

# More than meets the eye? Coalition formation in a strong-leader local government system

Cristina Stănuș<sup>1\*</sup>, Andrei Gheorghiță<sup>2</sup>, Horațiu Rusu<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Department of International Relations, Political Science and Security Studies, 34 Calea Dumbăvii, 550324 Sibiu, Romania

<sup>2</sup> Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Centre for Social Research, 2A Lucian Blaga Str., 550169, Sibiu, Romania

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## ABSTRACT

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This paper approaches local coalition formation at the second tier of local government in Romania within the specific context of super-election year 2024. It aims to answer a few questions concerning the coalition preferences of local actors and the coalition bargaining process that are pertinent to this context. Combining quantitative data concerning the outcomes of the elections with qualitative data, the description of this case also offers some insights for coalition research. These are linked to the challenges of measuring local coalitions, the particulars of coalition formation in strong-leader local government systems, and the matter of coalition congruence.

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## 1. Introduction

The 2024 local elections in Romania have brought about a series of firsts for Romanian local politics. First, as a delayed consequence of the pandemic, for the first time since the reinstatement of local self-government in 1992, there was to be a significant delay between election day (June) and the moment when newly elected officials were supposed to take office (end of October). The natural consequence was that coalition formation negotiations would take place during the election campaigns for legislative and presidential elections or even after the results of these elections were announced. Second, while nationally established parties have managed to relatively maintain their dominant position, the 2024 elections have brought about electoral

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\* Corresponding author, contact address: cristina.stanus@ulbsibiu.ro (C. Stănuș).

unsuccess for smaller centrist parties, which were replaced by the up-and-coming populist right Alliance for the Union of Romanians (*Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor*, affiliated with the European Conservatives and Reformists, AUR-ECR<sup>1</sup>). Third, local coalition-making has largely happened in the context provided by the unexpected results of Romania's first round of presidential elections and the unprecedented annulment of the entire presidential election process by the Constitutional Court. Following the electoral success of the populist right in the parliamentary elections and the first round of the presidential elections, established centrist parties have formed a grand national coalition intended to keep the populist right outside government. It includes: the centre-left Social-Democratic Party (*Partidul Social Democrat*, affiliated with the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, PSD-SD), the centre-right National Liberal Party (*Partidul Național Liberal*, affiliated with the European People's Party, PNL-EPP), and the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (*Uniunea Democrată a Maghiarilor din România*, affiliated with the European People's Party, UDMR-EPP). The Save Romania Union (*Uniunea Salvați România*, affiliated with Renew Europe, USR-Renew) has opted to remain outside this coalition, as it was unwilling to give up having its candidate in the repeated presidential elections. However, the three parties have a long and complicated history of cooperation and conflict in both local and national politics, which makes the notion that even a 'crisis-mitigating' national coalition is easily transferred at the local level highly unlikely. Hence, it is unclear whether a *cordon sanitaire* is being formed to keep the AUR-ECR away from political decision-making at all levels of government.

This paper approaches, in a rather descriptive manner, local coalition formation at the second tier of local government in Romania. It seeks to answer a few questions. Given the institutional setting, who is the typical coalition *formateur* in Romanian county politics? What types of coalitions are preferred? Are county coalitions congruent with the existing national coalition? Is there a tendency to exclude factionalised political parties from coalition bargaining? Is there a systemic decision not to cooperate with the populist right (pariah) parties? Or has the AUR-ECR managed to convert its

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<sup>1</sup> For analytical purposes, throughout this paper, where available, the name of the party is followed by that of the European political family to which it is affiliated.

electoral success into coalition potential and gain influence over county politics and policymaking? How public is the coalition bargaining process?

This paper departs from typical coalition literature, in that it does not aim to refine coalition theory. Instead, it seeks to explain a particular case at a particular moment. Hence, it combines descriptive statistical analysis with qualitative document analysis. This approach treats local coalition formation as an event connected to features of the local political competition and national politics. Thus, any conclusions might not be applicable in other national contexts.

The following section of this paper discusses the institutional and political context. The third section theoretically frames this view of local coalition formation. The fourth section discusses the research questions and data employed. The fifth section presents and discusses the results. The concluding section summarises the findings.

## **2. The institutional settings at the second tier of local government in Romania**

The Romanian subnational government includes two local tiers and no regional tier. The second tier of local government—the counties—responds to the NUTS-3 level, thus being the direct equivalent of French *départements* and German *Landkreise* (Heinelt and Bertrana 2011). Romanian counties are an example of relative weakness in terms of vertical (intergovernmental) power relations (Stănuș and Pop 2011). This has resulted in the county governments becoming less visible in the eyes of the citizens. Therefore, citizens are voting in county elections based on their party preference for national elections; Meanwhile, parties treat counties as a testing ground for their electoral strength in parliamentary elections (Dragoman and Zamfira 2018). Stemming from this, a sensible expectation would be that coalition formation at the county level follows the patterns of national coalition-making. However, anecdotal evidence gathered by national media suggests otherwise.

From a horizontal power relations perspective, both formal and informal aspects clearly allow for Romania's second tier of local government to be labelled as a strong-leader system (Stănuș and Pop 2011). Such an arrangement can constrain coalition formation. Among the formal rules, the

organisation of the executive branch at the second tier is paramount. Romanian counties are similar to the mixed (semi-presidential) regimes (see, for example, Elgie 2004; Roper 2002). The directly elected president of the county council proposes the budget and administers its implementation, coordinates public service provision, and leads the county administration. The directly elected county council holds decision-making power over aspects such as the county budget, taxation, organising service provision, borrowing, development strategies, and public investments. Thus, the legislative and executive depend on each other for fulfilling political goals. The county councillors elect from among themselves two vice-presidents to supposedly share the executive burden with the president. The president cannot formally influence who is elected, but he or she decides what tasks to share with the vice-presidents and how to divide them. He or she can also ask the council to create the position of county administrator, occupied by a person of his or her choosing, who will then exercise executive tasks for the duration of the president's term in office. Therefore, should the councillors choose vice-presidents who are viewed unfavourably by the president, he or she can choose to only share minimal (insignificant) executive tasks. Moreover, the council can decide to reject the creation of the county administrator office. Thus, a majority in the council can enter a conflict with the president, while neither of the two parties can recall the other or strip it of tasks. Both actors are incentivised to cooperate to avoid a stalemate that would undermine their ability to pursue their political and policy goals. The result of this cooperation is visible in the political affiliation of the vice-presidents, as well as in the existence of a county administrator. There are, however, no incentives to formalise the coalition agreement; the only exception is the pre-electoral coalition. The president gains the advantage by having the power to assign or delegate tasks to the vice-presidents chosen by the council. He or she informally becomes a coalition *formateur*, even if representing a smaller party. This also acts as a strong incentive to form stable coalition arrangements for the duration of an entire term. Since the direct election of the president was introduced, it has become possible that majority coalitions in county councils would be hostile to the presidents.

Among informal aspects, the phenomenon dubbed by Romanian media 'the local barons' is relevant for county-level coalition bargaining. Local politicians elected to the office of president of the county council (the

‘barons’) have sought informal channels to exercise influence not granted to them formally (Ștefan *et al.* 2004) and act as an interface between local elected officials/their local party organisation and national government/the national leadership of their party. The typical ‘baron’ combined the position of president of the county council with the leadership of the county branch of a centrist national party for a long period of time (a succession of electoral cycles). The local party organisation involved was usually able to win the mayoral position and majorities in local counties in a significant number of municipalities in the county, as well as a governing majority in the county council. This has made ‘local barons’ highly influential in national politics, with political bargaining within and between national parties over central government positions frequently being described by analysts and media as a process of accommodating the ‘local barons’ requests. In time, the influence of the ‘local barons’ has partially faded due to changes in electoral rules and voter preferences. While some have left office, several of the so-called ‘local barons’ remain in office in a more adversarial context. They are, nevertheless, in a position to informally, but significantly, influence county coalition bargaining.

Combining these institutional traits with electoral rules favouring the established national political parties to the detriment of independents and local parties, resulting in a nationalised local party system (Stănuș and Gheorghiță 2022), it seems, *prima facie*, that very little ever changes in Romania’s county politics. Nevertheless, since 2008, much has changed. In the 2008 elections the party of the newly elected president of the county council has not managed to obtain a governing majority in the council in five counties; in four of these counties a coalition hostile to the president was eventually formed (Stănuș and Pop 2011). In the 2024 elections the party of the president was unable to obtain at the ballot box a majority in 23 counties, which suggests increased competition among established parties. This significantly opens the field for county coalition bargaining. However, we know very little about the strategies employed by the involved actors and the outcomes of the coalition formation negotiations.

### 3. Local coalition formation: a literature review

The classical (rational choice-based) explanations of coalition formation, the size-principle and policy-range theories, emphasise the office-, policy-, and vote-seeking behaviours of political parties/the actors involved. From an office-seeking perspective, minimal winning coalitions, in terms of either voting majorities or the number of parties involved, are preferred by actors, while minority government is avoided (Browne and Franklin 1986; Laver and Schofield 1998; Martin and Stevenson 2001; Riker 1962). From a policy-seeking perspective, coalitions with the smallest distance on a policy dimension (the minimal connected winning coalition), with a small ideological range (the closed minimal range coalition), or including the median party (responding to the median voter) are preferred (Axelrod 1970; Browne and Franklin 1986; Laver and Schofield 1998; Leiserson 1966; Müller *et al.* 2003; Strøm 1990). Vote-seeking perspectives suggest that the expectation of reward in the next election shapes coalition formation (Strøm 1990). In practice, a trade-off is involved between the office-, policy-, and vote-seeking goals of the actors involved (Strøm 1990). Classical explanations of coalition formation have been criticised because they were tested on the same data that was used to generate them in the first place (Bäck 2003; Skjæveland, Serritzlew, and Blom-Hansen 2007). Moreover, critics have pointed out they tend to see coalition formation as a one-time event separated from electoral competition and the electoral costs of incumbency and political parties as unitary actors (Bäck 2003; 2008; Denters 1985; Laver and Shepsle 1996; Ștefuriuc 2009; Strøm 1990). Another criticism has concerned the assumption that the objective of involved actors is always a majority, although minority government or oversized coalitions are not uncommon (Albala 2018; Browne and Franklin 1986; Müller *et al.* 2003; Niikawa 2018; Strøm 1990).

Therefore, and somewhat departing from the rational choice roots of coalition research, a wide variety of other explanations have also been explored, especially in relation to the incidence of oversized coalitions. Looking at the bargaining power, it was suggested that a ‘dominant player’ (should it exist) or the largest party is always at the centre of a minimal winning coalition (Laver and Shepsle 1996; Van Roozendaal 1990). From a different point of view, considering formal and informal procedural rules at

play, it was suggested that the party taking the position of coalition *formateur* has the upper hand and can pick ideologically compatible partners (Martin and Stevenson 2001; Warwick 1996). Considering previous positive governing experience, it has been suggested that incumbent coalitions are likely to perpetuate when no other alternatives can be found or familiarity and bargaining costs (time, energy, and political capital) are considered (Martin and Stevenson 2010; Strøm, Budge, and Laver 1994; Warwick 1996). Considering intra-party politics, it was suggested that internal uncertainty increases parties' preference for oversized coalitions to insure the government against defections (Niikawa 2018). It was also suggested that there are institutional constraints to coalition formation, pointing to the combination of bicameralism and semi-presidentialism and its role in explaining oversized coalitions (Niikawa 2018).

Starting from this, the literature has eventually turned to the possibilities of large-N studies provided by local governments, to the extent a functional equivalent of a national coalition government can be identified locally (Laver, Rallings, and Thrasher 1987). Previously, the local level has sometimes been avoided because of the perception that it is less politicised (Debus and Gross 2016). There are, however, numerous national contexts with a high degree of politicisation at the local level and a fully or partially nationalised local party system, such as Croatia, Cyprus, Hungary, Moldova, or the Netherlands (Beschieru 2022; Dobos 2022; Kirlappos 2022; Kolk 2022; Komar and Živković 2022; Škarica and Tomić 2022).

These studies have also pointed out the fluidity of the concept of coalition at the local level, depending on the specific type of local government system and the formal relationships it prescribes between the local executive and legislative. The bulk of these studies focuses on municipalities (first-tier local governments) in countries with a committee leader or a collective form of local government system (see the discussion on the distinction between the two in Heinelt and Hlepas 2006). In these cases, it has been quite difficult to pinpoint the local functional equivalent of a coalition in council-committee systems (see, for example, the case of Sweden, Bäck 2008). The ability to identify a coalition depends on the extent to which formal rules compel the involved actors to formalise it. Thus, the literature distinguishes between 'technical' cooperation among actors (limited to the elections of occupants of certain local offices), the declared intentions of

binding common policy goals, and actual written agreements over binding common policy goals (Martinussen 2002). It also observes that local coalitions are more likely to be formalised and easily visible in very specific contexts (Martinussen 2002). In the opposite direction, a study on Portugal suggests some form of coalition bargaining happens even in contexts where there is no formal need for a coalition (Camões and Mendes 2008). Sub-national governments that adopt the strong leader form have received less attention (with the notable exception of Debus and Gross 2016; Gross and Debus 2018). Moreover, local coalition formation is unique in that the disintegration of a coalition does not necessarily necessitate the formation of a new one, as parties may choose to continue with ad hoc coalition-making until the end of their term (Debus and Gross 2016).

Extant quantitative literature on local coalitions has explored the influence of office- and policy-seeking behaviours on coalition formation in an institutionally constrained context (Bäck 2003; Gravdahl 1998; Olislagers and Steyvers 2015; Skjæveland, Serritzlew, and Blom-Hansen 2007; Steunenberg 1992). Thus, studies on local coalitions in Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Israel, the Netherlands, and Norway have suggested that, while obtaining office-related benefits is important for local actors, they seem to prefer larger-than-minimal coalitions (Gravdahl 1998; Olislagers and Steyvers 2015; Skjæveland, Serritzlew, and Blom-Hansen 2007; Škvrňák 2021; Steunenberg 1992; Tuttnauer and Friedman 2020). In some cases, this goes as far as to create oversized coalitions, sometimes in contexts where a party has already obtained a working governing majority at the ballot box (Gravdahl 1998; Tuttnauer and Friedman 2020). It has been suggested that minimal coalitions are preferred when formal coalition agreements, covering the occupants of relevant local positions, are necessary (Martinussen 2002). However, high electoral volatility also plays a role in this, as it is found to increase the chances that a formal coalition agreement is concluded (Martinussen 2002). While some of these studies suggest that office-seeking and policy-seeking explanations work together to explain local coalitions (Bäck 2003; 2008; Giannetti and Pinto 2018; Martinussen 2002), sometimes finding the first to be more relevant than the other (Škvrňák 2021; Steunenberg 1992), others do not take into account the policy-seeking explanations (Olislagers and Steyvers 2015) or find them to be irrelevant (Tuttnauer and Friedman 2020).



Studies on local coalitions also identify other relevant explanatory factors from the actor-oriented perspective. Thus, the presence of a ‘dominant party’ seems relevant in the Netherlands (Steunenberg 1992), while evidence points to a preference to perpetuate an incumbent coalition in Belgium, Denmark, Italy, or Sweden (Bäck 2003; 2008; Giannetti and Pinto 2018; Olislagers and Steyvers 2015; Skjæveland, Serritzlew, and Blom-Hansen 2007). Trust relationships between the local politicians involved also influence local coalition formation (Škvrňák 2021; Tuttnauer and Friedman 2020). Familiarity with (or lack of) and (dis)trust in representatives of controversial challenger parties influence decisions to include them in local coalitions, alongside previous coalition experience involving other parties (Leander, n.d.). Internally democratic parties and factionalised parties are more likely to be omitted from coalitions (Bäck 2008), and, when included, it is more likely that coalitions are oversized (Škvrňák 2021). Another direction of analysis has looked at systemic decisions not to cooperate with certain ‘pariah’ parties (to institute a *cordon sanitaire*) and found them to influence the probability that a minimal coalition is formed (Geys, Heyndels, and Vermeir 2006). In the same vein, but using qualitative methodology, a recent study suggests policy-consideration and vote-seeking objectives are invoked by local actors to justify their decisions not to cooperate with a controversial challenger (Leander, n.d.).

The literature also points to the influence of the institutional context in which local governments operate. Vertical power relations (intergovernmental relations) are found to influence local coalition formation in two ways. Firstly, where an upper level of government has significant decision-making power in relation to the local government and the multi-level institutional arrangement is more complex, local actors seek to form coalitions that are congruent with the coalition at the upper level (Germany, Debus and Gross 2016; Italy, Giannetti and Pinto 2018; Belgium, Olislagers and Steyvers 2015; Ștefuriuc 2009). However, congruence can diminish if more autonomy is granted to sub-national governments (Giannetti and Pinto 2018). The degree of symmetry between the national and local party systems also plays a role in attaining congruence (Ștefuriuc 2009). A different facet of this is the financial dependency of local governments, which seems to reduce the propensity of local actors to enter formal coalition arrangements (Martinussen 2002). Secondly, an

intergovernmental arrangement leaving little policy discretion to local governments is suggested to minimise policy considerations in coalition bargaining (Skjæveland, Serritzlew, and Blom-Hansen 2007).

The literature has also investigated the impact of horizontal power relations and emphasised the importance of the formal or informal coalition *formateur*. This has been studied in ‘strong leader’ local government systems, with a directly elected political leader of the local government (mayor). It was suggested that the leader’s party has higher chances of being included in a local coalition (Debus and Gross 2016; Gross and Debus 2018). From the same perspective, the organisational choices of the local government (if granted by the national government) also seem to influence local coalition bargaining (Martinussen 2002).

### 3. Research questions and data

In what follows, we explore how some of the findings in the literature apply to coalition formation at the second tier of local government in Romania. Thus, we pose several research questions. Some of these questions approach little-researched aspects in coalition literature, while others are meant to shed light on the specificities of the instance under study.

*RQ1. Who is the typical coalition formateur in Romanian county politics?* While institutional settings imply that the president of the county council is the likely coalition *formateur*, the situation is complicated by the direct election of the president using a plurality formula. This may theoretically lead to the situation in which the president is electorally weak (has obtained fewer votes than the largest party in the council), which in turn may impact coalition bargaining.

*RQ2. Is there a preference for oversized coalitions?* Research conducted in other national contexts suggests that, for various reasons, oversized coalitions seem to be preferred in local politics (Gravdahl 1998; Tuttnauer and Friedman 2020). Formal rules governing policy- and decision-making in Romanian county councils also create incentives for oversized coalitions, as key policy decisions can only be taken by a qualified majority in the council (two thirds of the councillors). Moreover, it is likely that the existence of a competitor which has obtained a simple majority at the ballot box (a dominant competitor) also influences this.

*RQ3. Do the resulting coalitions have small ideological ranges?* This connects to a significant difficulty of local government coalition research, namely the lack of data on the policy positions of local parties (Skjæveland, Serritzlew, and Blom-Hansen 2007). This also applies to the Romanian context. However, Romania's highly nationalised party system and the status of county elections as a final test before the parliamentary elections make it likely that there will be few differences in terms of policy positions between the county and national party organisations. Moreover, most coalition bargaining in 2024 took place after the unprecedented result of the 2024 parliamentary and presidential elections and the subsequent discursive polarisation of political parties and politicians into two camps: the populist right (the 'sovereignists') and the centrist parties (the 'pro-EU and pro-NATO' parties). Given this degree of discursive polarisation, it can be reasonably expected that there is, at least temporarily, a perceived congruence in policy positions among the two camps. Thus, it can be expected that the temporary perceived ideological alignment will impact local coalition politics.

*RQ4. Are county coalitions congruent with the existing national coalition?* Local coalitions differ because they form within a national bargaining context (Laver, Rallings, and Thrasher 1987). The literature has suggested that congruence is sought after if the autonomy given to subnational governments is limited (Debus and Gross 2016; Giannetti and Pinto 2018; Olislagers and Steyvers 2015; Ștefuriuc 2009), and Romania is a case of limited local government autonomy (see Ladner *et al.* 2019). Hence, we can reasonably expect some congruence. There is also another factor at play, namely the extent to which the discursive polarisation prevalent in national politics during county coalition bargaining has influenced the outcome.

*RQ5. Is there a tendency to exclude factionalised political parties from coalition bargaining?* This is linked with the lack of trust other actors may have in the ability of these parties to deliver (Bäck 2003; Leander, n.d.). However, there has been minimal research on this aspect of coalition bargaining. In the case of Romanian county politics in 2024, one political party that has managed to gain seats is easily identifiable as factionalized – the USR-Renew.

*RQ6. Is there a systemic decision not to cooperate with the populist right (pariah) parties?* A key aspect of Romanian politics after the 2020 surprise

entry into parliament of AUR-ECR concerns how established parties choose to deal with the populist right parties. In national politics, the approach has been so far of the *cordon sanitaire* type. AUR-ECR and other similar parties have been welcomed into key positions in parliamentary decision-making structures to the extent prescribed by existing formal rules while being excluded from consideration in coalition bargaining. There is the question of whether the *cordon sanitaire* approach has also been used in local politics.

*RQ7. Are coalitions informal and not publicly declared, informal and publicly declared, or formal? How public is the coalition bargaining process?* Coalition bargaining in national politics is a very public spectacle. Even when involved actors are trying to keep some of the details under wraps, the intense scrutiny of the media inevitably leads to disclosure of these details. Theoretically, county coalitions in Romania can be of three kinds: formal coalitions based on pre-existing formalised electoral or political alliances; informal coalitions that publicly declare their policy goals; and informal coalitions that are not publicly declared. Information on how this occurs at the local level is scarce.

To pursue these questions, there is a need to clarify the local functional equivalent of a coalition at the second tier of local government in Romania. In other words, it is necessary to determine what is being negotiated. Visible institutional constraints suggest that the two ‘vice-president of the county council’ positions and their tasks, as well as the county administrator position, need to be negotiated. However, in some cases, actors involved in coalition bargaining may also choose to negotiate the creation of a county administrator position. Moreover, different majorities in the council might be considered. Therefore, in certain situations, the focus of negotiations will be on establishing a simple majority, a move that will expedite the majority of decisions. In some other cases, especially if those involved estimate key policy decisions need to be taken during the current term in office, negotiations might be centred on building the qualified (two-thirds) majority needed for the key decisions. If more than two parties are needed to form the coalition, the county council's permanent committee chair positions will likely be negotiated.

Local coalition formation in the 41 Romanian counties is analysed at a single point in time, in the aftermath of the 2024 local elections. First, the official election results are examined quantitatively to determine who were

the successful competitors (winner of the county council presidency, parties gaining seats in councils and their shares of votes and seats) and whether the results create the need for a coalition. Second, desk research was conducted to collect information from official sources (e.g., the websites of the county councils) and local news media. This component has involved, for example, collecting information about the president and vice-presidents of the county council (political affiliation, tasks), the chairs of the permanent committees of the council (political affiliation), whether a position of county administrator was created, whether those involved in the negotiations have publicly communicated about the process, or whether details of the negotiations were passed on informally to local news media. The collected data is detailed and analysed in the following section.

## 4. Results

### *4.1. The results of the 2024 local elections and the potential for coalition bargaining*

The first step of the analysis looked at the potential for coalition bargaining in the 41 counties (see Table 1). The official results indicated that in all counties, the largest number of seats in the county council was obtained by one of the established parties (PNL-EPP, PSD-SD, UDMR-EPP) or an electoral alliance involving the PSD-SD and a partner (in two cases, PNL-EPP, and in a third case, the left-leaning Social Liberal Humanist Party – PUSL). These competitors were also successful in securing the position of president of the county council. In all counties except Botoșani, the same party has won the county council presidency and the most seats. Theoretically, this gives the newly elected president and her or his party advantage in coalition bargaining. However, in the three counties where an electoral alliance has secured the largest number of seats, there is still potential for the newly elected president and her or his party to depart from the pre-electoral arrangement and try to secure a better negotiation outcome for themselves, to the detriment of their partners.

The results of the election are, nevertheless, quite restrictive for the coalition formation process. The number of parties gaining seats in councils varies between three and five. In 20 out of the 41 counties, only three

political parties have gained seats in the council. In all these counties the three parties are the established PNL-EPP and PSD-SD and the populist right AUR-ECR. In five of these counties a coalition is needed to secure the simple majority in the council, leaving the established parties to decide whether they will cooperate with each other or open the door to the AUR-ECR. In the 16 counties where four political parties have gained seats, the situation is similar. In ten counties from this category, there is a need for a coalition to secure the simple majority. A coalition for the simple majority is needed in all counties where five political parties have gained seats. There are four counties where there is no need for a coalition, even if a qualified majority is desired. Two are Covasna and Harghita, inhabited predominantly by ethnic Hungarians, where the UDMR-EPP has secured a qualified majority in the council. The other two are Buzău and Galați, two counties where the PSD-SD is a dominant party. In all the other counties, should a qualified majority be deemed necessary, a coalition would be needed.

The populist AUR-ECR has gained seats and the chance to participate in coalition bargaining in all counties but Harghita. The USR-Renew, which is largely factionalised and is regarded as a difficult coalition partner in national politics, has gained seats in 16 counties. Given the small number of parties in council, it is likely that the established parties would at some point see coalition formation as a choice between a fragile coalition with a potentially unreliable partner to form the cordon sanitaire against AUR-ECR or a stable coalition with the potentially more reliable AUR-ECR. The next part of the analysis looks specifically at this.

Table 1. The potential for coalition bargaining after the 2024 county elections in Romania.

| County                 | Number of seats in council | Winner - council | No. seats winner | Party of winner-president | Congruence between winners | No. of parties in council | Populist right party in council | Fractionalized party in council | Coalition needed for simple majority | Coalition needed for qualified majority |
|------------------------|----------------------------|------------------|------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| <i>Alba</i>            | 33                         | PNL-EPP          | 17               | PNL-EPP                   | Yes                        | 3                         | Yes                             | No                              | No                                   | Yes                                     |
| <i>Arad</i>            | 33                         | PNL-EPP          | 13               | PNL-EPP                   | Yes                        | 5                         | Yes                             | Yes                             | Yes                                  | Yes                                     |
| <i>Argeș</i>           | 35                         | PSD-SD           | 16               | PSD-SD                    | Yes                        | 4                         | Yes                             | Yes                             | Yes                                  | Yes                                     |
| <i>Bacău</i>           | 37                         | PSD-SD           | 15               | PSD-SD                    | Yes                        | 4                         | Yes                             | Yes                             | Yes                                  | Yes                                     |
| <i>Bihor</i>           | 35                         | PNL-EPP          | 18               | PNL-EPP                   | Yes                        | 4                         | Yes                             | No                              | No                                   | Yes                                     |
| <i>Bistrița-Năsăud</i> | 32                         | PSD-SD           | 14               | PSD-SD                    | Yes                        | 4                         | Yes                             | No                              | Yes                                  | Yes                                     |
| <i>Botoșani</i>        | 33                         | PSD-SD           | 15               | PNL-EPP                   | No                         | 3                         | Yes                             | No                              | Yes                                  | Yes                                     |
| <i>Brăila</i>          | 31                         | PSD-SD           | 18               | PSD-SD                    | Yes                        | 3                         | Yes                             | No                              | No                                   | Yes                                     |
| <i>Brașov</i>          | 35                         | PNL-EPP          | 11               | PNL-EPP                   | Yes                        | 5                         | Yes                             | Yes                             | Yes                                  | Yes                                     |
| <i>Buzău</i>           | 33                         | PSD-SD           | 21               | PSD-SD                    | Yes                        | 3                         | Yes                             | No                              | No                                   | No                                      |
| <i>Călărași</i>        | 31                         | PSD-SD           | 17               | PSD-SD                    | Yes                        | 3                         | Yes                             | No                              | No                                   | Yes                                     |
| <i>Caraș-Severin</i>   | 31                         | PSD-SD           | 14               | PSD-SD                    | Yes                        | 3                         | Yes                             | No                              | Yes                                  | Yes                                     |
| <i>Cluj</i>            | 37                         | PNL-EPP          | 13               | PNL-EPP                   | Yes                        | 5                         | Yes                             | Yes                             | Yes                                  | Yes                                     |
| <i>Constanța</i>       | 37                         | PNL-EPP          | 15               | PNL-EPP                   | Yes                        | 4                         | Yes                             | Yes                             | Yes                                  | Yes                                     |
| <i>Covasna</i>         | 31                         | UDMR-EPP         | 22               | UDMR-EPP                  | Yes                        | 4                         | Yes                             | No                              | No                                   | No                                      |
| <i>Dâmbovița</i>       | 35                         | PSD-SD           | 22               | PSD-SD                    | Yes                        | 3                         | Yes                             | No                              | No                                   | Yes                                     |

| <i>County</i>    | <i>Number of seats in council</i> | <i>Winner - council</i>   | <i>No. seats winner</i> | <i>Party of winner-president</i> | <i>Congruence between winners</i> | <i>No. of parties in council</i> | <i>Populist right party in council</i> | <i>Fractionalized party in council</i> | <i>Coalition needed for simple majority</i> | <i>Coalition needed for qualified majority</i> |
|------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Dolj</i>      | 37                                | PSD-SD                    | 21                      | PSD-SD                           | Yes                               | 4                                | Yes                                    | Yes                                    | No                                          | Yes                                            |
| <i>Galați</i>    | 35                                | PSD-SD                    | 23                      | PSD-SD                           | Yes                               | 3                                | Yes                                    | No                                     | No                                          | No                                             |
| <i>Giurgiu</i>   | 31                                | PNL-EPP                   | 17                      | PNL-EPP                          | Yes                               | 4                                | Yes                                    | Yes                                    | No                                          | Yes                                            |
| <i>Gorj</i>      | 31                                | PSD-SD                    | 16                      | PSD-SD                           | Yes                               | 3                                | Yes                                    | No                                     | No                                          | Yes                                            |
| <i>Harghita</i>  | 31                                | UDMR-EPP                  | 24                      | UDMR-EPP                         | Yes                               | 4                                | No                                     | No                                     | No                                          | No                                             |
| <i>Hunedoara</i> | 33                                | PSD-SD                    | 16                      | PSD-SD                           | Yes                               | 3                                | Yes                                    | No                                     | No                                          | Yes                                            |
| <i>Ialomița</i>  | 31                                | PSD-SD                    | 17                      | PSD-SD                           | Yes                               | 3                                | Yes                                    | No                                     | No                                          | Yes                                            |
| <i>Iași</i>      | 37                                | PNL-EPP                   | 14                      | PNL-EPP                          | Yes                               | 4                                | Yes                                    | Yes                                    | Yes                                         | Yes                                            |
| <i>Ilfov</i>     | 35                                | Alliance PSD-SD & PNL-EPP | 22                      | PNL-EPP                          | Partial                           | 3                                | Yes                                    | Yes                                    | No                                          | Yes                                            |
| <i>Maramureș</i> | 35                                | PSD-SD                    | 15                      | PSD-SD                           | Yes                               | 5                                | Yes                                    | Yes                                    | Yes                                         | Yes                                            |
| <i>Mehedinți</i> | 31                                | PSD-SD                    | 18                      | PSD-SD                           | Yes                               | 3                                | Yes                                    | No                                     | No                                          | Yes                                            |
| <i>Mureș</i>     | 35                                | UDMR-EPP                  | 14                      | UDMR-EPP                         | Yes                               | 4                                | Yes                                    | No                                     | Yes                                         | Yes                                            |
| <i>Neamț</i>     | 35                                | PSD-SD                    | 16                      | PSD-SD                           | Yes                               | 3                                | Yes                                    | No                                     | Yes                                         | Yes                                            |
| <i>Olt</i>       | 33                                | PSD-SD                    | 20                      | PSD-SD                           | Yes                               | 3                                | Yes                                    | No                                     | No                                          | Yes                                            |
| <i>Prahova</i>   | 37                                | Alliance PSD-SD & PPUSL   | 13                      | PSD-SD                           | Partial                           | 4                                | Yes                                    | Yes                                    | Yes                                         | Yes                                            |



| <i>County</i>    | <i>Number of seats in council</i> | <i>Winner - council</i>         | <i>No. seats winner</i> | <i>Party of winner-president</i> | <i>Congruence between winners</i> | <i>No. of parties in council</i> | <i>Populist right party in council</i> | <i>Fractionalized party in council</i> | <i>Coalition needed for simple majority</i> | <i>Coalition needed for qualified majority</i> |
|------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Sălaj</i>     | 31                                | PNL-EPP                         | 11                      | PNL-EPP                          | Yes                               | 4                                | Yes                                    | No                                     | Yes                                         | Yes                                            |
| <i>Satu Mare</i> | 33                                | UDMR-EPP                        | 14                      | UDMR-EPP                         | Yes                               | 4                                | Yes                                    | No                                     | Yes                                         | Yes                                            |
| <i>Sibiu</i>     | 33                                | PNL-EPP                         | 10                      | PNL-EPP                          | Yes                               | 5                                | Yes                                    | Yes                                    | Yes                                         | Yes                                            |
| <i>Suceava</i>   | 37                                | PSD-SD                          | 17                      | PSD-SD                           | Yes                               | 3                                | Yes                                    | No                                     | Yes                                         | Yes                                            |
| <i>Teleorman</i> | 31                                | PSD-SD                          | 18                      | PSD-SD                           | Yes                               | 3                                | Yes                                    | No                                     | No                                          | Yes                                            |
| <i>Timiș</i>     | 37                                | Alliance<br>PSD-SD &<br>PNL-EPP | 20                      | PSD-SD                           | Partial                           | 3                                | Yes                                    | Yes                                    | No                                          | Yes                                            |
| <i>Tulcea</i>    | 31                                | PSD-SD                          | 13                      | PSD-SD                           | Yes                               | 3                                | Yes                                    | No                                     | Yes                                         | Yes                                            |
| <i>Vâlcea</i>    | 33                                | PSD-SD                          | 19                      | PSD-SD                           | Yes                               | 3                                | Yes                                    | No                                     | No                                          | Yes                                            |
| <i>Vaslui</i>    | 35                                | PSD-SD                          | 17                      | PSD-SD                           | Yes                               | 4                                | Yes                                    | Yes                                    | Yes                                         | Yes                                            |
| <i>Vrancea</i>   | 33                                | PSD-SD                          | 13                      | PSD-SD                           | Yes                               | 4                                | Yes                                    | Yes                                    | Yes                                         | Yes                                            |

## 4.2. *Coalition bargaining and its outcomes*

The analysis of Romanian county councils showcases the difficulties of identifying the functional equivalent of a coalition at the local level, which are frequently mentioned in the literature. Thus, what is being negotiated is locally defined. If a coalition is needed, the two vice-president positions are always subject to negotiations. In what concerns the positions of chairs of the council's permanent committees, there are two different approaches. The Administrative Code recommends that parties represented in the council are represented accordingly in the committees (using a proportional representation formula which local actors frequently label 'the political algorithm'). Local actors interpret this in two different ways. Some interpret this recommendation as applying to both the membership and the leadership (including positions like president and secretary) of the committees. In these counties, committee chairs' positions are not subject to coalition bargaining. In other counties the political algorithm is applied to the membership of the committees, while the leadership positions (frequently chairs, less frequently secretaries) are subject to coalition bargaining. The position of county administrator does not seem to be subject to coalition bargaining. In the 23 counties where a county administrator exists, she or he usually belongs to the same political party as the president of the county council. In Brașov County, a rather unusual situation exists, as a former USR-Renew vice-president of the county council is nominated for this office, despite his party clearly being in opposition.

An important lesson for researchers of local coalitions stemming from this analysis is that the visible division of negotiable offices between political parties does not necessarily denote the existence of a coalition, be it informal. In Vrancea County, the incoming PSD-SD president of the county council is apparently in conflict with some parts of the local party organisation. According to local media (Ziarul de Vrancea 2024), without prior negotiation, he surprises all participants at the inaugural council meeting by nominating for the vice-president positions councillors from the PNL-EPP and the AUR-ECR. He publicly justifies this proposal by the need to coalesce all political parties in the council around an ambitious plan to develop the

county. The council accepts his proposals, resulting in power sharing without the need for coalition bargaining.

*RQ1. Who is the typical coalition formateur in Romanian county politics?* To the extent relevant information on coalition bargaining is public, the typical coalition *formateur* at the second tier of local government in Romania is shown to be, as expected, the sitting president of the county council. There are, however, some intriguing exceptions to this. In Bacău, a broad coalition covering both the county council and the county capital is negotiated by the former president of the county council, a politician previously considered one of the ‘local barons’. In at least two other counties, local media suggest that a former president of the county council is influencing or trying to influence coalition bargaining. In the quite unusual case of Harghita, a county where the UDMR-EPP has an oversized majority obtained at the ballot box, an intra-party coalition between different territorial groupings is necessary and is, apparently, brokered by the national leadership of the party.

*RQ2. Is there a preference for oversized coalitions?* The outcomes of coalition bargaining are diverse (see Table 2). In 19 counties, a party obtained a simple majority at the ballot box. In 16 of these counties the winning party has decided to govern by itself, while in three others (Alba, Brăila, Mehedinți) an oversized coalition corresponding to the qualified majority was formed. It is quite likely that in these cases, for policy or political considerations, it was deemed necessary to ensure a working, qualified majority in the council. Furthermore, it is notable that all three coalitions comprise either the PSD-SD or PNL-EPP and the AUR-ECR. In two counties, Timiș and Ilfov, a pre-electoral coalition has obtained a majority at the ballot box (the equivalent of a minimal winning coalition in Timiș and an oversized coalition in Ilfov).

In the remaining 20 counties various options were pursued. In nine counties a minimal winning coalition was formed. There is also a county (Sibiu) where the coalition formed is in a minority in the council. In five counties, an oversized coalition was formed: one county with less than the qualified majority (Bacău), one with a qualified majority (Satu Mare), and three with more than the qualified majority (Botoșani, Mureș, and Neamț). There is an extremely oversized coalition in Neamț County, where the PSD-SD and PNL-EPP control together 31 of the 35 seats in the council. Four

counties can be placed into the category of minority single-party government. In two of these counties (Argeș and Iași) a few councillors belonging to the opposition parties were convinced to vote for the candidates of the winning party for the vice-president positions. In Caraș-Severin there seems to have been no negotiation, with the president of the county council publicly declaring that having no vice-presidents is more effective (Caraș Online 2025). In Constanța, only one vice-president, belonging to the same party as the president, has been elected. According to local media, the other parties in the council have been convinced that, once the parliamentary and presidential elections are concluded, negotiations will continue, and a coalition agreement will be concluded. None of these categories can adequately describe the case of Vrancea.

*Table 2. Types of government in Romanian counties, 2024.*

| <i>Type of government</i>        | <i>N</i> | <i>Counties</i>                                                                                                                        |
|----------------------------------|----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Minimal winning coalition        | 10       | Arad, Bistrița-Năsăud, Brașov, Cluj, Maramureș, Prahova, Sălaj, Suceava, Timiș, Tulcea                                                 |
| Minority coalition               | 1        | Sibiu                                                                                                                                  |
| Oversized, qualified majority    | 4        | Alba, Brăila, Mehedinți, Satu Mare                                                                                                     |
| Oversized < qualified majority   | 2        | Bacău, Ilfov                                                                                                                           |
| Oversized > qualified majority   | 3        | Botoșani, Mureș, Neamț                                                                                                                 |
| Minority single party government | 4        | Argeș, Caraș-Severin, Constanța, Iași                                                                                                  |
| Single party government          | 16       | Bihor, Buzău, Călărași, Covasna, Dâmbovița, Dolj, Galați, Giurgiu, Gorj, Harghita, Hunedoara, Ialomița, Olt, Teleorman, Vâlcea, Vaslui |
| Other                            | 1        | Vrancea                                                                                                                                |

There does not seem to be a preference for oversized coalitions at this tier of local government in Romania. However, there are two important points to consider. First, given the small number of parties represented in Romanian county councils, sometimes the number of votes a minimal coalition gathers can be significantly larger than the simple majority. Second, in seven counties, the coalition agreement also covers the government of the county's capital. Therefore, situations in which, at one tier of government, the coalition can be classified as minimally winning, while at the other tier it might be oversized, are common.

*RQ3. Do the resulting coalitions have small ideological ranges?* If we employ the centrist vs. extremist distinction, we find that twelve of the 20

coalitions analysed here have a small ideological range (see Table 3). Six of these are a coalition between the PSD-EPP and PNL-EPP, the two main parties in the national governing coalition. Five involve one of these parties in combination with either the UDMR-EPP (the third member of the current national coalition) or another ethnic minority political organisation, the Democratic Forum of Germans in Romania (*Forumul Democrat al Germanilor din România*, FDGR-unaffiliated). The last one is the three-party coalition between the PNL-EPP, UDMR-EPP, and USR-Renew.

Eight counties formed broad coalitions. In five cases a coalition between the PSD-SD and AUR-ECR was set up. In one case, there was a PNL-EPP and AUR-ECR coalition. In the remaining two cases, PSD-SD has entered a coalition with USR-Renew and AUR-ECR.

*Table 3. The ideological range of coalitions, by inclusion of extremist parties.*

| <i>Type of coalition</i> | <i>Main partner</i> | <i>Second partner</i> | <i>Third partner</i> | <i>Counties</i>                             |
|--------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| <i>Small</i>             | PSD-SD              | PNL-EPP               |                      | Timiș, Neamț, Bistrița-Năsăud, Botoșani     |
|                          | PNL-EPP             | PSD-SD                |                      | Ilfov, Brașov                               |
|                          | PNL-EPP             | UDRM-EPP              |                      | Cluj, Sălaj                                 |
|                          | PNL-EPP             | FDGR-unaffiliated     |                      | Sibiu                                       |
|                          | PNL-EPP             | USR-Renew             | UDMR-EPP             | Arad                                        |
|                          | UDMR-EPP            | PSD-SD                |                      | Mureș, Satu Mare                            |
| <i>Large</i>             | PSD-SD              | AUR-ECR               |                      | Brăila, Mehedinți, Prahova, Suceava, Tulcea |
|                          | PSD-SD              | AUR-ECR               | USR-Renew            | Bacău                                       |
|                          | PSD-SD              | USR-Renew             | AUR-ECR              | Maramureș                                   |
|                          | PNL-EPP             | AUR-ECR               |                      | Alba                                        |

Employing a more traditional perspective on the ideological range of a coalition and using affiliation with European political families as an organising criterion, this distribution is quite different (see Table 4). There are very few coalitions with a genuinely narrow ideological focus, while most cross the traditional left-right divide. Probably the most intriguing examples are those of Bacău and Maramureș. In Bacău, a complicated local political landscape has led to a coalition arrangement encompassing both the county council and the municipality of Bacău, involving both the USR-Renew and AUR-ECR. At the county level the coalition is oversized. In the

case of Maramureş, it is more likely that different considerations were at play, as the county coalition is a minimal winning one.

*Table 4. The ideological range of coalitions, by affiliation to European party families.*

| <i>Type of coalition</i> | <i>Main partner</i> | <i>Second partner</i> | <i>Third partner</i> | <i>Counties</i>                             |
|--------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| <i>Small</i>             | PNL-EPP             | UDRM-EPP              |                      | Cluj, Sălaj                                 |
|                          | PNL-EPP             | FDGR-unaffiliated     |                      | Sibiu                                       |
|                          | PNL-EPP             | USR-Renew             | UDMR-EPP             | Arad                                        |
| <i>Large</i>             | PSD-SD              | PNL-EPP               |                      | Timiş, Neamţ, Bistriţa-Năsăud, Botoşani     |
|                          | PSD-SD              | AUR-ECR               |                      | Brăila, Mehedinţi, Prahova, Suceava, Tulcea |
|                          | PSD-SD              | AUR-ECR               | USR-Renew            | Bacău                                       |
|                          | PSD-SD              | USR-Renew             | AUR-ECR              | Maramureş                                   |
|                          | PNL-EPP             | PSD-SD                |                      | Ilfov, Braşov                               |
|                          | PNL-EPP             | AUR-ECR               |                      | Alba                                        |
|                          | UDMR-EPP            | PSD-SD                |                      | Mureş, Satu Mare                            |

*RQ4. Are county coalitions congruent with the existing national coalition?* The nature of Romania's current governing coalition makes its replication locally unlikely. Together, or as part of a pre-electoral coalition, the three governing parties won in all counties. In 17 out of 20 counties that concluded a coalition agreement, one of these three parties also emerged as the second-placed competitor. The replication of the national coalition would have led to significantly oversized local coalitions. Moreover, there are frequently acrimonious relationships between the local branches of the PSD-SD and PNL-EPP. Consequently, no local coalition involves all three parties, and ten out of the 20 coalitions involve two of them. There is little talk in local politics about the need to maintain the national coalition in county and local politics. Moreover, as the election campaign for the parliamentary and presidential elections is still ongoing while coalition bargaining takes place, negative campaigning affects the relationship between the PSD-SD and PNL-EPP at the county level. The two parties frequently accuse each other of coalising with the AUR-ECR.

*RQ5. Is there a tendency to exclude factionalised political parties from coalition bargaining?* To respond to this kind of question, the obvious

approach is to seek instances in which the factionalised and difficult coalition partner USR-Renew is included/excluded from coalition bargaining. This has proved to be difficult, as in many counties there is little to no public information on coalition bargaining. It can be noted, though, that the USR-Renew and its allies have gained seats in 16 counties; the USR-Renew has entered into only three coalition agreements (approximately 1 for every 5 counties). An analysis of public information on coalition bargaining has revealed another way in which factionalisation within a political party influences coalition politics. In the case of Vrancea, factionalisation within the local PSD-SD branch likely led to the unusual outcome described above. At first glance, Bistrița-Năsăud appears to have a rather common PSD-SD – PNL-EPP coalition. However, *de facto*, only a part of the PNL-EPP councillors is cooperating with PSD-SD. In two of the minority government cases, Argeș and Iași, the winning party takes advantage of factionalisation within the AUR-ECR and convinces some of the AUR-ECR councillors to support the election of its candidates to vice-presidential seats.

RQ6. *Is there a systemic decision not to cooperate with the populist right (pariah) parties?* The electoral success of AUR-ECR, the main populist right party in Romania, in the 2024 local and European elections has led to some soul-searching within established parties on how to deal with this development. While the general tendency in county coalition bargaining seems to have been one of firstly exploring potential coalitions with established parties, pragmatic local consideration has led to the inclusion of AUR-ECR in eight coalitions. Given its presence in 40 out of 41 county councils, the AUR-ECR has a similar success rate in coalition bargaining to that of the USR-Renew (1 in 5 counties were represented). It is likely that some of the chances local branches of the AUR-ECR might have had to enter coalition agreements have been diminished/enhanced by their willingness to go against the public party line. Throughout the electoral campaign for the parliamentary and presidential elections, while coalition bargaining took place, the AUR-ECR national leadership has maintained its anti-system discourse and has asked local branches to not even be present for the election of county vice-presidents.

RQ7. *Are coalitions informal and not publicly declared, informal and publicly declared, or formal? How public is the coalition bargaining process?* This analysis has been challenging due to the limited information available,

primarily about the process of coalition bargaining and occasionally even its outcomes. Information about the process itself, coming from those involved in it, is only available in 14 counties. In the rest of the counties where bargaining took place, partial information was presented by local media withholding the identity of the sources. This is likely related to the fact that formal coalition agreements are not needed. Thus, the three formal coalition agreements were the outcome of pre-existing electoral alliances. In 7 counties, the parties do not publicly acknowledge the coalition, even though it exists.

## 5. Conclusion

This article has described and put into the context of coalition formation at the local government level literature the very particular case of Romania's second tier of local government. The approach is a descriptive one, yet some lessons relevant to local coalitions research can be inferred.

First, this case supports the points made in the literature about the difficulties of pointing out what a local coalition looks like (Martinussen 2002). It shows that when incentives to formalise a coalition agreement are lacking, measurement becomes difficult. In some of the local governments studied here, coalition agreements were never publicly acknowledged by the actors involved, most likely due to the charged environment of the ongoing parliamentary and presidential election campaigns. The analysis also indicates that the institutional framework influences the appearance of a coalition, which further complicates measurement. Different sets of governmental positions are subject to coalition bargaining across various local governments. This happens because the legal framework allows local governments to self-organise the policy-making structures (deciding on the number of council committees, applying recommendations for party representation in these committees, and determining whether to have a county administrator). The institutional framework also influences the formation of coalitions through the constraints it sets on local government decision-making. If key decisions can be made by the council with a simple majority, obtaining it would likely be the goal of coalition bargaining. If, like in the analysed case, larger majorities are necessary for key decisions, local



actors would likely pursue what is labelled by coalition literature an ‘oversized coalition’.

Second, this case has shown how the institutional framework of the strong-leader type of local government, combined with electoral rules, impacts coalition politics, in tune with findings in the literature on the impact of semi-presidentialism (Niikawa 2018). An important element concerns the identity of the coalition *formateur*. In this case, most frequently, the coalition *formateur* is the political leader of the local government; only on rare occasions does a different actor take the lead in coalition bargaining. The institutional framework also shapes the choice for a specific type of government arrangement. Only a few oversized coalitions could be identified at the second tier of local government in Romania, contrary to expectations formed based on the literature. Likely, this is due to the electoral rules and the subsequent small numbers of parties represented in county councils. In some of the cases studied here, considering the distribution of seats in the council, the number of seats corresponding to the minimal winning coalition is significantly higher than the simple majority. Beyond electoral rules, the strong-leader system has its peculiar influences on the choices of government arrangements. In two of the cases studied here, the political leaders of the local governments have decided to take advantage of the strong institutional position of their office, eschew coalition bargaining, and operate as a minority government (in one case without a council vote).

Third, this case illustrates there is more than one way to look at the issue of coalition congruence with other tiers of government. The literature has so far suggested that when local actors negotiate coalitions, they aim to attain congruence with coalitions at upper tiers of government, should the upper tier have significant decision-making power in relation to the local government or there be symmetry between the national and local party systems (Giannetti and Pinto 2018; Ștefuriuc 2009). In the case studied here, despite the limited autonomy of Romanian local governments, attaining congruence does not seem to be the purpose of county coalition bargaining. This is likely down to the basic reason that congruent coalitions would have been significantly oversized and impractical, given the dominance of established national parties over county politics. The fragmentation of the political landscape seems to also influence coalition bargaining. Examining

the finer details of the bargaining process reveals that quantitative analyses can easily misjudge congruence. In some of the counties analysed, the informal coalition agreement has included some first-tier local government units (typically the county capital). These were three-party coalitions in which the largest party and one junior partner divided their offices at one tier of government, while at the other tier of local government, the offices were divided between the largest party and the junior partner. A quantitative analysis, looking strictly at occupants of key offices to identify the composition of the coalition, would have deemed in these cases that the coalitions are incongruent.

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