

ROMANIA



Romanian populism and transnational political mobilization

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Abstract

Once considered a partial exception to the recent diffusion of populism worldwide, Romania saw Radical Right populism return to Parliament in 2020. The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) successfully campaigned on a platform of defending the Christian faith, freedom, the traditional family, and the nation. Although the party was initially considered the result of individual entrepreneurship linked to its founding leaders, it has successfully built on diffused networks of societal activism whose origins could be traced back to the early 2000s. However, the AUR's track record of discourse aligned with Kremlin rhetoric calling for Western economic, political and cultural hegemony to be resisted and rolled back saw a temporary decline in voters' support for the party. However, the party managed to rebuild consensus strategically by drawing on voters' increased anxiety regarding the economic effects of the war. This report offers a cogent analysis of the political performance of the AUR, examining the party's formative phase as well as its evolution since 2020, alongside a discussion of the impact of the war in Ukraine on Romanian party politics.

Keywords: *Radical Right; populism; Romania; reunification; nativism; societal activism.*

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Soare, Sorina. (2023). "Romanian populism and transnational political mobilization." In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0027>

The author thanks Marina Popescu, Daniela Vintila and Emilia Zankina for helpful comments.



Introduction

The literature dealing with the diffusion of populism across new and old democracies usually considers Romania a partial exception. While different variants of populism received electoral support and influenced the governmental agenda during the 1990s, in the 2010s, the supply of parliamentary populist parties dwindled if one only considers the most unambiguous cases. In 2012, amidst an economic crisis, widespread corruption, political instability and severe institutional clashes, the People's Party–Dan Diaconescu (PPDD) gained some electoral support. The party was able to capitalize on being new in politics and standing for “the people” in opposition to “the elite”, but only for a short while. The PPDD platform combined populism with authoritarian discourses around “social order” and a peculiar form of nativism in which the defence of the Romanian community and the endorsement of the project of reunification with neighbouring Moldova coexisted with an odd ethnicization of merit in a slogan claiming targeted collaboration with foreigners (Gherghina & Soare, 2021). By 2014, several parliamentarians had defected from the PPDD, and in 2015, the party merged with the National Union for the Progress of Romania (UNPR). For the next half-decade, nativism, authoritarianism, and populism dwelt outside the parliamentary arena (Soare & Tufis, 2019). Only in the 2020 elections did Radical Right populism return to the Romanian Parliament with a strong showing from the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR).¹

Yet public discourse and parliamentary debate point to populism's polymorphism and resilience in Romania, with a reach far into the mainstream political forces that are central to defining governmental alternatives (Soare & Tufis, 2019). Dragoman (2021), for instance, finds populism even in the anti-corruption platform of the Save Romania Union (USR), a party that is probably most often associated with liberal *opposition to populism* in Romania. Dragoman sees in the USR discourse “recombinant populism”, which is notable for connecting anti-communist stances with anti-corruption ones. Indeed, in Romanian politics, USR representatives have habitually accused traditional political actors — namely, the Social Democrats (PSD) and the Liberals (PNL) — of dishonesty and of serving their own interests. However, Engler (2020) has identified this kind of rhetoric as par for the course for *centrist anti-establishment parties*, which — apart from their anti-establishment and anti-corruption rhetoric — do not differ from the established parties they criticize.

1. Information on the party's profile can be obtained from its website (<https://partidulaur.ro/echipa/>)

Similarly, the USR can be considered part of the group of anti-establishment reform parties identified by Hanley and Sikk (2016), committed to liberal democracy and the market economy.

A borderline populist position can also be traced in the Social Democratic Party (PSD), per forthcoming updated research on Romania from Populist (<https://populist.org/>). A successor of the communist-era governing party, the PSD (and its predecessors) has been in Parliament since the first post-communist elections, with regular participation in government. The formerly socialist party's first ideological turn came at the end of the 1990s when the PSD endorsed market-liberal economics and cultural liberalism. Starting in 2012, though, the party increasingly came to champion left-wing populist economics and right-wing cultural traditionalism and adopted a Eurosceptic stance on issues from time to time. However, the PSD remained within the coordinates of mainstream party politics as an electorally dominant actor competing on the Left–Right political spectrum.

The AUR is undoubtedly the most noteworthy and universally recognized example of Radical Right populism in Romania today. This report focuses only on the AUR, given its peculiarities and significance today. As the war in Ukraine has unfolded, the AUR has aligned with the other parliamentary parties in condemning Russia's invasion and voicing concerns for the security of the community of co-ethnic Romanians living in Ukraine. However, the party's track record of discourse aligned with Kremlin rhetoric calling for Western economic, political and cultural hegemony to be resisted and rolled back saw the AUR initially penalized in terms of electoral support. Despite that, the party strategically invested in the heightened anxiety among voters regarding the economic effects of the war. It adapted its public stances to the need to defend the national interest by promoting forms of economic and energy protectionism, by promoting the idea that national resources (including energy) should be primarily directed towards Romanians and that foreign companies should receive limited access (if any) to these strategic resources. The latest opinion polling shows that the AUR has recovered from the decline in its electoral fortunes registered in the spring of 2022 and remains anchored as the third party in voters' preferences.

The remainder of the report is structured as follows. The first section details the origins of the AUR and party development in its formative phases. The second section focuses on the evolution of the party since it returned to Parliament after the 2020 elections. The third section focuses on the impact of the war in Ukraine on



Romanian party politics while also summarizing the main findings of the analysis.

Where did the Alliance for the Union of Romanians come from?

The AUR's programme combines an ethnically defined emphasis on the "people's will" with authoritarianism, understood as the belief in a strictly ordered community. This belief set encompasses traditional concerns about "law and order" but also culturally authoritarian positions like opposition to same-sex marriage, a hard line on LGBTIQ+ rights, and legislative proposals that claim to protect children from sexual propaganda in kindergartens, schools and the media. Due to the overlap between the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 electoral campaign, the AUR skilfully leveraged opposition to the government's vaccination strategy and unpopular public safety measures, such as the obligatory use of masks, mandatory vaccination, and vaccine certificates. Although the party leadership did not openly oppose vaccination, AUR representatives regularly emphasized opposition to forcing citizens to get vaccinated. One of its leaders repeatedly endorsed the protests against the government strategy, reasoning that the AUR sides "with the people who are right-headed, who want justice" (Deutsche Welle, 2021).

The AUR's rise was a great surprise in Romanian politics. The party garnered 9.1% of the overall vote in the 2020 legislative elections, including 541,938 votes for the Senate (9.17% of the total cast) and 535,831 votes for the House of Deputies (9.08%) (<https://parlamentare2020.bec.ro/>). As a result, the party saw four senators and thirty-three deputies elected. While the general turnout was the lowest since the end of communism, in the Romanian diaspora, turnout hit an all-time high. Previous studies have observed that Romanian non-resident voters have traditionally tended to vote disproportionately for centre-right candidates and parties over left-wing and populist parties (Vintilă & Soare, 2018). Still, in 2020 one in four Romanians abroad voted for the AUR; the party came first in the section polls organized in Cyprus and Italy and second in France, Germany and Spain (Ulceluse, 2020).

The available data allow us to clarify who voted for the AUR in Romania, but to the extent of my knowledge, no exit polls were conducted with Romanian voters living abroad. Exit polls conducted inside Romania show the typical AUR voter as a middle-aged male with a medium level of education. There was a strong correlation between conservative votes in a recent referendum related to the

definition of the family in the Romanian Constitution and the vote share of the AUR in the 2020 legislative elections (Pora, 2020). Recent data (Soare & Tufis, 2023) also show that emigration from Romania mattered: the higher the emigration rate across different Romanian regions, the better the AUR scored in those areas. Moreover, other exit polls stressed that the AUR's electoral success rested on voter disenchantment with traditional politics in the context of deteriorating socioeconomic conditions and rising economic inequality (Pora, 2020).

What looked like an unexpected electoral success resulted from a strategic investment in low-cost online campaigning with simple messages and Manichean stances claiming that all mainstream politicians were corrupt, the values of the Christian family were under threat, and the like (Doiciar & Crețan, 2021). The party was also very active in on-the-ground canvassing both in Romania and among non-resident voters in the West European diaspora (Andrei, 2020). Probably most importantly, the party benefitted from ties to political movements that pre-date its legal registration in 2019. In this early period, the AUR capitalized on the extensive societal activism of the party's founding co-presidents, George Simion and Claudiu Târziu² (Soare & Tufis, 2023). Although the trajectories of these two men in terms of political activism do not fully overlap, their activities have converged on several key themes: the goal of unifying Romania and the Republic of Moldova, an emphasis on tradition (traditional family values), and the defence of the Christian faith.

The challenges of winning seats in the national Parliament

Like many other populist parties, when it arrived in Parliament, the AUR faced a deficit of credibility among the other parliamentary parties. This was coupled with a bad image in the mainstream media. As a result, in February 2021, 40 Romanian intellectuals and representatives of civil society organizations signed an open letter expressing strong concern about the AUR's impact on Romanian democracy. They publicly called on the other parliamentary parties to establish a tight *cordon sanitaire* around the AUR by forswearing any cooperation or coalition with it (Europa Liberă România, 2021). For a while, the traditional parties followed this strategy of political exclusion by regularly blocking or voting against the AUR's legislative initiatives. It was,

2. Târziu's CV is listed on his personal website (<https://claudiutarziu.ro/despre-mine/curriculum-vitae/>).



however, impossible to exclude the AUR completely. For example, Claudiu Târziu, former co-president of the AUR and a senator representing Bucharest since 2020, managed to get elected as president of the Senate's Commission for Romanians Abroad.

Despite using folksy expressions and displaying raw and even violent behaviour (Deutsche Welle, 2022), the AUR was not hermetically isolated. In the middle of the 2021 governmental crisis, the AUR backed a motion of no confidence submitted by USR-PLUS, the junior partner in the governing coalition. At the beginning of 2022, different Romanian journalists wrote about a possible merger between AUR and the People's Movement Party (PMP), founded by supporters of Traian Băsescu, then president of Romania, with other minor parties. The merger, which in the end fell through, was supposed to become a movement to circumvent the AUR's international isolation and open direct access to the European People's Party that the PMP was part of. This strategy was complemented by direct lobbying from the extraterritorial branches that AUR successfully created across the different communities of Romanian emigrants who built local connections with possible sister parties, such as the Vox party in Spain and the Fratelli d'Italia (Soare & Tufis, 2023).

In recent years, the AUR has worked on developing a broader political agenda and building transnational ties. In 2022, for instance, the AUR founded the Mihai Eminescu Conservative Political Studies Institute in Bucharest, aiming to support scholarship and research on conservative themes and to raise citizen awareness of conservative values and ideas. As the head of the newly created institute, Târziu gave the opening speech at the first International Conference organized in Bucharest under the title "The Europe we believe in". The party invited representatives from the European Conservatives and Reformists Group, the Polish Law and Justice Party (PiS), and the Fratelli d'Italia to the conference together with representatives from Israel's Likud, France's Reconquête, and Portugal's Chega! (Partidulaur.ro, 2022). As emphasized in Târziu's speech, this event was seen as an occasion for intense networking with parties sharing conservative views.

Consequently, the AUR presented itself as a mainstream conservative party seeking to join a broader European and international campaign against the moral degradation purportedly produced by the spread of neo-Marxist ideology. Echoing one of the leading figures in the pantheon of European neo-conservatism, Ryszard Legutko and his *The Demon in Democracy* (Behr, 2021), Târziu and the other guests elaborated the thesis of the decadence of Western liberal democracy and the need to protect traditions following the model set by Poland and Hungary after

2010 (Aurnews.ro, 2022). It is yet too soon to evaluate the success of this networking. Still, the November 2022 event represented a radical change from Simion's failed attempt to join a similar meeting organized by Vox in Madrid in February 2022 (Dutulescu, 2022).

Overall, in the first two years of parliamentary representation, the AUR representatives remained vocal in accusing the government of damaging Romanians' living standards and for its mismanagement of the COVID-19 crisis. However, despite the continuity in discourses and behaviour, the first cracks in the party structure soon became visible. According to different media reports, the cracks were born out of two different visions of the party's future. While Târziu aimed to bring the AUR into the European neo-conservatism mainstream (in the mould of Hungary's Fidesz or Poland's PiS), Simion was more interested in maintaining the emphasis on the radical grassroots. The tensions between the two orientations exploded in public when Simion endorsed Călin Georgescu as an honorary president of the party. Georgescu was a highly controversial choice given his lionization of historical Far Right figures in Romanian politics, including Corneliu Zelea Codreanu and Ion Antonescu, antisemites both (Pavel, 2022). In the face of intense criticism, Simion was forced to back down and renounce his support for Georgescu and a raft of other controversial figures in Romanian politics.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine further accelerated this process, as Călin Georgescu was among the leading figures taking a pro-Russian position and publicly backing Putin, telling a news reporter, "He [Putin] is a leader, one of the few" (În Linie Dreaptă, 2020) while also helping to organize a visit of Alexander Dugin, the Eurasianist ideologue with ties to the Kremlin, to Romania in 2014 (ziare.com, 2014). At the AUR National Congress in March 2022, the party's dual leadership was abandoned, with Simion beating out Târziu to assume the sole presidency of the party. Simion continues to exhibit the kinds of public behaviours in Romania that characterized his pre-2019 societal activism and made him credible with the grassroots base of the party. He is uninhibited when it comes to standing up for "ordinary people", uses everyday or even coarse language to attract attention and burnish his "every man" credentials, and will readily exploit private events—including his own wedding—to stay in the public eye and be seen mixing with ordinary people.

While continuing to reinforce its organization on the ground in Romania and abroad, the AUR remains very active online, with a heavy presence on Facebook,



TikTok, and Instagram. According to Romanian experts, the party's extensive online networks are rife with conspiracy theories, misinformation, and Russian propaganda (Despa & Albu, 2021). The popular perception of the AUR as being close to Russia and the anti-European Union (EU) and anti-NATO rhetoric led to an abrupt drop in the party's popularity. Opinion surveys published just before the Russian invasion of Ukraine found 22% of respondents intended to vote for the AUR. By May 2022, this share had dropped to 16.3%. Yet, with increased *war fatigue*, *rising energy costs*, and *high inflation*, the party's voter support had returned to 22% by September 2022 (Anghelus, 2022). Internal tensions in the AUR have also calmed down as the party organization has consolidated and its ideology refined.

The war in Ukraine and its influence on Romanian politics

As the Russian invasion of Ukraine unfolded, all Romanian parliamentary parties rapidly aligned towards vocal condemnation of the Kremlin, backing the pro-Ukrainian position adopted almost universally in the West and raising concerns for the community of Romanian co-ethnics in Ukraine. This endorsement echoed the diffused perception of trust in the Western partnerships among the Romanian electorate. A January 2022 poll showed that the prospect of Russian aggression against Ukraine had increased Romanian voters' confidence in NATO and the EU. An overwhelming majority of voters (77%) believe Romania should intensify its political and military ties with the West; only 10.4% agreed that Romanian foreign policy should be oriented to the East and closer relations with Russia and China cultivated. However, compared to other international leaders, trust in Vladimir Putin remained high, in line with his image as a strong leader, with pronounced support among the young (Lupitu, 2022).

The pro-Ukrainian alignment came as a surprise, given the pro-Russian stances taken by prominent figures in the AUR in the past, their positive views of Putin's strong leadership and, more generally, their vocal endorsement of the Kremlin's fierce defence of national traditions and Orthodox Christianity. However, despite different media reports arguing a pro-Russian party might take up to 7% of the vote in Romania (Ancheteonline.ro, 2020), the AUR's official message was nuanced. In the aftermath of the December 2020 elections, Simion argued that "Russia, throughout the ages, from the Tsarist Empire to the Soviet Union and Putin's Russia today, has done a lot of harm to Romania" (Andrei, 2020). Moreover,

he pointed to his dogged campaigning for the reunification of Romania with Bessarabia (most of which lies in today's Moldova), which put him *directly at odds with the Kremlin*, which seeks to retain meddle in Moldovan affairs and has troops stationed in the breakaway region of Transnistria (Andrei, 2020). Consistent with these public statements against Russian imperialism, Simion had no hesitation in condemning Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022: "We are worried about the fate of the ethnic Romanians there [in Ukraine] and the repeated threats on the territory of Romania" (Mazilu, 2022).

At the same time, various AUR representatives have constantly expressed support and admiration for how traditions, values, and religion are defended in Russia. The Russian propaganda machine has picked up on this. At the end of 2021, the local outlet of the Kremlin-backed Sputnik media published a list of top personalities and political parties in Romania. At the top of their list was Diana Șoșoacă, a former AUR senator known for her anti-EU and anti-NATO stances. The Sputnik article also held the AUR out as "the absolute surprise of the Romanian political class" and praised its clear stance in defence of the national interest and domestic capital (Leonte, 2021). In parallel, the media chronicled a vast constellation of (former) AUR members with a record of avowedly pro-Russian positions in the public sphere. In addition, several newly registered parties rose to prominence in the public arena with pro-Russian messages grafted onto different conspiracy theories (Șuțu, 2022). A case in point is the Patriots of the Romanian People party founded by Mihai Lasca, a former AUR parliamentarian who vocally endorsed Putin's hardline position on homosexuality and lambasted President Zelenskyy's supposed "provocations" and "refusal to make peace" with Russia. Similarly, the new outfit SOS Romania welcomed Șoșoacă into the fold and aligned with her pro-Russian narrative of the war in Ukraine. Similar positions have been promoted by the so-called Roexit Party (a nod to Britain's exit from the EU) and the Alliance for the Homeland, both founded by figures who once found a home in the AUR but who were eventually expelled from the party or decided to resign.

The diffusion of pro-Russian stances, however fringe, is far from a recent phenomenon and goes beyond the AUR constellation (hotnews.ro, 2015). Various experts and reports have chronicled diffuse networks of support in the media, among civil society organizations or in the political, economic, cultural, and religious arenas (Fati, 2022). Many politicians have lobbied on behalf of Russian economic interests (mainly in the field of energy) since the early 2000s. Since the beginning of the war, some — including former foreign affairs ministers Andrei Marga and Adrian Severin



and Adrian Năstase, a former prime minister — have parroted Kremlin propaganda that Kyiv, more or less explicitly, provoked the conflict and drawn attention to reports of discrimination against Romanian co-ethnics in Ukraine (Fati, 2022).

Overall, the consensus across the parliamentary parties in Romania has championed the government in its consistent backing for the Western coalition supporting the Ukrainian resistance since February 2022. The AUR has adapted to this consensus, although not without putting its own twist on the framing. For example, party president George Simion has leveraged increasing energy prices to attack both Western companies operating in the Romanian energy market and the Romanian government for exploiting the country’s natural resources without sharing the benefits with the Romanian people. The party’s position echoes the data on electoral support. A recent analysis published by the CPD SNSPA (2022) captures how confidence in the West (the EU, NATO, the United States) and the East (Russia) has evolved over time and how voters of the main parties position themselves on this topic. The analysis confirms that Romanian voters retain strong pro-Western attitudes. It also shows that very few express vocal support for or trust in Russia, with inactive young people (unemployed and with low levels of education) and people with populist attitudes being the most positive toward Moscow. Strikingly, this group of respondents reports getting most of its news and information online. While the analysis finds that the voting intention for the AUR is a predictor of trust in Russia, it also observes that support for Moscow has dropped significantly over the past year, with most mainstream party voters expressing a lack of confidence in Russia.

Conclusion

This report has shown that the AUR’s rise in the Romanian Parliament is partly due to disenchantment with traditional politics. The other part of the explanation is connected to pre-existing dense networks of social ties that have allowed the AUR to successfully present itself as a credible counterpoint to the established political consensus regarding liberal democratic values while simultaneously promoting a return to tradition as a safety net in turbulent times. Some party members’ customary obsequiousness towards the Kremlin has been chronicled by a range of media reports, although the party has remained cautious in its official positions. Still, before February 2022, a number of party representatives were on the record praising the Putin regime and Russia generally as offering credible alternatives to the “decadent” liberal values of the West and as a hedge against economic exploitation from Western companies.

As the war in Ukraine has unfolded, some former AUR members have even parroted the Kremlin line, portrayed the aggression as justified and occasionally accused the government of failing to protect the Romanian minorities who call Ukraine home. Yet, the official message has focused more on the frame of economic protectionism, particularly regarding exploding energy prices. While carefully edited out of the AUR's public statements, pro-Russian positions lie just below the surface in the minds of the AUR electorate and, most specifically, Romania's inactive young voters.

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