

National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) in the Romanian Online News Media. Media Representations and Political Discourse of the Key Actors

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ABSTRACT. The Romanian media coverage of the NRRP builds on the political discourse of the public actors who mainly used the NRRP debate either to gain visibility, or to campaign. Emotions, conflict and negativity news values are dominant, and the analysis and contextualization usually lack from the news stories. The present study is a content based approach, which aims to identify who are the most prominent actors involved in the debate about the Romanian National Recovery and Resilience Plan, how these public figures are inter-connected in the media discourse and which are the main features of their discourse, and what topics associated to the six pillars of the Recovery and Resilience Facility are mentioned most frequently in the public discourse of the key public actors.

Keywords: recovery and resilience plan, media representations, political discourse

Introduction

The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) is a tool provided by the European Commission, aimed to support reforms and investments undertaken by Member States. The aim of the loans and grants is “to mitigate the economic

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and social impact of the coronavirus pandemic and make European economies and societies more sustainable, resilient and better prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the green and digital transitions.” (European Commission, 2020) The National Recovery and Resilience Plan has a different logic than the structural and investments European funds, because it provides budgetary support to implement systemic and structural reforms and investments in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak.

The Romanian Ministry of Investment and European Projects (MIEP) started the elaboration of NRRP in October-November 2020. On November 26, 2020 an initial form of the document was released for public consultation. The intervention areas of the NRRP match the six pillars defined by the RRF regulation (P1 - Transition to a green economy; P2 - Digital transformation; P3 - Intelligent, sustainable and inclusive economic growth; P4 - Social and territorial cohesion; P5 - Institutional health and resilience; P6 - Children, youth, education and competence.)

Starting from November 2020, Romanian online news media covered the NRRP issue, showing a particular interest for the Plan at the end of May 2021, when NRRP was sent to Brussels and the firsts feed-backs from the European institutions started to come. The rejection on June 4th, 2021 of the irrigations strategy project triggered vivid reactions of the political actors, reflected in a higher interest of the media for the subject, due to its controversial news value. The present analysis covers a time frame from November 1, 2020 to June 15, 2021 and due to the ongoing developments and debates, a future analysis is needed for a more comprehensive overview of the developments in media coverage of the NRRP issue.

The present study is a content based approach, which aims to identify who are the most prominent actors involved in the debate about the Romanian National Recovery and Resilience Plan, how these public figures are inter-connected in the media discourse and which are the main features of their discourse, and which topics are associated to the six pillars of the Recovery and Resilience Facility are mentioned most frequently in the public discourse of the main public actors.

Media coverage of the European affairs

Media attention to EU affairs is cyclical, with a tendency to vanish from the public agenda shortly after major events, such as European integration, European elections (de Vreese, 2001, p.285)

During the past decades, two major media frames have been shown to dominate representations of the relationship between the country and the European Union: a so-called messianic one, characteristic of the period of the country's accession, with European institutions expected to solve major domestic issues like poverty; and the marginal or peripheral position of the country, sometimes coupled with representations of EU institutions as punitive, for example in the case of the refusal to accept Romania as a member of the Schengen area (Bârgăoanu, 2011).

EU institutions and actors "are in strong competition with national governments that are not willing to relinquish their predominant role in EU communication" (Pfetsch and Heft, 2015, p.41).

Research into representations of the European Union in the Romanian public sphere has previously showed that when issues of concerns arise, as was the case of the 2008 economic crisis, collective actors are generally held responsible, and, apart from the political class and member states, European institutions are seen as accountable (Bârgăoanu and Durach, 2013, p.12).

Public discourse of the politicians and the media coverage

The logic of the storytelling used by the media puts a particular emphasis on the actors of the events that are being covered, because the reader understands and resonates better to stories lived and reported by real people - whether they are celebrities or not. Thus, a rather abstract topic - a strategic plan - needs to be associated with actors in order to make it easy to understand and appealing for the audience.

On the other hand, the public actors - politicians and members of the government seize every opportunity to campaign and to present the current affairs through the lens of the party's ideology.

The relationship between politicians and the mass media is a two way street: media needs politicians as sources and subjects of the news stories, and politicians need media to build their public image, their notoriety and to campaign.

As long as public perception of political figures is shaped by the media, the media has the power to reshape the identity of political leaders, as well as the identity of political parties, which are interested in delivering a clear, intelligible discourse.

Mass media communication has changed the traditional rules of democracy. The impact of the media on politicians greatly depends on the image they propose for themselves. In order to convince the public, this image has to meet some criteria, of which consistency is the most relevant. Correlation between the image that is displayed and the image that is publicly perceived is imperative. Should the public observe a rift between the two, they would abandon the respective politician, who would suffer a loss in credibility. Therefore, image appears as an essential element of political life mediation (Rieffel, 2008).

Due to the pressure imposed by the media cycle, *time* has undergone profound changes. While political time needs a certain duration for analysis and debate which generate continuity, mediatic time, on the contrary, is one of live, direct speech, one that is subjected to the ephemeral and swiftness. Subjected to the pressure of urgency, politicians are often forced to react on the spot to journalists' requests, seeking the mediatic effect or cliché, risking over simplifying, ill-calculated dramatizing in a superficial and conformist framework. Adapting their discourse to the norms of the media, politicians fall for the momentary reflex, or the "monstrative" logic, as Paul Virillo (1995) defined it, at the expense of the "demonstrative" logic.

In the public sphere, there is a discrepancy between the legitimacy by election and the legitimacy by media exposure and political marketing (Cotteret, 1991). Thus, the number of politicians expressing opinions in the media shrink to a few dozens, while MPs, mayors or other politicians who are out of the media spotlight end up completely ignored by the public. The current research confirms that only a limited number of public figures could be associated with voices addressing the NRRP topic.

The marketing model brought numerous behavioural changes in political communication and in the way politicians relate to media. As a consequence, nowadays politicians make use of persuasion techniques which can be expressed by four terms (Rieffel, 2008 p.15): personalization of actions; teatralization of behaviour; using new rhetoric; interpretation of [polling] data. Theatralization goes hand in hand with personalization. Politicians play roles following a precise script and scenography. They are constantly delivering a show while their “social facade” is being scientifically designed (Goffman, 2007 pp.238-239). Media training has become an indispensable part of politics. Political rhetoric has seen great changes as well. Politicians calibrate their speech according to the demands of the media, using plain, simple language, easy to understand. This media-imposed simplification is detrimental to detailed reasoning and solid argument (Rieffel, 2008).

The mediatic rhetoric of politicians is one of emotion and live communication, rather than analysis and reasoning. „Relation is more important than content and enunciation exceeds the announcement” (Debray,1993, p.127) Therefore, mediatic rhetoric is the aesthetic of seduction (Coulomb-Gully, 2004).

Personalizing actions at the expense of ideas, staging and theatralizing of all actions, the rhetoric of simplification based on emotions lead to the conclusion that politics is being redefined by the standards of mediation.

Mediated anger as a political emotion

Since the beginnings of the modern daily press, editors and journalists have understood that news is better reaching the audience when told as stories. Therefore news analysis should also focus on storytelling techniques - the way in which media reports create coherence and meaning while existing “within a cultural lexicon of understandable themes” (Bird & Dardenne, 2009, p.207).

A particular ingredient of the in journalistic narratives is emotionality. Emotionally engaging narratives are constantly produced because they facilitate audience engagement and understanding (Peters, 2011, p.297).

Mediated discussion of the matters that affect all people is shaped by emotional appeals and language and thus the citizens are motivated to participate in political life because of their affective engagement with politics – because they *care*.

More specifically, *anger* is considered a political emotion (Lyman, 1981) that can raise aggression and violence. Mediated anger is distinctive, due to the fact that it is performative - based on the performance of actors in the public sphere - and discursively constructed through the narratives of journalists - it represents the journalist's interpretation of behavior of actors with reference to the emotion of anger (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020, pp.92-94).

As Romanian media outlets are the primary bodies that cover the European and national public affairs, one might have expected a balanced, analytical approach towards a topic of the highest national interest, such as NRRP. Public communication, as reflected by the media, generated a lot of confusion and misleading, due to biased information, heavily marked by populism and political interest, as a result of media polarisation. Under these circumstances, the NRRP media coverage showed once again a deeply divided political class, the discourse being rather subjected to the aims of a constant political campaign. Conflict, confrontation and mutual allegations represented the main ingredients of NRRP related communication.

The current analysis is structured around four research questions: 1) *who are the most prominent actors (public figures) in the media coverage of the Romanian National Recovery and Resilience Plan*; 2) *how these public figures are brought together in the media discourse*; 3) *how politicians address their opponents in their discourse* and 4) *which topics belonging to the six pillars of the Recovery and Resilience Facility are mentioned most frequently in the public discourse of the main actors?*

Methodology

We aim to answer the research questions by employing a content-oriented approach, based on a sample of articles published in three large online Romanian news outlets: *adevarul.ro*, *digi24.ro* and *antena3.ro*. All

three are among the largest such outlets, and all are online portals of media organizations with offline content as well: Adevărul is a print newspaper, while Digi24 and Antena3 are news television channels. All the articles containing the key term - PNRR (Romanian abbreviation for NRRP) were collected using automated web scraping of the news sites with Chrome scraper. The resulting sample, used for the current analysis, consists of a total of 616 articles: adevarul.ro (n=246 articles), Digi24.ro (n=190 articles) and antena3.ro (n=180 articles), ranging from November 2020 to June 15, 2021.

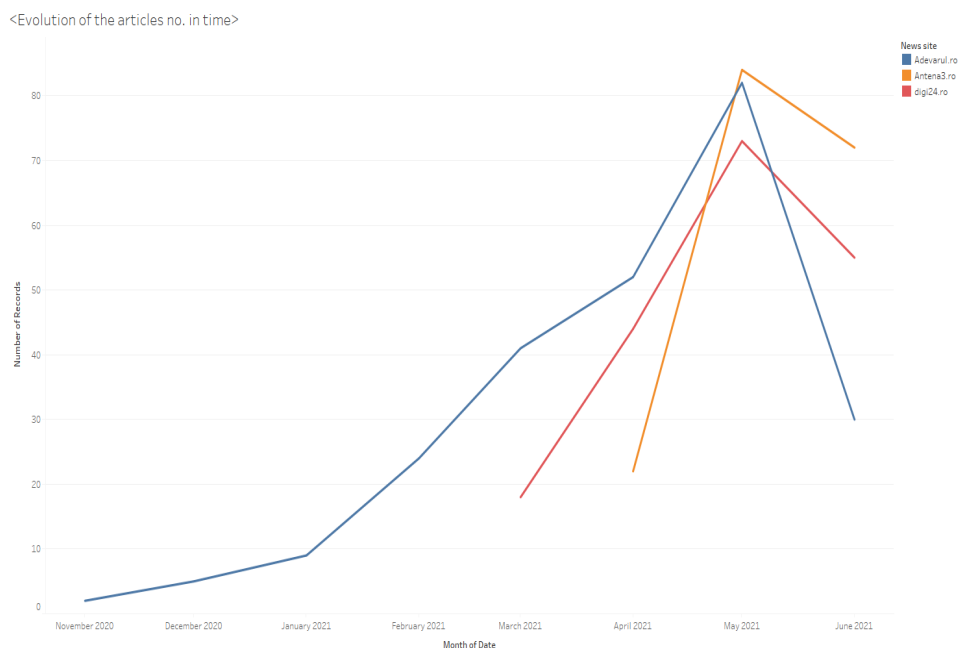


Figure 1: Media coverage of NRRP from November, 2020 to June, 2021

The present study uses mixed methods, in order to provide both an overview of the media coverage of NRRP and a sample of specific discursive forms and structures. Firstly, a semi-automated quantitative content analysis was conducted using MaxQDA software: all the articles were coded to measure *the frequency of the main actors in the sample* (33 public figures - politicians,

members of the government, the President, Romanian EU officials) and to measure *the prominence of the issues related to the six pillars* of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (green economy; digital transformation; sustainability; social and territorial cohesion; health; children, youth, education.)

A co-occurrence analysis was performed to identify the pairs and the clusters of political actors mentioned together in the same article most frequently. Further, a cross tabulation between the main actors and the topics being covered in the media discourse showed how specific issues are associated with specific actors. The preliminary results showed a rather limited number of NRRP topics (e.g. *irrigations, pensions, roads and highways*) mentioned by the public actors.

Based on the initial findings of the quantitative content analysis, the discourse analysis focuses on how specific actors were portrayed, whether the political discourse aimed at the technical aspects of the NRRP or it was rather targeted at specific political competitors and their actions and statements. The discursive samples point out how the negative emotions became part of the media narrative.

Findings and discussion

(1) Key actors

Media narratives tend to put a particular emphasis on the actors of the events that are being covered, because the reader understands easier and resonates better with stories lived by real people - whether they are celebrities or not. Thus, the NRRP, a rather abstract topic, is constantly associated with actors in order to make it understandable and appealing for the audience.

On the other hand, the political discourse of the public actors - politicians and members of the government - seize every opportunity to campaign and to present the current affairs through the lens of the party's ideology.

There is a slight difference between the three news sites in terms of the top ten most frequently mentioned actors. Nevertheless, the lists of the first six key actors are similar for the three media outlets: the most prominent actors are the Prime Minister Florin Cîțu (1019 mentions in 292 articles) and the Minister of Investment and European Projects Cristian Ghinea (994 mentions in 255 articles), followed by the leader of the opposition party - the Social Democrat Party (PSD), Marcel Ciolacu (683 mentions in 158 articles) and the leader of the National Liberal Party (PNL) / the President of the Chamber of Deputies - Ludovic Orban (345 mentions in 107 articles), the President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis (285 mentions in 110 articles) and the Deputy Prime minister Dan Barna from USR - Union Save Romania (217 mentions in 95 articles).

The editorial policies and/or political/ideological leans of the media outlets influence the amount of media coverage of some specific actors, and the comparison shows that minister Cristian Ghinea received less coverage in Antena3.ro news stories, in spite of the central role played in the negotiations and submission of the NRRP. Liberal Ludovic Orban, President Klaus Iohannis and Union Save Romania (USR) leader Dan Barna were mentioned by antena3.ro fewer times, in comparison with digi24.ro and adevarul.ro

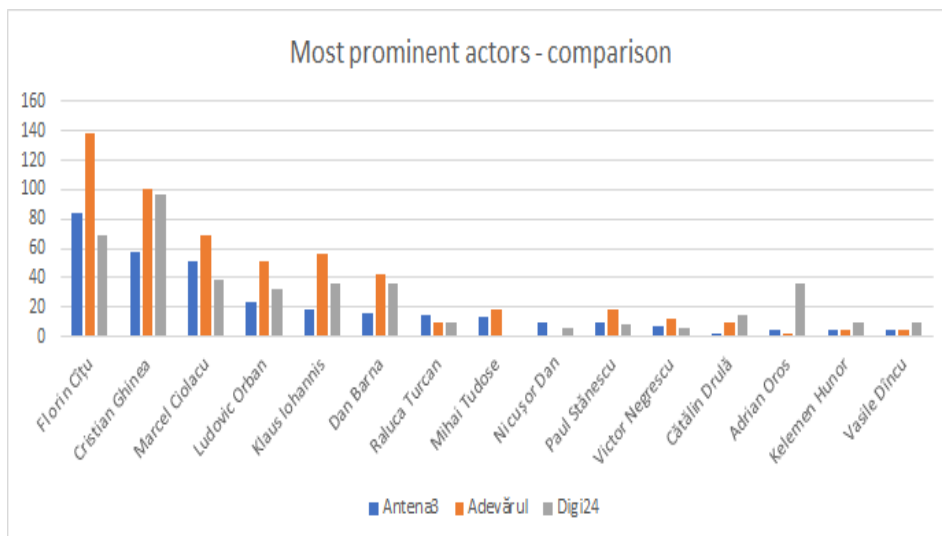


Figure 2: Comparison of the most prominent actors (no. of articles)

(2) Who's talking about whom?

More than 30 public figures were identified in the sample, but some of the public figures were mentioned only rarely in the texts. Therefore, for an in-depth understanding of the situations in which these actors are mentioned together, a co-occurrence map was created, applying a threshold of at least ten mentions per actor ($T \geq 10$).

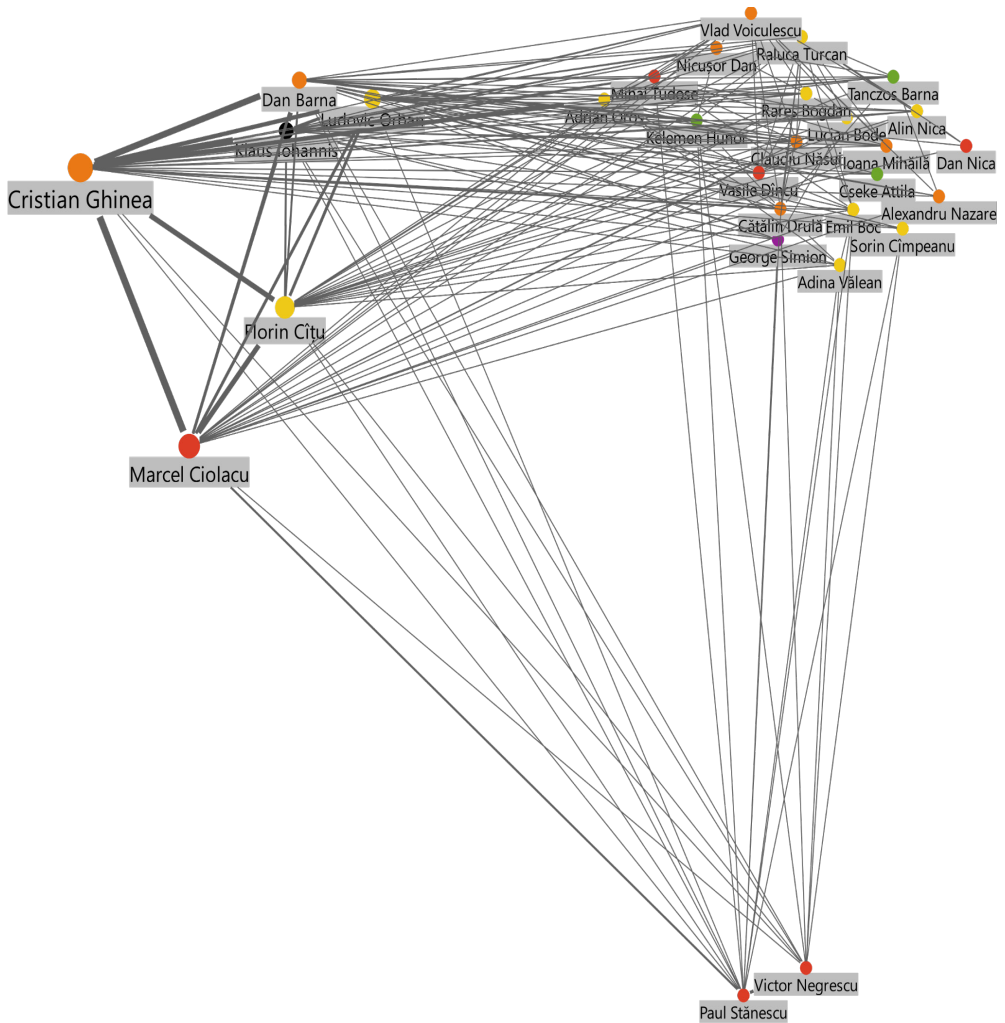


Figure 3: Co-occurrences of the actors ($T \geq 10$)

The network diagram presents a distinctive cluster of the six public figures frequently mentioned in the media, either based on their public office or mentioned by other actors : Florin Cîțu, Cristian Ghinea, Marcel Ciolacu, Ludovic Orban, Klaus Iohannis, Dan Barna. PM Florin Cîțu, minister Cristian Ghinea and Deputy PM Dan Barna were the official voices of the Romanian government, communicating about the resilience and reconstruction plan during the public consultation, the elaboration and the submission of the document, and the censor motion.

(3) Discursive patterns

The discourse analysis highlighted words semantically associated with verbal aggression (*insult, shaming*), conflict (*crisis, resignation, chaos, political war, treason*), power and success (*failure, lack of vision, vain promises, helplessness, lack of transparency*) as well as traits of character and other individual or collective features of the opponents (*arrogant, stupid, incompetent, liar, infatuated, organized in gangs, coalition of losers*). The word *Romanians* returned to the discourse, just like in the electoral campaign, suggesting that politicians using it are dedicated to the people they belong to. This is a general feature of the NRPP communication, as well as the use of strong words, suggesting the fierce struggle they fight for the wellbeing of the nation. Here are some relevant examples [with authors' emphasis added - *in italics*].

A particular role is played by Marcel Ciolacu, the leader of the opposition party - the Social Democrat Party (PSD). He is the most prominent actor who does not play an active role in the process of elaborating and publicly communicating the NRRP, but he seizes each opportunity to attack the PM or the ministers of the governmental coalition or to respond back to their allegations.

Marcel Ciolacu responded to prime-minister Cîțu's remarks : "This vaccine saves and protects us from COVID, but it has no effect on *arrogance, incompetence and stupidity*." Ciolacu claims that instead of wasting time replying PSD's critique on Facebook, the prime minister should rather concentrate on absorbing the 227 million Euros and putting his ministers to

work. "Things are definitely not looking well, prices are rising. The *living standard has dramatically dropped in Romania. Romanians' priorities are others than arrogance.*" (Gorgorin, I., *Cum răspunde Marcel Ciolacu la insulta premierului Cîțu: "Acest vaccin ne scapă și ne ferește de COVID. El nu ne vindecă, nici de aroganță, nici de incompetență, nici de prostie!"* Antena3, May 20,2021). Earlier in April, social democrat leaders adopted a tough language, declaring : "No matter how hard might be Iohannis trying to *hide the truth*, one thing is for sure: The Cîțu government *lamentably failed* managing European money because of their *incompetence and infatuation!* The *lack of vision* and reforms but most of all the money distribution decided on political grounds, led to the third rejection of the NRRP by the European Commission." (Dinu, L., *PSD: Oricât ar încerca Iohannis să mintă, acesta este motivul care a dus pentru a treia oară la respingerea PNRR de către CE*, Antena 3, April 26, 2021). On May 13, Marcel Ciolacu said that he had personally spoken to the Vice President of the European Commission Frans Timmermans, who agreed with PSD's standpoint that the NRPP is "far from being complete", and the European Commission forced prime-minister Cîțu to present the NRPP before the Parliament. "Cîțu must *stop lying* and start working hard. The government cannot hide the *failure* of the Brussels visit." Ciolacu said that he spoke to Timmermans about the solutions proposed by the social-democrats to resolve the *crisis*, without going into any details. (Marina, G., *Marcel Ciolacu: Comisia Europeană a dat dreptate PSD*, Digi24, May 13 2021).

Marcel Ciolacu responded violently to Cristian Ghinea-s challenge, who proposed Marcel Ciolacu to resign [*"Ciolacu, let's discuss with your resignation on the table!*], had the NRRP been approved. Otherwise, he would do the same. Mr. Ghinea accused the PSD of re-issuing fake news about NRPP being rejected by the European Commission.(Dinu, L., *Cristian Ghinea: "Ciolacu, hai să discutăm cu demisia pe masă! Te ține?"* Antena3, June 11 2021). Marcel Ciolacu responded : "Ghinea did not convince anyone with his wits but instead bewildered everybody with his *stupidity.*" Marcel Ciolacu went on, wondering why Mr. Ghinea is still a member of the cabinet, adding: "Cristian, weren't you ashamed to boldly *lie* on TV that everything was OK, knowing about the European Commission's *devastating remarks*?! Cristian,

YOU are a *disaster* ! ZERO! GO HOME!!! (Dinu, L., Marcel Ciolacu, *răspuns dur pentru Ghinea: "Ce demisii ceri tu, Cristian? TU ești un dezastru! ZERO!"* Antena3, June 11 2021).

In a press release PSD explained that the NRRP is a *national* plan to which all must *contribute* if we expect a good outcome. "Ghinea has only one option to climb out the hole he got himself into: bring the NRRP *before the Parliament* or *resign*". "Before making any requests from PSD, Mr. Ghinea and all of his "parteners" in the Coalition should *kneel* on the stairs of Kiseleff palace and *beg forgiveness* for their *arrogance* and *stupidity*. You *refused political consensus, public dialogue* and the involvement of *social actors* – business owners, trade unions, civil society. You refused to bring this plan before the Parliament." "The NRRP is not a plan for Ghinea and his Coalition of *losers*". (News.ro, PSD: Ghinea și partenerii din Coaliție să își ceară scuze în genunchi pentru aroganță și prostie. Adevarul, April 26, 2021). Responding to PSD, which demanded the government to give up the "arrogant and self sufficient" attitude on NRRP and invite all political parties to contribute, Ionuț Moșteanu, leader of USR PLUS deputies, said that that the Government is the sole entity which can complete the NRRP, as members of Parliament are not entitled to negotiate with the European Commission. "465 people in the Parliament cannot negotiate with the European Commision, that why we have a Government invested by the Parliament, therefore it has the confidence of the majority." (Ghiorghie A., Lider USR PLUS, replică pentru PSD: „Nu putem negocia 465 de parlamentari cu Comisia Europeană. Pentru asta avem un Executiv". Adevarul, April 27, 2021).

Marcel Ciolacu, interviewed on Antena 3, declared that „The Commission literally *pulverized* the NRRP." He claimed that the funds are being directed towards "their *political consultancy companies*." He talked about some documents proving that the NRRP has been created by *foreign companies*. "I presume the members of the Commision dropped their pens when they read these follies. Where is Iohannis's Educated Romania? It is smashed, it's a *shame*." (Țaga, M., Marcel Ciolacu: Pur și simplu Comisia a pulverizat PNRR. Cred că le-a sărit pixul din mână când au citit aceste gogomării. Adevarul, June 11, 2021).

Other voices of the Social Democrat Party followed the same argument:

Paul Stănescu, PSD Secretary General, declared that the NRRP cannot be sent to Brussels *without the consultation of the PSD*. He claims that his party has won the parliamentary elections and has the most MPs and local elected officials. Stănescu also said that after President Iohannis asked mayors to get involved in the vaccination campaign, PSD local elected officials got the message that in the *absence of a dialogue with PSD*, “we will start a great political war.” (Dinu, M., *Paul Stănescu, amenințări pentru Guvern și Iohannis: Vom declanșa un mare război politic*, Adevărul, May 19, 2021).

On April 27, Adrian Ionuț Gâdea (PSD), president of Teleorman County Council, warned that Teleorman villages would fail to connect to natural gas grids because the ruling coalition decided to finance grid extension by NRRP funding, contrary to the European Commission directives: “Instead of finding *serious solutions for the Romanians in the rural areas*, the liberals have chosen to offer *vain promises*”. (Adam, G., *Lider PSD: PNL lasă fără gaze satele din Teleorman*, Antena3, April 27 2021).

There’s no plan, suggests Mihai Tudose, MEP, on his Facebook page: “after *Orban and his gang last year bragged*” about the billions of euros flowing from the EU, there’s been silence on this topic ever since the elections. The government has to hastily *redo the NRRP*, as it was ill-designed. “Brussels is far away but the loot is near and it has to feed many hungry mouths...”, concluded Tudose, criticizing the government for being *so late*. “There is a guide issued by the European Commission. If you follow it, you can’t go wrong. Well, they could go wrong.” (Eremia, R., *Mihai Tudose, ironii la adresa Guvernului: Uite banii, nu e planul! Ciolanul e aproape și trebuie împărțit la multe guri flămânde*. Adevărul, January 19, 2021).

Victor Negrescu, MEP, accused the government for “trying to fool us with a *makeshift NRRP*. From its shape to proposed targets, the entire NRRP is copy-pasted from the *projects already in process* in different ministries, the Romanian MEP said. People in the government failed to understand that the NRRP cannot be the “Easter Rabbit” of the ruling parties which satisfies *electoral targets* but instead, it must be a vision to put Romania back on track. Later on, Mr. Negrescu explained that this *over-bureaucratized plan*, which cannot be implemented in due time because of its funding problems, such as its

value of 41.1 billion euros, as Romania is entitled to 29.2 billion euros. (News.ro, *Victor Negrescu: Guvernul încearcă ne păcălească cu un Plan Național de Redresare și Reziliență făcut pe picior*, *Adevarul*, March 19, 2021). One month later, the same MEP, Victor Negrescu said that the new NRRP was *not accepted* by the European Commission, because it is a plan that is “*politicized*”, finances being distributed on *political grounds*, instead of representing a national plan for Romania. “For instance, funding for irrigation has disappeared. Funding for the economic sector is inexistent. *There isn't sufficient transparency* regarding funding the local authorities and the civil society. And the list of problems continues.” (Ghiorghe, A., *Victor Negrescu, despre PNRR: „Nu a primit acceptul Comisiei Europene. Este un plan politizat, cu finanțări distribuite pe criterii politice”*, *Adevarul*, April 22, 2021).

The few opinion pieces on NRRP are not necessarily examining the NRRP, but the inability of the Romanian government to produce a approvable and reliable project for the European bodies.

“The news of the day about Romania’s *helplessness*: The European Commission *disagrees* with the project proposed by the government of Romania as part of the NRRP, regarding the access to natural gas grids of hundreds of villages, as announced by the PNL president Ludovic Orban. This is the *second large project rejected* by the Commission, after the one regarding the reconstruction of the irrigation system. In fact, one should decide between *helplessness, ignorance, and administrative chaos*. We surely need the money, even *their money* eventually, but we do not want, by all means, to get used to take it (for the country, as one would say during the campaign) *under their conditions, following their priorities and plans?*” (Unteanu, C., *De ce urâm fondurile europene?* Digi24, April 26, 2021). In the article entitled “PNL leaders, *dissatisfied* by the way the NRRP is being managed by USR-PLUS ministers”, the author claims that manyer party leaders asked prime-minister Cițu to “*take political control over NRRP*”, as USR-PLUS ministers failed to prepare and negotiate this plan with Brussels, the way liberals had wanted. (Eremia, R., *Surse: Liderii PNL, nemulțumiți de modul cum este gestionat PNRR de către miniștrii USR-PLUS. Ce i-au cerut premierului*. *Adevarul*, May 10, 2021).

As AUR voted *against* the NRRP, George Simion, AUR deputy, declared that „on behalf of a *sovereign Romania*”, all AUR MPs will vote against the NRRP, because “*common Romanians* would not benefit from this program.”

“Today, we are going to say no to a *damaging* policy which would throw us into an abyss, so I’m asking you, MP’s from both the power and the opposition, if you don’t want to see the *IMF* visiting us again, do not vote this program, on behalf of common Romanians who will not benefit from pompous programs called “digitalization” or “just transition.” (Ghiorghe A., *George Simion, la prezentarea PNRR în Parlament: Spunem „nu” acestui plan, în numele românilor.*, Adevarul, May 26, 2021).

Following European Commission's observations on the NRRP, senator Claudiu Târziu, co-president of AUR (Alliance for the Union of Romanians), accused the government of “*treason*” and requested the immediate *dismissal* of the entire government for being “the sole responsible for the development of the NRRP”. He said that minister Cristian Ghinea must *be dismissed* even before the dismissal of a government which bears the responsibility for the “*shameful rejection* for the third time of the NRRP, which *compromises* Romania in the European Union.” He accuses the government of things like “*incompetence*”, “*irresponsibility*”, “*crass lack of expertise*” and, first of all, “the lack of an authentic *Romanian vision* in a *European context*”. “Such an enormous failure is unacceptable. I demand president Iohannis to admit his share of guilt for what seems to be HIS GOVERNMENT’S biggest failure.” (News.ro., *Claudiu Târziu cere demisia Guvernului: „Respingerea rușinoasă, a treia oară, a PNRR compromite România în UE”*, Adevarul, June 11, 2021).

The lexical analysis of the public actors suggests that one of the words that describe the communication on NRRP and the subsequent media coverage is *conflict*, frequently going from an aggressive discourse to insults, from both the governmental coalition representatives and the opposition leaders.

(4) Topic coverage in the media

Each of the six pillars of the NRRP was operationalized into several dimensions, reflected in the use of several keywords: (1) transition to a green economy (*green*); P2 - Digital transformation (*digitization, certificate, electronic ID.*); P3 - Intelligent, sustainable and inclusive economic growth; P4 - Social and territorial cohesion (*transportation [highway, express road, road], region, metropolitan, UAT, county, irrigation, pensions*); (5) Institutional health and resilience (*hospital, doctor, health, Covid19, vaccination, epidemy*);

(6) Children, youth, education and competence (*school, college, university, pupil, student, professor, education*)

	Cristian Ghinea	Raluca Turcan	Florin Cîțu	Lucian Bode	Adrian Oros	Vlad Voiculescu	Adina Vălean	Kelemen Hunor	Dan Barna	Alexandru Nazare	George Simion
irigații	57	4	4	0	24	0	0	0	13	0	0
drumuri	48	1	4	0	10	0	0	0	5	0	0
pensii	42	179	57	80	4	15	6	18	6	1	10
investiții	39	8	15	0	11	8	0	5	2	2	2
școli	34	4	8	0	9	4	0	0	0	0	0
transport	26	0	5	0	3	3	17	1	5	0	0
economic	19	9	6	3	5	1	10	1	0	11	0
reforme	16	38	19	19	0	5	21	1	1	1	3
sănătate	15	3	6	0	1	44	1	1	1	0	0
digitalizare	13	20	0	1	2	1	0	0	0	1	2
educație	11	1	3	0	4	0	0	1	3	0	0
medic	11	7	3	0	1	15	0	0	0	0	0
organizare teritorială	8	2	3	0	12	7	0	0	6	0	0
verde	8	1	2	0	17	0	2	0	6	0	0
sustenabilitate	1	4	10	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
electronic	1	13	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0

Figure 4: Cross-tabulation: Key actors and key themes

The most frequently mentioned topic was by far the pensions, which is one of the favorite campaign topics of the PSD. In a Facebook post cited by Digi24, Marcel Ciolacu accused Cîțu of *promising* the European Commission to *abolish* early retirement and *increase* the retirement age. This approach brings back the favourite topic that appeals to PSD traditional voters. „Although no one had asked them to, the Cîțu government informed Brussels about their intention to *quit* enforcing the law regarding a *raise* in pensions, to abolish early retirement and *increase* the retirement age.” Ciolacu wrote on facebook. He claims that „PSD is categorically *opposing* these intentions” by „all legal means”. (R.,K., *Ciolacu îl acuză pe Cîțu că s-ar fi angajat în fața CE că va desființa pensia anticipată și va crește vechimea necesară pensionării*. Digi24, May 21 2021).

In the opinion article entitled “Orban *lies* to our face. He considers us *stupid* and *easy to manipulate*” the author suggests that Ludovic Orban is *deliberately lying* to the people. Among manyer issues, the one that stands out – pensions. “On EC’s request, Romania is required to withdraw the Law No 127/2019 and not increase pensions. In Orban’s opinion, these are not EC’s

requests. *What are they, then?*" (Vlaston, S., *Orban ne minte în față. Ne consideră proști și ușor de manipulat. Adevarul*, May 27, 2021).

The President of the PSD National Council, Vasile Dîncu declared on June 15 2021 that private interests were found within the annexes of the NRRP. He specifically addresses the pensions issue, stating that a reform of the pensions system is necessary but it has to be correlated with a national development plan. "We will present an alternative plan, created within the Department of Labour and Social Protection of PSD, we will contribute with ideas of what is to be done in order to comply to economic efficiency, a better management of the pension fund and also non-discrimination and social cohesion." (Adam, G., *Vasile Dîncu acuză interese private în PNRR: "Acest lucru vine din faptul că s-a refuzat să se facă transparent"*, Antena3, June 5 2021).

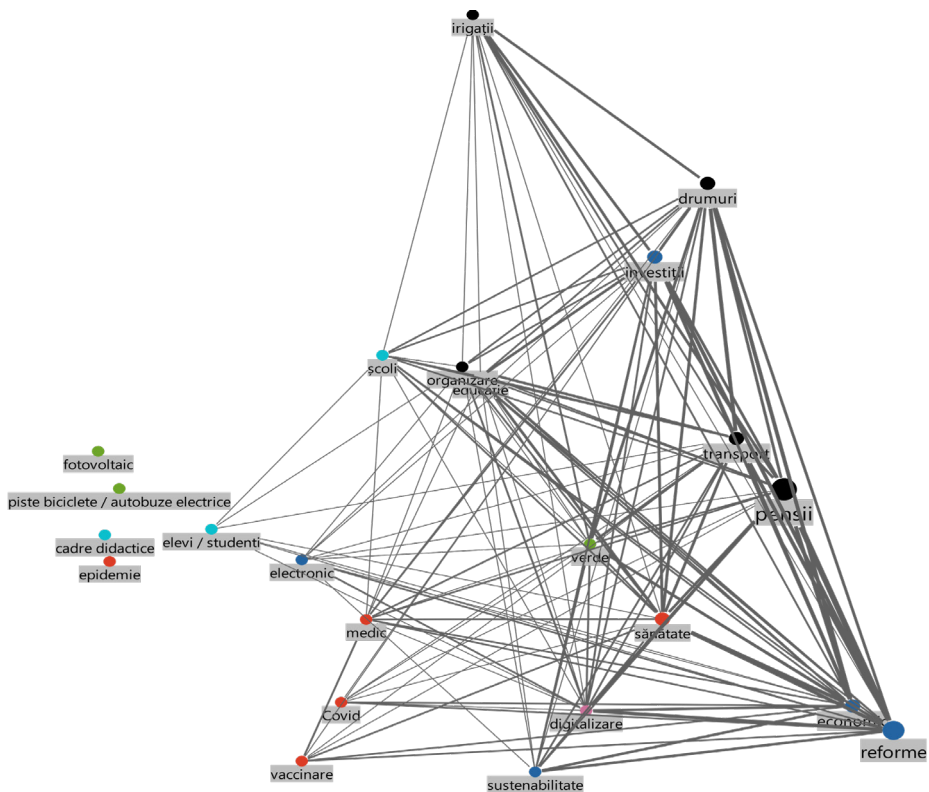


Figure 5: Network map of the most prominent topics of the NRRP debate

Another major topic of the NRRP debate and subject of controversy was the *irrigations* chapter. The minister of agriculture, Adrian Oros, declared for Digi24 that despite the *observations* of the European Commission regarding the planned irrigation funding included in the NRRP, Romania will *continue* sustaining this project. Vice-prime minister Dan Barna explained that the European Commission *requested changes* in the NRRP, considering that irrigations do not constitute a *reform* helping “*resilience after COVID.*” “We will continue presenting technical aspects before the Commission.” “If things support *climate* objectives(...) we have answers to all the observations issued by the Commission.” Agriculture minister Adrian Oros explained for Digi24: “We really wrote projects which comply to Commission’s requests and we’ll continue sustaining our case” (Pavaluca, L., *Adrian Oros: România își susține în continuare proiectul cu irigațiile, sunt convins că o să obținem cele 2,5 miliarde de euro din PNRR*, Digi24, April 22 2021).

Alfred Simonis, leader of PSD deputies, accused minister Cristian Ghinea that he disconnected his phone to watch the movie Terminator exactly when the European Commission was sending their *observations* regarding the NRRP. “But you are not Arnold Schwarzenegger, you are rather Benny Hill”, said Alfred Simonis. Mr. Simonis then used this opportunity to attack Mr. Ghinea for sending an “*absurd*” plan to Brussels, a plan which will continue deepening *discrepancies* between regions. “You sent a plan (...) conceived by companies directly interested in their own projects, you dedicated hundreds of millions to bike trails in villages without sewing systems, training programs worth hundreds of thousands of euros, billions for consultancy for your companies.(...) And for all these, you cut from the poor people and agriculture, you freeze pensions and salaries.” “In your opinion, *retirement* should come with the *death certificate* and you say it with a smile on your face.” (Cojan, L., *Simonis, ironic la adresa lui Ghinea: Nu sunteți Arnold Schwarzenegger, ci mai degrabă Benny Hill*, Digi24, June 14 2021).

Marcel Ciolacu attacked the Agriculture minister for failing the NRRP agriculture sector, especially the irrigations, in a press conference in Craiova. “We left for Brussels to negotiate seven billion, Ghinea and Oros got there with 3.8 billion and they came back with zero euros for Romanian agriculture.” Ciolacu suggested that Adrian Oros should leave.” You can’t go

to Brussels with Ceausescu's plans and do agriculture today as they did it in the sixties(..) I repeat, Poland included irrigation funding in their NRRP, Bulgaria, Hungary, did the same, not to mention Spain and Portugal, which are already in the lead. (*Ciolacu: Am plecat la negocieri pentru 7 miliarde, au ajuns domnii Ghinea și Oros la 3,8 și s-au întors cu 0 euro pentru agricultură*, Digi24, June 12 2021)

Conclusions

The Romanian media coverage of the NRRP builds mainly on the political discourse of the public actors who used the NRRP debate to gain visibility or to campaign. The use of negative emotions and the lexic of conflict are dominant, and the analysis and contextualization usually lack from the news stories.

As Romanian mass media represents a primary mechanism that conveys information about European affairs to the general public, one might have expected a balanced, analytical approach towards a topic of the highest national interest. Furthermore, there is little (if any) coverage of the Romanian NRRP in the international media, which, by all means, could only be accessed by the higher educated. Instead, public communication about the NRRP, as reflected by the media, generated a lot of confusion and misleading, due to biased information, heavily marked by populism and political interest, as a result of media polarisation. The causes for this polarisation are diverse but they mostly originate in media ownership, which is more or less transparent. This is an ongoing problem of Romanian media, which proves once again the limitations of a media system which lacks a strong, independent sector.

Under these circumstances, the NRRP media coverage showed a rather emotional approach of a technical, strategic plan, due to the fact that the discourse proposed by a divided political class was subjected to the aims of an everlasting political campaign. Conflict, confrontation and mutual accusations represented the main ingredients of communication.

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