

PECULIARITIES OF THE LOCAL ELECTIONS IN SEPTEMBER 2020. ANALYSIS ON DOLJ COUNTY*

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Abstract: The local elections of September 2020 have known some peculiarities generated, first of all, by the sanitary pandemic that humanity is currently facing. Thus, after the postponement of the elections from June to September, the Covid 19 virus forced political parties, more than ever in recent years, to move their electoral activities online. It should be noted that the Internet has forced political competitors to improve their political discourse and communicate with the electorate, as well as the resulting campaign strategies to be the most desired. Dolj County was no exception to these rules.

Our study aims to highlight the peculiarities of this election year, so that the phenomenon can be better understood by the general public.

Keywords: elections, pandemic, peculiarities, electoral campaign, political parties.

The pandemic situation has determined some European countries to postpone the elections for next year, as is the case in England, or only by a few months, as in the case of France, Poland, but also Romania. This postponement was aimed at organizing the electoral process¹ at a time when the restrictions would have been less, and the first wave of the pandemic already managed.

The local elections in 2020 took place differently from all previous rounds. The Coronavirus pandemic in the element that has generated new, very special challenges in terms of organizing the election campaign and the local elections on September 27. Obviously, the context was the same for the general elections at the end of the year, but also for the by-elections in June 2021.

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¹ Mihaela Bărbieru, *Tehnici de campanie electorală folosite în România după anul 1990. Comparație și analiză*, in "Arhivele Olteniei", New Series, no. 34/220, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Publishing, p. 240

In this context of the Coronavirus pandemic, declared by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, and given the international epidemiological situation of the spread of SARS-CoV-2, the Romanian Government adopted the draft emergency ordinance by which the date of the local elections has been postponed and their preparation procedure has been simplified. Thus, by Emergency Ordinance no. 44 of April 6, 2020 on the extension of the mandates of the local public administration authorities in the period 2016-2020, some measures for the organization of local elections in 2020, as well as the amendment of the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 57/2019 on the Administrative Code, published in the Official Gazette no. 297 of April 8, 2020, several changes were made. By art. 1 of the ordinance provided that the local elections be initiated within 6 months from the expiration of the state of emergency, and by art. 3 that the mandates of the local public administration authorities have been extended until the date of taking over, in accordance with the law, by the new local public administration authorities the mandates resulting from the elections provided in art. 1, but not later than December 31, 2020². The date of the elections was to be determined later, at the proposal of the Permanent Electoral Authority and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, but with the opinion of the National Committee for Special Emergency Situations³. In order to simplify the procedures for preparing the elections, the parties and candidates were required to present a single list of supporters, and the minimum number of signatures to be 25,000⁴. By way of derogation, there is also the possibility that the lists of supporters may be replaced by "proof of the deposit in the bank account of an electoral contribution amounting to at least 3% of the maximum amount allowed for the position for which an independent competitor is running or 50 minimum basic salaries for the electoral campaign at the level of the county or at the level of the Capital, where the candidate is running"⁵. Art. 7 also provided for the possibility of electronic submission of application files, in accordance with the law⁶. Also, through art. 8 of the ordinance, art. 151, al. 3 of Government Emergency Ordinance no. 57/2019 on the Administrative Code with the following content, it was stipulated: "The mandate of the mayor provided in par. (1) shall be exercised until the oath is taken

² Government Emergency Ordinance no. 44 of April 6, 2020 on the extension of the mandates of the local public administration authorities in the period 2016-2020, some measures for the organization of local elections in 2020, as well as the amendment of the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 57/2019 on the Administrative Code, published in the Official Gazette no. 297 of April 8, 2020, available at <http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/224731>

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ Of which at least 500 voters from counties and at least 1,000 from Bucharest.

⁵ For more details, see *Guvernul amână alegerile și prelungeste mandatele aleșilor locali până la 31 decembrie*, in "Ziare.com", available at <https://ziare.com/ludovic-orban/premier/guvernul-amana-alegerile-si-prelungeste-mandatele-alesilor-locali-pana-la-31-decembrie-1605591>; Art. 6 of GEO 44 of April 6, 2020, available at <http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/224731>

⁶ Art. 7 of GEO no. 44 of April 6, 2020, available at <http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/224731>

by the newly elected mayor. The mandate of the mayor may be extended, by organic law, in case of war or catastrophe or other situations expressly provided by law when, due to these situations, elections cannot be organized under the conditions of par. (1)”⁷.

The date for the local elections was set by the Romanian Parliament for September 27, 2020, the Chamber of Deputies being the decision-making body. We note the USR amendment on the establishment of two voting days, but it was rejected in Parliament. Subsequently, the draft of the Parliament became Law no. 135 of July 16, 2020, published in the Official Gazette no. 626⁸.

As already mentioned, the local elections in 2020 took place under special conditions. For the smooth running of the election campaign and the pandemic voting process, the Government has adopted a decision on health protection rules, so that the risk of Coronavirus infection is reduced. Thus, it was forbidden to organize rallies, demonstrations, concerts and other types of meetings in open spaces, wearing a mask and disinfecting hands was mandatory for all participants in events, distance between participants and a limit of maximum 50 persons indoors, for a period of maximum two hours, limitation to a maximum of 100 participants for outdoor events, with the delimitation of the perimeter by visible signs and ensuring an area of 4 sqm per person. For the campaign actions carried out in the street, the number was limited to a maximum of 6 participants, and for door-to-door actions to a maximum of two people with the application of the hygiene rules provided by law. Wearing a protective mask was mandatory for all persons, regardless of the action⁹. The security measures implemented were constantly accompanied by messages from state authorities and political leaders urging the population to exercise caution and responsibility. "It is for the first time when, in Romania, the electoral election and the related campaign will take place in exceptional conditions, generated by the COVID-19 epidemic. A premiere that no one wanted, but to which we must adapt as best we can. The main objective is to organize both the events of the election campaign and the election itself, in conditions of maximum health security, to protect human health and reduce the risk of infection of participants in the election process. This is possible if we all follow a set of rules and measures designed to ensure an optimal framework for conducting electoral actions under special conditions. There are precedents, there

⁷ Art. 8 of GEO no. 44 of April 6, 2020, available at <http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/Detailii/Document/224731>

⁸ Art. 1 of Law no. 135 of July 16, 2020 on establishing the date of elections for local public administration authorities in 2020, as well as measures for their proper organization and conduct, published in the Official Gazette no. 626 of July 16, 2020, available at [LEGE 135 16/07/2020 - Portal Legislativ \(just.ro\)](http://www.lege.ro/leges/135-16-07-2020)

⁹ *Alegeri Locale 2020/ A început campania electorală; măsuri speciale – în pandemie*, available at <https://www.agerpres.ro/politica/2020/08/28/alegerilocale2020-a-inceput-campania-electorala-masuri-speciale-in-pandemie--563447>

are countries that have organized several types of elections in this pandemic, without this having subsequently a negative impact on the number of infections. Elections are the foundation of democracy. Even if we live in one of the most complicated periods in the recent history of Romania, democracy cannot be suspended or placed in parentheses, because it guarantees us all the rights and freedoms we enjoy”¹⁰.

For the states where elections were organized, implicitly also for Romania, an absenteeism was observed as an effect of the voters' fears to go to the polls in these conditions. In addition, the restrictions at the time of voting strengthened the conviction of some not to go to the polls. However, perhaps the biggest challenge for local authorities was to ensure that quarantined persons took part in the vote, all the more so as the universal nature of the vote had to be respected even in these conditions, and the risks to public health had to be minimized. Basically, the electoral authorities were forced to seek a balance between the exercise of democratic rights and health risks. Regarding Romania, absenteeism at the polls saw a moderate manifestation in the local elections, we can say that it was even comparable to the previous election, but for the parliamentary elections a historical minimum was reached, only a third of the voters on the permanent electoral lists exercising the right to vote.

Under a different than usual election campaign, on-line political practices, which have become somewhat commonplace for political parties and voters alike, have led to improved political communication and the development of on-line electoral strategies. We can say, without error, that the electorate has never known better information during an election campaign than now. Another conclusion we reached in our analysis is that on-line political communication techniques will experience an increasing development, regardless of the future pandemic situation. At the moment, politicians and voters can also say that they are quite familiar with the new trends, so that things can only evolve in the sense of development and improvement. We already know that the Internet has become the tool with multiple possibilities of exploitation that is put both in the service of the citizen and in the service of the state¹¹. In political action in recent years, candidates have stepped up their on-line actions and developed campaign strategies so that political messages reach as many voters as possible, especially in the last year when on-line virtual medium has been the lifeline for all areas, including political campaign actions, where the electorate communicated and was informed more than ever¹². On the Facebook platform, one of the most used in the on-line environment, the campaign

¹⁰ Administrația Prezidențială (Presidential Administration), *Conferința de presă susținută de Președintele României la 26 august 2020*, available at <https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/declaratii-de-presa/conferinta-de-presa-sustinuta-de-presedintele-romaniei-domnul-klaus-iohannis1598459893>

¹¹ Mihaela Bărbieru, *Criteria for political communication and mass influence in the Internet age*, in Anuarul Institutului de Cercetări Socio-Umane „C.S. Nicolăescu-Plopșor”, no. XXI/2020, Bucharest, Academiei Române Publishing, p. 136.

¹² *Ibidem*.

was structured and planned in advance, specific posts were made according to a predetermined calendar, and increased visibility was cascaded by amplifying a post with specific content through other subsequent posts with similar content. Videos uploaded directly to the platform and embedded in posts were used for greater exposure¹³. In order to attract as many voters as possible, political parties and candidates have built more effective electoral messages, and in order to achieve their ultimate goal, that of creating an emotional connection with the voter or a potential voter, they have clear, short, believable messages, with important, contrasting topics, addressed to the target audience and constantly repeated¹⁴. However, we believe that the maximum development of on-line campaigns has not yet been reached.

In Dolj County, the electoral campaign for the local elections in September 2020 was in accordance with the general lines that we have already set out in our research. The electoral rallies were limited, according to the norms in force, the sanitary protection measures imposed were instituted, according to the norms in force, the sanitary protection measures imposed were instituted, the political actions were moved to the on-line environment, and the voting day was organized strictly within the limits of the norms drawn by the authorities.

The main political parties that contested the primacy in Dolj County were the Social Democratic Party (PSD), the National Liberal Party (PNL) and the 2020 USR-Plus Alliance. In addition, the Popular Movement Party (PMP), Pro Romania, USR-Plus, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE), the Romanian Ecological Party (PER), the National Peasant Christian Democratic Party (PNTCD), Pro Europa (social-liberal), the Humanist Power Party (PPU), the Alternative for National Dignity Party, the Right Alternative Party, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians Party also won the local election. For Craiova, no less than 11 candidates have registered in the fight to win the mayor's office¹⁵, and for the Local Council of Craiova were submitted lists of candidates from political parties and formations, but also independent candidates: PNL, PMP, PSD, USR-PLUS Alliance, Pro Romania, Romanian Ecological Party (PER), Alternative for National Dignity Party, ALDE, Right Alternative Party, Humanist Power Party (PPU), National Peasant Christian Democratic Party (PNTCD), Alliance for the Union of Romanians Party and 3 independent candidates – Isidor Răducea, Dumitru Mănescu and Călin Roșu¹⁶.

¹³ Mihaela Bărbieru, *Election campaign and political communication through social media*, in "Revista de Științe Politice. Revue des Sciences Politiques", no. 70/2021, Craiova, Universitaria Publishing House, p. 102.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ 10 of them belonged to political parties and one was independent.

¹⁶ *AlegeriLocale2020/Dolj: 11 candidați pentru funcția de primar al Craiovei; unul este independent*, în "Agerpres", available at <https://www.agerpres.ro/politica/2020/08/25/alegerilocale-2020-dolj-11-candidati-pentru-functia-de-primar-al-craiovei-unul-este-independent--561698>

Table 1.

Candidates registered for the local elections in September 2020 for the mayoral seat of Craiova

CRT. NO.	Surname, first name of the candidate	The political party to which the candidate belongs
1.	Lia Olguța Vasilescu	Social Democratic Party (PSD)
2.	Lucian-Bernd Săuleanu	USR-PLUS Alliance
3.	Antonie Solomon	Romanian Ecological Party (PER)
4.	Nicolae Giugea	National Liberal Party (PNL)
5.	Eduard-Ionuț Ciceu	Pro Romania
6.	Anișoara Stănculescu	Popular Movement Party (PMP)
7.	Marian-Daniel Păloiu	Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE)
8.	Marin Costache	Humanist Power Party (PPU)
9.	Janina Mariana-Micu	Alternative for National Dignity Party
10.	Emil-Iulian Mladin	Right Alternative Party
11.	Adimaria Claudia Luminița Simoiu	independent candidate

Source: The author

The candidates with chances for the mayoral seat were Lia Olguța Vasilescu, PSD candidate, who returned to the race after holding this position in 2012–2017 and former Minister of Labor, Nicolae Giugea, university professor, PNL candidate, Lucian-Bernd Săuleanu, university professor and Dean of the Dolj Bar, USR-PLUS Alliance candidate and Antonie Solomon, former mayor of the municipality in the period 2004–2010, 2011–2012, from PER. For the position of President of the Dolj County Council, PSD together with ALDE supported the PSD candidate, the vice-president of the CJ at that time Cosmin Vasile, for PNL Alexandru Gîdăr, history teacher, and for USR-Plus – Silviu Bratu, sociologist¹⁷. All campaign activities and voting day organization were carried out in accordance with the measures taken by the authorities in view of the pandemic situation, and the messages of political and independent candidates for voters and participants in campaign activities were prudent and in compliance with health rules. The communication and transmission of political messages was mostly done on-line, especially on the Facebook platform¹⁸, where all candidates communicated through political pages and personal accounts. This facilitated the interaction with voters from all over Dolj County, the politicians being able to address the masses of voters more easily. On-line communities have proven to be stronger and more numerous in these conditions than in previous elections, but we believe that not only the pandemic has contributed to this on-line effervescence, but even the development trend of this segment which is manifested due to high Internet consumption, in all socio-professional plans, at the level of the

¹⁷ *Alegeri locale 2020. Cine candidează pentru funcția de primar al Craiovei. Află care este ordinea pe buletinul de vot*, in "Mediafax.ro", available at <https://www.mediafax.ro/politic/alegeri-locale-2020-cine-candideaza-pentru-functia-de-primar-in-craiova-afla-care-este-ordinea-pe-buletinul-de-vot-19574767>

¹⁸ Mihaela Bărbieru, *The implications of social media in political communication. A new form of electoral campaign*, in "Revista Universitară de Sociologie", Year XI, no. 1(21), Craiova, Beladi Publishing, 2015, p. 43.

county, the country and not only. The type of on-line electorate in Dolj County is part of the classic parameters of the on-line consumer electorate.

As the local press mentioned: “The September 27 election was a good opportunity for political parties to measure their strength and adjust their firing in view of the parliamentary elections knocking at the door. The good news is practically for everyone: PSD won the positions of mayor of Craiova and president of Dolj County Council, through Lia Olguța Vasilescu and Cosmin Vasile, and won, by score, 78 to 30, the match of mayors in the county. The Liberals took into account two important municipalities and increased their number of elected members in the County Council and the Local Municipal Council, in the latter forum having the chance to form the majority together with USR-PLUS, and PMP, PER, Pro Romania they managed, for the first time, to send their representatives in the county legislature, the ecologists managing to double the surprise at Local Municipal Council (CLM) Craiova as well”¹⁹.

The results of the elections for Dolj County gave the victory to the social democratic party, with 78 mayoralties²⁰ and 667 local councilors. It was followed by the liberal party, with 30 town halls²¹ and 448 local councilors, the Popular Movement with two town halls²² and 58 local councilors, and a mayor’s office was won by the mayor of PNTCD (Dioști). As for the PMP, following the death of the elected mayor on election night (Sadova), the party was left with only one commune won, because in the June 2021 by-elections the voters nominated a PNL winner for Sadova commune. Other political parties that obtained mandates of local councilors were Pro Romania with 71, USR-Plus with 25, ALDE with 20, PER with 13, PNTCD with 4, Pro Europa with 3, Green Party with 2 and PPUSL with²³.

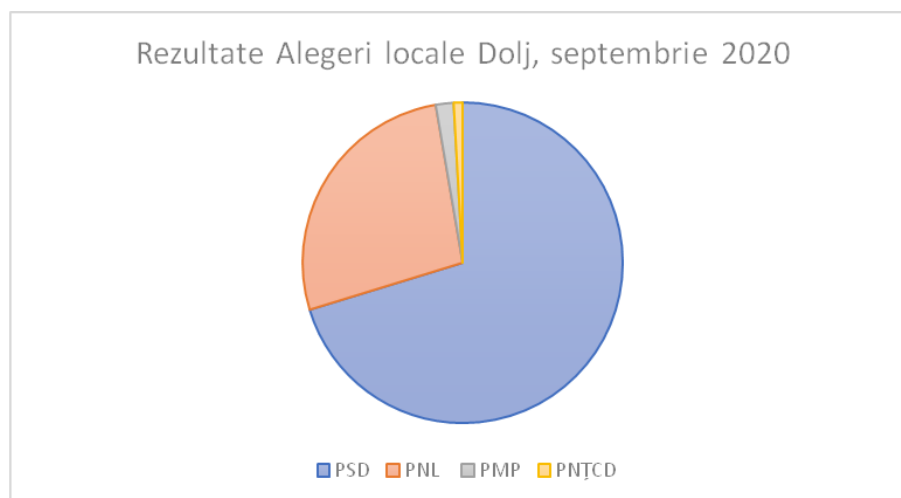
¹⁹ Invazie de câștigători la alegerile locale din Dolj, in “Indiscret”, available at <https://www.indiscret.ro/2020/09/30/invazie-de-castigatori-la-alegerile-locale-din-dolj/>

²⁰ 5 cities – Craiova, Filiași, Segarcea, Bechet și Dăbuleni. 73 communes – Almăj, Amărăștii de Jos, Amărăștii de Sus, Argetoaia, Bârca, Bistreț, Brabova, Brădești, Bratovoiești, Breasta, Caraula, Catane, Cârcea, Cârna, Carpen, Celaru, Cerăt, Cernătești, Cetate, Cioroiași, Ciupercenii Noi, Coțofenii din Dos, Coțofenii din Față, Daneți, Desa, Dobrești, Dobrotești, Drăgoteși, Fărcaș, Galicea Mare, Ghercești, Ghidici, Ghindeni, Gighera, Gângoiva, Giubega, Giurguța, Goicea, Goiești, Grecești, Ișalnița, Izvoare, Leu, Lipovu, Măceșu de Jos, Mârșani, Melinești, Moțăței, Murguși, Negoii, Orodel, Ostroveni, Perișor, Piscu Vechi, Pleșoi, Podari, Rast, Robănești, Sălcuța, Scaești, Seaca de Pădure, Secu, Siliștea Crucii, Șimnicu de Sus, Tălpaș, Terpezița, Teslui, Țuglui, Unirea, Valea Stanciului, Vârtop, Vârvoru de Jos, Vela. In Filiași and Brădești, PSD won with over 90% of the votes.

²¹ Afumați, Apele Vii, Băilești, Botoșești-Paia, Braloștița, Bucovăț, Bulzești, Calafat, Călărași, Calopăr, Castranova, Coșoveni, Drânic, Galiciuica, Gogoșu, Întorsura, Măceșu de Sus, Maglavit, Malu Mare, Mischii, Plenița, Poiana Mare, Predești, Radovan, Rojiște, Seaca de Câmp, Sopot, Teasc, Urzicuța, Verbița.

²² Sadova and Pielești.

²³ For more details, see Autoritatea Electorală Permanentă, județul Dolj, available at <https://prezenta.roaep.ro/locale27092020/romania-pv-final>



Graphic 1. Graphic representation of the results of the September 2020 elections, Dolj County
Source: The author

For the Dolj County Council, appointed by the voters was the PSD candidate, Cosmin Vasile, supported by the PSD-ALDE Electoral Alliance (42.1%). The next ranked were the candidates PNL (32.5%), USR-PLUS (7.09%), Pro Romania (5.4%) and PMP (4.7%)²⁴. The 36 seats for the County Council were distributed as follows: PSD-ALDE – 16 seats (39.6%), PNL – 13 seats (31.7%), Pro Romania – 3 seats (6.9%), PMP – 2 seats (5.6%), PER – 2 seats (5.4%). Although USR-PLUS obtained 6.7% of the votes, it has no representatives in the county council because it fell below the electoral threshold of 7%, necessary in the case of alliances²⁵.

The results of the elections in Craiova did not offer big surprises, Lia Olguța Vasilescu (PSD) winning the third term as mayor with 34.29% of the valid votes cast (30,062 votes). The next ranked were the PNL candidates with 24.55%, PER with 20.74%, the USR-PLUS Alliance with 12.80%, PRO Romania with 2.27% and PMP with 2.24%. The turnout was lower than in the previous election by just few people over 10,000²⁶. 89,480 people voted (35.77%), and of these 1,752 were null²⁷. Out of the 11 candidates, it is interesting to note the independent candidate who ranked 7th with 1.18% (1,038 votes), surpassing in percentage candidates of some political parties. The Craiova Local Council was formed by only 4 political

²⁴ The rest of the percentages were divided among the other political parties.

²⁵ Cum și-au împărțit PSD și PNL localitățile din Dolj, in Gazeta de Sud, available at <https://www.gds.ro/Local/Dolj/2020-09-28/cum-si-au-impartit-psd-si-pnl-localitatile-din-dolj/>

²⁶ At the local elections in 2016, in Craiova, 99,554 of the persons registered on the permanent electoral lists went to the polls.

²⁷ For more details, see Autoritatea Electorală Permanentă, județul Dolj, available at <https://prezenta.roaep.ro/locale27092020/romania-pv-final>

formations, the others failing to obtain the necessary votes for the electoral threshold – PSD with 10 seats, PNL with 9 seats, USR-PLUS Alliance with 5 seats and PER with 3 seats²⁸.

As a final conclusion, in the local elections of September 2020 we can say that the turnout was not significantly affected by the health situation. We note that the procedures were somewhat complicated by the measures taken by the authorities for health protection, and the voting day took place in an organized manner throughout the country. However, there were some cases in which the flow was slowed by the crowd at the polling stations due to the application of health protection measures, but the incidents were not major. Masks and disinfectant were provided for participants in the electoral process in all polling stations.

The organization of the elections was done in a difficult context, with a complex legislative framework, sometimes with multiple changes or which created confusion at the moment. Legislative changes have failed to cover all the issues raised by such a pandemic context, but we believe that the situation has been difficult for all states that held elections during this period. From a pandemic perspective, local elections have been a real challenge for all actors implied in this process, including voters.

²⁸ AlegeriLocale2020/Dolj: PSD, PNL, Alianța USR-PLUS și PER au obținut mandate în CL Craiova, in Agerpres, available at <https://www.agerpres.ro/politica/2020/10/02/alegerilocale2020-dolj-psd-pnl-alianta-usr-plus-si-per-au-obtinut-mandate-in-cl-craiova-rezultate-partiale-aep--584428>