

AUR – The Electoral Geography of Romanian Conservative Nationalism

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journals.sagepub.com/home/psrev**Claudiu Crăciun**  and **Andrei Țăranu**

Abstract

In December 2020, Romania held elections for its new Parliament amid the pandemic crisis. The voter turnout was historically low, at 31.84%. The Alliance for the Union of Romanians, a new party, won 9% of the vote, making it the fourth largest party in the Parliament. Having received only 0.29% of the votes in the local elections held 2 months prior, Alliance for the Union of Romanians' success was unexpected. To explain this outcome, we analyse its programmatic choices, political strategy and symbolic and electoral geographies. The pandemic crisis allowed the consolidation of a nationalist and conservative constituency originating in the 2018 constitutional referendum to ban same-sex marriages. Romania's example shows that a nationalist-conservative radical party can become viable if extra-political groups, networks and organisations are willing to lend significant local support to it.

Keywords

Romania, conservatism, populism, Euroscepticism, pandemic, territory, electoral geography

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Introduction

The study of Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) is relevant for explaining the impact of far-right parties on national politics and their increasing presence in local governments across the European Union (EU) (Fitzgerald, 2020; Paxton, 2020, 2023). It can also inform the research agenda linking places and populist right radical voting (Arzheimer and Bernemann, 2023; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). At the same time, its path to relevance is essential for understanding the impact of the pandemic on parties and party systems (see Bohle and Eihmanis, 2022). Populist radical right parties in opposition used the pandemic to criticise the government and rally the anti-restriction and even conspiratorial conservative positions. However, this did not gain them significant support in Europe (Rovira

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Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2022). In Romania, the pandemic elevated AUR to the level of a relevant political actor.

The pandemic prompted ideological changes and re-alignments and created a specific vote structure shaped by the combination of territorial factors, such as size, density, and distances, with epidemiological trends. Thus, to account for the emergence of AUR, territorial factors, geographical scales and the constituency-building facilitated by a constitutional referendum and the pandemic need to be placed in the same framework. By doing so, we follow the suggestion that the political parties ‘cannot be adequately understood without attending to the ways in which considerations of geographical scale are intertwined with their ideologies and organizational activities’ (Agnew, 1997: 2).

The case of AUR is also relevant for understanding party support for various strands of conservatism, populism and Euroscepticism in the Central and East European region (see Țăranu and Crăciun, 2014). Populism, defined as a people-elite divide (see Mudde, 2004), is a significant part of AUR’s rhetorical repertoire. Țăranu and Pîrvulescu (2022) relate it to the historical agrarian populism prevalent in the region, resurfacing today in Romania and Hungary. Dragolea (2022: 90) also places AUR in a larger regional context, branding its ideology as ‘illiberal populism’ due to its anti-gender and anti-LGBT attitudes. AUR’s ideological choices are reinforced by its communication style. Its leader, George Simion uses ‘scandalization to generate the necessary attention and visibility, as well as the tension that allows populist leaders to dress themselves as saviours or problem solvers’ (Grapă and Mogoș, 2023: 11). The populism–nationalism–conservatism nexus promoted by AUR led to historical comparisons with the interwar Romanian fascist movements (see Gheorghiu and Praisler, 2022).

National Conservatism and the Politics of Place

According to its programme, AUR’s (2020) ideology is based on four pillars: family, homeland, faith and freedom. In its programme, territory and place are central sources of historical purpose (unification with Moldova), community redefinition (one Romanian nation and one faith, regardless of residence) and political tension (opposing autonomism and separatism) (AUR, 2020).

As a nationalist party, AUR’s main reference scale is *national*, having two overlapping components: a unified, large and uncontested territory and a cohesive political community sharing language, faith and ethnicity. Yet, state and nation have different meanings in various historical circumstances. For AUR, the unification of Romania and Moldova is a central objective and a matter of historical duty. Second, the ethnic Romanians living in neighbouring countries are considered part of the nation, and AUR (2020) intends to shield them against ‘ethnocide’ through cultural, economic and political mobilisation. At the same time, all ‘Romanians’ living abroad are considered *to be* the country:

There is only one Romania, and its main definition is the people, language, culture, tradition and the shared historical past. Thus, while living in Rome, London, Cernăuți, Chișinău, Chilia, Madrid, Ialoveni, Timoc, Bruxelles, New York or Tiraspol, we are all Romania (AUR, 2020).

The enumeration brings together Romanian minority cities in the neighbouring countries and cities of recent migration facilitated by the country’s entry into the EU. The extensive definition of the nation de-territorialised the political community and highlighted the ambivalence of migration. Migrants are considered nation members but are also part of a ‘demographic catastrophe’ to be stopped and reversed through a traditionalist family-centred policy.

The issue of nation and state permeates the perspective on the *regional* part of the geographical scale. The inhabitants of historical regions are mentioned only once as such but otherwise referred to as Romanians and Europeans. In the first part of the programme, there is a clear opposition against the ‘internal federalization’, against ‘extremism’ and ‘irredentism’, alluding to the Hungarian minority, set to make the Romanians ‘foreigners in their own country’ (AUR 2020).

Political Mobilisation and the Pandemic Crisis

AUR, or the political constituency for a nationalist-conservative party, was long in the making outside party and electoral politics. By following the party’s main leaders, we can map their political buildup and explain why the pandemic crisis became a significant political opportunity for the party.

George Simion is the founder of the party and its prominent leader. He became socially involved by organising the football fan group of the national team United under the Flag (*Uniți sub Tricolor*). The group held nationalistic and even far-right political views, as many others in Central and Eastern Europe (see Kossakowski et al., 2020). The group was not political per se, but it proved to be a good starting base for the second initiative George Simion and his colleagues organised, *Acțiunea 2012*, which pursued the objective of uniting Romania with Moldova. This way, Simion entered the antechamber of politics, trying to rally political, institutional and mass-media support for his agenda. In 2019, when George Simion ran as an independent for the European Parliament elections, his logo was ‘Greater Romania in Europe’.

In parallel, The Coalition for the Family, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) alliance of roughly 44 members, was formed in 2013 in support of the ‘traditional family’, mainly by preventing the legalisation of same-sex marriages, promoting formal and informal religious education and questioning the pro-choice social consensus (see Băluță, 2020). The Coalition pushed for a citizen initiative to organise a constitutional referendum to ban same-sex marriages, gathering around 3 million signatures of support. The subsequent 2018 referendum was invalidated for not reaching the 30% minimum threshold. The outcome left the Coalition empowered but disillusioned, seeing that parliamentary parties would not pursue a conservative direction despite their public support for the ‘traditional family’. The two streams, one predominantly nationalist and one predominantly conservative, joined forces in 2019 when Claudiu Târziu, one of the leaders of the Coalition, announced he was co-founding AUR with George Simion.

AUR was registered in January 2020, very close to the beginning of the pandemic and the state of emergency declared by the Government. Similar to many other countries, Romanian authorities enacted measures that restricted movement and imposed severe limitations on public events, including religious processions. Notably, the latter proved extremely contentious as the bans coincided with the main Orthodox event, Easter, which took place in late April and was severely affected by the restrictions. AUR was the only party publicly opposing the restrictions, federating various groups against national and supranational elites deemed ‘anti-religious’ (Stoica, 2021: 124). The party organised several rallies, which were small but had enough participants and visibility to connect AUR and social groups affected by the response to the pandemic, including law enforcement. At that time, AUR joined various religious processions, highlighting their connection to the homeland, its religion, cultural habits and practices.

This low-intensity mobilisation against the pandemic restrictions helped the party to create a solid social media presence outside mainstream media that was almost unaware of AUR's existence. Stoica (2021: 116) points out that

its aggressive, systematic and regimented use of social media allowed AUR to target its potential voters, with whom the party would engage in lively discussions either through the comments section or via personal messaging, thus giving voters the feeling of empathy, in sharp opposition to how political communication was conducted by mainstream parties.

Claudiu Târziu, one of the leaders of the party, explained in a post-election interview that the success of the social media campaign was due to the use of professional communication companies, the involvement of young volunteers, the experience gained during the constitutional referendum in 2018 and the distribution of content in various nationalist and Christian organised online groups (Pagina de Media, 2020).

Electoral Geography

The geography of the AUR vote could show how the programme and strategy turned into electoral support and explain its relative performance against the other parties. The parliamentary elections were held on 6 December, when COVID-19 infections were common and restrictions were in place. This context of the vote lowered the turnout and tended to favour AUR. Sandu (2020: 1–2) asserts that abstentionism was higher in large and densely populated cities and highly educated groups, associated with higher rates of infection, fear of COVID-19, and traditionally voting for the centre-right parties. AUR's vote was concentrated in more isolated localities from the large urban areas and having a medium to a high level of development. Yet, to account for the variation and concentration of AUR's vote, organisational and institutional factors should be considered.

AUR had solid support in the diaspora, winning over 23% of the votes and becoming the second largest party in the electoral constituencies abroad (see Figure 1, Crăciun and Țăranu, 2023: 5). In the country, its scores varied significantly from county to county, ranging from 1% to 15%. The best-performing counties were concentrated in the Eastern regions, in Bucovina and Moldova (Suceava, Botoșani – 14%–15%; Neamț, Vrancea – 13%–14%; Iași, Vaslui – 12%–13%), and Dobrogea (Constanța – 14% and Tulcea – 11.57%). The only significant results outside these two regions were in two Western counties Arad (13.69%) and Alba (12.29%). In the capital Bucharest, the results were modest, less than 5%.

How can this voting pattern be explained? The only relevant comparison is with the 2018 constitutional referendum to ban same-sex marriages. The referendum created an electoral cleavage between conservatives and various strands of liberals and progressives and helped galvanise an AUR constitutive community. Despite the rhetorical support for the participation in the referendum coming from the main political parties, the turnout was very low – 21.1%, far from the 30% validation threshold, with 91.56% voting Yes and 6.47% voting No. The low turnout was also a result of the calls for boycotts from various civic and political coalitions opposing the referendum. Thus, the general turnout can be used as an indication of the conservative vote in the country and abroad. Racu et al. (2020) identified in the referendum a paradox in which conservative cultural strength is translated into conservative political weakness. The high abstentionism could also be explained by the fact that the legalisation of same-sex marriages did not represent a

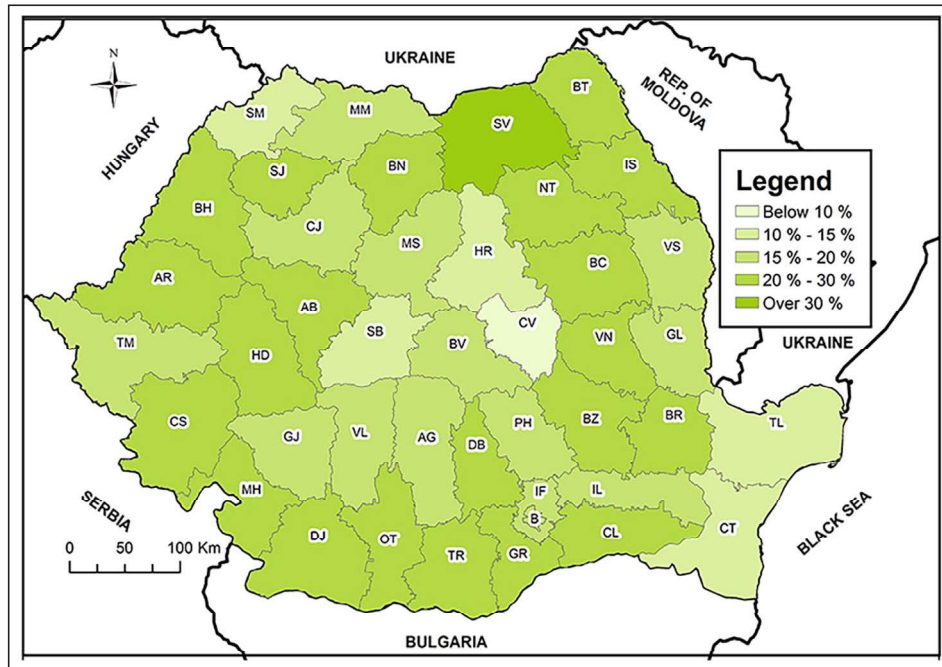


Figure 1. 2018 Referendum Turnout by County.

‘threat’ to the way of life of traditionalist/conservative voters, and hence not being worth mobilising against (see also Gherghina et al., 2019; Racu et al., 2020).

In the period between the two polls, AUR tried to consolidate and monopolise the conservative vote. In contrast, the mainstream parties, Social Democratic and National Liberal, tried to moderate and re-embed it in their electoral base. The transfer of votes to AUR’s benefit is traceable at the level of the diaspora. In 2018, the Romanian diaspora voted in large numbers, 126.239 votes compared to 262.232 in 2020 (Chamber of Deputies). In 2020, the party had the largest share of votes in the diaspora compared to its county-level votes on Romanian territory. Its emotional appeal to citizens living abroad, emphasised in its programme and public communication, reached the audience with the help of ‘individual political entrepreneurs and their networks of activism that existed before the party emerged’ (Soare and Tufiş, 2023). Rammelt (2020) asserts that folklore, tradition, faith and homeland rhetoric are perhaps closer to the lives of those who feel they have been forced to emigrate. As in the case of previous votes, the diaspora’s electoral orientation influenced the communities’ options at home. In Italy, AUR had its highest share of votes and obtained significant support in the localities experiencing outward migration to that country (Sandu, 2020: 3). But despite the emphasis in the programme and strategy on unification with Moldova, the party gained only 8.81%, marking the less salient nature of the issue in Moldova and the lack of credibility of AUR as a pro-unification party.

At the regional and county levels, there is also evidence of continuity (see Figure 2, Crăciun and Țăranu, 2023: 6). In 2018 Suceava County had the highest turnout in the country – 30.67%, and the largest share of AUR vote in 2020 – 14.51%. All the best-performing AUR counties in 2020, concentrated in Moldova and Dobrogea, also had higher-than-average turnouts in the 2018 referendum. The electoral continuity can be

set of circumstances leading to electoral viability. AUR was singular in criticising the pandemic response and the restrictions, especially those impacting religious activities and ‘freedoms’. This position allowed it to reach dissatisfied groups through informal networks and social media. Despite their organisational weakness, the support of many Orthodox priests and other religious and nationalist groups helped them mobilise effectively locally. The voting for AUR shows that a conservative constituency emerged, previously mobilised in the 2018 constitutional referendum to ban same-sex marriages. It was territorially concentrated and mobilised by ‘traditionalist’ clergymen and conservative community organisations from Romania and abroad, increasingly dissatisfied with existing parties. The case of AUR also highlights the relevance of diaspora communities and their redefinition of identity, territory and place through electoral mobilisation.

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