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THE RISE OF A NATIONALIST-POPULIST PARTY IN ROMANIA – THE ALLIANCE FOR THE UNION OF ROMANIANS (AUR)

Abstract

During the last few years, while, in many countries, political leaders and supporters of liberal democracy were facing new and unexpected challenges due to the rise of populist radical right tendencies, Romania seemed to be immune to such temptations. The latest development of the political landscape in other countries from Eastern Europe like Hungary or Poland, apparently, didn't matter either. Therefore, after the downfall of the Greater Romania Party, more than a decade ago, and some other less successful attempts, the far-right side of the Romanian political spectrum remained empty. Things suddenly changed in the 2020 legislative elections when, as a surprise for Romanian citizens, political analysts, and media as well, the *Alliance for the Union of Romanians* – an unknown political party with nationalist-populist views – managed to obtain more than 9% of the votes and thus became the fourth largest party in the Romanian Parliament. The aim of the paper is to analyse the main factors that led to this outcome and to observe to what extent the anti-vaccination and anti-restrictions rhetoric promoted by the representatives of the *Alliance for the Union of Romanians* during the Covid-19 pandemic enhanced the party's chances to obtain this unexpected result.

Keywords: Romanian politics, Alliance for the Union of Romanians, nationalist-populist, radical right, elections, Covid-19

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, *populist radical right* [PRR] parties have been a constant presence in many European countries, in some cases even participating in governing coalitions and thus influencing the decision-making process (Abou-Chadi & Krause 2020; Krause, Cohen & Abou-Chadi 2022; Mudde 2019). Recent events have increased the impact of the PRRs' main ideas and have provided them with a wider audience. From the "us vs them" paradigm to "corrupted bureaucracy" or "our country first", in the last years, PRR representatives had stronger voices and a significant number of events fueled their need to criticise (Bakker, Jolly & Polk 2020; Bernhard & Kriesi 2019; Rodrik 2021). Some European countries with solid democratic values have helplessly faced the disruption of their political landscape by the emergence or consolidation of dynamic PRR parties. Due to the populist side of their message, the PRR rhetoric became exactly what some European citizens wanted to hear. As a result, a symbiotic relationship developed between politicians and their followers. The latest national elections held across the continent, as well as the European elections from 2014 and 2019 stand as proof of the undeniable influence of PRR parties in Europe (Arzheimer 2018; Ortiz Barquero, Ruiz Jiménez & González-Fernández 2022; Santana, Zagórski & Rama 2020; Schmitt, Hobolt & Brug 2022). More than the typical political party doctrine, the rhetoric of the PRR parties has a unique way of spreading and therefore influencing an impressive number of people. In this regard, social media played a major role in promoting the messages of the PRR actors (Engesser, Ernst, Esser & Büchel 2017; Ernst, Engesser, Büchel, Blassnig & Esser 2017). One of the PRRs' main characteristics, that of criticizing and considering that some people are better or entitled to receive more, worked like a charm for many politicians. In addition, it can be noted that the values of classical liberal democracy face challenges due to the fact that populist, radicalist, illiberal and even authoritarian leaders around the world speak "the same language"; they often support each other, creating a bond and a kind of collaboration that none of the other categories of political parties or even ideologies have (De Cleen 2017; Chrysosgelos 2017, 2020; Destradi & Plagemann 2019; Gherghina, Mişcoiu & Soare 2013; Liang 2016; McAdams & Castrillon 2021). Moreover, some of the issues raised by the COVID-19 pandemic have been speculated by the PRR actors. As the populist messages are most of the time based on crosscutting ideas and "grow" on different anxieties of the people, those messages can be better articulated during a crisis. Therefore, the pandemic offered the

representatives of the PRR the opportunity to rally antagonisms between different categories of people and use them for political gain (Bobba & Hubé 2021; Lamour & Carls 2022).

In Romania, after the fall of the *Greater Romania Party* [PRM] more than a decade ago, and in the absence of another significant PRR party, several mainstream politicians have embraced the national-populist and anti-European or anti-establishment rhetoric. This was the case until the December 2020 legislative elections, when the *Alliance for the Union of Romanians* [AUR]¹ won over 9% of the votes. The main research question is how a party that was created merely a year before the elections, one that few Romanians had heard of, managed to achieve this percentage, becoming the fourth largest party in the Romanian Parliament. This sudden and unexpected emergence of AUR on the political scene is more intriguing considering that a few months before, in September 2020, in the local elections, the votes that the party had gathered were less than one percent. What changed or what events led to this turnout? These are some of the questions this study will try to answer.

No detailed research papers dealing exclusively with AUR electoral success has been published so far, although political analysts, political scientists and historians have expressed their opinion about this new Romanian political party in various interviews. Most of the information that can be found about AUR has been gathered by reporters and journalists. However, recent articles are providing valuable insights regarding on the one hand the support that many members of the *Romanian Orthodox Church* (BOR) have given AUR during the 2020 electoral campaign (Gherghina & Mişcoiu 2022) and, on the other hand, on how some of the representatives of Roma community responded to AUR's political messages (Pantea & Mişcoiu 2022). Two other articles, the first using data collected by a team of academics during the legislative elections (Stoica, Krouwel & Cristea 2021), and the second presenting a sociological analysis on the 2020 parliamentary elections (Sandu 2020), offer information primarily about AUR's voters and thus highlight some of the reasons that made AUR the fourth largest party in the Romanian Parliament. Therefore, most of the resources used in the preparation of this study are statistics, polls, and elections results. Public speeches, messages posted on social media and interviews given by the party leaders are also an important part of the used material. For the theoretical background on the European PRR parties and the Romanian tendencies

1 The acronym for the *Alliance for the Union of Romanians* – AUR means GOLD in Romanian.

to embrace political parties with ultra-conservative and, to some extent, discriminatory views, I will refer to the relevant scientific research in the field.

The paper will begin with a brief description of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians, including its leaders and political ideas. After the presentation of some general information regarding the parliamentary elections from December 6, 2020, the study will focus on identifying the main factors that led to AUR getting over 9% of the votes. Moreover, a thorough analysis of the preferences of AUR voters on the one hand, and the political context, the electoral campaign organized by AUR and the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on the other hand will allow us to identify the reasons behind AUR's electoral success.

THE ALLIANCE FOR THE UNION OF ROMANIANS

In the evening of December 6, 2020, the day of the parliamentary elections in Romania, and the days that followed, the question asked by most Romanians and many journalists and political analysts as well was: "Who is the Alliance for the Union of Romanians?". This is also the question that I will try to answer before observing the party's performance. For a better understanding of AUR, one should explore at least two directions – the official one, presented by the party's programme and the one suggested by most researchers and analysts based on the public discourses and actions of the party's representatives (Clej 2020; Cochino 2020; Schmitt 2020; MacDowall 2020; McGrath 2020; Pîrvulescu 2020).

The *Alliance for the Union of Romanians* was created on December 1st, 2019, on Romania's National Day, 101 years after the Great Union of Romania. The co-founders of the party are George Simion, a young activist, and Claudiu Târziu, a former journalist with a strong connection to the Romanian Orthodox Church, also known for his involvement in the 2018 referendum on the traditional family in Romania. According to its Political programme, AUR is a conservative party with national and Christian values and the four main pillars of the party are: *family, homeland, faith, and freedom* (AUR 2019). The party representatives claim that the traditional family – consisting of a woman and a man – should be supported and defended and any other formula is not accepted. Moreover, the party's doctrine considers that "gender ideology is a theoretical aberration propagated by Neo-Marxist activists" (AUR 2019). The homeland is seen as an initial hearth, and the population within Romania's borders is only a part of the Romanian nation that in large numbers is abroad. With regard the nation, the landmarks are clear

and somewhat restrictive as well; this concept is defined based on the *ethnocultural* dimension postulating that language, Christian faith, and ethnicity are the main features of those belonging to the Romanian nation. The third pillar – the Christian faith – is presented in close connection with the church, tradition, and nation, as AUR considers that Christian values, symbols of faith and the representatives of the church should benefit from more support. The party's doctrine also recalls the vital importance of freedom in all its forms, which is seen especially as a right through which individuals can manifest their identity and at the same time defend their values (AUR 2019). Although I do not aim at providing an exhaustive presentation of the political programme of AUR, three other important ideas that emerge from this document are worth mentioning, as they outline the official vision of the party: the Union with Bessarabia, the sceptical position toward the European Union and the anti-establishment position. Also, the party leaders present themselves as the only true representatives of the people and the only ones fighting for the freedom and welfare of the entire nation (Simion 2020b). However, even some of the party members (Lavric 2020) and the party programme tell a different story; although other references may be identified within that political document suggesting the party's uncompromising position, one paragraph particularly draws attention:

“Our alliance openly declares itself against any form of contemporary Marxism. Currents of political correctness, gender ideology, egalitarianism or multiculturalism are disguised forms of the Neo-Marxist plague. We cannot discuss with those who, under the false front of the fight against discrimination, end up destroying the hierarchies and values that centuries of tradition have raised with patience and love” (AUR 2020).

In terms of the main theoretical characteristics of the PRR parties, AUR meets most of them: the ultranationalist message complemented by a refractory attitude toward certain ethnic, religious, or sexual groups other than the majority, populism expressed through anti-establishment statements, authoritarian tendencies, Euroscepticism, charismatic leadership, and a strong social media campaign. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, like other European PRR parties, AUR has embraced a vehement anti-restriction and anti-vaccination discourse. A specific feature of the PRR Eastern European parties, also seen in AUR, is the particular importance attached to the Christian religion, in our case to the Orthodox Christian faith and, by extension, to the Church and priests. This characteristic was also a defining feature of the Romanian extremist movement in the interwar period, namely the Legionary Movement, also

known under the name of its paramilitary organization – the Iron Guard. This is one of the reasons why some analysts have considered AUR a neo-legionary movement (Clej 2020; Schmitt 2020; Pîrvulescu 2020).

THE RESULTS OF THE DECEMBER 2020 GENERAL ELECTIONS

The parliamentary elections of December 6, 2020 were held after a period of increased political instability. During the last parliamentary term, besides the fact that the country was governed by four prime ministers, two of whom were removed by a no-confidence motion, large demonstrations of citizens took place, the largest since 1989². In addition, the frustrations, and dissatisfactions of a part of the population were exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic that began in Romania in March 2020. It is important to emphasize that only 31,84% of the voting population participated in the elections of December 6, 2020 (Permanent Electoral Authority [AEP] 2020a), the lowest percentage since 1989, the main reasons being precisely the acute dissatisfaction of the population toward politicians and state authorities and, to a lesser extent, the pandemic. After the general elections five political parties or alliances entered the Parliament, none of which had a high enough electoral score to guarantee its participation in the government. According to the results, the first place was occupied by the *Social Democratic Party* [PSD] with 29,32% for the Senate [S] and 28,90% for the Chamber of Deputies [CD], followed by the *National Liberal Party* [PNL] with 25,58% S and 25,18% CD, the *Save Romania Union* [USR] - *PLUS Alliance* with 15,86% S and 15,37% CD, the *Alliance for the Union of Romanians* with 9,17% S and 9,08% CD, and the *Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania* [UDMR] with 5,89% S and 5,74% CD (Central Electoral Bureau [BEC] 2020a; 2020b).

The surprise of the elections, as perceived by most Romanians, analysts, and the national and international press alike, was brought by AUR, as they managed to collect more than 9% of the votes (Preda 2021, 72-73). The result is even more surprising as AUR got less than 1% in the local elections (BEC 2020c), and most of the polls before the

2 In a number of protests – including the largest in the post-December 1989 period, at the beginning of 2017, attended by hundreds of thousands of people, about 600.000 people in the entire country: 300.000 in Bucharest and tens of thousands in the largest cities of the country – and also through manifestations of the diaspora, Romanians in the country and abroad showed their indignation about the corruption of the political class and implicitly about the negative repercussions it had on the population.

parliamentary elections did not consider the party. Polls that included AUR did so quite late, some of them days before the election, and the score assigned to this party was around 3-4%, a score that would not have allowed its entry into Parliament. Although the analyses and polls regarding AUR voters – like the ones conducted by the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy [IRES], Avangarde Socio-Behavioral Studies Group in collaboration with the Centre for Urban and Regional Sociology [CURS], or IRSOP Market Research & Consulting – did not agree on all aspects, they nevertheless give us an overview of the electorate who chose this party (Jurcan 2020; Bechir 2020; Pora 2020; Pricop 2020). Thus, according to such analyses, AUR voters were mainly men, younger, with medium or low education levels, with a conservative view, religious and Eurosceptic. In terms of location, AUR recorded higher percentages in certain localities in Moldova and Transylvania, and, in the diaspora, it was first in the preferences of Romanians in Italy and Germany.

The studies show that, from a sociological point of view, around 40-50% of AUR voters were young men up to the age of 35 and only 6% of the category over 65 (Jurcan 2020); many of them had at most high school or post-secondary education, and only 8% had higher education; they generally belonged to somewhat developed communities, but which were at the same time relatively isolated from large cities (Sandu 2020). From an ideological perspective, AUR voters, according to their own statements, did not occupy a clear position on the left-right political spectrum, but in terms of conservative-progressive orientation, they were very conservative. Even from an economic point of view, their views were not very clear; it can be said that, economically, they tended to the moderate left. As for the relation to the EU, AUR voters considered that, in general, EU integration was not a beneficial thing for Romania, claiming that Romania was treated differently within the Union (Stoica, Krouwel & Cristea 2021). Regarding the previous political options of AUR voters, there are opinions according to which certain communities that voted consistently in favour of this party would have voted in the local elections with PSD, PNL or Pro Romania (Sandu 2020). Moreover, research shows that around half of AUR voters either did not vote in 2016, were not of voting age, or voted for small parties that did not enter Parliament (Stoica, Krouwel & Cristea 2021).

In the areas where AUR stood higher than its national average, it seems that the party representatives attracted the conservative and religious electorate with an anti-Hungarian view from Transylvania and the religious one with a unionist view from Moldova (Bechir 2020). At the same time, studies have shown that AUR received more votes

in Romanian communities with a large number of citizens having left for Italy. The explanation found by specialists was that Romanians who went to work abroad influenced their relatives to vote for this party (Sandu 2020).

An important aspect in studying the votes received by this new party is the large number of diaspora voters who voted for it. Thus, AUR placed on a remarkable third place in the options of Romanians abroad with just over 23% (23,3% S and 23,24% for the CD) after the USR-PLUS Alliance with more than 32% (32,82% S and 32,59% CD) and PNL which obtained around 25% (25,13% S, 24,93% CD) (BEC 2020d; 2020e; AEP 2020b; Code for Romania NGO 2020a; 2020b). Also relevant is the fact that in two major European countries – Italy and Germany – AUR occupied the first position in the Romanians’ options. Thus, in Italy, the party obtained 35,02% for the Senate and 34,61% for the Chamber of Deputies, managing to outpace the PNL by almost 10%, which obtained just over 25%, and in Germany AUR obtained more than a third of the votes – 35,57% Senate and 35,33% Chamber of Deputies, ranking ahead of the USR-PLUS alliance, which achieved just over 31% (31,21% S, 31,77% CD) Moreover, in most major European states, AUR ranked second; this was the case in Britain, Spain and France (AEP 2020b; Code for Romania NGO 2020a; 2020b).

THE MAIN FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTED TO AUR GETTING OVER 9% OF THE VOTES

On the evening of the election, after finding out the results of the polls which placed AUR in a surprising fourth place, George Simion, the party’s president, summarizing the essence of the electoral campaign of AUR, said: “We are the surprise of this election because Romanians are tired of theft, lies and lack of attachment to national values” (Simion 2020a). Indeed, as we will see next, the *anti-establishment* as a feature of *populism* and the *ultra-nationalism* were the main directions addressed by the AUR representatives in the electoral campaign. There are many factors that led to AUR getting more than 9% of the votes in the December 2020 legislative elections; in my opinion they can be divided into two categories: both external and internal factors, which have created a favourable context for the emergence and evolution of a PRR party in Romania and factors directly related to this new PPR Romanian party, its political strategy and the speeches and actions of the leaders of this party, in essence, how leaders knew how to speculate exactly that favourable context and thus maximize the chances of success of AUR. Because of the

significant changes that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought, the major influence it has had on the success of AUR will be a separate analysis.

Factors that created a favourable context

Regarding the first category of factors, I believe one should start by stressing *the populist radical right trend of recent years* (Abou-Chadi & Krause 2020; Albertazzi & McDonnell 2008; Langenbacher & Schellenberg 2011; Minkenberg 2015; Mudde 2007, 2019; Ortiz Barquero, Ruiz Jiménez & González-Fernández 2022). At both European and global level, it can be seen not only an increase in the number of PRR parties and their impact on domestic policy in various states (Engler, Pytlas & Deegan-Krause 2019; Krause, Cohen & Abou-Chadi 2022), but especially an increase in the influence of the ideas associated with the PRR even outside the political spectrum (Enyedi 2020; Loch & Norocel 2015, 251-254). From accepting and even perpetuating dichotomies, to preferring separation over collaboration, from identifying through differentiation from others to slogans such as “us vs. them” or “the outside evil” (Norocel, Hellström & Jørgensen 2020), the rhetoric of the PRR could be found quite often in the speeches of some important political leaders of the world (Oliver & Rahn 2016; Norris & Inglehart 2019; Plattner 2019; Weyland & Madrid 2019). This type of speech legitimized and at the same time favoured a reshaping of the mentality of important segments of population in democratic states, thus creating a new normality in terms of the way of thinking and behaviour of individuals (Diamond & Plattner 2015; Diamond 2016). For this reason, it was to be expected that part of Romanians, both those living in Romania and especially those living in Western Europe, would be influenced by this trend and, implicitly, become receptive to PRR rhetoric (Gherghina, Mişcoiu & Soare 2021).

Moving on to internal factors, two essential aspects must be underlined, namely the *populist* and the *nationalist* tendencies (Gherghina 2022) that became more visible and nevertheless more influential inside the Romanian political environment of recent years and, furthermore, became the two main pillars that favoured the development of a PRR party. Therefore, in examining the internal factors that facilitated AUR’s electoral success it is essential to analyse the favourable context for the spread of *populism* in Romania (Chiruță 2021; Gherghina, Mişcoiu & Soare 2021; Shafir 2008a; Soare & Tufiş 2019; Țăranu & Pîrvulescu 2022). Although recently there has been no PRR party in Romania, populist attitudes and messages have been present during the whole period after

the fall of communism in 1989. From the right-wing nationalist populism of PRM and its leader Corneliu Vadim Tudor, to the populist rhetoric of former Romanian President Traian Băsescu, to the virulent nationalist-populist speeches of PRR politicians such as Dan Diaconescu, leader of People's Party Dan Diaconescu [PPDD] (Gherghina & Mişcoiu 2014), and finally to the populist messages that many mainstream politicians have used to enhance their political gains, populist tendencies have left an important mark on the Romanian political life over the past three decades. Moreover, by promoting populist messages Romanian politicians have cultivated a type of exclusionist attitude that has encouraged ordinary people to do the same. While some of the researchers analysing Romanian populism propose a broader perspective when it comes to examining the evolution of this phenomenon (Voicu, Ramia & Tufiş 2019), there are studies that highlight the crucial influence that anti-corruption discourse has in explaining the rise of the overall populist tendencies (Kiss & Székely 2021; Mungiu-Pippidi 2018). Regardless of which approach one considers appropriate, recent studies conclude that populist tendencies have strong roots inside Romanian society, and, in my opinion, these tendencies played a major role in the establishment of a new PRR party in Romania.

The dissatisfaction of the population with the political class, in general, and the governing authorities, in particular, had a significant influence on electorate's migration to the radical right. Several surveys have shown a part of the Romanians do not trust either politicians or state institutions and in their opinion the situation is getting worse. A survey conducted between April and May 2019 shows that 76,4% of Romanians believe the country is heading in the wrong direction, most Romanians being worried about the situation in the country, as follows: 84,2% are concerned about the level of corruption and 73,7% about the differences between rich and poor people. Moreover, regarding the trust in state institutions, the same survey shows that most Romanians trust the Army – 67,9% and the Church – 56,8%, with confidence in political institutions and organizations being extremely low: Government – 12,4%, Parliament – 9,8% and political parties – 8,9% (INSCOP Research 2019). Thus, one of the main factors that propelled AUR into the voters' preferences was *the anti-establishment position* adopted by the party (Gherghina, Ekman & Podolian 2021; Popescu & Vesalon 2022). It was to be expected that in a country where trust in politicians and state representatives is low, anti-establishment messages would be appreciated by the population. This type of message helped also USR in the previous elections (Dragoman 2021), those of 2016, to get many votes, although it addressed a different

electorate, one with a predominantly urban and a high education level. It can be observed that the critical discourse on the mainstream politicians and the precarious functioning of the state system has been and will continue to be appreciated by the dissatisfied population regardless of their level of education or social status.

At the same time, another important element in the surprising percentage of AUR in the elections was the fact that it was a *new party*. The same discontent and revolt of voters led them to trust a new party instead of the traditional ones whose practices they had grown tired of (Cochino 2020). The position of AUR was similar to the one held by the USR in the previous elections when this party, although created only a few months before the elections and without a national structure, managed to instill hope to a large part of the electorate.

Another explanation for the Romanians' receptivity regarding PRR messages is the *lack of a party that would capitalize on the votes of nationalist conservatives* for whom respect for *Christian values* is very important. *Nationalism*, understood as patriotism, had a catalytic role in the formation of the Romanian state, so many Romanians see the importance of cultivating this feeling. Therefore, in the hands of politicians, nationalism can become a weapon used to increase popularity and sometimes even to discriminate. Well-known examples in Romanian history are the extremist interwar nationalism and the nationalist tint given to communism by Nicolae Ceaușescu in the latter part of his dictatorship (Copilaș 2015). Without the violent tendencies of the past, nationalism continued to be invoked by most politicians after 1990. Among the most vehement parties was the PRM, mainly through the voice of President Corneliu Vadim Tudor. Thus, although there were politicians who continued to come before the electorate with nationalist messages, after the decline of the PRM, there was no relevant party in Romania with a nationalist doctrine. Understood in a positive sense or not, nationalism has influenced and continues to influence an important part of Romanians, making them receptive to nationalist messages from politicians. A survey conducted in 2018 showed that almost half of Romanians (48%) believed that "nationalism is a necessary movement for Romania" (IRES 2018). A few months after the elections, in March 2021, a similar poll showed that 66,4% would vote for a nationalist party that promotes Christian values and supports the traditional family (Strategic Thinking Group [STG] and INSCOP Research 2021). Therefore, AUR, officially promoting the nationalist discourse, was expected to win the votes of an important segment of the population.

Complementary to the nationalist propaganda, AUR promoted

the unionist message advocating for the union of the historical region of Bessarabia with Romania. Currently, this region forms an independent state – the Republic of Moldova. Although there are very few Romanians who really believe in this Union, most of them still consider the Moldovans to be Romanians, hence the positive echoes of the unionist message among the population.

In close connection with nationalism, in the nativist and restrictive sense of the word, lies the *Euro scepticism*. Although manifested by a part of the electorate, Euro scepticism was not integrated into the doctrine of any party, instead, it was used conjecturally by various politicians. More than nationalism, Euro scepticism was used in PSD's campaign messages, especially by the former leader of this party Liviu Dragnea. However, with his arrest³, in an attempt to delimit from the former president, the PSD's Euro sceptic message also faded, and the opposition to the European Union [EU] almost disappeared. As evidenced by the surveys and statistics developed in recent years, part of Romanians is still hesitant about certain aspects of the EU. A survey conducted in early 2021 shows that almost a third of Romanians are quite reluctant about the EU and Western alliances. Thus, 35,2% of Romanians consider that Romania's accession to the EU has brought rather disadvantages; 29,3% believe that, although it is a NATO Member, in case of an aggression, Romania would have to defend itself, and 32,1% believe that over time Western countries have done more harm to Romania (STG and INSCOP Research 2021). In the years before the emergence of the AUR, this electorate did not find a political party that confirmed and encouraged its concerns regarding the EU and a certain type of behaviour of Western states.

The ecologist message was also present in the AUR's campaign. However, it was not a message that would develop the main topics related to climate change issues, which AUR representatives do not consider to be genuine, but was a mere extension of the nationalist discourse. Thus, forests were considered to be one of Romania's greatest natural treasures, which was why massive forest cuts were seen as a threat to

3 Liviu Dragnea, a social-democrat politician with conservative views, who has held high-ranking official positions since 1996, was also president of the Social Democratic Party and president of the Romanian Chamber of Deputies between 2016 and 2019. After PSD won the 2016 legislative elections with more than 45% of the votes and became the main party in the governing coalition with a large majority in Parliament, Liviu Dragnea sought to change legislation on certain offences to make them less harshly punished. This course of action was strongly criticized by many Romanian citizens at home and abroad, as well as by representatives of the European Union institutions. On May 27, 2019, Liviu Dragnea was convicted and sentenced to three and a half years in prison for abuse of office.

national well-being. As one may observe mainly from their Facebook pages, AUR representatives stressed that this widespread phenomenon was fostered by the negative role of foreign companies, which, in their opinion, were tacitly supported by certain state representatives.

Relevant in studying the reasons that led to the electoral success of AUR are also *the intolerance tendencies* within the Romanian society. Studies show that similar tendencies are registered in other European countries too (Kende & Krekó 2020). The decline of the PRM more than a decade ago was not due to the change in Romanians' mentality or at least to the significant decrease in intolerance trends, because, as most of the research in the field shows, it has remained quite high (Andrescu 2015, 251; Cârstocea 2021; Cinpoș 2013, 169-171; 186-188; Cinpoș 2015, 286; Soare & Tufiș 2019; Shafir 2008b). According to a recent opinion poll, the phenomenon of discrimination is perceived as a problem by most of the population (71%), and a third say they have experienced the phenomenon of discrimination from direct experience. It was also found that fear of what is different manifests itself in a high level of mistrust especially in homosexuals (74%), Roma (72%), immigrants (69%), Muslims (68%), people with HIV AIDS (58%), people of other religion (58%), Hungarians (53%) and Jews (46%) (IRES 2018). In conclusion, the data analysis shows that discrimination in Romania is predominantly defined by homophobia, but there are also significant nuances of xenophobia, chauvinism and anti-Semitism.⁴ Official documents submitted to the Romanian authorities by the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities – Council of Europe (2018), the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (2021) or the United States Embassy in Bucharest (2019a; 2019b) also point out that the relevant institutions should use a different approach in dealing with specific problems faced by particular categories of people living in Romania. These are some of the reasons why the position officially assumed by AUR – that of having reservations about certain groups based on ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation, and at the same time blaming political correctness – was well received by a part of the electorate.

4 The data analysis of the opinion poll conducted by IRES was carried out by the National Council for Combating Discrimination [CNCD] and the Institute for Public Policy of Bucharest [IPP] as part of the Project "10 Years Implementation of EU Framework Decision on racism and xenophobia in Romania: challenges and new approaches regarding hate crime actions – NoIntoHate2018" funded by the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020).

Specific factors related to AUR's political strategy

It can be observed that AUR's representatives sought to cover every major political issue that had been insufficiently addressed. The reasons examined above, namely the lack of a party that would officially assume certain positions and thus put into words some discontents and tendencies of a part of the population, basically created the favourable context for the emergence of a PRR party. In these circumstances, I chose to include in the second category the factors related to the way in which AUR leaders have exploited this favourable context. This was generally achieved through a well-designed and extraordinarily executed election campaign. In my opinion, the specific aspects of the campaign represent the second category of factors that include: promoting AUR messages in most major cities in Romania, an approach supplemented and maximized by a strong social media campaign, the use of short, clear and repetitive messages, and last but not least, the delivering of these messages by a persuasive leader – George Simion – and other vehement leaders, very active both in the public space at meetings and protests, but also in the virtual space. The charisma of George Simion, as in many other cases of PRR leaders (Eatwell 2006; 2018; Michel, Garzia, Ferreira da Silva & De Angelis 2020), has gain for the party the attention of the Romanian public and brought AUR more supporters.

There are numerous controversies regarding the electoral campaign of AUR, a series of hypotheses were launched regarding who developed the campaign strategy and especially about who financed the electoral campaign of AUR (Despa & Albu 2021; Isăilă 2020; Schmitt 2020). Since there is no concrete evidence to support these assumptions, I will not develop this topic in the paper.

AUR representatives, led by leader George Simion, took a tour of Romania in a real marathon, in an attempt to reach as many localities as possible to send the AUR message directly to the population. Between October 28 and November 24, 2020, the AUR Caravan managed to reach all the counties of the country and campaign in almost all the major cities of the country. This way of campaigning, although appreciated, could not have achieved the desired result because of the effectiveness of larger parties such as PSD and PNL, very well trained in this type of campaign. Thus, like other PRR actors (Engesser, Ernst, Esser & Büchel 2017; Ernst, Engesser, Büchel, Blassnig & Esser 2017; Krämer 2017), AUR had a *strong campaign on social networks*. From short messages to photos and videos, AUR leaders were featured during speeches or when they were participating in various actions. Through thousands

of shares, tens and even hundreds of thousands of likes and views, the messages transmitted by AUR have gone viral. Present day after day in different parts of the country, participating in most of the protests during that period and posting constantly, AUR representatives managed to cultivate and maintain a close relationship with the targeted electorate. Journalistic investigations carried out a few days after the general election showed the magnitude of the organization of AUR's campaign on social networks. From creating videos that went viral to smart targeting and using the Nation Binder software, George Simion said they were able to build their own bubble. Moreover, as both George Simion and the campaign leader of AUR stated, they did not remain stuck in certain initial party messages. The complaints heard during direct meetings with citizens became campaign messages and thus people felt listened to (Popescu 2020; Simion 2020b). The massive online campaign also brought them the advantage of transmitting their message much easier to those in the diaspora.

An analysis of the official Facebook pages of the main Romanian politicians during the last three months before the general elections shows that George Simion led by far, with over 3 million interactions in September, 2.4 million in October and 2.5 million in November. These figures are relevant because the AUR leader was followed very far by the image vectors of the big parties who – except for Gabriela Firea from PSD, who reached 1 million interactions for a very short period in September – only had a few hundred thousand interactions, not exceeding 500,000 (Recorder 2020; Simion 2020b). Moreover, the existing data shows that compared to other political competitors, the AUR leader achieved that performance with much less funding for his Facebook page.

Also, considering the very low score recorded in the local elections, below 1%, AUR was considered a party of no relevance and therefore mainstream media did not give them the opportunity to present their political platform (Szabó, Norocel & Bene 2019) or take part in the electoral debates broadcast on television channels. This aspect was speculated by AUR's representatives who declared that they were wronged or even censored precisely because others did not want their message to be heard by the citizens (Simion 2020b). At the same time, the participation and even the organization of numerous protests long before the creation of AUR gave George Simion and other AUR leaders such as Claudiu Târziu, the necessary training in both strategy and campaign execution. Moreover, oratory talent and persuasion gave AUR leaders credibility in front of voters. As mentioned before, AUR's representatives took advantage of the discontent of the population, translating it into anti-

establishment messages. The party leaders thus outlined some clear and very effective messages that covered a wide range of voter discontent. As one may observe from their Facebook pages, the language used by AUR leaders, especially by George Simion and by one of the most vocal members of the party, Diana Șoșoacă, was quite harsh on the mainstream politicians. Some of the phrases they used were the “political mafia”, the system was considered to be “abject”, politicians – “corrupt”, “country traitors”, “incompetent”, “robbers”, and political parties – “traitors”.

The influence of the Covid-19 pandemic

As research papers are showing, the Covid-19 pandemic had different impact on PRR parties; while some parties, mainly those governing, were negatively affected (Wondreys & Mudde 2022), others gained support during the last years (Bobba & Hubé 2021; Lamour & Carls 2022). When not in government or in governing coalitions, the PRR actors’ antagonistic views and, in some cases, their discriminatory messages were better promoted during the crisis the pandemic created. Due to the uncertainties and even anxieties of that period, people were more likely to listen and approve political messages that were mainly criticizing the authorities. This type of anti-establishment approach that AUR also had at the beginning of the pandemic influenced the party’s result. Furthermore, what needs to be analysed, are the methods and actions by which the party’s representatives managed to generate significant support from the electorate. Indeed, all the elements analysed previously, from the favourable context to the energetic way of campaigning, influenced to a greater or lesser extent the placing of AUR in the fourth place in the elections. Moreover, what appears to have helped AUR decisively in the campaign was the position taken by party representatives on the Covid-19 pandemic. This aspect is very important because no other Romanian political party has officially positioned itself against the restrictions. Obviously, from a political perspective, the opposition parties, especially PSD, challenged the government’s decisions, but this challenge concerned certain decisions and, more specifically, how the government decisions were applied during that period, and not the imposition of a set of restrictions to prevent the spread of the virus.

Regarding AUR’s position on the Covid-19 pandemic, three elements appear to be relevant: (1) the context given by the reluctance of many Romanians regarding restrictions, vaccination and even the existence of the virus; (2) the anti-system position of AUR which could be fully exploited at a time when the state authorities did not have a clear

strategy on how to address the problems arising from the pandemic and, last but not least, (3) the relationship established between AUR leaders and some important representatives of the *Romanian Orthodox Church* (BOR) during the campaign, a collaboration based on almost identical opinions and statements regarding the pandemic.

Given that the vaccination campaign only began in Romania on December 27, 2020, and a survey conducted in mid-January 2021 shows that almost a third of the population was reluctant to vaccinate – 9% of the population did not want to get vaccinated, and 22% said they would “definitely” not get vaccinated (IRES 2021) – it made sense that the anti-vaccination speech would bring additional supporters to AUR. The critical discourse on the authorities also had the expected success given that the rulers did not have a coherent and effective strategy that would lead to the mitigation of the harmful effects of the pandemic. Moreover, the poor state of hospitals, also blamed on the authorities, helped shape the powerful anti-establishment message of AUR (Popescu & Vesalon 2022).

An essential impact in the unexpected growth of AUR in the preferences of the electorate was the connection established during the electoral campaign between the party leaders and some of the representatives of the BOR (Gherghina & Mişcoiu 2022; Simion 2020b; see also: Stan & Turcescu 2007; Stan & Turcescu 2011). It had been observed also that across Europe the link between religion and some of the PRR actors is becoming more visible due to the emphasis that members of those political organisation are putting on religion in order to gain electoral support (Marzouki, McDonnell & Roy 2016; Schwörer & Romero-Vidal 2020). With the BOR initially reluctant to adopt a clear official position on the Covid-19 pandemic and implicitly on restrictions, a major impact in the public space was held by sceptical and very vehement positions of some representatives of the BOR regarding the restrictions and vaccination. A conjectural relationship of closeness was established between a part of the future members of AUR and certain representatives of the BOR during 2018 the *referendum for the traditional family*⁵ (Cinpoieş 2021; Gherghina, Racu, Giugăl, Gavriş, Silagadze &

5 The 2018 *referendum for the traditional family* was initiated with the intention to change the Romanian Constitution to define *the family* as the exclusive union between a man and a woman; in other words, to ban the same-sex marriage, a topic not explicitly mentioned in the Constitution. During the referendum campaign, representatives of the BOR, certain NGOs and civil organizations all tried to convince as many voters as possible to attend the referendum in order to change the legislation. In Romania, for a referendum to pass, at least 30% of the registered voters must participate (Romanian Parliament 2000). With a turnout of 21,1% the referendum

Johnston 2019; Mărgărit 2019; Norocel & Băluță 2021; Soare & Tufiș 2021), a referendum for which orthodox priests have waged a real door to door campaign in an attempt to persuade the faithful of their parishes to support the traditional family by voting. It was exactly what Claudiu Târziu did through the NGO he was running⁶. What led them to close collaboration, however, was the similar stance on the pandemic of some of the BOR representatives and AUR members. The resemblance of their views even led some priests to campaign for the AUR (Gherghina & Mișcoiu 2022). Studies show that some of the traditionalist priests shared with the member of this political party not only common opinions on the pandemic, but also on several other political issues. For example, when interviewed, some priests expressed concern about the existence of anti-clerical attitudes in Romanian society, and said they were disappointed with the mainstream parties for neglecting the Church; they also declared that they perceived the EU as a threat to traditional values and the Romanian way of life (Gherghina & Mișcoiu 2022).

Close to the election campaign, the restrictions, which had been partially lifted during the summer, were put back into practice. And if in March the lack of information and the shock of the pandemic caused most of the population to be circumspect and adopt an expecting position, in the autumn, after more than six months since the start of the pandemic in Romania, things were totally different, so some of the population was no longer willing to compromise. This was the context speculated by the AUR leaders who participated and, most of the time, they themselves organized anti-restriction protests. Furthermore, in order to maximize their chances in front of the electorate, AUR representatives also tried to win points in terms of image. Thus, AUR leaders began to display almost ostentatiously, in their public outings and campaign posters, both their nationalist views, by wearing the national costume and the Romanian flag, and the Christian faith, by using the cross and icons, and by numerous visits to different churches.

During the electoral campaign, there were also three great

did not pass (BEC 2018).

- 6 The 2018 *referendum for the traditional family* was initiated with the intention to change the Romanian Constitution to define *the family* as the exclusive union between a man and a woman; in other words, to ban the same-sex marriage, a topic not explicitly mentioned in the Constitution. During the referendum campaign, representatives of the BOR, certain NGOs and civil organizations all tried to convince as many voters as possible to attend the referendum in order to change the legislation. In Romania, for a referendum to pass, at least 30% of the registered voters must participate (Romanian Parliament 2000). With a turnout of 21,1% the referendum did not pass (BEC 2018).

Christian holidays, which are traditionally accompanied pilgrimages attended by tens of thousands of believers: October 14th Saint Paraskevi – pilgrimage to Iasi, October 26th-27th Saint Demetrius – pilgrimage to Bucharest, November 30th Saint Andrew – pilgrimage to Constanta. With the increase in infections and the number of deaths caused by the virus, these pilgrimages were prohibited for people who did not live in the cities where these religious processions were to take place (National Emergency Committee [CNSU] 2020, Romanian Government 2020); these decisions created an obvious rift between the state position and the wishes of the priests and implicitly the wishes of a part of the population. Thus, during that period, AUR representatives, especially the lawyer Diana Șoșoacă and the two co-presidents, George Simion and Claudiu Târziu, tried to present themselves as the only defenders of the faithful (Reman 2020). Even the Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, who, until then, had been quite reserved in rejecting the restrictions, classified the banning of pilgrimage to Saint Paraskevi for believers who did not live in Iasi as: “a disproportionate, discriminatory measure taken without prior consultation with the BOR” (Basilica.ro 2020). A statement of Claudiu Târziu, from October 12, posted on his Facebook page, summarized the situation created by the banning of pilgrimages and underlined AUR’s position:

“The Romanian Orthodox Church must understand that, at this moment, it no longer has any partner on the first political scene of the country and, implicitly, neither in the state structures. I am referring both to the institution of the Church and to the Community of believers. The Church must find an ally. And the only natural, honest, and likely to get on the first stage is the Alliance for the Union of Romanians.”

And indeed, the only party that officially assumed the Church’s position on pilgrimages was AUR. It was also the representatives of this party who organized protests in which they challenged the decisions on the remaining restrictions. Moreover, the lawyer Diana Șoșoacă offered her services and even defended in court believers and representatives of the Church in various trials with the state, which were based on challenging the restrictions. A famous case was the lawsuit filed against the state by Teodosie Petrescu, the Archbishop of Tomis, in which he challenged the prohibition of pilgrimage to St. Andrew’s Cave for those who were not from Constanța; the lawyer hired by the archbishop was Diana Șoșoacă. Thus, if the use of national and Christian symbols by AUR representatives during the campaign brought them notoriety and distinguished them from the rest of the politicians, the defence of a high

representative of the BOR by and AUR member in a lawsuit against the decisions of the state, a process that concerned the rights of the faithful, had a strong echo among some of the Romanians. Moreover, the images of the two coming and going from the Court in Constanța and especially the interviews given by them at the exit from the Court, which were broadcast by all the important Romanian TV stations, have become viral (Zagoneanu & Bușurică 2020). Those images were very powerful and showed the entire country an AUR leader and a high representative of the BOR who sent the same message, that they were on the same page and also that they were the only defenders of the rights and freedoms of the Romanians.

CONCLUSIONS

In the light of the preceding arguments, it must be said that a careful pre-election analysis of the previously detailed issues would have determined that, if not AUR, another party with a PRR-specific message could have obtained significant electoral support. But it is due to the abilities of AUR leaders to have been able to speculate on each of the issues outlined above, through meticulously executed political strategy. If one looks closely at how the campaign went, it can be observed that the promises that normally make up most of a party's messages, were quite rare in the case of AUR. Even when they appeared in the speeches of the representatives of this party, the promises were exaggerated and almost impossible to achieve. Therefore, I consider that AUR's campaign can be seen as a long series of protests; at the same time, one can notice a vehement challenge of the system by AUR leaders, who accused the elected politicians of the precarious situation that the country was going through. As it was observed, the Covid 19 pandemic helped AUR and a significant aspect that brought its success was the close relationship established with some of the BOR representatives during the electoral campaign. By dressing up most of the time during the campaign in traditional costumes and pretending to be the only true Christians, the only ones who cared about both the people and the Church, the party leaders managed to create for a part of the electorate the illusion that they were the only viable political choice.

Regarding the general tendencies of the AUR electoral campaign, it should be noted that, with simplified speeches focused on issues important only to a part of the common people, its leaders often proposed solutions that went beyond the limits of the principles of liberal democracy. It can also be seen that some of the high-ranking members of the AUR tried

to use the problems faced by Romanians for political gain. By choosing to pursue and exploit the various dissatisfactions that people had with the representatives of the political parties that ruled Romania in recent years, AUR leaders positioned the party along populist lines and, at the same time, unintentionally emphasized their political opportunism. Their virulent criticism of the governing parties also confirmed their populist agenda. The few solutions that AUR leaders proposed seemed more like a vendetta against the representatives of mainstream political parties and also, as mentioned above, the solutions rarely respected the limits of liberal democratic principles. Ignoring the basic pillars of living in a free society, some AUR members deliberately increased animosity between different categories of Romanians; occasionally, they even promoted a discriminatory approach and tried to “sell it” as the only viable solution. In their speeches, while trying to mask this tendency, AUR leaders showed little respect for the rights and freedom of certain categories of Romanians. Therefore, in the name of religion, nationalism, or the traditional family, they hid their political agenda; moreover, appearing to be primarily concerned with their target electorate, AUR representatives promoted in their speeches a type of restrictive politics and transmitted messages of exclusion that should raise concern about the direction Romanian politics is heading.

On this note, I conclude that it is easier to criticize, condemn and ultimately propose “eradication” than to respect and seek to address the needs of most of those living in a country. In my opinion, it is imperative for the future of Romanian politics that both politicians and voters see beyond the differences and try to find common ground and build, starting from the unifying themes prevalent in society.

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