latest studies on parliamentary debates have focused on the argumentative dimension of the parliamentary speech (Holzinger, 2004; Smadja, 2009). They have allowed achieving the goal of defining the concept of “deliberation” in the parliamentary plenary debates, so that a complete operational definition is as follows: “Deliberation refers to a *process* by which reasoning is utilized to form preferences and reach a collective decision. A real exchange of arguments has to take place and participants must be willing to adjust their opinions – both beliefs and desires, over the course of the debate, before the debate is closed by a collective decision of some kind.” (Rasch, 2011, pp. 4-5).

3. Europe as institutional actor

The phrase *European Union* – frequently found in the parliamentary debate (*cf.* Table 1), often indicates a reverential reporting to the European superstructure in the discourse. The reference to the European Union is made especially institutionally, in an attempt to align the national legislation to the European legislation, even after the integration. The European Union is an active actor in the parliamentary debate, which is always found in positive discursive contexts.

The abbreviation [EU, *UE into Romanian*] for European Union is rarely used in Romanian speeches, due to phonetic reasons as it would mean to bring together two vowels in a hiatus, a method that is often considered unpleasant to the hearing and avoided over time, especially in poetic language. This would be the explanation why the abbreviation has few occurrences in Romanian speech, as it is otherwise in other Romanic languages, as well, unlike English, where speakers often prefer the phrase [EU]. The multiplication of occurrences starting with 2012 indicates the moment when the abbreviation started being used in speech, which, in the case of the parliamentary debate, can also be explained by its ritualized and rigid features and the accurate documentation of the parliamentary sessions, where the speakers use the abbreviation in order to be able to convey as much content as possible in a short amount of time.

Table 1. European Union and Europe in Romanian parliamentary debates

Year / Term (occurrences in absolute values)	European Union	EU	Europe
2007	17	2	13
2008	353	1	140
2009	406	4	105
2010	440	1	96
2011	402	3	64
2012	512	10	101
2013	298	11	140

The phrase *Europe*, more and more frequent in both the political discourse and the media discourse, especially starting with 2008, indicates at first a terminological alignment to the language of the European space. Thus, it is used most often in order to indicate, as an abbreviated phrase, the institutional actor *European Union*; it is also used symbolically as an identity reference point, associated with the various metaphors that marked Romania’s pre-accession period such as: *European family*, *European civilization*, *European normality*, *European spirit* etc. (see Pricopie, 2011).

4. Europe as identity communicational space

The post-accession period is marked by the reemergence of a new set of concepts which can be classified into three categories: a. reactivated (national and European) interwar concepts, b. borrowed contemporary European concepts and c. contemporary national concepts, which define genuine currents of thought, most of them favoring the European construction and Romania’s accession to the European Union, except for the new currents specific to

the European space, which revolve around euroskepticism and are most often disputed in the Romanian political discourse. The presence of these items in the parliamentary discourses is not statistically representative, but it is worth mentioning in relation to the specific contexts of discursive registration, so that we are able to identify their contemporary features in the Romanian political discourse.

Table 2. Associated European concepts in Romanian parliamentary debates.

Year / Term (occurrences in absolute values)	Europeanization	Europeanism	Pro- Europeanism	Pro- European	Anti- European	Uneuropean	Euroskeptical
2007	-	-	-	2	2	2	-
2008	1	-	-	1	-	-	-
2009	2	-	-	-	-	-	-
2010	-	-	-	-	1	-	-
2011	-	1	-	-	-	1	-
2012	-	-	1	2	-	-	-
2013	-	-	-	-	1	-	1

The first category could include the term *Europeanism*, which has been well known to the European and Romanian cult public, since the interwar period; even if, at present, it is found only in the Dictionary of Neologisms (see Roșca, 2013). However, the history of the term is intermingled with the history of the national state Romania: “in the interwar period, the term acquired significant ideological and political connotations. During the communist period, the term was used solely in literary and cultural exegesis and, after 1989, it returned to the public space enriched with numerous meanings, according to international political developments and in relation to the European Union” (Roșca, 2013, p. 299). The term *pro-Europeanism* (which could be included in the third category) appears in the post-accession period, being associated to Europeanism and Romania’s role in the European construction. The Prime Minister V. Ponta includes the term in his speech presenting the new government during the joint session of the two chambers of Parliament, on December 21st, 2012: “Romania is not only the seventh largest country in the European Union, but also a country which can have a genuine contribution to the European construction, a country where no political dispute has managed to undermine the fundamental *pro-Europeanism of our society* and I believe that Romania can no longer be a second-class member of the European Union. We must be where we truly deserve to be.” The term is not used in Romanian at all and the meaning it acquires is different from the meaning we would have expected (emphasizing a political attitude favoring the European idea and construction); however, its social and cultural significance makes the term rather pleonastic.

The second category includes the concept of *Europeanization*, which is obviously borrowed from the academic vocabulary (in social and human sciences) and even from the European institutional vocabulary. The three references capture the three dimensions of the concept: in 2008, regarding the actual desired integration of Romania into the European Union, which would also imply a genuine Europeanization of the country, especially with regard to its availability to follow the rules and norms; and in 2009, regarding first of all the support of the Romanian Parliament for “the integration and Europeanization of the Republic of Moldova”, and, then, towards the end of the year, in a competitive discussion, during the debate on a censure motion against the government, where Europeanization is used as a political argument in order to justify the economic crisis in Romania, as a result of the world and European crisis: “Actually, you did not understand what globalization or Europeanization imply. You demand, at all costs, that Romania controls the effects of the crisis through its own policies...” (Senator Toader Mocanu, the Democrat Liberal Party).

Pro-European is also included in the category of borrowed concepts, based on the premise that the contemporary Romanian society is intrinsically pro-European; this fact is also demonstrated by the constant very favorable results for Europe found in the Eurobarometer reports. In binary opposition, another borrowed term is *anti-European*, designating a law, a stand, a decision or an organization with anti-European tendencies. It is also worth mentioning that, at the level of parliamentary interventions, *anti-European* is used most of the times in juxtaposition with *anti-*

Romanian. Another term associated with a negative, but moderate, connotation is *uneuropean* (which we included in the third category because, as we are about to see, its meaning is created within the Romanian language); it is first used in 2007, during the presentation of a censure motion against the right-wing government. In the speech, the term becomes an attribute of an unwanted society model, therefore a *uneuropean* model, which is inconsistent with the known models of western societies. The model is also illustrated in the speech as follows: “a movement towards a *uneuropean* society model, a deeply divided and polarized society” (Nicolae Văcăroiu, President of the Senate, September 27th, 2007). In 2011, we find the term again illustrating some attitudes, which were inconsistent with the European practices, and it is associated once more, through juxtaposition, with *anti-Romanian*.

Finally, we have selected a concept from the second category – *euroskeptical*, which occurs only once in our corpus of parliamentary debates. It is introduced by President T. Băsescu, in his intervention during the parliamentary plenary meeting, in the common session on March 12th, 2013, with reference to the tendencies of the political discourse of the power, which was in strained relations with the European Union at that moment, especially with regard to the country reports presented by the European Commission in 2012: “*An anti-European, anti-Occidental discourse can only damage us. Romania needs its people to believe in the orientation towards the West, because, honestly, there is no other orientation to adopt. Who has an alternative to this path? Therefore, my request is the following – responsibility, because not only our European partners analyze any statement and I would not want Romania to be labelled, quite soon, as a euroskeptical country. The responsibility for your statements is fundamental for both the people who voted for you and our European partners*”. The meaning of the concept refers to a discursive sanction against a new tendency in the strategic approach on Romanian’s public and political communication towards European Union. Certainly, the extrapolation towards the label of *euroskeptical* country, even if the modal verb *would* is used, is introduced in the speech by force, but the speaker uses it skillfully and oscillates between two different registers, from the pro-European tendency of the Romanian public opinion to the potentially negative influence that an inconsistent political discourse could have over time on the relations between Romania and the European Union.

The three categories of terms associated with the European idea create favorable premises for a participatory debate at national level (based on the orientations of the political discourse illustrated above) with regard to the tendency to strengthen the idea of Europe as identity space in the Romanian public imaginary. In this respect, the terminological associations are revealing at the level of the discursive contexts, and the perspective of a Europe integrated in the national body is even more obvious in the binary oppositions such as European vs. *uneuropean/anti-Romanian*, pro-European vs. *anti-European/anti-Romanian*, thus illustrating an internalization of Europe, as both institutional superstructure and at its symbolical level of identity construction.

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