

POPULIST CHALLENGES ON ROMANIA'S SECURITY

*General (ret.) Proffesor Teodor FRUNZETI, Ph.D**

*Dorin GAL, Ph.D. Candidate***

Abstract: *Populism is the modern challenge of democratic countries, particularly challenging through its ability to adapt and reshape its discourses based on local problems. In a country where most of the citizens already feel at odds with the local authorities, the A.U.R. party's ascension still caught many by surprise. The danger here is that the local socio-political context can help this success change from a once-in-a-lifetime event to a very stable and dangerous presence in the Romanian political world.*

Keywords: *populism, Romanian populism, neo-populism, A.U.R.*

Introduction

Populist challenges on the countries and institutions following democratic procedures are already widely known these days. Since leaders do not always follow a path of transparency, particularly when a threat is as volatile and everchanging as that of populism, this can sometimes give birth to wonder-actors that spring from nowhere and end up at the very top of the political ladder. Romania's A.U.R. (The Alliance for the Union of Romanians) is one such example. In this paper, we are going to use its ascension to prove that a lack of communication and trust between the government and the people can be exceptionally good for populist threats to thrive, particularly in Eastern Europe's younger breed of democracies.

To settle things from the start, the definition used in this paper will follow the generally accepted ideas of much more established researchers, whose vision is also shared by the author. On a general level, populism is seen as the ideology splitting the society "into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'", so citizens require a strong leader that will be able to return politics to the

* Full member of the Academy of Romanian Scientists, President of the Military Sciences Section of the Academy of Romanian Scientists, tfrunzeti@gmail.com.

** National Defence University "Carol I", Bucharest, Romania, doringal07@gmail.com.

original state of being “*an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people*”¹.

As it was also argued elsewhere, social media platforms, while rich in their benefits and uses, have also given birth to a new type of populism that has a heavy impact on the gatekeeping function that regular media was usually entrusted with. Gifted from birth with an exceptional ability to turn half-real facts into sensational stories, populists used their narratives to become the go-to actor for media organizations that are relying on breaking stories and subscriptions in order to survive².

The Romanian space has always shown characteristics that would favorize the development of populist actors due the “us versus them” mentality that is already ingrained deep in the local culture. The aim of this paper is showing how quickly a 30-year old democracy, still struggling to fix the last remnants of communism, can fall prey to the ascension of a party that taps into deep national issues, has no coherent ideology, and uses mistakes made by authorities to justify hate speech and bullying.

An analysis of populist tendencies in Romania

The democratic Romania’s territory was always going to be a haven for populist tendencies and discourses, particularly those that thrive on issues particularly found in Eastern Europe such as underdevelopment and lack of trust in state authorities. Therefore, an accurate description of the behavior of the post-communist Romanian political space is required in order to fully grasp the magnitude of the problem.

Over the more than 30 years that have passed since the revolution of December 1989, Romania has had its share of parties and leaders that could easily be partially or completely classified as “populist”. In the years that followed the fall of communism, the political void provided a huge opportunity for such groups. Factions such as *The Party for the National Unity of the Romanians (PUNR)*, or *The Great Romania Party (PRM)*, either tried their best to join the government, or established themselves as

¹ C. Mudde, “The populist zeitgeist”, in *Government and opposition* 39.4 (2004), p. 543.

² M. Galeotti, *Will the populist wave wash away NATO and the European Union?*, 2017, available at <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2017/01/06/will-the-populist-wave-wash-away-nato-and-the-european-union/index.html>, accessed on 23.11.2021.

powerful opposition. Led by Corneliu Vadim Tudor, the PRM populism party posed a very real threat during the 2000 elections as they conflated xenophobia, love of Romania's "pristine" culture, and communist nostalgia to reach the second round of presidential elections³.

PRM started losing fuel after the electoral failure and was quickly replaced with another opportunistic populist actor: *The Democratic Party* led by soon-to-be-president Traian Băsescu. This time, however, Romanian populists showed great capability for evolution, as rhetoric and strategies completely changed course: gone was the nationalist and nostalgic speech, to be replaced with anti-communist and pro-European rhetoric. Băsescu's party completely showed what populists mean when appealing to "the People" as they urged the entire country to fight against the old regime made of communists remnants refusing to leave power. Furthermore, from 2009, the president's regime proved what Jan-Werner Muller, the famed author, was yet to write for another 8 years: The idea that populists are fated to disband once in power is a myth, born out of a need of the international community to more dutifully ignore its ascension⁴. Once a populist has power, anything bad that is happening from then on will be placed on the shoulders of the "elites", at home or abroad.

Furthermore, the volatility of populist ideas hit Romania different than most. The country was already abundant in traditional ideas about its people's superiority and glorious history, so it started the march towards the "us versus them" discourse that's so identical to populism as early as 1989. This was the context that allowed Nicolae Densușianu's 1913 work, "*Prehistoric Dacia*", to be used as the focal point of a Dacian tropism that is, to this day, the very origin of Romanian populism. The book was, of course, widely criticized by established authors and described as a "*science-fiction novel, filled with mythology and absurd philology, which, when it first appeared, awakened a wave of admiration and enthusiasm among the Romanian dilettantes in archeology*"⁵.

³ D. Dragoman, C. Ungureanu, "The Faces of Populism in Post-Communist Romania", in *CIDOB Reports*, 2017.

⁴ J.W. Muller, *Ce este populismul?*, POLIROM, 2017, p. 72.

⁵ V. Pârvan, *Getica: o protoistorie a Daciei*, Meridiane, 1982.

Regardless, the ground was set for the events described earlier in the paper. Romania was already under the spell of an everlasting search for “modernity”, but one that would not threaten too much its traditional values. Keeping true to the populist spirit, many political actors were able to use this belief, regardless of what modernity actually meant: the Western values at the beginning of the 20th century, the West as it was seen during the time of Nicolae Ceaușescu, or the European Union and global multilateralism nowadays⁶.

During the age of communism, this focus on the past served as reasoning for the position chosen by national authorities, but it works just as well today, and it is one of the main reasons that lead to the A.U.R. party’s meteoric rise. Providing a scapegoat and offering evidence of a more successful past may not be the sole privilege of populist leaders, but the availability of Romanian citizens to believe such ideas can no longer be denied, further increasing the danger of such leader and the justification of this paper.

There’s much irony to be found in the similarity of speeches made 30 years ago to those of today in terms of how every political actor seems inclined to revert responsibility on to somebody else. All these characteristics, already developed before 1989, were fully integrated in the Romanian post-communist national populism. This is such a broad subject, in fact, and worthy of a paper of its own, that we will only try to identify those characteristics that served as fuel for the ascension of A.U.R., without necessarily providing an in-depth explanation in regards to its origins.

Margaret Canovan underlined the existence of several basic traits through which underdeveloped societies become a fertile soil for populist ideas: Constant unhappiness of the population, the spread of this idea through all layers of society, and the comparison between the poverty and frustration at home, with the prosperity that others seem to be enjoying⁷. These elements create not only a wide number of people who are always ready for radical ideas, but also leaders who are prepared to lead them. Despite the fact that these two social factions live in very different contexts,

⁶ R. Adam, *Două veacuri de populism românesc*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 2018, pp. 228-229.

⁷ Margaret Canovan, *Populism*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981, p. 279.

just like in post-1989 Romania, the common hatred against the status quo represents a powerful weapon for local populists⁸.

Lacking a democratic tradition and thrown directly into the socio-political void created after the 1989 revolution, the Romanian state and its citizens attracted a large amount of information, tendencies, and beliefs from the Western world, without having the chance to go through a step-by-step transition process, as the West did. Therefore, it is only natural that the message of local parties be a little more ambiguous, especially since Romanian voters put much more emphasis on emotions and habits than on logic and arguments in regards to the proper functioning of a democratic system. This is to be understood in lack of consistent social responsibility, but also works as an amazing instrument for populist actors who manage to influence those emotions.

As a direct example, Romania has tried and succeeded to become a member of two key-organizations: NATO and the European Union. However, many citizens continue to conflate economic stagnation with involvement in the Western world. From a socio-economic standpoint, while the elites in power managed to fulfill the criteria required in order to join those two international actors, the common citizen was only able to observe the signs of a democracy in a crisis. Besides, an over-simplification of the message and reducing everything to the need of a quick fix⁹ or result is not only the mark of Romanian populism, but of the entire post-communist Romanian society.

A.U.R. and the lifeblood of Romanian society

Missing the restrictions and results brought by a long democratic tradition, Romanian populism immersed itself in the nuances of the communist myth of total and absolute equality of the people. The danger comes from the ability of such a speech to be used absolutely against anyone, party or individual leader, by somehow projecting a direct link to the state interests, therefore underlining the need to eliminate that actor. The betrayal of the people is not as general as it is in the West, dutifully

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ S. Ghergina, S. Mișcoiu (ed), *Partide și personalități populiste în România postcomunistă*, The European Institute, Iași, 2010, p. 90.

executed so the elites can obtain power. Rather, it is always pictured as the beginning of a crisis, more or less imaginary¹⁰.

This is the type of context that allowed A.U.R. to win 9.08% of the votes for the Chamber of Deputies and 9.17% of the votes for the Senate during the September 2020 Romanian parliamentary elections.

*“It’s been 30 years from the Revolution, 100 years from the Great Unification and Romanians are more and more disunited”*¹¹, is the receiving message on the party’s official website. Still, its explosive success seems far likely to have more to do with the country being a fertile ground for Romanian neo-populism of all types, and less with how A.U.R.’s leaders present themselves in front of the citizens. As it was shown so far, Romania has had its share of populist leaders since it began its run as a democratic state. However, it’s worth noting that A.U.R.’s success shows the first time that such a populist actor experiences power as a result of citizens’ frustration against the general authorities, not due to their own personal charisma.

The party presents itself as being a nationalist one, whose values are Family, Country, Christian faith, and Freedom¹². *“I run a conservative party which fights for tradition. We are for the freedom of choice(...) We are tied to the local producer, the Romanian peasant”*, said George Simion, one of the founders of A.U.R., in December 2020¹³. The organization’s rise was so fast, in fact, that a study conducted at the end of October 2020 did not even have it shown among the voting options of the citizens¹⁴. It’s also worth mentioning that the elections where A.U.R. emerged into the spotlight had one of the lowest turnouts in recent history, which once again highlights how populism thrives when citizens feel disconnected and unhappy with their leaders.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p.91.

¹¹ *The Vision and Objectives of the Party the Alliance for the Union of Romanians*, available at <https://www.partidulA.U.R..ro/>, 2021, accessed on 25.11.2021.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ “Cine este A.U.R., partidul venit de nicăieri care ar putea intra în Parlament”, in *Ziarul Financiar*, 2020, available at <https://www.zf.ro/eveniment/A.U.R.-partidul-venit-nicaieri-ar-putea-intra-parlament-spunea-george-19770960>, accessed on 25.11.2021.

¹⁴ B. Ștefan, ”Barometru politic național 25-30 octombrie 2020”, in *Barometru Politic Național*, 3, 2020, available at <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3774704>, accessed on 25.11.2021.

According to an analysis ran by the *Romanian Institute for Public Opinion Polling (IRSOP)*, the fact that only 31.84% of the entire population went out to vote shows a general feeling of distrust in the authorities due to poor standards of living and the ongoing COVID-19 crisis¹⁵. A new analysis, roughly 10 months later, in October 2021, showed A.U.R.'s approval rates to be up at 17.1%, a staggering amount for a party not even two years old.

The pandemic also played a decisive role in this result, in more ways than one. About 265.000 Romanians abroad voted in the 2020 elections, most of them residing in countries such as France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Moldova, and the UK¹⁶. Overall, one in four Romanians living abroad chose to vote for the A.U.R. populist party. As the pandemic took shape, more than 1.3 million people returned home after being laid off, a clear sign of even more boosts in terms of electoral support. With Romanian authorities being perceived as disrespectful after President Klaus Iohannis urged emigrants to avoid returning home at the height of the pandemic so as not to spread the virus, A.U.R.'s success with them came as no surprise¹⁷.

Last but not least, the final point requires remembering what we pointed out earlier about how Romanians choose emotions over logic and democratic reason when making a lot of their political decisions. The same IRSOP analysis quoted above showed that “*most respondents who supported the A.U.R. had a negative opinion about the President and the government, and 58% of them saw the restrictions forced upon them by the authorities as their main source of personal unrest, while only 11% saw the spread of COVID-19 as the most pressing issue*”¹⁸.

¹⁵ ”Alegeri parlamentare 2020. Analiza IRSOP a votului din 6 decembrie: Cum se situează PSD și PNL în opinia publică și cum a apărut A.U.R.”, in *Mediafax*, 2020, available at <https://www.mediafax.ro/alegeri-parlamentare-2020/alegeri-parlamentare-2020-analiza-irsop-a-votului-19775108>, accessed on 25.11.2021.

¹⁶ Magdalena Ulceluse, “How the Romanian diaspora helped out a new far-right party on the political map”, in *LSE European Politics and Policy blog*, December 2020, available at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2020/12/17/how-the-romanian-diaspora-helped-put-a-new-far-right-party-on-the-political-map/>, accessed on 25.11.2021.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ Alegeri parlamentare 2020. Analiza IRSOP a votului din 6 decembrie...

All these factors, combined with the way social media empowers populist discourses as it was argued in the beginning of this paper, led to a stunning growth and ascension by the populist A.U.R. party. In what follows, the emphasis will be on the dangers that this event can bring as well as possible solutions to hold off the populist tide.

The danger of a Romanian extremist party rising to power

The danger of A.U.R.'s rise to party must be properly understood and managed in order to contain it later. Since most of the country gets a large part of its daily share of information from online sources, the Romanian populist party represents a danger because it has the ability to spin any narrative to fit their wide hate speech. George Simion, the co-founder of A.U.R., declared that he chose to exclusively campaign online because *"TV news don't have the freedom of speech anymore, we couldn't get in to any televisions, we only campaigned online"*¹⁹. This type of societal status quo can lead to the downfall of the liberal state's political framework, forcing the political parties to lose touch with the social domains they were mirroring up until the Internet made it possible to completely go around them²⁰.

With most of the other options to exert free speech stuck because of the pandemic, most of the Romanians are left extremely vulnerable to the populist discourse of the party. A.U.R. representatives even suggested that they are looking to win the presidential elections of 2024, surely a scenario that must be avoided at all costs. The damage that a Donald Trump-type of leader can do in a country without the democratic liaisons and traditions of the United States is worthy of the famed black swan category, even though we should be careful enough that this event does not take us by surprise.

Besides, the extremely low turnout for the 2020 elections shows that most citizens do not feel connected with the political class of the country, something that A.U.R. keeps exploiting to this day. *"The Romanians are disappointed with the political class, they are disgusted. (...) If only we look*

¹⁹ Cine este A.U.R., partidul venit de nicăieri...

²⁰ G. Mazzoleni, W. Schulz, " 'Mediatization' of Politics: A Challenge for Democracy?", in *Political Communication*, 16(3), 1999, pp. 247-261, available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/105846099198613>, accessed on 27.11.2021.

at how many of them are not voting, more and more of them are not voting, they don't identify with the political class. There's a whole category of Romanians who don't feel as if they are politically represented. Especially our segment (...) has not been represented, the Christian-democrat, the patriotic segment, so we are here to fill a natural void", declared George Simion in an interview for a nation-wide newspaper²¹. When it comes to Romania's general context, the main issue that was found was not the ability of A.U.R. to attract votes, but the ability of the socio-political environment to effectively drive voters into the populist party's hands. In May, 2021, A.U.R. used the nationwide scandal after the killing of 'Arthur the Bear', one of the male bears studied by researchers in the Carpathian Mountains, by a member of Liechtenstein's royal family, to invoke a custom-tailored appeal to patriotism, nationalism, and anti-foreigner feelings. The leaders of the party used the online platforms to share a story that described the poaching episode as *"a perfect parable for the way things have happened to (Romania) in the last 30 years"*²².

Furthermore, this danger can easily translate into threats to Romania's foreign policy efforts if A.U.R. were to ever get a hold of more power. Its representatives have openly acknowledged that they are inspired and follow the efforts of Poland's Conservative Party, and even from what Donald Trump tried to do in the United States. An analysis of leader George Simion's speech shows a young breed of populism, still in its early forms, but one that still has a lot of place to grow and threaten the stability of the state. (The European Union) *"is a construct which needs to be reformed, modernized, but one that we need. (...) We have half of our people outside of the borders which we have now. (...) Do you know what I don't like about the European Union and NATO? That we have to kneel, instead of standing*

²¹ C. Andrei, "Interviu. George Simion despre cine e în spatele A.U.R., legionari, Rusia și politicieni", in *Europa Liberă*, 2020, available at <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/interviu-george-simion-despre-cine-e-%C3%Aen-spatele-A.U.R.-legionari-rusia-%C8%99i-politicieni/30990612.html>, accessed on 27.11.2021.

²² C. Andrei, A. Heil, "Romanian Nationalists Weave Xenophobic Parable From Poaching Death of 'Arthur The Bear' ", in *Radio Free Europe*, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/romania-nationalists-xenophobic-parable-bear-poaching/31248097.html>, accessed on 27.11.2021.

straight like the Polish do, and negotiate our own national interest”²³, declared Simion.

As I’ve mentioned when analyzing the history of populist tendencies in Romania, populists very easily find culprits when they are in the opposition, but tend to adopt a more radical attitude once they have the society under their control. Therefore, we must be wary of the possibility of A.U.R. rising to power and perhaps emulating Poland’s model, trying to use membership in organizations such as NATO and the EU for the sole purpose of advancing Romanian national objectives, and completely ignoring those of our allies.

Conclusion

The rise of nationalist and populist feelings in Romania cannot and should not be separated from the larger wave emerging across the Europe of the last decade. While the liberal and progressive trends promoted by the more developed Western Europe have often produced conservative backlash in Eastern countries, Romania stands to lose much more because its citizens also feel disenchanted with their own national authorities too.

More than a year after the 2020 elections, it’s safe to say that A.U.R. rode the wave of its success and learned how to play Romania’s political games. Therefore, it’s safe to say that the danger of the populist party staying around for much longer has now transitioned into a reality. Romania is now at a crossroads, as the more traditional parties need to do better not only for their own personal gains, but also because their lack of success translates to gains for populist and nationalist actors. Gone are the days of political void, but the country’s social context has led to the alternative being an extremist one, rather than another democratic initiative.

Fortunately, A.U.R. still relies on the errors of its opponents, as its leaders don’t seem to have learned how to better present themselves so far. It should also be mentioned that the popular support for membership in international organizations, particularly the European Union, is still quite high in the country, so there’s still a lot of time for improvement. From my perspective, the scenario which we need to avoid is the one from 2018 Italy, where the populist *Five Star Movement* led a wave of unrest to participate in

²³ C. Andrei, *op.cit.*

the formation of the government. Romania still has time to avoid this, and reform its own political framework to ensure that proper democratic traditions and values do not fall to the rise of populist flamboyant discourses. As charisma and social platforms still remain crucial tools for nationalist and populist parties across Europe, A.U.R.'s local lack of internal development is a chance for the authorities to catch up and do some damage control.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ***. (2020). *Alegeri parlamentare 2020. Analiza IRSOP a votului din 6 decembrie: Cum se situează PSD și PNL în opinia publică și cum a apărut A.U.R.* Preluat de pe Mediafax.
- ***. (2020). *Cine este A.U.R., partidul venit de nicăieri care ar putea intra în Parlament.* Taken from pe Ziarul Financiar.
- ADAM, R. (2018). *Două veacuri de populism românesc*, Humanitas, Bucharest.
- ANDREI, C., HEIL, A. (2021). *Romanian Nationalists Weave Xenophobic Parable From Poaching Death of 'Arthur The Bear'.* Taken from Radio Free Europe.
- ANDREI, C. (2020). *Interviu. George Simion despre cine e în spatele A.U.R., legionari, Rusia și politicieni.* Taken from Europa Liberă.
- CANOVAN, M.(1981). *Populism*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981;
- DRAGOMAN, D., UNGUREANU, C. (2017). *The Faces of Populism in Post-Communist Romania, CIDOB Reports.*
- GALEOTTI, M. (2017). *Will the populist wave wash away NATO and the European Union?. Nato official website.*
- GHERGHINA, S., MIȘCOIU, S., (eds.). 2010. *Partide și personalități populiste în România postcomunistă*, The European Institute, Iași.
- MAZZOLENI, G., SCHULZ, W. (1999). 'Mediatization' of Politics: A Challenge for Democracy?. *Political Communication*, 16(3).

General (Ret.) Professor Teodor FRUNZETI, Ph.D
Dorin GAL, Ph.D Candidate

- MUDDE, C. (2004). The populist zeitgeist. *Government and opposition* 39.4.
- MULLER, J.W. (2017). Ce este populismul?. POLIROM.
- PÂRVAN, V. (1982). Getica: o protoistorie a Daciei. Meridiane.
- ȘTEFAN, B. (2020). Barometru politic național 25-30 octombrie 2020. *Barometru Politic Național*, 3.
- ULCELUSE, M. (2020). How the Romanian diaspora helped out a new far-right party on the political map. *LSE European Politics and Policy blog*.

