



**Andrei Țăranu**

# The Profiteers of Fear?

Right-wing Populism and the COVID-19 Crisis  
in Europe  
**Romania**

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### About this publication

The emergence of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) party on the scene in Romanian parliamentary elections in December 2020 took everyone by surprise. Having developed up until then below the radar of public attention, the AUR was formed by banding together several currents (conservative, nationalist, traditional religious, etc.) under the unifying umbrella of a radically nationalist political vision. The outbreak of the pandemic and the behaviour of the mainstream parties in Romania presented a unique opportunity for this party. With its extremely aggressive political activities, a conservative revisionist agenda and a nationalist populist rhetoric based on negationism and post-truth, the AUR is raising concerns about a possible political regression in Romania.

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# The Profiteers of Fear?

## Right-wing Populism and the COVID-19 Crisis in Europe Romania

Last spring, when the Coronavirus pandemic hit, Romania was already embroiled in intense political turmoil. A few months earlier (November 2019), the social democrat PSD government had fallen by a motion of censure brought by an extremely unlikely majority consisting of a broad coalition of political forces outside the PSD. A minority government led by the conservative liberal National Liberal Party (PNL) ascended to power with the intention of bringing about early elections, which they then hoped to win. In March 2020, everything looked like all the political forces in the arena had aligned themselves so that Romania would experience early elections for the first time since 1989. The liberal minority government of Ludovic Orban had also been turned out of office by a motion of no confidence, after which the President had designated a Prime Minister Candidate, whose sole mission was for his part to also fail a vote of confidence in Parliament and thus, in line with the Romanian Constitution, open the way for early elections to be organised within a period of 45 days.

Thus, when the pandemic was in its beginnings, Romania was already feverishly being driven by an electoral campaign logic, with all the parties jockeying for position and seeking to mobilise their electoral base and find ways to build their political platforms so as to obtain the greatest possible support from the electorate. The various narratives – either those aimed at forcing early elections (spearheaded by the PNL) and those of its official allies (e.g. the PMP) or those of the unofficial allies of the government (USR-PLUS), or parties in the coalition that had held the reins of power until the autumn of 2019 (PSD, ALDE) – had in common a more or less populist critique of political and socio-economic realities in Romania and were bent on demonising their opponents *ad nauseam*. Romania thus entered the pandemic completely unprepared, totally distracted from the need to take measures in the face of the upcoming medical, economic and social emergencies and upheavals that were already gathering force everywhere in Europe and the rest of the world.

### AN ABRUPT CONFRONTATION WITH THE PANDEMIC

When a state of emergency was finally proclaimed (16 March 2020), underscoring the fact that the pandemic had arrived in Romania as well, political life suddenly came to a halt, with

the election campaign being put on ice and local and general elections postponed for the time being. For a short time television and radio stations seemed to be paralysed, at a loss on how to make the transition from an election campaign logic to a medical emergency which the Romanian political arena had largely ignored up until that point. In a brief span of time, however, media institutions shifted gears and moved the spotlight to doctors and scientists.

Romanian political parties seemed to find this transition a much more formidable challenge. The PNL, the ruling party, saw itself forced to abandon its plans to bring about early parliamentary elections and instead institute urgent measures to cushion the impact of the pandemic on the Romanian health system, which had already been suffering from a chronic lack of resources and underfunding for many years, coupled with shortages of medical equipment and human resources, which virtually overnight had become of critical importance. In order to avoid overburdening hospitals and gain time in the fight against the pandemic, the authorities opted to impose a very harsh lockdown regime, backed up by very high fines for anyone who violated the measures taken. The other parliamentary parties officially (PMP) or unofficially (USR-PLUS) supporting the conservative liberal government also affirmed their support for the government's efforts.

For their part, the Social Democrats in the PSD hesitated at first, flirting with the path of denying the seriousness of the new COVID-19 virus and opposing the restrictions imposed by the government but, on the other hand, at the same time seeing an urgent need to bring the party closer to the lines of other European Social Democratic parties and to regain the trust and confidence of its European partners in the wake of the Liviu Dragnea era, a period in which the party became infatuated with various conspiracy theories and even seduced by a Euro-sceptical narrative<sup>1</sup>. In the end, the PSD decided to abandon its stance of denial and to posture as a party guided by the expertise of medical specialists. The

<sup>1</sup> G4media: Mircea Drăghici, trezorierul PSD, face teoria conspirației pe Facebook: Vor să-l dea jos pe Dragnea pentru ca minoritățile sexuale "să aibă acces la copii" (19 September 2018) <https://www.g4media.ro/mircea-draghici-trezorierul-psd-face-teoria-conspiratiei-pe-facebook-vor-sa-l-dea-jos-pe-dragnea-pentru-ca-minoritatile-sexuale-sa-aiba-acces-la-copii.html> [22 February 2021]

issue of the pandemic and the proper response to it thus became the key topic of debate between the mainstream parties, with the various political actors not questioning the adoption of lockdown measures per se – these had already largely been accepted – but rather their degree of severity. In fact, the political melee was even put on the backburner for a brief period, with a new PNL government being voted into power by parliament in an urgent session, including with the votes of the Social Democrats<sup>2</sup>.

One of the reasons why the government as well as the opposition were in doubt as to whether or not to tighten measures related to the impact of the state of emergency on the economy. From the very beginning, the government stated that it would prop up the economy by taking interventionist measures in specific branches and fields of the economy (HORECA, transportation, agriculture, etc.). Other areas, such as art and culture (the performing arts, visual arts, etc.) or the retail sector (aside from food or pharmaceuticals) have thus far been completely left up to their own, with no projects or measures to support these areas in sight.

At the beginning of the state of emergency, the Romanian labour market contracted by more than one million jobs<sup>3</sup>; only recovering less than half of these by the end of the year<sup>4</sup>. Much of this loss was also due to the way in which the economy had closed down and reopened in successive moves reacting to the varying intensity of pandemic waves, thereby leading first and foremost to a crisis of confidence in the government. After the state of emergency was ended on 15 May 2020, being scaled down into a state of alert, the number of cases began to mount instead of decrease, further heightening distrust in the government's ability to manage the situation, while fuelling conspiracy theories revolving around the government's purported desire to limit the freedom of Romanians<sup>5</sup>.

The mainstream parties sidestepped issues like people questioning the existence of COVID-19 or the actual magnitude

of the pandemic, which the severity of the measures taken by the government was based on, the closure of many small businesses, especially in the fields of catering and transport, restrictions on gatherings and movement, mandatory wearing of masks and physical distancing, creating a vacuum that could be exploited by new political forces which had been more or less obscure before the outbreak of the pandemic.

## A NEW POLITICAL PARTY FLYING BELOW THE RADAR

Against this background, the performance in the December 2020 parliamentary elections by the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) party took everyone by surprise. All the more so as in local elections held just two months before, in September 2020, the party had not attracted any attention whatsoever, with its most prominent candidates barely garnering 1% of votes.

In fact, the party did not play any important role in the Romanian political arena before the pandemic. One of its two co-presidents, George Simion, although he had previously received a modest degree of public attention, had only managed to obtain a negligible share of 1.21% of the vote in the 2019 European elections<sup>6</sup>, while another better known leader, Ninel Peia, president of the Party of Romanian Kin, a party that would later become part of the AUR, obtained only 0.34% of the vote in the presidential elections the same year<sup>7</sup>. The AUR was practically beyond the pale of public attention, causing many observers to expect that it would disappear altogether, just like many other nationalist populist parties that had sprung up in the wake of the collapse of the far-right Greater Romania Party in 2008.

The AUR therefore appeared to merely be yet another among the plethora of marginal political parties with a nationalist, religious and populist storyline. It follows from their statutes that they would be a conservative, nationalist party emphasising tradition – a political space hitherto targeted by other small parties without success. In fact, the AUR was formed precisely by unifying several different strands (conservative, nationalist, traditional religious, etc.) under the umbrella of a radically nationalist political vision. And the outbreak of the pandemic and actions of the mainstream parties offered it a unique opportunity.

For the Romanian society, the emergence of such a party was a profound shock, because since 2008 no self-declared nationalist (and unabashedly populist) party had entered parliament and Romania appeared to be the only country in

2 Digi24: Guvernul Orban 2 a fost învestit. Voturile PSD au fost decisive. Măsuri speciale pentru depunerea jurământului (14 March 2020) <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/guvernul-orban-2-a-fost-investit-voturile-psd-au-fost-decisive-masuri-speciale-pentru-depunerea-juramentului-1275448> [22 February 2021]

3 Profit.ro: CONAF: România a pierdut într-o lună peste un milion de locuri de muncă, mai mult decât în perioada de criză economică (13.04.2020) <https://www.profit.ro/stiri/economie/conaf-romania-a-pierdut-intr-o-luna-pest-un-milion-de-locuri-de-munca-mai-mult-decat-in-perioada-de-criza-economica-19333107> [22 February 2021].

4 Ziarul Financiar: Aproape jumătate de milion de locuri de muncă au dispărut din economia locală în pandemie: industria prelucrătoare a pierdut 90.000 de locuri de muncă, iar din construcții au dispărut mai mult de 70.000 (2 October 2020) <https://www.zf.ro/eveniment/aproape-jumatate-milion-locuri-munca-au-disparut-economia-locala-19601168> [22 February 2021]

5 Examples of conspiracy theories in the Romanian public space abound, one example being here: Daniel Roxin: România devine „prima Colonie a Guvernului Global. De internarea cu forța nu va scăpa nimeni!” E important să știi (14 July 2020) <https://daniel-roxin.ro/romania-devine-prima-colonie-a-guvernului-global-de-internarea-cu-forta-nu-va-scapa-nimeni-iata-ce-spune-proiectul-de-lege-covid-al/> [22 February 2021]

6 Hotnews.ro: FINAL - REZULTATE Europarlamentare 2019 (28.05.2019) [https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-europarlamentare\\_2019-23169636-rezultate-partiale-pnl-psd-usr-plus.htm](https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-europarlamentare_2019-23169636-rezultate-partiale-pnl-psd-usr-plus.htm) [22 February 2021]

7 Digi24: Rezultatele finale oficiale alegeri prezidențiale 2019, turul I (14 November 2019) <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/alegeri-prezidentiale-2019/rezultatele-finale-oficiale-alegeri-prezidentiale-2019-turul-i-1216835> [22 January 2021]

the region impervious to populism. Of course, a nationalist populist current was almost always an element to be found in the mainstream parties, but none of these was radical enough to be considered a right-wing populist party in the classical sense of the word, like the PiS in Poland, FIDESZ in Hungary, ATAKA in Bulgaria or SmeRodina in Slovakia. Generally speaking, Romanian political parties have avoided nationalist extremism, adopting a more centrist stance on the major problems exploited by European populism, such as migration or Euroscepticism, especially since Romania is a country of emigration much more than a country of immigration.

As it were, the Romanian diaspora played a very key role in the success of the AUR. As is well known, Romania has one of the largest diasporas among EU Member States, most of it being formed in the last decade and a half since Romania's accession to the EU. Millions of Romanians have left the country to live and work in Western Europe, especially in Italy and Spain, countries whose language is relatively close to Romanian. These Romanian citizens have been considered to be part of a radically anti-communist electorate, liberal and much more open than their fellow Romanians remaining in the country, considered to be rather much closer to the social democratic PSD. However, as northern Italy was the hardest hit region at the beginning of the pandemic, a significant number of Romanians who were working in northern Italy and elsewhere in Western Europe lost their jobs and / or housing stability, in many cases prompting them to return to Romania in the hopes of being able to re-adjust economically and socially there.

Instead, when they returned, they were put under strict quarantine, being viewed with suspicion and often even being forced to leave certain small localities, as they were considered to be vectors carrying a virus that would spread throughout the population. Even some mainstream parties, especially those in power, have attempted to dissuade Romanians living abroad from returning to the country. Suddenly, the diaspora, which was considered to be a "civilizing" force for Romania, became the enemy, the carrier of disease, in other words "Them" in the most negative sense. For this reason, a large proportion of voters in the diaspora turned against the mainstream parties, and instead of casting their votes for the USR-PLUS<sup>8</sup> or PNL in parliamentary elections, as they had done in the past, they went over to the AUR – the only party that had projected a brazen stance, emphatically condemning the measures taken by the government while, through its leaders, embracing and circulating conspiracy theories, pseudo-scientific and irrational explanations of the crisis to audiences receptive to such rhetoric.

The vote garnered by the AUR among the diaspora caused considerable anguish in Romania among the mainstream

political parties, as the party obtained 24.9% of the votes in the diaspora<sup>9</sup>. The mainstream parties and especially those which had railed against corruption saw that sentiment was turning in the direction of a nationalist vote of protest at their expense, as the AUR has co-opted in a declamatory and populist manner both anti-corruption and anti-communist rhetoric, while at the same time hoisting the anti-austerity and anti-Covid banner.

## CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND THE PANDEMIC IN ROMANIA

As Jayson Harsin of the American University of Paris, one of the leading scholars investigating the Post-Truth era, has noted, it would appear that never in history have conspiracy theories and hatred been so salient in human society as during the current Coronavirus pandemic (Harsin: 2018). Society has been divided between "holders of the truth" (conspiracy theorists and their followers) and the "useful idiots" of the system, as Stalin called them, derisively referred as "snowflakes" or "sheep". The latter accepted – so goes the script – being deprived of their freedoms (economic, social, movement, etc.) by the big pharmaceutical companies and information technology (Big Tech, Big Pharma), etc., which had set about destroying the last remnants of human freedom and democracy. The theory that Big Tech and Big Pharma were cooperating to introduce microchips to monitor human beings through the vaccine appears to have spread throughout the world. At any rate, these theories are also present in Romania, especially among AUR supporters, but not only.

Carting out the apocalyptic text of the Bible, the significance of the number 666 and the coming end of the world – Armageddon – this theory was an instant and resounding success from the United States to South Korea, from Brazil to Romania. And the ambiguous and oscillating behaviour some political leaders have displayed in their response to the pandemic has only strengthened the spectre of a global conspiracy. The fact that Donald Trump in the US, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil or Boris Johnson in the UK (and they were not the only ones), at least initially, denied the pandemic and tried to propagate and preserve a pre-pandemic reality (business as usual) further split their own societies while strengthening conspiracy theorists' perception that occult forces (the Deep State, Big Tech, Big Pharma, George Soros, etc.) want to seize political power to the detriment of civil and democratic freedoms of the world's people. It is no surprise, then, that the vast majority of populist and anti-liberal leaders have reacted in tandem with religious or parareligious groups to turn their supporters against the health care system, which they consider oppressive and amenable to occult interests.

<sup>8</sup> The USR-PLUS was from its establishment in 2016 until the parliamentary elections of December 2020 the party with the highest number of votes among the diaspora, followed by the PNL.

<sup>9</sup> Mediafax: Scor urias pentru AUR în diapora. Rezultate parțiale (7 December 2020) <https://www.mediafax.ro/politic/scor-urias-pentru-aur-in-diaspora-rezultate-parțiale-alegeri-parlamentare-19771359> [22 January 2021]

The emergence of new media and the democratisation of information have led to an explosion of what is now referred to as fake news and conspiracy theories that have generated and continue to generate strong mistrust in traditional political elites (mainstream parties, epistemic or academic elites). Of course, the repeated mistakes of elites as well as the emergence of various ‘leaks’ and ‘gates’, have compromised political parties and mainstream elites without them being replaced politically or toppled from positions of authority. We are dealing with a typical case of a revolt on the part of horizontal networks against the vertical elite, as Niall Ferguson has described it (Ferguson: 2017). This time, however, horizontal networks are no longer concerned about reason or logic, as the urban bourgeoisie was at the beginning of the Modern Era, instead cultivating conspiracy theories and so-called religious truths against what the populists perceive to be the “Totalitarianism of Scientific Thought.”

Nor is this reaction to rationality and science new in contemporary history. It traces back to the period immediately after the First World War, when Italian fascism sought to appeal to will and irrationalism as political engines opposed to liberalism and democracy, considered then (and unfortunately now as well) to be the main culprits behind social regression and political and economic crisis.

In peripheral areas of Europe, such as Spain or Romania, fascism also followed a conservative religious line of a mystical vein in which telluric democracy had a counterpart in the form of a transcendental dictatorship in the celestial plane. From this perspective, Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera (founder of the Spanish Falange) and Corneliu Zelea Codreanu (founder of the Legion of Archangel Michael<sup>10</sup>) are very similar, with both promoting a hieratic vision of their country, both movements targeting the political left as the enemy and both advocating their movements obtaining power through violence if democratic elections do not allow such. The notable difference between the two fascist movements was that the Legion was a declared anti-Semitic and xenophobic chauvinist movement from its very inception. Much along the lines of the AUR’s present-day rhetoric, the two early fascist movements glorified struggle against the system and the political establishment, energetically rejecting both capitalism and communism, and placing more hope in God than in a series of clear public policies which would lead them to modernity (Pierre: 1991; Schmitt: 2017).

It is sad that in the December 2020 elections in Romania, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) party, which

through its discourse and the behaviour of its leaders is all too reminiscent of the Legionary Movement, made its way into the Romanian Parliament with 10% of the vote, thereby surpassing some of the mainstream parties, even though it seemed to have no chance of political survival and was at the time still below the radar of sociologists or political scientists. And much of the resounding success of this political party came precisely from resistance to what conspiracy theorists have termed a “muzzle”, i.e. the medicinal masks that protects against Covid-19.

## RELIGION, ULTRA-CONSERVATISM AND ANTI-MASK PROTESTS

In fact, the fight against the requirement to wear a protective mask was precisely what galvanised the ideological amalgamation which is the AUR. The party was founded a year before the elections by unifying two radical right-wing currents, a nationalist one agitating for unification with the Republic of Moldova, which Romania not only has direct borders, but also shares a long cultural and linguistic history, and the other one, an important conservative religious movement, mostly made up of supporters of the pro-family referendum (Coalition for the Family) aimed at introducing in the Constitution the phrase “marriage is the union between a man and a woman”. According to their political platform, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians is founded on four pillars: family, homeland, faith and freedom<sup>11</sup>. Proclaiming these four pillars, the AUR has avowed an unabashed populist nationalist position with prominent irrationalist religious inflections.

The point in time when the AUR was formed as a legal party, 24 January 2020, was very close to the official onset of the pandemic in Romania. In the measures imposed in connection with declaration of the state of emergency, the Romanian authorities adopted a rather complicated position vis-à-vis religious communities and especially the Romanian Orthodox Church, which enjoys great authority and influence in Romania. Thus, churches were ordered to close places of worship, and religious services were allowed only between certain hours and in open spaces. And the fact that the feast of Easter in the Orthodox rite (which does not have the same calendar as the Catholic and Protestant ones) was allowed only under extremely strict conditions, triggering a furious reaction from a section of the Orthodox community. This was presumably the moment when this tiny party truly took off.

Theories of an alleged conspiracy among “neo-Marxists” and progressives seeking to allow same-sex marriage and the adoption of children by same-sex families by legislation had already cropped up in Romania (as elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe) during the campaign leading up to the

<sup>10</sup> The Legion of Archangel Michael was a Romanian political movement having fascist roots, a strong orthodox mystical penchant and profoundly anti-Semitic and anti-communist leanings. Over the years it was responsible for the assassination of two Romanian prime ministers (I.G. Duca in 1933 and Armand Călinescu in 1939) as well as numerous political and intellectual notables. It came to power in 1940 for five months, and was responsible for forging Romania’s political alliance with Nazi Germany.

<sup>11</sup> AUR: Program [https://www.partidulaur.ro/program\\_aur](https://www.partidulaur.ro/program_aur) [22 February 2021]



2018 pro-family referendum, but were considered ridiculous at the time, which is the main reason why the referendum did not pass. But these have subsequently fallen on fertile ground in the so-called conflicts between the State and the Church, with the AUR assiduously fanning the flames of it all through the anti-mask demonstrations launched in the summer of 2020.

For the first time since the interwar period, high-level office-holders in the Romanian Orthodox Church openly intervened to encourage the activities and political propaganda of a party that they have without a doubt supported and continue to support<sup>12,13</sup>. AUR leaders have on a massive scale engaged in religious propaganda to allow, in the midst of a pandemic, pilgrimages (involving large numbers of people crowded together and, therefore, a risk of accelerating spread of the virus) seen as traditional and sacred in Iași, Bucharest and later in Constanța. For their part, AUR leaders benefited from the impressive media infrastructure of the Orthodox Church, which helped facilitate their scaled-up election campaigning, while still remaining below the radar of mainstream cultural and ideological stakeholders. Hence the shock and surprise that these parties experienced when they saw themselves suffering political defeat at the hands of the AUR.

It is very interesting that, in fact, the AUR was not the first success story in such an endeavour, as a decade and a half ago, another radical Catholic populist party, the PiS (the current ruling party) employed a similar recipe in Poland (Radio Maryja, in particular). While it is, of course, unlikely that the PiS offered the AUR support, the ideological affinities between the AUR and PiS are undeniable, as AUR party members, immediately after entering parliament, spoke out in favour of an alliance with PiS conservatives on the European political stage<sup>14</sup>.

The difference is, however, that the AUR has thus far not positioned itself aggressively against the European Union, as the PiS has done, instead adopting – at least in its declarations – a more pro-European vision, which is understandable considering that European funds are Romania's only chance of escaping underdevelopment. Here the AUR has aligned itself – it is to be seen whether this is only for the time being or not – with mainstream political forces. One possible explanation for this is that the AUR attaches importance to maintaining close ties with the diaspora electorate, whose loyalty it believes it has gained and whose members

are extremely interested in continuing to live and work in the States of the European Union.

The AUR is a conglomeration of political currents whose main common link is nationalism. One of these currents is the Romanian Kin Party<sup>15</sup>, which also has a vaguely Eurosceptic stance, although rather ambiguous, as in Romania there is – at least for now – no party that explicitly calls for a sovereignist or anti-European direction. Their rancour is directed against all “foreigners”, who allegedly want to plunder Romania with the connivance of the ruling parties that have “sold out”.

## SOFT POPULISM VERSUS RADICAL POPULISM

The appearance of the AUR on the scene took everyone by surprise – also due to the fact that this party replaced parties that were connected to the institutional and press establishment, such as the People's Movement Party (PMP) under former Romanian President Traian Băsescu, or Pro Romania under former Prime Minister Victor Ponta<sup>16</sup>. One cannot say with any certainty whether the voters of the two parties went over to the AUR *en masse*, but there is an interesting aspect worth noting here. The two parties, although apparently opposed to each other, rallied around roughly the same brand of soft populism: a traditionalist breed of nationalism combined with Romanian exceptionalism, an aversion to progressive movements and especially to political correctness and LGBTQ + activism. In addition, the PMP had a special relationship with the Republic of Moldova<sup>17</sup>, declaring itself in favour of union between Romania and the Republic of Moldova within the European Union<sup>18</sup>.

Therefore, almost all the elements of the AUR platform existed in Romanian society and politics even before the party emerged. One possible explanation for the success of the AUR to the detriment of certain populist parties already existing in Romania is the radicalism with which it has approached issues. Research carried out by YouGov-Cambridge

<sup>12</sup> Basilica: Cartea „Șocul Referendumului” a fost lansată la Facultatea de Teologie din București (27 November 2019) <https://basilica.ro/cartea-socul-referendumului-a-fost-lansata-la-facultatea-de-teologie-din-bucuresti/> [22 February 2021]

<sup>13</sup> Trinitas TV: Casa cu rost (23.10.2020) <https://www.trinitas.tv/casa-cu-rost/?fbclid=IwAR3rPwX86F9LoVXfrPyJoYTTNiMVLV8BBHa2u-PAsNBMV5XbwDVQfVurVc> [22 February 2021]

<sup>14</sup> G4media: AUR anunță că strânge relațiile cu partidele anti-UE (22 February 2021) <https://www.g4media.ro/aur-anunta-ca-strange-relatiile-cu-partidele-anti-ue-george-simion-s-a-intalnit-cu-lideri-ai-partidului-de-guvernare-din-polonia-si-cu-conservatorii-europeni.html> [22 February 2021]

<sup>15</sup> The Romanian Kin Party was founded in 2018 by Ninel Peia, a former Social Democrat deputy, and two reservist generals of the Romanian army. According to the party's statutes, it favours the urgent implementation of the “Polish model” in Romania, the preservation and observance of Christian values and a stop to Muslim migration to Europe.

<sup>16</sup> Mediafax: Rezultate finale alegeri-parlamentare 2020. Cinci partide intră în Parlament. AUR ia peste 9% din voturi. Pro Romania și PMP nu trec pragul electoral (9 December 2020) <https://www.mediafax.ro/alegeri-parlamentare-2020/rezultate-finale-alegeri-parlamentare-2020-cinci-partide-intra-in-parlament-aur-ia-peste-9-din-voturi-pro-romania-si-pmp-nu-trec-pragul-electoral-19770461> [22 February 2021]

<sup>17</sup> Radio Europa Liberă Moldova: România, parlamentare 2020: USR Plus și AUR își împart votul diasporei. Nu în R. Moldova (7 December 2020) <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/rom%C3%A2nia-parlamentare-2020-usr-plus-%C8%99i-aur-%C3%AE%C8%99i-%C3%AEmpart-votul-diasporei/30987559.html> [22 February 2021]

<sup>18</sup> In this context, it must be said that the AUR leader, George Simion, also built his political career around the issue of relations with the Republic of Moldova.

Globalism Project<sup>19,20</sup> in 2020 revealed that support for the discourse of populist parties tended to decrease in the previous year (2019–2020, the period in which the study was undertaken) based on the definition offered by Cas Mudde. He said in a famous paper exploring populism that it can be defined as a “thin ideology that opposes the *pure people to the corrupt elite*” (Mudde, Kaltwasser: 2015). On the other hand, the same study also notes that those who are leaving populist parties in Europe and the US are for the most part heading for movements based on conspiracy theories<sup>21</sup> – anti-vaxxers, in particular – whose discourse has not yet been internalised by populist parties.

Thus, to put it in a nutshell, the Coronavirus pandemic caused interest in softer populist parties to wane in Europe and the Americas, while augmenting support for more radical movements. The success of VOX in Spain and the AUR in Romania is in line with this trend. All of which shows that assuming a radical populist religious line, propagating premodern irrationalism and appealing to legionary mysticism (which the two parties PMP and Pro Romania would not have dared to do) was an element in the success of the AUR.

## CONCLUSIONS

The question to be asked is whether the arrival of the AUR on the Romanian political stage would have been possible without the context of the Coronavirus pandemic and without the questionable behaviour of the mainstream parties immediately before and after the outbreak of the pandemic. It is noteworthy that the AUR has established itself and operates as an anti-system party, being characterised by extremely aggressive political behaviour and seeking to profit from the incapacity of the authorities and political class as a whole to impose measures to combat the pandemic and limit its effects on the lives of Romanians within the country itself or in the diaspora. With its huge economic and social impact, the COVID-19 pandemic has given the political actors enlisting with the AUR a perfect opportunity to obtain a more prominent political platform and gain loyal supporters who may prove receptive to the most abstruse conspiracy theories and are vulnerable to fake news. The aim and objective of the AUR is to steer a part of society in the direction of resistance against the system, which would cause instability in the medium and long term, and to roll back civil rights and freedoms in accordance with its conservative doctrine.

In any normal situation, the entry of the AUR into parliament with 10% of the seats simultaneously with the disappearance of two small parties (PMP and ProRomania), all of which had features characteristic of populist nationalist parties, should not have given rise to any serious political fears and forebodings. Romania has had populist parties in the past which got off the ground with plenty of fireworks but that nevertheless did not last long on the political scene. An end to the pandemic is not yet in sight, however, and other economic and social crises could well follow. That is why the AUR must be a cause of concern to both the mainstream parties and the European democratic community, as this party already has a much more radical narrative than the two it replaced and which were, in one way or another, part of the system. This rhetoric mainly feeds on crisis situations.

And the biggest fear of pro-democratic civil society is that if the AUR's rhetoric begins to be even more successful (as has happened in many European States where conservative populist rhetoric has been gaining momentum), parties that can still be considered mainstream today could try to profit some from this anti-systemic discourse. We are already witnessing the PSD, the main opposition party, echoing some of the AUR's positions on the issues of freedom of movement and religious expression<sup>22</sup>. But even the PNL – the main governing party – has discovered that it has populist factions within it who in part have sentiments similar to the AUR<sup>23</sup>.

In the wake of the 1989 revolution, when Romania was likened to a Phoenix that had been reborn out of the violent struggle against Nicolae Ceaușescu and his Securitate secret police and that could choose for itself a democratic future in Europe, a series of nationalist and populist tremors (anti-Hungarian movements in Târgu Mureș, the violent protests of coal miners, etc.) returned it to the remote backwaters of international politics for almost a decade. Fears of pro-democracy forces could portend a return to a nationalist populist rhetoric, based on negationism and post-truth, and possibly having the same effect, almost 15 years after the country's accession to the European Union.

<sup>19</sup> The Guardian: What is the Guardian YouGov-Cambridge Globalism Project? (1 May 2019) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/01/populism-what-is-yougov-cambridge-globalism-project-methodology> [22 February 2021]

<sup>20</sup> The Guardian: European support for populist beliefs falls, YouGov survey suggests (26 October 2020) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/26/european-support-for-populist-beliefs-falls-yougov-survey-suggests> [22 February 2021]

<sup>21</sup> The Guardian: Revealed: populists far more likely to believe in conspiracy theories (1 May 2019) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/01/revealed-populists-more-likely-believe-conspiracy-theories-vaccines> [22 February 2021]

<sup>22</sup> Adevărul: Marcel Ciolacu, despre tăierea banilor pentru biserici cu aproape 90%: Vor să distrugă tot ce are legătură cu credința acestui neam! (18 February 2021) [https://adevarul.ro/news/politica/marcel-ciolacu-bugetul-2021-prezinta-sume-maimici-biserica-vor-distruga-ceare-legatura-credinta-acestui-neam-1\\_602e46275163ec42711e5735/index.html](https://adevarul.ro/news/politica/marcel-ciolacu-bugetul-2021-prezinta-sume-maimici-biserica-vor-distruga-ceare-legatura-credinta-acestui-neam-1_602e46275163ec42711e5735/index.html) [22 February 2021]

<sup>23</sup> Digi24: Rareș Bogdan îl atacă dur pe Orban: I s-a umflat capul și s-a crezut căinele alfa. Partidul e pe un butoi cu pulbere (18 January 2021) <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/rareș-bogdan-il-ataca-dur-pe-orban-i-s-a-umflat-capul-si-s-a-crezut-cainele-alfa-partidul-e-pe-un-butoi-cu-pulbere-1435771> [22 February 2021]



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## EUROPA

In many countries the COVID-19 crisis had initially led to increased trust in government. The restrictions to personal freedoms, curfews, restrictions on social contacts, the closure of large segments of the economy as well as the widening of executive powers in many countries was largely accepted and supported by the public. However, frustration and distrust of government have been increasing the longer the restrictions have been in place. Some countries, such as Germany, witnessed large demonstrations against the counter measures. Moreover, the wide dissemination of fake news and conspiracy theories are influencing the public debate on how to handle the pandemic.

Reports from Sweden, Finland, Italy, France, Spain, Greece, Romania and Germany – all countries with large or growing right-wing populist movements and parties explore the question, if right-wing populism in Europe has been able to benefit from the Corona-crisis. A synopsis interprets and classifies the developments in the individual countries in a comparative perspective.

Further information on the project can be found here:  
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