

The Rise of Populism during the Pandemic: The Case of AUR in Romania

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the case of AUR a populist political party, that entered the political electoral arena during the COVID pandemic. The party's populist messages on social media activated an electorate that is receptive to the appeal of a nationalist anti-establishment party. Combining a description of the discourse, strategies, leadership and context coupled with an investigation of a nationally representative survey, the paper argues that AUR has succeeded to become an established party by mobilization of the national and transnational electorate through social media. We further show that AUR appeals to a predominantly male, young and anti vaccination electorate in a similar fashion to other voters of populist parties in Europe indicating that the Romanian political system witnesses the emergence of a new left-right gendered political cleavage.

Introduction

For many years, Romania did not have a parliamentary extremist political party. In 2020 this has changed: AUR entered as one relevant

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parliamentary political party that has a populist, Eurosceptic, anti-vaccine, unionist and nationalist agendas. The literature agrees that the emergence of populist parties is a result of a concatenation of contextual political and social factors that permeated the nationalist political orientations (Chiru et al. 2020, Laroze 2019, Mudde and Rovira 2017, Varga 2020, Wieringa and Meijers 2020). In this article we demonstrate that the rise of AUR (Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor, The Alliance for the Union of Romanians) is due to the changes of the international and national context of Romania. Moreover, the vote for AUR is gendered, namely that unvaccinated, uneducated, young men are the most likely supporters of this party.

In 2020, with the introduction of drastically restrictive rules due to the COVID 19 pandemic, several protests sparked the appearance of a populist anti vaccines social movement present on the streets and the social media (Digi24.ro 2020). Diana Șoșoacă and George Simion picked up on the anti vaccine discourse and turned it into a political message of a new political movement called the AUR (Gold) (Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor – The Alliance for the Union of Romanians). The two leaders had multiple declarations clearly against the restrictions and vaccination:

“Therefore, get out on the street and start protecting your children! Get out and defend yourselves, you will tragically die, vaccinated with products that you have no idea what they are and what effects they will produce” (Diana Șoșoacă quoted in Gândul 2021).

“AUR refuses dictatorship. The vaccination is not compulsory know. Join us, join AUR. One of the four pillars of AUR is freedom. We will always take it on the streets for freedom and for our rights” (George Simion quoted in Digi24.ro 2023).

In March 2020, to prevent the spread of the COVID19 coronavirus, unprecedented movement restrictions were imposed. Circulation during the night was prohibited, shops closed at 20:00 or at 18:00. The wear of sanitary masks in public places was compulsory. These decisions were reminiscent of the restrictions imposed by the communist authorities in

the days leading up to the December 1989 revolution. The imposing of measures, triggered a number of small-scale protests throughout the country. These were not unique to Romania. In several countries in Europe, the imposition of restrictions has had an important social and political impact. In France, protests to abandon the restrictions required by the fourth wave of the pandemic in autumn 2021 have been going on for eight weeks (RFI 2021). In Germany, protests took place in November 2020 (DW 2020a) but also in August 2021. In March 2021, more protests took place in several European cities in Croatia, Great Britain, Serbia, Switzerland and Germany (Digi24 2021a).

States in democratic decline accelerated their process of reducing political and individual freedoms. In Hungary, the government enjoyed increased powers during the austerity period and took advantage of this to implement its illiberal agenda. For example, the Orbán government cancelled the possibility of gender change for transgender people and passed through the Parliament, in an accelerated procedure, a series of measures aimed at changing the electoral rules in its favour (Index.hu 2020). In Poland and Romania, the state banned abortion, causing people to take to the streets and defy the restrictive conditions implemented by the coronavirus (CNN 2021).

Some anti-mask protests degenerated into violence and conflicts with the police and gendarmerie. Occasionally, the protests were orchestrated by conservative or far-right political parties and forces (Reuters 2021).

Following the 2020 parliamentary elections in Romania, AUR managed to gain parliamentary representation, passed the 5% electoral threshold and garnered 8% of the votes.

This article depicts the rise of a new populist party in Romania, during the restrictions imposed by the spread of the coronavirus. The rapid success of this new social movement in a typically conservative and nationalist political environment was unexpected (Europa Liberă 2020).

The main argument of the article is that AUR's success is the result of a combination of important transformations and events and appealed to a conservative male electorate. These involve strategies of electoral mobilization, international context and local political and social conditions. More precisely, by using strategies of grassroots activism and digital populism in a context of the pandemic, AUR managed to capture and own the anti-progressive, anti-feminist, Eurosceptic and anti-LGBT issues. Older topics included a unionist agenda and anti-Hungarian messages.

We hypothesize, that rise of AUR is not solely the consequence of a protest against the restrictions imposed by the Covid19 pandemic but a successful employment of digital populist strategies combined with favourable political opportunity structures. Our second hypothesis is that AUR manage to collect unrepresented supporters in a similar fashion to other supporters of populist parties in Europe. We expect that there will be a gender discrepancy between voters of AUR and other voters. We claim that the crisis generated by the pandemic and the digital media acted as catalysts for the activation of social and cultural preferences in line with AUR ideology.

The first section of the article will present the origin and development of AUR to comprehend the position of AUR in the Romanian party system, and obtain information about the transformation of AUR into a parliamentary party. Then we will explain the four factors that contributed its success. The last section explores the impact of the AUR on USR and analyses the impact on the party system.

Far-right parties in Europe

In the 20th and 21st centuries, there have been three moments that witness the rising popularity of the extreme right. In the interwar period, fascism embraced by some small political parties at the fringes of politics among

most states in Southern, Central and Eastern Europe (Domaradzki 2023, Mares 2023, Zgut-Przybylska 2023 Kuruc 2023). Countries like Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria or Poland had Nazi parties with anti-Semitic and pro-Christian messages. After the Second World War, in non-communist Europe, parties of the extreme right reappear as a counter-reaction to the left-wing social movements of students and workers, targeting mainly the increase of the immigrant workforce. At the same time in the 1970s, the populist Norwegian Progress party, the New Democrats in Sweden and the Danish Progress party criticized the fiscal policy of the welfare state (Widfeldt 2023). In the 1980s, extremist parties become extremely vocal against immigrants (Ignazi 1992).

The former communist Eastern European area is familiar with the resurgence of far-right parties (Bustikova 2018, Minkenberg 2017). After the fall of communism, nationalist parties reappear and enjoy the popularity of the electorate. FIDESZ in Hungary that started out as a party of young students and dissidents against communism turned conservative and far right nationalist by the early 2000s (Kingsley 2018, Patoka 2023) and it is the ruling political party since 2010. In Poland, PiS was one of the many nationalist parties that mushroomed after 1989 and in a few years managed to become larger political party (Fassoulas and Cotterell 2024, Sieradzka 2023). But the mobilization and rise of far-right movements is not a typical Eastern European phenomenon. The National Front in France, the People's Party in Austria and the Alternative for Germany emerged and a few of them dominate national political scenes. In the 2024 elections in France the National Rally and in Austria, the People's Party came out first garnering the highest amounts of votes (BBC, 2024). In the second round of the French parliamentary elections the National Rally occupied the third place (The Economist 2024).

After 2006, during the economic crisis, nationalist and Eurosceptic parties become popular in several European countries. In Hungary, Jobbik, a party that was extremist and currently is a centre-right party in

the making, was born from the coagulation of grassroots youth groups. In five years, it manages to get the second place in the parliamentary elections, and to maintain itself as an important party of the Hungarian political scene. Its popularity is caused on the one hand by the dissatisfaction of the society generated by the high costs of the transition to the market economy. We mainly referring to the social inequalities between Budapest, where a third of the country's population lives, and the other regions. On the other hand, the party manages to rely on anti-Roma and anti-Semitic nationalism coupled with a paternalistic view of the economy (Kim 2016, Pirro 2015).

In Romania, the intense nationalism cultivated by the Ceaușescu regime permeates all parties, except the UDMR (Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România, Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania), and include it in their electoral programs. The most vocal are the Party for the National Unity of Romanians, a Transylvanian nationalist party with an anti-Hungarian discourse, and the Greater Romania Party, which gain representation in parliament. Following the parliamentary elections of 2000, the Great Romania Party became the second largest party in Romania to disappear from the Parliament in the 2008 elections. The New Right party, founded in 2000, managed to coagulate a group of supporters but not enough to get seats in the parliament or at the local level. A report (Cinpoș 2012) on Romanian extremist parties argued that the lack of success of extremist parties is due to the fact that society tolerates racist attitudes and that public discourse is cluttered with racist and chauvinist statements that go unpunished. That is why the New Right or other parties are not successful. The report concludes that Romania is ready for an extremist party. The Romanian society of the 2010s, however, is different (Voicu et al. 2020). Racist, sexist and xenophobic public discourse is publicly sanctioned and conflicting value-based themes are much more discussed especially after the traditional family referendum in 2018 (Verseck 2021).

However, AUR, a nationalist party, became very influential. In its early days, it built its profile as a protesting, mobilizing, unionist party by adopting a discourse with varied themes, many borrowed from the electoral messages of populist movements in other countries (Soare and Tufiş 2019). At the beginning of its existence, the central theme of the program was the union with the Republic of Moldova. That is why the party was considered unionist. The leader of the party, George Simion, was involved in several protests and symbolic actions aimed at rapprochement and union with the Republic of Moldova (Digi24 2020).

Taking this extraordinarily rapid resurgence of the nationalist movement as a starting point, the article aims to answer the following important questions: What exactly explains the transformation of the AUR from a marginal party with a political message into a major parliamentary party? What is the relationship of AUR with other parties? What social background has the supporters of AUR?

To answer these questions, we advance these hypotheses:

1. The digital populist successful strategies, coupled with political internal and external opportunity structures and Romanians appetite for conservative values account for the success of AUR.
2. AUR is a reaction to the progressist debates since the 2018 referendum for the traditional family and the rise of USR
3. Gender is a determinant for the vote for AUR. AUR voters are more likely to be young uneducated unvaccinated men.

Literature review – emergence of new parties

New parties have a problematic relationship with democracy and its stability. After the Second World War, the democratic systems of Western Europe were worried that the emergence of new extremist parties could fuel political instability that ultimately led to the outbreak of the world

conflagration. Politicians were well aware of the fertile context of Germany's failed Weimar Republic for the emergence of extremist parties (Dyson 1975). Thus, stability and good governance came to be associated with a political system in which fewer parties could operate. The two-party system in Britain and the United States represented ideal cases where the nature of party competition created by electoral rules discouraged the emergence of new parties (Downs 1954).

Once a party system becomes stable, it becomes increasingly difficult for other parties to participate in the electoral game (Mair 1998). Established parties will impose electoral thresholds or impose rules that prevent parties from outside the system from entering parliament (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). But once democracy as a political system has divorced the principle of political stability so acclaimed by totalitarian regimes, the appearance of new parties becomes an indicator of good governance and improved quality of democracy. This change of perspective allows the access of new parties in the system without the fear of democratic decline. There are four reasons for the emergence of new parties. These are, on the change and conflict of values in society, second the political or economic crises, third the political opportunity structures and last and more importantly the rise of digital media as essential tools in electoral campaigns.

Changing values

This approach entails that the role of political parties is to be a mirror of the society in which they operate. When society changes, new political parties appear and old ones disappear. An example how values influence politics is the emergence of ecological parties that reflect the change in societal values regarding the exploitation of the environment. Environmental parties in Western Europe indicate a societal shift from materialistic values of survival and safety to aesthetic values and self-

expression (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). Value change began with the sexual revolution, the 1960s social movements for civil liberties in America and the student protests in Paris in 1968. According to Inglehart (1977) there are three types of societal values shared by almost all human societies. The first to form are the old traditional values which are belief in authority, in the hierarchical order and obedience to state authorities, submission to church authorities and attachment to national values. Here success in life depends on the level of obedience and faith towards religious and state authorities.

These values, following the industrial and national revolutions, were replaced by so-called materialistic values that replace religion and faith with rationality and the subjugation of nature by man by exploiting its resources to ensure the progress of humanity. A person with materialistic values sees success in the accumulation of possessions. The job is just a means of accumulation to get a house, a car and other goods. Most citizens in Europe have materialistic values. The new, post-materialist values are secular, critical of authorities, cosmopolitan, embracing diversity. The expression of identity, individual responsibility greatly influences the post-materialist lifestyle that is less based on the accumulation of material objects and is more based on the quality of life and life experiences. The success in life of a person with post-materialistic values is one in which the quality of life or the happiness that the workplace brings, the efficiency with which the authorities work is essential. The workplace is not a means to achieve success but a way to express your identity and have life experiences. From the combination of these three types of values, two camps are formed, two political currents: progressivism and traditionalism. In Romania, traditionalism is based on a combination of traditional and materialistic values. Traditional Romanian values are associated with religious faith, the glorification of some elements of the communist past such as order, lack of protests and nationalism (Voicu et al. 2020). Also, the accumulation of goods and their

possession are symbols of social status. The family is very important and it is one consisting of a man and a woman.

Progressive values are associated with secularization or distancing from the church and a critical look at how state institutions work. Communist national and economic values are condemned. Cosmopolitanism, openness to Western European values, interest in self-expression through work and lifestyle are characteristic of progressive movements.

For most societies, materialistic values are more important than post-materialistic values. But, thanks to a process of societal education and socialization, post-materialist values, which also include protecting the environment, criticizing the performance of democratic institutions and engaging in boycott and protest activities, are embraced and adopted by more and more people (Inglehart 1990: 310). The political representatives of these values are the Green parties (Miller 2022, Grant and Tiley 2019, Rudig 2019). These are the voices of citizens with post-materialist values who are in opposition to those with materialist values (Inglehart 1997: 243-252).

Environmental parties have a stable presence in Germany and in several countries occupy seats in parliament. Contrary to Miller's opinion that green parties are on the rise, they are stagnating (Miller 2022: 3). Green parties of the New Left have failed to become more popular due to the large parties adopting and implementing their environmental policies (Grant and Tiley 2019). That's why for several decades the green parties hardly pass the electoral threshold. But where they survived, they managed to consolidate their electoral support (Grant and Tiley 2019).

The influence of post-materialism on the formation of new parties is exerted especially on the ideological left. Inglehart who developed the theory of postmaterialist values avoids considering the effects of these changes in the right-wing ideological field (Ignazi 1992). Ignazi observes that we are witnessing the emergence of new and right-wing parties, a

process that Ignazi (1992) called the "silent counter-revolt". Ignazi suggests that there is a dialectical opposition between the values of postmodernism and traditional and modern values. The popularity of the new progressive left which is for animal rights, environmental protection, sexual liberation and immigration has attracted a backlash with the emergence of far-right parties (Ignazi 1992). Few new far-right parties have links to the fascism of the 1930s and 1940s. They have a neoconservative ideology that combines anti-parliamentary and anti-pluralist discourse with opposition to immigrants and other marginalized groups such as the transgender and LGBTQ community. Their ideology offers a worldview that is in opposition to the progressive left represented by environmental parties (Inglehart and Flanagan 1987, Girvin 1988).

Both types of parties compensate for the failure of traditional parties to represent the preferences of the electorate and do so by including citizens in the party's decision-making process (Ignazi 1992). In Italy, in the 2013 parliamentary elections, the Movimento Cinque Stelle achieved third place based on the electorate's dissatisfaction with traditional and corrupt parties (Mosca 2014).

Another feature of the populist electorate is that it is composed mostly by men. In Norway, the older men who feel are left out and climate deniers support conservative parties (Krange et al. 2018). One consistent finding in World Values Survey studies is that women tend to vote for left-wing parties while men support more right-wing politicians (Inglehart and Norris 2000). Gender remained an important predictor for the support for populist right-wing parties (Hareveld et al. 2015, Abi-Hassan 2017). Coffe et al. 2023 confirm this finding on the supporters of Vox in Spain. They argue that masculinity and sexism are the intermediating factor explaining the support for populist parties by men.

In Romania, two political parties represent the new left and right. These are USR and AUR. USR appeared first originating from a progressive social movement against corruption and supporting the EU

integration (Dumitru, 2022). They gained parliamentary representation in 2016 and in 2024 their presidential candidate, Elena Lasconi, a woman, came in second place, defeating the Social Democratic Party candidate by a few thousand votes. AUR entered the parliament four years later, but with a radically different agenda strongly Eurosceptic and populist. The leaders of AUR were often accusing USR of being pro LGBT or being pro-European (Parvu 2023). The next section refers to crisis as a catalyst for the emergence of new parties.

The crisis as a factor in the emergence of new parties

The economic crisis of 2008-2012 had a major impact on democratic systems in southern Europe. In Spain the Indignados protests led to the formation of PODEMOS, thus a social movement turned into a party that changed the two-party system into a three-party format. In Greece, Syriza, a left-wing party born out of anti-austerity social movements, and Golden Dawn, a far-right party, rose to prominence during the economic crisis by blaming the European Union and immigrants for the country's problems. In 2015, in the midst of the immigration crisis to Europe, Jobbik (the translation is Better) a right-wing populist party from Hungary, becomes the second largest party mainly because of the active anti-immigration campaign but also for the tough position towards the Roma community.

It is obviously far too simplistic to consider an economic or societal crisis as the sole determining factor for the rise of these parties. Several crises and events must be considered. The political parties in southern Europe went through a crisis of representation (Ignazi 1992, Spourdalakis 2014) due to specific events such as the corruption scandals in Italy (Mosca 2014). There was the disillusionment with the Hungarian socialist party whose leader Gyurcsány was recorded as having lied in the election about the economic state of the country (Magyar 2013). Finally the poor management of the economic crisis (Bedock and Vasilopoulos 2015) and

the 2015 immigrant crisis contributed to the decline of traditional parties and the rise of political forces that promised simple solutions to societal problems and ensure safety.

The opportunity structures and phases of institutionalization

Crisis and the gradual change of values are important processes that transform a political system (Inglehart 1990, Ignazi 2002, DelaPorta 2022). There are however several rules that lower the threshold of access to the parliament for new parties. Government instability, a lower number of elections and a higher district magnitude increase the chances for parliamentary representation (Chiru et al. 2020).

Digital media provided assistance for the mobilization for new political parties. They have been very active online to mobilize supporters and keep them informed about party activities, visits and actions in the parliament. New European political parties such as Movimento Cinque Stelle, Podemos, Syriza and AUR have been far more avid users of social media to reach out to their supporters, than other political parties (Mosca 2014, Barlai 2012, Iglesias and Alonso 2021, Soare 2023).

In order to be successful a party has to go through phases of party development. New political parties navigate through three stages of institutionalization that require three types of leaders (Harmel and Svasand 1993). The mobilization stage requires a charismatic leader that can gather momentum and be visible for the electorate. Once the party entered the parliament comes the organization phase in which a more bureaucratic leader has to take over to create local offices and maintain the electoral support. Finally, comes the legitimation phase when the party is coopted in government or enters in coalition with more established political parties. This phase requires a leader that has parliamentary experience and can negotiate with the other elites as well as compromise the ideology of the party.

The nationalist political parties in Eastern Europe employed various strategies of institutionalization. FIDESZ has successfully mobilized and captured its electorate through offline mobilization. The party was engaged in a long duration process of building a network of local party organizations and grassroots groups called Civic Circles (Enyedi 2005). PiS started out as a small parliamentary party a splinter from a reformist party (AWS). They have built a rhetoric of Euroscepticism coupled with an anti-abortion stance and nationalist appeal and managed to overshadow the other nationalist parties like LPR or Samoobrona (Burean 2022). PiS and FIDESZ managed to capitalize on the European migration crisis and were capable of capturing the votes of those that felt frustrated and forgotten (Ainslie 2019). Moreover, they came up as a viable alternative to the traditional post 1989 parties plagued by large scale corruption scandals and responsible for the poverty and inequality in the transitional societies (Koenig 2012, Enyedi 2006, Szczerbiak 2002, Szczerbiak 2006)

AUR has managed to surpass the first stage and the second stage of institutionalization with the help of the digital media. Similarly to Jobbik in Hungary, AUR maintains the constant campaign of mobilization of its voters online, locally, nationally and internationally. Remarkable is the capacity of the party to mobilize the support from the sizeable Diaspora community with the help of social media but also by getting in contact with the large Romanian communities in Spain and Italy (Soare 2023). Similarly to the Conservative People's Party of Estonia AUR performed a transnational institutionalization (Soare 2023, Jakobson et al. 2021) by keeping their national and local organizations connected to the transnational organizations providing a sense of inclusion to their electorate.

What is absent from the studies on AUR is a comparative perspective on the profile of their voters. We fill this gap first with a large

dataset that allows for a comparison of AUR voters to the voters of the other relevant political parties.

Methodology

The analysis has two sections. First, we include a descriptive part that follows the unfolding of a trajectory of the political party, its ideology, the leaders' rise, the campaign strategies employed and their reflection in the social media. This includes party programs, reports on the popularity of political parties in social and the online media as well as tertiary data from an exit poll and data from CrowdTangle to capture the popularity of AUR in comparison

The second section is using a nationally representative survey funded by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Its purpose was to observe the progressive values in Romania. The survey was designed to capture the opinions of people living in Romania on specific social and political issues. 3666 respondents answered and 51,6% are female and 48,4%. The amplitude of the sample allowed for a comparison of the supporters of AUR with those of the other political parties, and especially with USR. The dependent variables are the intention to vote for a political party. With the help of logistic regressions we show that the profile of AUR voters is similar to other populist political parties in other European countries. This method is employed by other researchers that investigate voters' profile and opinions (see: Anduiza and Tormos 2022, Tufiş 2009, Norris și Inglehart 2003, Kitschelt and McGann 1997). The dependent variables are vote for AUR, vote for PSD, vote for PNL. UDMR (Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România, The Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania) was not included. The number of survey respondents that declared their voting intention for UDMR was too small.

Gender was coded with value 1 for woman and 0 for male. The survey operator decided on the gender of the interviewed person.

Education had three categories: up to trade school, high school and graduate with post graduate. The type of locality in which the respondent resides was divided into urban and rural. The database did not contain the names of the localities which impeded on the possibility to perform regional comparisons. The survey did not include a question on income. A question on how does a household manage with the money they have is a proxy we used instead. Voting intention is measured by the question: If on next Sunday there would be parliamentary elections, who would you vote for? Past voting intention in 2020 was transformed in a dummy variable with value 1 for those that voted and 0 for the others. Political interest is composed of the average value of four answers on trust in politicians, trust in government, trust in parties and trust in parliament. The left-right scale from 1 to 10 was dichotomized with right wing respondents' answers ranging from 7 to 10. Vaccination was included as a proxy for the vote for populist values. This correlation was found to be statistically significant in France, United States and in Norway (Wollebæk et al. 2022). Church attendance takes value 1 if a person attends church at least once a month.

This article's purpose is to shed light on the profile and development of a new political party as a prototype of the increasing family of populist parties. Secondly the survey that is used revealed the importance of gender and populism in Romania, which is unexpected. Research on German adolescents indicates that gender differences for political participation and political preferences should be reduced given the culture of gender equality. In Germany, gender and sex education studies are compulsory in secondary schools since 2002 (Blaschka et al. 2020). In Romania gender equality and sex education are optional focused on biological differences between boys and girls. Furthermore, the presence of women in politics is feeble. The index of gender equality places Romania in the last place in the European Union in the last three years

(Gender Equality Index 2024). Thus, the Romanian case makes it the least likely to display gender differences on political preferences.

In the following section I will describe the leaders of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) and its rise followed by some possible explanations for the party's success related to the pandemic crisis and the conflict of societal values followed by the analysis of the political preferences of AUR voters.

Important events and popular leaders

The party was established in 2019 under the permissive conditions of the new law on the establishment of political parties which states that three people are needed to create a political party. The founder of the party is George Simion. The popularity of the party is closely related to the personality of the founder but also to the political program.

The political program has a strong unionist character. Family, homeland, faith and freedom are the main themes (Partidulaur.ro 2021). AUR supports the family formed between a man and a woman, the homeland is closely linked to the language, it proclaims itself a defender of Christianity and freedom. Ideologically, it considers itself a conservative and anti-immigration party.

Diana Șoșoacă, a lawyer and politician, became known through her messages on social media platforms for her messages against the restrictions generated by Covid 19. She became a member of AUR and together with this party managed to win a seat as a senator for Iași county, only to be expelled in February 2021. Moreover, most of the party's supporters come from Moldova, southern Romania and Transylvania. In Moldova, the strong unionist message was popular, and in Transylvania, conservative nationalism reactivated voters who were former supporters of PRM (Greater Romania Party) and PUNR (Romanian National Unity Party). Gheorghe Funar, former PRM president and former PUNR

president is a supporter of the party, participating in one of the AUR protests in Cluj-Napoca (Digi24.ro 2021b).

Before becoming known politically, Diana Șoșoacă was very active on social networks. She had daily posts that fuelled the conspiracies surrounding the COVID19 epidemic. After winning the mandate of senator, the online activity also intensified. Online and offline mobilization have brought him popularity and celebrity, now being one of the best-known political personalities in Romania. In April 2021, the Senate's YouTube page received a warning from YouTube for spreading false information and conspiracies about COVID 19 (Digi24 2021c). Diana Șoșoacă's Facebook page currently had over 72,000 likes and over 155,000 followers, which makes her one of the most popular people in the Romanian political environment.

George Simion is the founding chairman of the party. He is 34 years old and founded the party in September 2019. Most of his public activity has focused on the desire for the unification of the Republic of Moldova with Romania. In 2012, he organized a unionist march in Chișinău, which, together with other public activities, caused him to be banned from entering the Republic of Moldova. He participated in the European Parliament elections in 2019 but did not obtain a European Parliament mandate. George Simion is also a founding member of two nationalist supporters' galleries named Honor et Patria and Uniți sub Tricolor, and he attended football matches in the galleries that were fined for xenophobia by UEFA (Digisport.ro 2021). George Simion was one of the organizers of the protests at the heroes' cemetery in Valea Uzului where several Romanians and Hungarians protested and joined hands. The conflict between two localities, one Hungarian and one Romanian, is generated by the right of ownership over the cemetery where both Hungarian and Romanian soldiers and soldiers of other nationalities are buried (Mediafax.ro 2019).

George Simion had a very active online campaign promoting the party on his personal Facebook page. In 2021 it had over 543,000 likes and over 838,000 followers. In terms of number of followers, he is close to the most popular person on Facebook, the president of Romania with over one million followers. However, it is remarkable that George Simion has become very quickly known since 2020, together with the restrictions imposed by the spread of the coronavirus and with the anti-Covid protests.

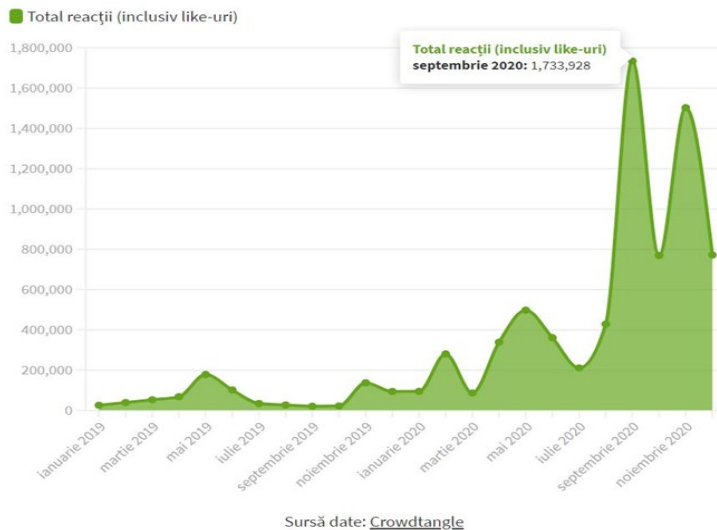
Diana Iovanovici Șoșoacă and George Simion have a populist speech and behaviour. The populist discourse has two main characteristics: it supports the side of low-income people and accuses the entire political class of corruption (Mudde 2000). Added to these themes is the support of conspiracies around COVID 19 and vaccination. In 2021, AUR started a campaign called Caravana AUR (georgesimion.ro, 2021) with the aim of visiting as many localities as possible to stop the misinformation made by the other political parties. Diana Iovanovici Șoșoacă had several interventions in social problems in Iași and in Roșia Montană she initiated a campaign to help some locals affected by floods. At the beginning of September, he visited a mobile vaccination center in Răchiteni commune, Iași county (G4media.ro, 2021) where he stopped the vaccination process and accused the doctors of not informing people correctly.

The next section presents the rise of AUR in the year 2021 followed by some explanations regarding the electoral success of this party.

From online to offline: Increasing popularity

Founded in 2019, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians succeeds in one year in entering the parliament, outranking older parties such as the Popular Movement Party and Pro Romania, a party that absorbed the Alliance of European Liberal Democrats (ALDE) parliamentary formation until 2020 led by Călin Popescu Tăriceanu.

Figure 1 shows the evolution of the number of likes and reactions on George Simion's personal Facebook page.

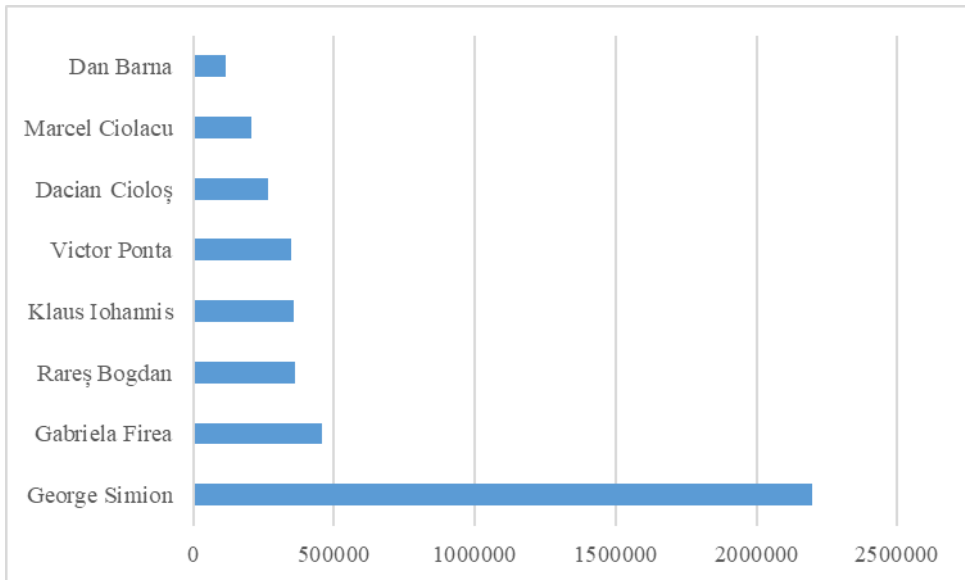


Source: recorder.ro

Starting from March 2020, AUR led an intense mobilization campaign offline, by organizing protests against the restrictions and online through frequent posts and live interventions in which George Simion and Diana Șoșoacă presented and supported many of the conspiracies born around vaccination and the spread of Covid 19.

An exponential increase can be seen in the months of September, the month of the 2020 local elections, and November before the 2020 parliamentary elections. Figure 2 shows the large discrepancy between the popularity of the AUR president and the most popular politicians from the other parties.

Figure 2. *The number of Facebook likes obtained in November 2020 by the most popular politicians in Romania*



Source: recorder.ro

AUR did not get involved in the anti-restriction protests from the beginning. It has only done so since September 2020. The first organized anti-mask protest takes place on May 15, 2020, the first day of the state of alert imposed by the authorities. In addition to refusing to wear masks and opposing restrictions, they also oppose vaccination. George Simion also participates in this protest, posting pictures of the protesters on his page.

This is followed by one on July 11, 2020 organized by Iosefina Pascal close to the Sputnik media group. Sputnik is known for spreading fake news (ElPais 2018, Watanabe 2018). On September 19, AUR announces the protests against the restrictions taking place in Bucharest, Timișoara, Oradea and Cluj-Napoca. Around 400 people participate. On October 10, AUR participated in the anti-mask protests in Bucharest, Oradea and Cluj-Napoca, attended by around 500 people. Prime Minister Ludovic Orban and President Klaus Iohannis condemned the protests. On November 8,

AUR participates in a new anti-mask and anti-restrictions protest the day before the state of emergency is implemented. After the elections, AUR becomes the main organizer and spokesperson of the anti-restriction protests. The protests on January 31 in front of the Matei Balș hospital in Bucharest on March 7 in Bucharest and Cluj are representative of the anti-vaccination and anti-restriction movement in Romania. Like popular movement parties in several countries such as PODEMOS, Movimento Cinque Stelle in Italy or Jobbik in Hungary, AUR has an intense campaign of mobilization and involvement at the street level. It becomes the most active party in the street but also in the online environment during the restrictions period.

The electoral campaign and the 2020 parliamentary elections

The 2020 election has been a challenge for many democratic states that have had elections. The rules related to social distancing determined the postponement of the elections or the finding of alternative solutions for expressing the vote. The elections were not without controversy. In the United States of America, a large part of Democratic voters voted by mail, which led to Donald Trump being declared the winner in the first exit polls. Only a week after the election, and after counting the postal votes, the result was in favor of Joe Biden. In Poland, the ruling party tried to introduce a change to the legislative system that would make voting in the summer 2020 presidential election exclusively by mail. Realizing that this was not administratively possible, the same government declared a state of natural disaster due to COVID 19 and thus had the legal basis to postpone the elections until the fall (Lazowski 2020). Elections were finally held on 28 June. For the first time the Polish Diaspora had the opportunity to vote by mail. This voting process raised questions because the envelope containing the ballot with the vote cast also had a form containing the voter's personal data.

In Romania, the 2020 local elections were postponed from spring to autumn, and there were also discussions about postponing the autumn parliamentary elections to 2021 (Parvu 2020).

Table 1. *The final results of the parliamentary elections of 2020 in Romania*

	Chamber of Deputies	Senate
PSD	28,90%	29,32%
PNL	25,19%	25,58%
USR PLUS	15,37%	15,86%
AUR	9,08%	9,17%
UDMR	5,74%	5,89%

Turnout was 33,24%

Source: The Central Electoral Bureau

The local elections on September 27 and the parliamentary elections on December 6 were conducted by physical presence at the polling stations. AUR obtained 3 mayoral mandates and 78 local councilor mandates. The party obtained 0.45% of the votes for the local council, 0.99% of the votes for the county council, 0.77% for the presidency of the county councils and 0.29% of the votes for the mayors, ranking tenth. The result was encouraging for a party founded only a year ago.

The electoral campaign for the parliamentary elections was an atypical one. Movement restrictions at night and between localities that had several infected people and the restriction of public gatherings to 50 people made it difficult for candidates to meet the electorate. Most politicians held press conferences online on social media. Here, however, the rules of advertising and gaining popularity are different from the offline environment. AUR had an intense and much more active campaign than the other parties. Many could not explain how a party was able to grow from less than 1% in local elections in September to 9% in early December (DW 2020b). According to the data presented above, the

number of likes and the number of shares and views of AUR and the accounts associated with AUR far exceeded the views enjoyed by other political parties. Some have speculated murky interests financed this party's election campaign (DW 2020b). A 2021 European Parliament report also mentions and exposes a funding orchestration of anti-LGBTQ and gender identity social movements in Europe whereby Russian oligarchs and US religious groups funded anti-identity movements with \$702 million between 2009 and 2018. From Romania, the Family Coalition, the Pro Vita Association and the New Right appear as beneficiaries of these funds (EPF, 2021).

Thus, at the end of this atypical campaign that took place mainly online, the results provided a series of surprises, the biggest being the obtaining of parliamentary representation by the AUR (Table 1).

AUR went on a nationalist-populist campaign. Their messages blamed the entire political class for the country's economic problems, for the discrepancy between the rich and the poor, and for the servilism of politicians towards the European Union. Their positions on minority rights were conservative. Thus, unlike the other political parties, they explicitly supported the position of the Coalition for the Family for the marriage of only one man with one woman. I reject the rights of the LGBTQ community and consider their acceptance as homosexual propaganda from Western Europe. The party has a strong unionist message with the Republic of Moldova. AUR was the only party that also participated in the presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova. The party achieved significant success in the Diaspora, placing first in Italy and second in Spain, although the party did not have a campaign aimed at the community of Romanians living outside the country, with the exception of the Republic of Moldova (Free Europe 2020). It is possible that the vote was one of protest by a community that is dissatisfied with how it is treated in Romania and is too little taken into account by the authorities (Teleleu.ro 2021).

Table 2. *The socio demographic profile of voters at the parliamentary elections of 2020 (percentages)*

Name	Gender		Age				Education			Rezidence		Region		
	male	female	18-35	36-50	51-65	65+	little	average	superior	urban	rural	Transilvania +Banat	Sud	Moldova
PSD	29	39	24	22	35	58	43	33	17	29	40	25	40	33
PNL	25	23	20	27	28	22	22	26	23	22	26	31	19	24
USR-PLUS	12	14	25	15	9	2	4	13	31	18	7	16	13	8
UDMR	3	3	3	3	5	1	2	4	3	2	3	8	0	0
AUR	9	4	8	11	4	2	9	6	2	5	8	3	8	7
PMP	3	3	0	5	5	3	4	3	3	3	3	4	2	3
ProRomania	5	4	5	6	3	4	8	2	2	6	3	1	4	12
Alții	1	2	0	2	2	1	1	1	3	1	1	1	2	1
DK	0	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	2
Cancelled my vote	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0
Did not vote	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0
No answer	11	7	13	8	10	5	6	10	12	11	7	9	9	8

An exit poll presented by IRES (Table 2) shows the profile of the AUR voter in Romania as male with little education, middle-aged from rural Moldova or southern Romania exactly the opposite of the USR voter who is female, with higher education, young and from Transylvania. The voters of the older PNL and PSD parties are different. Thus, the PSD voter is older from the rural and small urban areas of southern Romania. The PNL voter is urban, with secondary and higher education from Transylvania and Bucharest. Furthermore the 2023 telephone survey done by FES (Friedrich Ebert Schtiftung) contained enough respondents to compare the voters of AUR to the voters of the other political parties.

Table 3 contains four logistical statistical models that explain the vote for AUR, PSD, PNL and USR the main political parties with the exception of UDMR. The models contain three sets of predictors: socio-demographics, political behavior and social. The socio-demographic variables were gender, age, education and urban-rural. The political behavior variables were previous vote, interest in politics, political trust and left-right. Social variables were vaccination and church attendance.

Table 3 *Determinants of the vote for AUR, PSD, PNL and USR*

		Model1	Model2	Model3	Model4
socio-dem	Gender	-,513**	,178	,075	,449*
	Age	-,474***	,583***	-,298***	-,645***
	Education	-,367*	-,398***	-,073	,846***
	Rural	-,152	,281*	,359*	-,0219
	Income	-,116	-,069	,413***	,064
political	Voted in 2020	,245	,251	,254	1,125***
	Interest in politics	,140	,228***	,199*	,112
	Trust in politicians and institutions	-,219	,296***	,427***	,112
social	Left-right	-,214	-,589***	,958***	,025
	Vaccinated	-,876***	-,203	,562***	1,326***
	Church attendance	,117	,149	,152	-,349
	Nagelkerke's R	,101	,238	,149	,284
	Dependent variables	vote AUR	vote PSD	votePNL	voteUSR
	* $<0,05$ ** $<0,01$ *** $<0,0001$				
	3666 persons				

Table 3 shows the most important differences between the voters of AUR and the other parties. Thus on the one hand PNL and PSD have remarkably similar voters. They also have the highest number of supporters in the survey. On the other hand USR and AUR have voters that are very different. AUR is more likely to be voted young men, with fewer years of education and that are not vaccinated. USR is more likely to be voted by young women with graduate studies, that are vaccinated and went to vote in 2020. The success of AUR in the category of young uneducated men that are not vaccinated is similar to the profile of other young voters of populist political parties in Europe (Politico 2024). These findings mirror the findings of a study on digital populists. Bartlett et al. (2011) find that digital populists are mostly young men.

A explanation for the success of the AUR can thus be found in the combination of factors related to the nature of the elections and the electoral campaign. An active online campaign, targeted at the events of the campaign, reactive to the statements of the other parties and a weak electoral participation in the context of the pandemic and the promotion of the image of a new anti-establishment party that resonates with the preferences of the Diaspora caused the electoral success. Beyond these contextual determinants are some structural ones related to the international context and a change in party competition and the values of the Romanian electorate. These will be detailed in the next section.

Why was the Alliance for the Union of Romanians electorally successful?

The international political context

In addition to human and economic tragedies, the pandemic has also created a fertile environment for the activation of global conspiracies. The international context was favorable for demonstrations of denial of the pandemic, acceptance of conspiracy theories supported by important world leaders.

The president of Brazil or the United States minimized the effects of the pandemic and were reluctant to the warnings of specialists regarding the danger of the spread of COVID 19.

The increase in the importance of the fake news phenomenon and Russia's media influence was also felt in Romania (EPF, 2021). One of the anti-mask protests was organized by a supporter of the Sputnik media group known for its pro-Russian propaganda.

Thirdly, several large-scale anti-restriction protests take place in European capitals in August-September 2020, legitimizing the anti-mask and anti-vaccination protests in Romania.

Last but not least, a contagion effect can be observed from countries with populist discourse and leaders in the region. The governments of Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Slovakia had critical and reluctant positions towards the restriction policies imposed by the European Union and the World Health Organization. Moreover, in these countries the nationalist phenomenon, anti-LGBT positions and Euroscepticism are important and popular and promoted by the ruling parties. It is a surprise that Romania did not join sooner or that there were no parties to support this current of rejection of postmodern European values. AUR is the first party to express its support for these conservative values. On the website of Claudiu Târziu, one of the founding members, there is a message of solidarity with the Eastern European conservative movements in Poland and Hungary (Târziu 2021).

The conflict of values sharpened in the Romanian society

The 2018 referendum to amend the Constitution in which 3,531,732 citizens voted "for" is a symptom of a manifestation of conservative values in Romania. Establishment parties have rarely expressed clear positions on supporting or rejecting the LGBTQ community. It should be noted the ambivalence with which the referendum initiated by the Coalition for the Family was treated by all parties, including USR, considered the most reformist of all parliamentary political formations. A part of AUR "separated" from the Family Coalition. Claudiu Târziu, AUR co-president, was a member of the national campaign coordination council after the failed referendum (G4media.ro 2020).

Conservative values did not find a political manifestation even during the anti-corruption protests of 2017. They also manifested as a counter-reaction to the ideas and messages circulated in those protests. Although heterogeneous in terms of content, the messages of the #Resist protests were neoliberal and open to the LGBTQ community. They promote creativity, support private initiative, employees in the private

sector at the expense of those in the public sector, and were against those who benefit from social assistance. "We want a country like outside" shouted the hundreds of thousands of protesters in Piața Victoriei and on the streets of the other big cities of the country. This message, however, symbolized a country on a classic liberal, Thatcherist model, an economic system with a small state, free market, a capitalist work ethic and restrictions on the labor market. Through the discursive adherence to the West (Gubernat and Rammelt, 2020), the protesters seriously attacked the decrepit and communist character of the state institutions, but at the same time they distanced themselves from the supporters of conservative Romanian values who are circumspect and reluctant towards the ideas of the Western West. USR is the political exponent of anti-corruption protesters. They are supporters from the urban environment, young people, from the private environment open to Western values. The emergence of AUR represents (Ignazi 1992) a counter-reaction of the extreme right to the emergence of social movements and cosmopolitan leftist ideas. Inglehart and Norris (2003) argued that the global cultural change of the last 40 years has led to the emergence of a new political and social division between those with post-materialist and cosmopolitan values and the backlash formed by those with conservative, religious and anti-immigration.

Emigration, immigration and economic development

The economic effects of globalization and migration were strongly felt in Romania. GDP growth compared to 2000 was 103% in 2019 (Cepăreanu 2020). The economic development of the country has created important social inequalities with contrasts between a standard of living as in Western Europe in the big cities and regions of extreme poverty especially in the east and south of the country (Romania Insider 2017). In addition, after the lifting of visas and Romania's entry into the European Union, emigration increased. The emigration rate from Romania is the highest in

the world after Syria. In the last 20 years, approximately 5 million Romanians have gone to work in western, but especially southern, Europe.

This labor exodus has created depopulated areas faced with poverty, unemployment and value conflicts with the emigrants who return to the country annually. At the same time, since 2017, the number of immigrants filling the labor shortage in construction and the HORECA field has grown considerably. For the first time, Romanians come into contact with immigrants who are racially different from them. The labor force in Romania comes mainly from Turkey, Vietnam and Sri Lanka. That is why it is not surprising that in Romanian society, exposed to racial diversity, public discourse about gay marriage and in which success in life is inextricably linked to emigration, there is a lot of frustration, anger and glorification of the past. AUR, through its nationalist, homophobic and anti-immigration message, resonates with these grievances. Romanians living abroad see in this party a solution for an accelerated change in Romania. In 2012, the Dan Diaconescu People's Party, similarly to AUR, manages to enter the parliament for the first time with 14% and with the help of the Diaspora who voted massively with this party.

Pandemic crisis

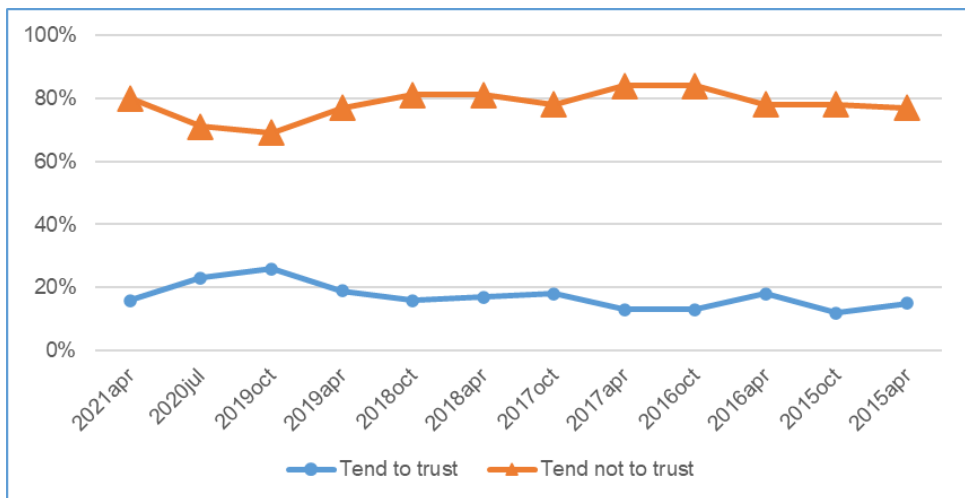
The restrictive measures imposed by the Romanian state and other states due to the spread of COVID 19 have created an unprecedented crisis situation in recent world history. The imposed restrictions, alarmist news about the death rate of the disease, rising unemployment and bankruptcies created a context of uncertainty about the future. The perception of an imminent threat to the safety of life and standard of living activates in people a strong need for security (Fromm 1994) and an activation of authoritarian personality predispositions (Feldman and Stenner 1997, Lavine, Lodge and Freitas 2005).

These psychological effects have long been studied by psychologists and sociologists of the Frankfurt School to explain the popularity of the Nazi party led by Adolf Hitler in Germany and to explain the foundations of this preference for extremist parties. During the pandemic crisis, according to an IRES barometer, the fear of an economic and financial crisis was among the top fears mentioned by Romanians (65%) (Mediafax 2021). AUR clearly conveyed who are the enemies of Romanian national identity and traditions. He identified as culprits the European Union, all the political parties in Romania, the LGBTQ community and the Hungarian minority (Partidulaur.ro 2021). Eliminating these threats is the main objective of the party. However, more time is needed to be able to study and understand these complex psychological effects on the collective mind in times of major societal crises. It took ten years of research to publish the volume "The Authoritative Personality", the key book for understanding the support of the Nazi regime by the Germans.

Distrust in political parties

Last but not least, an important reason for the success of AUR lies in the decrease of Romanians' trust in political parties.

Eurobarometer data (Fig. 3) shows a 10% drop in trust in parties between 2019 and 2021 from 26% to 16%. The decrease is significant, especially since distrust in parties is generally stable. This decrease can lead to the support of some parties that are against the system and that want to eliminate the other parties or revolutionize the political system. During the economic crisis of 2008-2011, a similar evolution was observed in southern Europe of 16% (Mungiu-Pippidi 2015). Anti-system parties like Podemos in Spain, Movimento Cinque Stelle in Italy, Syriza in Greece built their popularity with a message that criticized all political parties in the system. Similarly, the AUR relied heavily on criticizing the activities of Romanian political parties, characterizing them as corrupt entities enslaved to the European Union or communists.

Figure 3 *Distrust in Political parties in Romania*

Source: Eurobarometer <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/screen/home>

Conclusions

The data and the documentation examined in this article are consistent with the consideration of AUR as a populist party. As such, in order for a populist party to thrive a favorable context such as the pandemic is not enough. The party needs to be capable of using a motivating environment to propose simple solutions and use digital tools and appropriate leadership. Furthermore, the electorate has to be captured and identified.

This research shows that the pandemic, together with the use of digital networks for populist mobilization, an international favorable context and social and cultural values prone to support nationalist populist ideas are necessary conditions for AUR to thrive in the Romanian party system.

We speculate that the link between the imposed restrictions due to the pandemic and the mobilization of the conservative electorate is not straightforward. To some the restrictions reminded of the hardships during the communist period and the few days prior to the start of the

1989 revolution. These restrictions imposed, in now democratic Romania, sparked outrage for many Romanians.

The analysis of the Romanian electorates preferences shows that the new left versus new right divide appeared at the level of political parties and their supporters and crosscuts the more familiar communist-anticommunist political cleavage. As shown, AUR and USR are the two representatives of this divide that promises to replace the previous divisions. The electorate of AUR is preponderantly male, uneducated, unvaccinated and young and the electorate of USR consists of educated women and who go to vote and are young. This indicates a clear separation on gender and education between supporters of a pro European and a Eurosceptic party. Previous research showed that the support for right wing populists consists of Eurosceptic males who are uneducated. Our finding confirms the World Values surveys (Inglehart and Norris 2000) that men vote for right wing parties. The AUR voters are similar to the supporters of the Spanish radical right party Vox (Coffe et al. 2023). The voters of AUR are not that similar to those of AfD in Germany or of Geert Wilder or Front Nationals support where women make up a large segment of the electorate. These parties have appropriated feminism to rally support by talking about the oppression of women in Islam or dropping references on abortion like Le Pen did (Horst and Groenendaal 2025)

The impact of this crisis was unexpected in Romania and led to the return of the nationalist current in the parliament after an absence of almost 15 years. The reasons presented, which explain this success, are not exhaustive, but they provide an all-encompassing picture and provide an understanding of the political and social impact of the emergence of a new anti-system party in Romania. It is still too early to estimate whether the party will institutionalize and remain on the Romanian political scene. AUR has successfully managed to become a well known party, managed to

enter the parliament and maintained its presence in the subsequent elections in 2024.

However, let us not forget that the cemetery of new political parties in Romania is haunted by parties with ephemeral success. Worth mentioning are the Alliance for Romania, the New Generation Party, the Dan Diaconescu People's Party, which had a few months or even years of success, only to lose their popularity as quickly as they gained it. It remains to be seen whether AUR will succeed in consolidating its electorate in the way other similar parties in Europe such as Hungary's Jobbik, Spain's Podemos, Italy's Movimento Cinque Stelle and Greece's Syriza have done.

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