

ROMANIA



Charting Populist Pathways: Romanian Populism's Journey to the European Parliament

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Abstract

This report examines the landscape of the far right in Romania within the context of the 2024 European Parliament elections. Two Romanian far-right parties secured seats in the European Parliament: the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) and SOS Romania (SOS), receiving 14.9% and 5% of the valid votes, respectively. Both parties emphasize the defence of Romanian sovereignty and promote nativist and authoritarian rhetoric. However, over the past year, the AUR has increasingly incorporated neoconservative elements into its platform. Consequently, the 2024 campaign has revealed notable differences in programs, candidates, styles of political campaigning and alliance strategies.

Keywords: *far right; Romania; European Union; conservatism; sovereignty; political alliances*

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Introduction

In the December 2020 legislative elections in Romania, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) performed surprisingly well despite being established only a few months prior, in September 2019. Since then, the AUR has increasingly positioned itself as a significant opposition party, engaging critically with the state of Romanian democracy. Central to its political platform is the defence of Romanian sovereignty. The party utilizes populism to mobilize support, often framing society in stark terms: the pure and genuine Romanian people ('us') versus the corrupt elites ('them'), namely, mainstream political parties, cosmopolitan intellectuals, NGOs and similar entities. This division is further reinforced by nativist rhetoric, which emphasizes the organic nature of the Romanian community and underscores various threats posed by non-native elements. While Western societies often view these threats as originating from migrants, in Romania, ethnic minorities such as Hungarians are frequently singled out in this narrative. As such, the AUR's ideological stance incorporates nativism, authoritarianism and populism, which aligns with what Mudde (2007) identifies as a populist radical right party.

The AUR's radical dimension (Pirro, 2023) manifests in its opposition to key features of liberal democracy, particularly aspects related to personal liberties. However, the AUR does not seek to undermine democratic institutions but rather draws an ideological boundary with the liberal pillar of liberal democracy, delineating the frontier between the in-group and the out-group (Kauth & King, 2020). Specifically, the in-group comprises Romanian natives and their families, guided by the Christian faith and traditions (Program of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians, 2020).

Political parties are not monolithic entities; they often accommodate multiple political projects within one organization. The AUR exemplifies such diversity, where the original dual leadership represented at least two compatible ideological strands: one primarily oriented towards a unionist platform integrated with populist radical right features; the other focused on conservatism as a cultural, social and political vision opposing cosmopolitan and liberal values, while emphasizing traditional forces such as nature, God, and historical heritage (Drolet & Williams, 2018). A significant convergence point between these strands is their opposition to aspects of the established socio-cultural order characteristic of post-communist liberal democracy. In this context, the European Union (EU) is directly targeted as a source of disruptive values for the Romanian organic community. Criticisms are focused on a wide range of policies and norms perceived to limit national sovereignty, such as the recognition

of homosexual families and restrictions on personal liberties like the use of cash.

Beyond the AUR, the landscape of Romanian politics features various actors challenging the status quo. One such prominent figure is Diana Șoșoacă, who emerged as an extremely vocal political leader. Elected on the AUR list in the 2020 legislative elections, Șoșoacă was later expelled and joined SOS Romania, a party whose name viscerally reflects its core narrative: the urgent need to save Romania. Nativist, authoritarian and populist dimensions resonate in her discourse, echoing the need to defend national sovereignty against the EU and other foreign interests. However, there are differences in intensity and content compared to the AUR. Her communication style is characterized by a highly confrontational manner and a narrative of perpetual crisis. Șoșoacă's unconventional performance serves as a substitute for party organization and autonomous political identity, making both her political style and messages potentially disruptive to the democratic status quo. From this perspective, SOS Romania embodies the potential for extremism.

Romania's political landscape appears complex in the aftermath of the 2024 European Parliament elections. While it is acknowledged as a bastion of political stability and pro-EU sentiment, with the coalition of mainstream parties – the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the National Liberal Party (PNL) – securing a significant victory with 48.5% of the valid votes (See Table 1 below), there is also notable representation of MEPs from parties advocating radical right stances. This report analyses the historical trajectories of two Romanian parties embodying such views, scrutinizing their campaigns for the EP, evaluating their electoral platforms and profiling their candidates.

The far right strikes back: Romanian insights

Following a period of dormancy in the early 2000s, the far right (Pirro, 2023) made a significant resurgence in Romania's political landscape. Initially operating outside parliament, the Romanian far right gained considerable momentum following the 2020 legislative elections. While the AUR secured substantial parliamentary representation, it also became a focal point for nativist, authoritarian and populist discourses. In parallel, the AUR has faced several internal challenges, marked by the departure of key figures like Șoșoacă, who has since become the leading figure in the rival SOS Romania party.

Additionally, other members of the AUR have splintered off to establish their



own political entities. For example, Smaranda Lup, once influential within the AUR's Cluj branch, cofounded the RO-EXIT party. This new party explicitly advocates for Romania's withdrawal not only from the EU but also from organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). However, despite these developments, the electoral potential of these smaller parties remains relatively limited.

Two projects in one

Founded out of a blend of activism, AUR's founding leadership focused on two main lines of mobilization associated with the political figures George Simion and Claudiu Târziu, who jointly led the party from 2019 to 2022 (Soare & Tufiş, 2023). Since the early 2000s, George Simion has been deeply engaged in grassroots activism, particularly focusing on anti-communist and pro-union causes. Over time, he emerged as the primary spokesperson for the party. Meanwhile, Claudiu Târziu leveraged his journalism background and connections within right-wing networks. Through his blog, Târziu consistently advocated for preserving Christian conservative values within contemporary Romanian democracy. Simion and Târziu jointly advocated for the defence of Romanian identity, sharply underlining its historical heritage as a bulwark against perceived threats from both domestic and international influences.

These principles were fundamental to the AUR's platform, which was organized around four conservative pillars: faith, nation, family and liberty. Their platform aimed to counter what they viewed as the erosion of traditional values since the communist era. Integral to their approach was a robust anti-establishment stance and a communication strategy that fostered closeness with the Romanian populace. For instance, AUR voters have been invited to participate in personal milestones such as George Simion's marriage, which aimed to strengthen their connection with supporters on a personal level.

Against this backdrop, two distinct roles emerged among the AUR's leading figures. George Simion embodies a functional role akin to a modern *tribunus plebis*, an elected representative tasked with vocally defending Romanians against corrupt and abusive politicians. Conversely, Claudiu Târziu pursues an intellectual specialization in close collaboration with prominent conservative intellectuals such as Sorin Lavric.

Looking for international/European partners

Târziu's role as the party's intellectual leader involved networking with conservative and far-right parties across Europe and globally. This role became pivotal in preparing for the 2024 EP elections, with the AUR strategically targeting membership in the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group. This strategy received support from grassroots engagements between the AUR extraterritorial branches and local politicians from parties like Vox and Brothers of Italy (Soare & Tufiş, 2023). Concurrently, the party bolstered official political networking efforts, exemplified by George Simion's participation in Italy's Atreju festival organized by Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia (FdI). While some encounters, such as Simion's reportedly contentious reception at Vox's Madrid meeting in January 2022 – purportedly due to objections from Fidesz over anti-Hungarian statements – were framed in the media as setbacks, these engagements remained integral to AUR's strategic outreach.

By October 2022, the AUR had established the Mihai Eminescu Conservative Political Studies Institute in Bucharest. As the institute's director, Claudiu Târziu expanded its influence through political networking and international conferences. These gatherings hosted a spectrum of international political representatives and intellectuals, providing a platform to articulate conservative visions for Europe and advocate for national sovereignty. One notable event, titled 'Make Europe Great Again', took place in Bucharest in April 2024. Explicitly referencing Donald Trump's 'MAGA' slogan, the conference aimed to address concerns about Europe's perceived decline. It featured prominent intellectuals, politicians, journalists and activists from Europe, Israel, the United States, Canada and Latin America.

Cristian Terheş, a former MEP with the ECR group, played a pivotal role in this context. In December 2023, he joined the Romanian National Conservative Party (PNCR) and soon became its president. The PNCR subsequently forged alliances with the Republican Party of Romania, the Peasant National Alliance, the National Identity Force and the National Renaissance Alliance, forming a coalition with AUR for the European Parliament elections. The gate towards the ECR was definitely open.

The topics of reference

Since its electoral breakthrough in 2020, the AUR has championed the defence of Romania's political, economic and sociocultural interests. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the AUR emerged as a prominent advocate for personal liberties,



staunchly opposing mandatory vaccination, with some representatives endorsing anti-vaccination conspiracy theories. Additionally, the party has criticized European bureaucracy, portraying mainstream parties as subservient to the EU and betraying national interests. AUR has also voiced concerns over EU values, particularly regarding LGBTQ+ rights, advocating for the traditional family as a defence against what they perceive as European intrusions.

Simultaneously, the AUR has consistently emphasized the protection of Romanian communities in neighbouring states and the rights of nonresident economic migrants. Party representatives regularly accuse the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) of being a 'chauvinistic entity' that promotes 'terrorism against Romanians' while also criticizing mainstream parties for their perceived political subservience (Fati, 2024).

In the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the AUR has taken nuanced positions. While denouncing Russia's interference as a significant obstacle to unification with Moldova, the party also criticizes Ukrainian discrimination against ethnic minorities, particularly Romanians.

Emerging competitor: The origins of the SOS Romania party

Despite its young age, the AUR has become a fertile breeding ground for more radical and extremist platforms, exemplified *in primis* by Șoșoacă, a Romanian lawyer whose political career was boosted by her election as a Romanian senator on the AUR lists in 2020. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Șoșoacă became one of the most well-known faces of the antivaccine movement, regularly criticizing the government's defensive measures (Arun, 2024). More generally, Șoșoacă has pushed populist rhetoric to new extremes with tough homophobic, ultra-nationalist, xenophobic and anti-European messages. She proudly presents herself as the first Romanian MP to advocate for a 'Ro-exit', stating,

Since we have been in the European Union, we have ruined ourselves! And, under these circumstances, all I can say is RO-Exit! If you relinquish all industry to the European Union, That's what you did with the PNRR [i.e., National Recovery and Resilience Plan, supported by the EU's post-COVID-19 recovery fund]! You made fun of all the state companies in Romania! You sacrificed our

sovereignty for this! Never! The Romanian Constitution must never be subordinated to EU treaties. Shame on those who have betrayed Romania and its people! (SOS Romania, 2022).

Her theatrical, patriotic speeches are characterized by aggressive gestures and coarse vocabulary, in which she regularly denounces the ruling parties and emphasizes her proximity to the people. She regularly dresses in traditional popular costumes and voices concerns for Romanian traditions and values at risk of extinction. Şoşoacă has also emerged as one of the most vocal supporters of pro-Russian stances in Romania. She was declared 'Personality of the Year' in 2021 by Sputnik, a Russian broadcaster and purportedly sought to promote her messages on Vkontakte, the Russian social media platform (Arun, 2024). In March 2022, Şoşoacă and other MPs paid a high-profile visit to the Russian embassy in Bucharest to present a position of neutrality regarding the ongoing war. One year later, she sparked significant controversy with an interview given to a Russian publication, in which she claimed that Romania is essentially a 'colony' within the European Union. She further asserted that Europeans and Americans aim to destroy Russia and argued that Ukraine illegally occupies territories, including some that rightfully belong to Romania (Despa & Vovesz, 2024).

Regarding the armed conflict between Israel and Hamas-led Palestinian militant groups taking place in the Gaza Strip since 7 October 2023, Şoşoacă distinguished herself from the establishment by not participating in the pro-Israel rally organized in Bucharest in the aftermath of Hamas' 7 October attack. Her position was motivated as less connected to foreign policy choices and more about her fear of drawing Romania into the war. Furthermore, media reports have highlighted her controversial remarks, including instances of antisemitism. For instance, during a joint session of parliament dedicated to the Day of Solidarity and Friendship between Romania and Israel in May 2024, Şoşoacă complained that this day should serve to commemorate Romanian martyrs from communist prisons, criticizing what she viewed as an incorrect focus on antisemitism. She protested that Romania saved over 400,000 Jews during the Second World War (Cotidianul, 2024).

The pursuit of consensus for the European Parliament elections

The AUR presented a strong list of 43 candidates for the European Parliament



elections in June 2024, with Cristian Terheş and Claudiu Târziu featuring prominently at the top. The list included notable figures such as Gheorghe Piperea, known for bringing large class-action lawsuits against commercial banks over abusive credit contract commissions, and Georgiana Teodorescu, a vocal advocate for traditional family values. Also included were Adrian Axinia, an AUR MP closely associated with George Simion and serving as one of AUR's vice presidents. The list comprised various AUR members, lawyers, entrepreneurs, Monica Iagăr, a former athlete, the actress Mara Nicolescu and several academics.

Although the extent of its territorial organization within Romania or abroad remains unclear, SOS Romania succeeded in fielding 43 candidates for the European Parliament elections, including lawyers, a journalist, local councillors and other party members. The first two positions on the party list were occupied by Şoşoacă herself, followed by Luis Lazarus, a journalist trained at the TV stations owned by the controversial former journalist and populist politician Dan Diaconescu.

Regarding the mood of Romanian citizens in the context of the European elections, the Parliament's Spring 2024 Eurobarometer reveals strong interest among Romanian citizens, fully aligned with the European average (EP Spring 2024 Survey). However, Romanian citizens express a more critical and nuanced view towards different aspects of the European arena, particularly concerning the EU's impact on their daily lives. While almost three-quarters of European citizens state that EU actions impact their daily lives, only 65% of Romanians share this opinion. Similarly, although a large majority of Europeans (71%) agree that their country benefits from EU membership, only 65% of Romanians share this view. On the eve of the election, this indicates that there is a fertile breeding ground for parties voicing concerns and criticisms of the EU.

The AUR's campaign focus

Since its electoral breakthrough in 2020, the AUR has been an ardent advocate in defence of Romania's political, economic and sociocultural interests. Unsurprisingly, the party's campaign for the EP elections emphasized Romania's Christian identity and safeguarding the family as the cornerstone of society. The party's platform notably advocated for the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU, viewing it as a strategic step towards uniting the Romanian states. AUR's 11-point manifesto addressed a wide array of issues, from EU relations to specific sectors such as youth,

poverty and environmental policies. Conducted concurrently with the local elections, the AUR's EP election campaign echoed Euroscepticism, targeting specific policies rather than the EU project itself.

AUR has a dedicated website (<https://europarlamentari2024.ro/candidati-aur/>) and a Facebook page (Europarlamentari AUR, 2024) to disseminate its message. Central to the AUR's European vision was a staunch opposition to cosmopolitanism and globalism, advocating instead for European integration rooted in sovereign national identities. The party endorsed Poland's model of preserving national languages, cultures and traditions as exemplary.

Among its key policy points, AUR emphasized the need to stimulate the return of Romanian migrants by combating poverty and facilitating access to European funds for small rural businesses. A recurrent argument was the reduction of administrative rigidity and an open fight against the double standards that penalize Eastern member states.

During the campaign, AUR candidates urged Romanian voters to choose between defending Romanian sovereignty or succumbing to what they termed 'Romanian vassalage'. Symbolically, AUR's program insisted that politics should reflect the general will, specifically the will of national voters:

Politics in Romania must be done at home, not in Brussels or in Moscow. Although alliances with our strategic partners, both European and international, must be consolidated, AUR wants a different approach, one of alliances for the benefit of the country, not for the interests of the parties (AUR's Plan for the European Parliament, 2024).

SOS Romania party's campaign

SOS Romania's campaign primarily focused on Șoșoacă, highlighting concrete measures outlined in a very concise program. The program advocated for Romanians' rights to continue using traditional energy sources like firewood and natural gas, reopening coal mines, and demanded compensation from the European Commission for the costs and side effects associated with COVID-19 vaccines. The program vigorously denounced perceived breaches of national sovereignty and criticized what it viewed as double standards in EU product regulations while emphasizing the protection of Romanian farmers and agriculture.



Aligned with AUR, SOS Romania advocated resisting digital or centralized financial systems (e.g., supporting the continued use of cash for consumer payments) and, in general, supported simpler fiscal regulations from Brussels. Șoșoacă also called for Romania to adopt neutrality in geopolitical matters, opposing the country's involvement in the Ukraine conflict. The candidate and the party program staunchly defended the supremacy of Romania's constitution over any international or European institution. SOS Romania also championed Christian values and traditions, opposed imposed globalism and the LGBTQ+ agenda, and advocated for prohibitive measures against gender education, sex change operations and same-sex marriage in Romania.

The electoral results

In the 2024 European Parliamentary elections, the far right emerged as the second political force in Romania, closely trailing the coalition of PSD and PNL (Table 1). Combining the votes for AUR and SOS Romania, these two parties collectively secured almost one-third of the votes. While AUR's result represents a contraction from the 20% voting intentions registered in the preceding year, SOS Romania's final outcome came as a surprise. Initial exit polls had placed the party below the threshold, a trend confirmed by early official national results. The turnout among nonresident voters was the decisive factor in overturning the initial forecasts.

Table 1. 2024 European election results for Romania

Party	Votes	Share of votes (%)	MEPs (out of 33)	Parliamentary group affiliations (number of MEPs affiliating)
PSD-PNL Alliance	4,341,686	48.5	19	S&D (11) EPP (8)
AUR Alliance	1,334,905	14.9	6	ECR (6)
United Right Alliance	778,901	8.7	3	Renew (2) EPP (1)
Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania	579,180	6.5	2	EPP (2)
SOS Romania	450,040	5.0	2	NA (2)
Ștefănuță Nicolae Bogdănel (Independent)	275,796	3.0	1	Greens/EFA (1)

Sources: Central Electoral Bureau (2024) and European election results (2024)

Interestingly, despite their focus on unification processes, the mobilization of AUR and SOS was notably lower in the Republic of Moldova, particularly in comparison

to mainstream parties. Nonresident voters awarded AUR the highest number of votes in five countries with substantial migrant communities: Spain, Belgium, France, Austria and the United States. Şoşoacă's leadership notably attracted voter support in the United Kingdom, Germany, and Italy (Central Electoral Bureau, 2024). The election results thereby validated AUR and SOS as the primary opposition forces. SOS Romania secured as many MEPs as the liberal Save Romania Union, while AUR doubled the representation of the United Right Alliance.

Benefiting from extensive pre-election networking efforts and Terheş' previous affiliation with the ECR, AUR MEPs have joined this group. The official announcement was made ten days after the elections, coinciding with the news that the ECR had become the third-largest group in the new European Parliament. On the same day, Hungary's Fidesz announced via X that it no longer sought to join the ECR, citing explicit concerns over AUR's extreme anti-Hungarian positions.

Notably, AUR's inclusion in the ECR group came with an agreement to support the Ukrainian cause. This agreement is particularly significant given that George Simion has been deemed *persona non grata* in both Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova due to his irredentist views. Şoşoacă and Lazarus, the two SOS MEPs, remained isolated from alliances at the European level. Despite approaching the emerging Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) group in the EP, their candidacy was rejected by the Alternative for Germany (AfD), the group's founding member. Şoşoacă's opposition to conventional politics became visible in her maiden speech in Parliament in July, where she accused the EU of ruining Romania by providing aid to Ukraine and called for stopping the supply of weapons to Kyiv. In a move laden with symbolism, she was eventually escorted out of the Strasbourg chamber after repeatedly disturbing Valerie Hayer during the debate following a speech by the European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen. On this occasion, she wore a dog's muzzle on her face (Starcevic, 2024).

Conclusions

This report has explored the landscape of the far right in Romania against the backdrop of the 2024 EP elections. The emergence of AUR and SOS Romania as significant political players underscores the growing influence of populist narratives in Romanian politics. With its increased emphasis on a conservative platform and Romanian sovereignty, AUR positioned itself within the ECR group, aligning with softer Eurosceptic stances. In contrast, SOS Romania, led by the outspoken Diana



Șoșoacă, projected a more confrontational stance, challenging mainstream narratives with outspoken critiques of EU policies and advocating for nationalist agendas, including calls for territorial revisionism.

Despite facing rejection from the main EP groups, SOS Romania's representation in the European Parliament alongside AUR highlights the diversity of strategies employed by the far right in contemporary politics. Their campaigns resonated with segments of the electorate disillusioned with traditional political parties, including a significant proportion of young voters, capitalizing on issues such as national identity, sovereignty and cultural preservation. Looking forward, the impact of AUR and SOS Romania in shaping Romanian and European Union policies will depend on their ability to navigate internal cohesion challenges and establish meaningful (and stable) alliances within the EP.

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