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Political Shifts and Social Dynamics in Eastern Europe: Exploring the Recent Rise of Romania's Populist Radical Right Movement

Abstract

The recent rise of populist political forces in Romania reflects a broader European trend but marks a significant local shift. Our study analyzes the populist phenomenon from both the *demand* side (i.e., the Romanian electorate's populist inclinations), and the *supply* side (examining the characteristics of the political offerings aligning with these inclinations). Using nationally representative survey data (N = 2,714), we estimate Romanians' populist attitudes by applying a methodological approach that allows for a nuanced categorization. Additionally, our analysis links strong populist attitudes to support for the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), and we investigate the party's ideology to assess its alignment with populist radical right characteristics. This study contributes to understanding Romanian populism by analyzing the interplay between societal demand and political supply.

Keywords: populism, Romania, radical right parties, AUR, Eastern Europe

1. Introduction

In recent decades, European populist movements have grown by channeling public dissatisfaction with the political establishment to challenge representative democracy. Populist parties, especially those on the far right, have shifted from the fringes to the mainstream, promoting an agenda of anti-immigration, exclusive nationalism, anti-globalization, and Euroscepticism. The success of parties such as the Freedom Party in Austria, Brothers of Italy and the League in Italy, National Rally in France, Alternative for Germany or the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands seems to confirm that we are in the midst of the „age of populism" (Krastev, 2007) or in „the Populist Century" (Rosanvallon, 2021), while Mounk (2018) observes the global rise of populism in major democracies.

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Populism in Western Europe is not monolithic, but commonly these parties exploit fears about the loss of cultural and economic identity, often in the context of economic crises or demographic changes. While not always in power, these movements have stimulated reassessments of traditional politics, influencing national policies and shaping public debates.

In Romania, parties with populist orientations have repeatedly entered Parliament over the past three decades, but only recently have they posed a tangible challenge to the democratic establishment. A young democracy emerged from communism in 1989, Romania faces unique challenges, including low civic participation due to distrust in political institutions and a strong attachment to traditional values, reflecting its cultural heritage (Cinpoeș, 2015; Voicu & Voicu, 2007).

Like other Eastern European counterparts, Romania has been exposed to anti-Western propaganda and the spillover effects of multiple crises, from post-pandemic economic instability to Russia's aggression in Ukraine. These circumstances created a fertile ground for the development and success of populist narratives, often propagated by the media and mainstream politicians, as well as for the success of populist leaders and parties that can become real threats to the country's Euro-Atlantic direction. Thus, in line with political evolutions in Western Europe and elsewhere, Romania has experienced the rise of populist political forces in recent years (Buti & Constantin, 2021). This trend was first confirmed during the 2020 parliamentary elections when a new party, AUR (Alliance for the Union of Romanians), gained parliamentary representation with a message considered populist, and reconfirmed in June 2024, when AUR, as well as SOS, another populist party created by one of its former members, Diana Șoșoacă, gained representation to the European Parliament. Later, during the 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections a new populist-sovereignist voice – Călin Georgescu – appeared as a shock, triggering parliamentary access for a new party, POT.

To understand this evolution within the broader populist wave, we examined the Romanian case on both the „demand" and „supply" levels (Mols & Jetten, 2020; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Spruyt et al., 2016) based on 2023 data. On the demand side, we analyze the populist attitudes of the electorate through nationally representative survey data, employing a custom-designed profiling method. On the supply side, we investigate the ideological profile of AUR, by conducting a thematic analysis of its programmatic documents and social media communication, using Mudde's conceptual framework of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism as our analytical benchmark. By combining these two dimensions, the study not only identifies the extent of populist inclinations within the Romanian electorate but also evaluates how these demands are met by the political offers.

2. Theoretical Framework: Populism in Political Science

2.1. Definition and Characteristics

Populism's growing global prominence and complexity make it a common political label. Consequently, some scholars prefer discussing „populisms" in the plural (Pasquino, 2008; Țăranu, 2012) to better define the concept.

Despite differences in emphasis, most definitions converge on a moral and political opposition between „the pure people" and „the corrupt elite" (Mudde, 2004, 2007; Müller, 2016). Taggart (2000, 2002) describes populism as a fluid, anti-establishment discourse emerging

in times of crisis and animated by nostalgia for a lost „heartland". For Laclau (2005), it constitutes a political logic that constructs collective identity through antagonism, while Canovan (1999) interprets it as a permanent tension between the „redemptive" and „pragmatic" faces of democracy. Norris and Inglehart (2019) emphasize its cultural dimension, linking populism to an authoritarian backlash against liberal cosmopolitanism. Complementing these views, Katsambekis and Stavrakakis (2017) frame populism as a discursive practice rather than a fixed ideology – an articulatory process through which „the people" are symbolically constructed against „the elite".

These perspectives illustrate that populism functions less as a comprehensive, standalone ideology and more as a political logic that can attach itself to various host ideologies. As Taggart (2003) notes, populism in Europe has been most visible on the far right. In Western Europe it gained support through anti-immigration, anti-taxation, and ethnic regionalist appeals, while in Eastern Europe it relied on hostility toward ethnic minorities, protectionism and economic nativism, criticism of globalization and privatization, and anti-Semitic or pan-Slavic conspiracy theories (Mudde, 2007).

The rise of far-right parties, which often encompasses extremist elements, also has a vast literature despite its conceptual imprecision. Whether it is the ideological spectrum (Mudde, 2007; Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Kondor & Littler, 2023), electoral success (Carter, 2005; Kitschelt & McGann, 1995;), challenges to democracy (Kaltwasser, 2014; Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Rummens, 2017), populism (Mudde, 2007, 2017; Taggart, 2000) or globalization and backlash (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), it underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of far-right parties, their appeal to disaffected segments of the population, and their potential impact on democratic systems.

Even though it remains somewhat ambiguous, with no clear consensus among experts on how to define and classify the concepts (Mudde, 2007; Rooduijn et al., 2024), the distinction between „radical right" and „extreme right" is useful for understanding party dynamics in correlation with public attitudes. The option to use the umbrella concept of „far right" (Pirro, 2023; Rooduijn et al., 2024), which generally refers to nativist and authoritarian political parties, may be suitable to more accurately reflect the complexity and ideological overlaps found in some parties. However, our case study focuses on a single party, analyzed through the lens of populism. Given that populism can be an attribute of radical right parties (Pirro, 2023; Wondreys & Zilianello, 2024) and less so of extreme right parties, which are anti-democratic, and often elitist and racist (Pirro, 2023), we will henceforth refer in our study to a populist radical right party.

To operationalize this concept for our analysis, we adopt the foundational framework proposed by Cas Mudde (2007, 2019). Following Mudde, we define populist radical right parties as having a core ideology of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism.

Nativism, a xenophobic nationalism that excludes liberal forms of nationalism, asserts that a country should be inhabited only by members of the native group („the nation"), while viewing non-native individuals or ideas as threats to the nation-state's unity. Authoritarianism denotes a belief in a strictly ordered society in which deviations from authority are harshly sanctioned; it emphasizes law, order, and a strict adherence to traditional moral norms; while the radical right conflicts with liberal democracy, it is not anti-democratic per se, as it accepts the principle of popular sovereignty. Populism, as noted, is based on a sharp division between

„the people" and „the elite." For Mudde the populist radical right is a specific subset within the wider radical right that includes both populist and non-populist ideas and movements.

This three-part ideological profile characterizes the political actors at the heart of the populist radical right. However, to fully understand the rise of such movements, one must also analyze the societal context in which they operate. A key debate in our study addresses the analytical distinction between the demand side – citizens' attitudes and value orientations, and the supply side – political actors articulating populist messages. This dual framework captures populism's dual nature as both societal predisposition and political strategy (Mols & Jetten, 2020; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). On the demand side, populism emerges as a latent attitudinal potential within the electorate, driven by economic insecurity, cultural backlash, and political distrust (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Rooduijn, 2018). On the supply side, research highlights populist entrepreneurs who frame grievances and mobilize discontent through „pure people versus corrupt elite" narratives of exclusion and belonging (Laclau, 2005; Moffitt, 2016). Mols and Jetten (2020) propose an integrative view, emphasizing that populist radical right success stems from reading and shaping public grievances through messaging, while Gidron and Bonikowski (2013) see populism arising at the intersection of individual predispositions and political opportunities provided by elites. Echoing studies of the radical right, this perspective shows that demand factors alone cannot explain electoral outcomes without the organizational and discursive strength of supply actors (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Golder, 2016; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2020). Our study contributes to this literature by integrating both perspectives: we assess the populist attitudes of the Romanian electorate (*demand*) and analyze the ideological profile of AUR (*supply*), illustrating how these two dimensions converge.

2.2. Application to the Romanian context. Research questions

Research on populism in post-communist Romania has highlighted the willingness of society and the political scene to host populist orientations and radical right parties since the early 1990s. The literature views Romanian populism as a response to dissatisfaction with the political class and the deficient management of the post-communist transition, emphasizing its persistence, adaptability, and diversity.

Representative actors include PRM (The Greater Romania Party) and Corneliu Vadim Tudor (Cinpoeș, 2012; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2001; Sum, 2010), PNG-CD (New Generation Party – Christian Democratic) and Gheorghe Becali (Cinpoeș, 2012; Shafir, 2008; Sum, 2010), PP-DD (People's Party – Dan Diaconescu) and Dan Diaconescu (Gherghina & Mișcoiu, 2014; Soare & Tufiș, 2019; Țăranu & Nicolescu, 2017), PDSR (The Social Democracy Party of Romania) and Ion Iliescu (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2001), PDL (The Democrat Liberal Party) and Traian Băsescu (Shafir, 2008, 2012; Țăranu & Nicolescu, 2017), USR (Save Romania Union) (Dragoman, 2021), each with specific nuances and approaches. Romanian populism reflects a complex combination of exclusivism, ethnicity-based nationalism (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2001; Sum, 2010) or extreme nationalism (Cinpoeș, 2012), anti-elitism, and a Manichean approach to politics characterized by a dichotomy of „the pure people" against „the corrupt elite" (Dragoman, 2021; Țăranu & Nicolescu, 2017). This is accompanied by an anti-establishment attitude and discourse, intolerance towards various groups such as the Roma, ethnic Hungarians, or sexual minorities (Cinpoeș, 2012; Corbu et al., 2017; Shafir, 2008, 2012), an ideological mix of left and right (Corbu et al., 2017; Gherghina & Mișcoiu, 2014; Shafir, 2012), an attachment to Orthodox Christian beliefs and values (Cinpoeș, 2012), anti-Semitism (Cin-

poeș, 2012; Shafir, 2008; Soare & Tufiș, 2019), exploitation of social divisions and negative emotions, and the provision of simplistic solutions to complex problems (Dragoman, 2021; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2001).

Clearly, the analysis of Romanian populism is neither uniform nor entirely convergent. The literature captures populism's evolution by focusing on charismatic leaders, party dynamics, and the application of diverse conceptual frameworks. As such, Romanian populism is treated either (1) as a distinct phenomenon that transcends the left-right cleavage, rendering it irrelevant, (2) as a mix of left and right values and policies becoming an (ideological, discursive, actionable) hallmark of both right and left parties, or (3) as a characteristic of far-right parties. This has led to terminologies such as radical right parties (Soare & Tufiș, 2019; Sum, 2010), right-wing populism (Țăranu & Nicolescu, 2017), extreme right parties (Cinpoeș, 2012), radical populism (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2001), national-populism (Gherghina & Mișcoiu, 2014; Țăranu & Nicolescu, 2017), neo-populism (Shafir, 2012), recombinant populism (Dragoman, 2021), or simply, populist parties.

Although numerous studies have analyzed the populist discourse, especially during elections or media controversies, including recent works on AUR (Buti & Constantin, 2021; Crăciun & Țăranu, 2023; Dragolea, 2022; Soare & Tufiș, 2023), the literature, with very few exceptions, has not consistently concentrated on examining populist inclinations within the electorate. Consequently, there has been an insufficient exploration of the public's openness to such messages and political movements – hence the objective behind our first research question:

RQ1. To what extent is the Romanian electorate characterized by populist attitudes, and how can these be measured and categorized?

Furthermore, we link populist attitudes to voting preferences to identify which parties attract this electorate. We seek to determine to what extent the public attracted to populism becomes a potential constituency and audience (Moffitt, 2016) for parties that engage in this type of political discourse – more specifically, for the AUR party, labeled as populist – thus exploring the relationship between the demand and the supply side of Romanian populism:

RQ2. How do populist attitudes among Romanian voters relate to their electoral choices, particularly in relation to supporting AUR?

On the supply side, we explore the extent to which AUR, beyond publicly circulated labels, concretely fits the criteria that define a populist radical right party in current political science literature, studying the core features of this party's ideology, using as a benchmark the conceptual framework proposed by Mudde (2007). Hence our final research question:

RQ3. How does AUR's ideology align with the conceptual framework defining populist radical right parties?

Romania was selected for analysis due to the recent rise of right-wing populist movements, a phenomenon that has reshaped the national political landscape. Our study makes a significant contribution by integrating both the demand and supply sides of populism in the Romanian context. Unlike previous studies that have focused on isolated aspects (Corbu et al., 2017; Gherghina & Mișcoiu, 2014; Shafir, 2012; Voicu, 2012), we address a key gap: the insufficient examination of the relationship between the electorate's populist attitudes and the populist political offer. Through this integrated approach, we provide a more nuanced understanding of populism in Romania and contribute to a broader comprehension of similar movements across Europe.

By combining survey data with qualitative analysis of party documents and social media communication, the paper seeks to map attitudinal orientations within the electorate, and also to examine their correspondence in AUR's political messaging, thereby highlighting the interplay between the two dimensions of populism.

3. Methodology

3.1. Understanding the Public: Survey Research

The paper relies on data collected through a nationally representative survey, designed and funded by the authors. The survey was conducted between January 17 and 26, 2023, using the CATI (Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing) method[1], and applied a methodological approach first devised by Sultănescu et al. (2021) leading the research team at the Center for Civic Participation and Democracy – CPD SNSPA, to dissect the public's populist tendencies (see Sultănescu et al., 2024 for full details). This methodology implies two consecutive steps. The first – simplified – profiling method is based on the one used by Pew Research (Mitchell et al., 2018) and leverages responses to two survey questions to categorize individuals into varying classes of populism. The questions assess respondents' agreement with the statements: „The majority of elected politicians are not interested in what ordinary people think," and „Ordinary people would be better at solving the country's problems than the majority of elected officials." Both variables measure perceptions of the distance between elites and the people, and the extent to which elites align with the will of the people. The resulting categories created for analysis are *populists* (those who agree with both statements), *non-populists* (those who reject both statements), and *mixed views* (the rest of the public, including those who refused to answer both questions). We employed a similar wording of the questions to the one used in the Pew Research studies, and we used a 4-point scale to „push" the public towards clearer answers.

The second – advanced – method goes a step further by adding a third survey question to distribute respondents across a more nuanced spectrum, since, after initial testing of the simplified methodology through opinion surveys in 2019 (Sultănescu et al., 2021), the results significantly differed from existing measurements in Western countries, with much higher proportions of populist public identified in Romania. Since the Romanian public is highly sensitized by the prevalence of anti-corruption discourse and public manifestations of hostility towards political elites, which might be why it expresses agreement more freely with the two critical statements about politicians, a third, more aggressively formulated variable was included in the measurement equation, intended to test the public's degree of dissatisfaction with politicians on a more profound level: „The majority of politicians have stolen and should go to jail."

This new three-variable mix classifies the public into four categories:

- Strong populism: Respondents who select *strongly agree* for ALL three statements.
- Moderate populism: Respondents who select *agreement* (either *strongly agree* or *somewhat agree*) for ALL three statements.
- Populist inclination: Respondents with mixed responses, defined as agreeing (either *strongly agree* or *somewhat agree*) with at least two of the three statements, while rejecting or not responding to the third statement.

- Non-populism: Respondents who do not meet the criteria for the other three categories, including those who reject the statements (*somewhat disagree* or *strongly disagree*) or fall into the non-response or DK category.

This method offers a more granular understanding of the intensity of populist sentiments among the public, enabling a detailed analysis of political leanings.

The reliability of the scale measuring populism was confirmed by Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha = 0.82$), indicating a high level of internal consistency and thus justifying the use of the populism scale in the analysis.

3.2. Understanding the Populist Speech: Thematic Analysis

Using Mudde's concepts of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, we conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to determine if AUR fits the populist radical right category. This approach emphasizes the interpretation of meanings communicated through a text, while deliberately overlooking the formal or structural techniques employed by the authors of the document (Esin, 2011). We used a combination of latent and semantic coding (Byrne, 2022), considering both explicit signifiers found within the analyzed text as well as implicit meanings and abstract concepts.

We applied this method to two programmatic documents of the party, identity documents that reveal the vision, values, and directions of action of AUR. These are official elements of identification, particularization, and positioning of the party in the Romanian and European political space, functioning as a foundation for its public manifestations and providing a clear picture of the party's ideology. These documents are AUR's political program (The Alliance for the Union of Romanians [AUR], 2022) and governance program as of 2023 (The Alliance for the Union of Romanians [AUR], 2023). We also explored the party's communication in the online space, particularly on Facebook, where AUR is quite active[2]. We analyzed the official AUR Facebook page and those of two leaders: Deputy George Simion, the party president, and Senator Sorin Lavric, the president of the AUR Senate. The three Facebook pages were monitored from March to August 2023, and the top 10 posts by interactions (tracked by CrowdTangle[3]) were analyzed.

For each recording unit, we aimed to identify content elements compatible with the three ideological features of populist radical right parties and their subcategories, such as internal homogenization, ethnic nationalism, state nationalism, exclusionism, external exclusiveness, xenophobia, strong state, revisionism, traditionalism, national(ist) capitalism. Notably, many of these intertwining variables are found across all core concepts (nativism, authoritarianism, and populism), having multiple dimensions (economic, political, cultural, social, etc.).

4. Findings

4.1. Understanding the Demand for Populism in Romania

Our initial classification, based on the Pew Research method, shows that a significant majority (61%) of Romanians hold populist views. A much smaller faction falls into the mixed category, while the non-populist electorate is notably minimal (see Table 1). This distribution would suggest a predominant inclination towards populism, with a substantial segment of the

electorate either fully embracing or showing tendencies towards populist ideologies. Comparatively, the Pew Research survey results reveal that Spain recorded the highest proportion of populists (45%) among all eight surveyed nations, while Germany and the Netherlands registered 26%, and Denmark slightly lower at 25% (Mitchell et al., 2018). Thus, this method of estimating the populist predisposition of the Romanian public lacks sufficient precision.

Table 1. Categories of populism using both the simplified and the advanced method of segmentation

DEGREES OF POPULISM (simplified method)	**% of population**	**N**
Populist	61%	1656
Mixed views	30%	814
Non-populist	9%	244
TOTAL	100%	2714
DEGREES OF POPULISM (advanced CPD method)	**% of population**	**N**
Strong populism	27%	733
Moderate populism	27%	733
Populist inclination	31%	841
No populism	15%	407
TOTAL	100%	2714

Source: Survey, Jan 17-26, 2023.

Results obtained with our advanced profiling method suggest that strong and moderate populist tendencies are equally common, each characterizing about a quarter of the surveyed population, while the largest segment exhibits low populist tendencies (see Table 1). This segmentation highlights a more balanced distribution across different intensities of populist beliefs, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the degrees of populism among the Romanian public.

When studying the characteristics of the different segments obtained through the advanced populist profiler, we uncover richer nuances[4]. Firm populists exhibit a higher level of pessimism, with 80% believing that the country is on the wrong path, in contrast to 70% of moderate populists, and 53% of non-populists. Concerns over inflation and rising costs are more acute among firm populists, with 91% expressing they are „very worried," compared to 59% of non-populists and 78% of the general population. Socio-demographically, firm populists are more often male, have secondary education, work in blue-collar jobs, and perceive themselves low income. They are less likely to have higher education. Regarding media consumption, firm populists disproportionately rely on television for news, though they also utilize a combination of TV and online sources. A total of 57% watch TV news daily, compared to 49% of the average population and 47% of non-populists.

Moderate populists often mirror the general population's views on the nation's trajectory and main perceived threats. This group has a higher representation of young adults (26% aged 18 – 29 years, vs. 19% average). They also exhibit a slight increase in educational attainment, with 13% holding a higher education degree, compared to 4% of firm populists and the

10% average. Pensioners are less represented (23%) compared to the general population analyzed (30%), and there is a higher incidence of white-collar occupations within this group. Moderate populists are less dependent on television for news than the general public (22% vs. 28%), but engage more with news on their smartphones, with 35% reading news daily on their devices, compared to 30% of firm populists.

Pessimism diminishes as the intensity of populist beliefs decreases, a pattern consistent among those with low populist inclinations, except in their attitudes towards the war in Ukraine, where their views align with the general population. Within this segment, pensioners are overrepresented, while blue-collar workers are less common.

Hence, the initial analysis of populist inclinations among the Romanian electorate reveals a predominant preference for populist ideologies (61% through the simplified method). This inclination is nuanced further through the advanced profiling method, showing a more balanced distribution across varying degrees of populist beliefs. This detailed categorization aligns with socio-demographic factors and concerns, such as pessimism about the country's direction and economic worries, which are more pronounced among firm populists.

4.2. Understanding the Supply: The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR)

4.2.1. Link between populist attitudes and AUR voting patterns

Consistent with other studies (Mitchell et al., 2018), we expected to identify a stronger populist attitude among voters of anti-establishment parties. When applying our simplified profiling method to the survey results, we notice a significant inclination towards populism among the electorates of all four major political parties, with AUR having the most pronounced populist base but with similarly high percentages for the other parties as well (see Table 2).

Table 2. Party electorates by populism inclination[5]

DEGREES OF POPULISM (simplified method)	**PARTY**			
	PSD (N=504)	**PNL (N=370)**	**USR (N=200)**	**AUR (N=414)**
POPULIST	60%	59%	58%	69%
MIXED VIEWS	30%	30%	35%	25%
NON-POPULIST	10%	11%	7%	6%
total	100%	100%	100%	100%
DEGREES OF POPULISM (advanced CPD method)	**PARTY**			
	PSD (N=504)	**PNL (N=370)**	**USR (N=200)**	**AUR (N=414)**
STRONG POPULISM	26%	20%	16%	41%
MODERATE POPULISM	25%	31%	39%	21%
POPULIST INCLINATION	33%	29%	30%	28%
NO POPULISM	16%	20%	15%	10%
total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Survey, Jan 17-26, 2023 (N = 2714).

Using the advanced method, strong populists constitute 41% of AUR's electorate – a much higher share than in mainstream parties. PSD voters are distributed in a relatively balanced manner across all levels, with a slight tilt towards lower levels of populism. PNL has a similarly even distribution but with the highest percentage in the 'moderate' category, like USR. AUR has the fewest non-populists, further emphasizing the strong populist inclination of its electorate.

We also analyzed the results in a different manner, by looking at the distribution of voting intentions for each segment of the population categorized by its populist inclination (see Table 3). Simplified segmentation suggests that while AUR holds a significant portion of the populist electorate, tied with PSD at 19%, it also has a notable presence among those with mixed inclinations and non-populists, indicating that this type of categorization is not suggestive or nuanced enough to derive clear conclusions.

Table 3. Voting intentions by populism segmentation

PARTY	DEGREES OF POPULISM (simplified method)			DEGREES OF POPULISM (advanced CPD method)			
	POPULIST	MIXED	NON-POPULIST	STRONG POPULISM	MODERATE POPULISM	POPULIST INCLINATION	NO POPULISM
PSD	19%	19%	21%	19%	18%	21%	19%
PNL	12%	13%	17%	10%	14%	12%	17%
USR	6%	7%	5%	4%	9%	6%	6%
AUR	19%	14%	10%	25%	14%	15%	10%
ND*	29%	34%	30%	28%	30%	33%	32%
total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note. Smaller political parties are not included, thus some values contributing to 100% sums are not shown.
* Denotes undecided

Source: Survey, Jan 17-26, 2023 (N = 2714)

To obtain more nuanced insights, we also analyzed the results of the more advanced profiling method to examine voting intentions across different degrees of populist inclination. A notable trend emerges among those categorized as strong populists: a significant preference (25%) towards the AUR party, suggesting it appeals particularly to voters with pronounced populist views, more than PSD (19%) or PNL (10%) – which, at the time of measurement, together formed the governing coalition in Romania. Undecided people also make up a consistent segment of the strong populist group (28%).

Among moderate populists, PSD holds a slight lead over AUR and PNL, while USR attracts a smaller share of supporters. Those with weaker populist inclinations show a more pronounced preference for PSD, followed by AUR, and a considerably larger proportion remain undecided (see Table 3).

These figures suggest that AUR's messaging and policies are particularly resonant with voters who favor populist ideas, highlighting a political landscape where populist sentiment has the potential to influence electoral preferences.

4.2.2. Core features of AUR's ideology

Our aim to assess whether AUR party fits ideologically within the populist radical right category was carried out through thematic analysis, using Mudde's (2007) three central concepts: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism.

AUR defines itself in its political program as „a patriotic party, of conservative essence […] Man and nation are at the center of our policies. The basic doctrinal pillars of our party are: Faith, Nation, Family, and Liberty".

Nation, homeland, and nation-state are central to AUR's worldview, guiding its political and governance programs. They are defined in ethnic and biological terms, through tradition, history, language, and faith. The political program speaks of the „biological essence of the Romanian nation and its genetic heritage". The individual's relationship with the nation is affective: „the idea of national unity must be illuminated by Christian morality, […]. No one can integrate through love into humanity if he does not love his nation" (AUR, 2022, p. 5). Thus, love becomes an element of citizenship.

Although AUR avoids overtly xenophobic language, its discourse conveys a defensive nationalism focused on protecting traditions, sovereignty, and national interests from perceived internal and external threats – a logic of identity preservation rather than open hostility toward outsiders.

Nativism is also reflected in the party's Facebook communication. AUR justifies parliamentary opposition to various bills by claiming that they would affect national sovereignty and harm „our children, our families, our national resources, state-owned companies". Criticism targets the parliamentary majority, ruling parties, and/or, generically, the post-communist political class, portrayed as threats to Romanians and „national wealth". Many of the Facebook messages carry strong emotional tones, promoting sentiments of belonging and national pride but also of hatred, revolt, and fear. For instance, Claudiu Târziu, the president of the National Leadership Council of AUR, warns of the „danger of our extinction as a nation and our disappearance as a state".

AUR nationalism also challenges current borders, supporting as a „major strategic goal" the reunification with the Republic of Moldova – not symbolically, through Moldova's accession to the EU (as the other national parties also claim), but through „restoring the unity of the states" and „the unity of all Romanians".

The Manichean „us–them" distinction employed by AUR highlights both the nativism and populism of the party. AUR opposes „parties of the old corrupt and bureaucratic system, guilty of betraying the vital interests of citizens and the country" (AUR, 2022, p. 3). It criticizes and rejects the political elite but does not directly oppose it to the people, maintaining support for representative democracy and popular sovereignty. Appealing to tradition and culture, AUR presents itself as the authentic expression of Romanian identity. Its adversaries are all those who pervert or cancel everything that is related to Romanian values and traditions, national identity and culture, national interest, and sovereignty. These include traditional parties, „foreign entities" buying agricultural land, „sexualization of education," gender ideology, „WOKE and Cancel Culture trends", foreign corporations that control production and commit abuses (AUR defines foreign companies not as adversaries but as a problem contributing to the status quo, characterized by the imbalance between foreign and domestic capital), and EU centralization tendencies.

Manichaeism is sharper on social media, where the political elite and traditional parties are labeled corrupt and disloyal (selling the country to foreigners, promoting outside inter-

ests, contrary to the national interests) and are portrayed as enemies of the people. Conversely, AUR depicts itself as the sole defender of Romanians and national interests.

AUR's vision of democracy aligns it with populist radical right parties. It begins with the concept of „authentic democracy," but this is not properly defined. The party's program provides a clue, mentioning the „expression of political will through a representative parliamentary system" (AUR, 2022, p. 6), but the reference to „authentic democracy" suggests dissatisfaction or criticism towards the current democratic system, implying that reality also encompasses a „non-authentic", „less authentic" or „false" democracy. AUR and its representatives speak more directly on Facebook about „a radical change, which only the Romanian people can make", about the fact that „Romanians must take back their power", but also about a „moral renaissance on a national scale," with a „devastating" effect on PNL and PSD who „will disappear from history. [...] And if that happens, then we have fulfilled our purpose as we envisioned it from the very beginning". AUR's message refers to the power of the people but also to the elimination, to the point of disappearance, of the political opponents, placing the party not only at an extreme of the political spectrum but at the edge of the democratic system. This is supported by messages conveyed directly from the podium of the Romanian Senate and echoed on Facebook, promoting the cult of former Legionary leaders. This is the case with Sorin Lavric, who paid tribute to George Manu[6] and called for the rehabilitation of Mircea Vulcănescu[7], claiming that the court did not annul his conviction because he was Romanian, not Jewish[8].

Within AUR's vision of democracy, „law and justice" are central values to be respected unconditionally, as outcomes of education. Regarding minorities, AUR is a conservative party, defender and promoter of tradition and Christian doctrine, rejecting sexual minorities and opposing changes to legislation concerning the family, which is defined as a union between a man/father and a woman/mother, contrasted with the „gender ideology".

Given the strong emphasis on „nation," „language," and „Christianity," minorities are not explicitly rejected but are indirectly marginalized. Defining the state as the „instrument of the Romanian nation," with the nation understood ethnically and biologically, diffuses and even limits the relationship between minorities and the state. The AUR program talks about the obligation of national minorities to know the Romanian language, in addition to their mother tongue, about the „ethnic enclaving through school," which it aims to stop. It also discusses the lack of rights of Romanians (compared to ethnic Hungarians) in some counties. From this perspective, AUR proposes a reshaping of interethnic relations.

The instrumental view of the state extends to other areas. Its task is to promote the common good, national interest, and, in general, everything Romanian, and to defend Romanians „from threats both outside and within the borders" (AUR, 2022, p. 4). The state should play an active, significant role in the economy and society, ensuring meritocracy, social inclusion, and poverty reduction. Additionally, it must „ensure young people the necessary living conditions, a high-performance professional training, an education in the spirit of Christian morality, and unconditional respect for law and justice" (AUR, 2022, p. 8).

Economic nativism prevails in both political and governance program. AUR advocates for a national(ist) capitalism, which often goes beyond the logic of the market economy. Its vision is based on a combination of liberalism and a nativist economic model, asserting the principles of a market economy, property rights, and entrepreneurship, on one hand, and protectionism, state intervention, support for domestic over foreign capital, and nationalization of companies in strategic sectors, on the other.

AUR's economic policies lean toward protectionism: safeguarding the domestic market, protecting local producers, preserving the distinctive features of rural Romania, shielding Romanians from economic abuses (foreign firms, banks, financial institutions, and gambling industries). The protection of Romania's resources and natural wealth for its citizens is also promoted on Facebook.

AUR's stance toward the European Union (EU) is characterized by contradiction, dominated by nativism, and at the very least euro-pessimist. The party does not self-identify as anti-European, declaring fidelity to the „Euro-Atlantic option" and considering EU and NATO membership „strategic and irrevocable." However, it criticizes „the way the European Union acts today," denouncing the tendencies toward federalization and „centralization of decisions" at the European level. These developments are rejected from nationalist-sovereignist positions, with the EU seen as a construction with Christian roots, a collection of states pursuing and „firmly defending their national interests." Accordingly, AUR commits to „counter, through all legal and institutional instruments, agreements and directives that may affect the interests of Romania and Romanians".

Public discourse by AUR representatives is more explicit. Criticizing a draft law on preventing child separation from families, the party leader depicted the EU as a master imposing laws and affecting tradition and national sovereignty and appealed to those supporting „the national idea, the family, the faith". An AUR EP candidate described EU authority as „dictatorship and tyranny" and defined Romanian MEPs' duty as „defending Romania's dignity, sovereignty, and freedom".

Regarding globaphobia (Mudde, 2007), the attitude is present though not explicit in the party's identity documents. It primarily transpires from the approach to the nation and what is outside of it, to the ingroup („us") and outgroup(s) („them"). Economically, AUR expresses reluctance toward foreign capital (companies). Politically, it opposes a federalist EU, advocating for the „supremacy of states' sovereignty in the global architecture". Facebook posts echo this dichotomy: „You must decide which side you're on, the side of the globalists and Satanists or the side of good and God, of the natural and the intrinsic." Culturally, two concepts define AUR's vision: Christianity, „one of the essential factors of social cohesion" (AUR, 2022, p. 8), and the nation, whose identity, tradition, and language must guide cultural institutions.

One of the messages conveyed on Facebook by Sorin Lavric, President of the AUR Senate, contradicts the idea of universal rights and values. Lavric claims that nondiscrimination is a „neo-Marxist lie" and tolerance is „another neo-Marxist blather, whose role is to soften people in the name of a deceitful indulgence toward any aggression coming from outside".

Analysis of AUR's political and governance programs, alongside its social media communication, confirms its fit within Mudde's definition of radical right populist parties. Nativism, authoritarianism, and populism are evident in its rhetoric and programmatic documents that promote a revisionist nationalism, criticize the traditional political elite, and empower the state to defend national, Christian, and family values. Supporting an „authentic" democracy and opposing external influences, AUR distances itself from European values and policies, promoting national sovereignty and the interests of the ethnic majority.

5. Discussion and Conclusion. Implications For the Political Landscape in Romania

This study investigated Romanian populism (based on data from 2023) by analyzing the electorate's populist attitudes (demand) and the ideological profile of the AUR party (supply).

While the research offers novel insights into Romania's populist dynamics, it remains exploratory in nature. The analysis relies primarily on bivariate descriptive techniques, consistent with its aim to document, for the first time, systematic patterns linking populist attitudes and vote intentions in Romania. Moreover, the measurement of populist attitudes is highly contextualized to the Romanian case, though designed for international comparability, using a streamlined alternative to multi-item scales. These limitations do not undermine the robustness of the findings but rather position the study as a necessary first step, providing a foundation for future research.

The integrated approach, focusing on both the demand and the supply sides in Romania, constitutes the originality of our paper. Populism is, by its nature, a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. Analyzing only one side limits understanding of the real dynamics between electorate and parties. On the one hand, the demand dimension is essential, as populism cannot be explained without understanding the value orientations of the public (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). On the other hand, the supply dimension is equally important. Political parties and populist leaders are not merely mirrors of these predispositions. They are active agents that shape and amplify this demand through their discourses and proposed policies. Without analyzing the supply side, we risk overlooking the role that political actors play in constructing and disseminating populist rhetoric (Laclau, 2005). In short, populism cannot be fully understood through a one-sided analysis, but through the interaction between these two dimensions.

The study uses a two-tiered methodology created and previously applied over several survey waves by the research team at CPD SNSPA to analyze populist tendencies. This methodology allows for a granular understanding of populist sentiments within the Romanian public, capturing a richer spectrum of disillusionment with the political class. The classification of the public into distinct categories based on their populist inclinations facilitates a detailed analysis of political leanings, based on survey data.

Regarding people's populist predispositions (RQ1), our analysis revealed that the Romanian electorate exhibited significant populist inclinations in 2023. Using the simplified profiling method, 61% of respondents were identified as having populist tendencies, while only 9% were non-populist. However, the advanced profiling method, which includes a third variable to better capture specific realities, showed a more nuanced distribution, with 27% strong populism. This confirms a predominance of populist inclinations within the population, but also a significant variation in the intensity of these beliefs.

Regarding the association of populist attitudes and voting (RQ2), results indicate a strong connection between populism and support for AUR. The AUR party stands out with an electorate that exhibits pronounced populist tendencies: 69% of its voters have populist tendencies in our simplified evaluation, exceeding the populism percentage found among voters of all other major parties (PSD, PNL, USR). Furthermore, our detailed analysis shows that AUR particularly attracts voters with strong populist views, who constitute 41% of its electorate. This suggests that AUR resonates especially well with those voters who hold very pronounced populist views.

The thematic analysis of AUR's programmatic documents and its public communication (RQ3) shows alignment with populist radical right traits: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. AUR's political program emphasizes nation, sovereignty, and traditions, highlighting an exclusionary and revisionist nationalism. The anti-elite discourse is omnipresent, and AUR promotes a vision of democracy that favors the sovereignty of the people while criticizing current democratic structures. Messages conveyed on social media reinforce this image, underscoring opposition to traditional political elites and European values, while promoting national interests and Christian values.

Thus, our study contributes to a comprehensive understanding of populism in Romania, highlighting how the demand and supply of populism influence each other. The electorate shows significant openness to populist messages, while AUR capitalizes on it, consolidating its position as a populist radical right party. This dynamic reflects a broader trend of disillusionment with traditional political structures and a search for alternatives promising closer alignment with the will of the ordinary citizen.

Our findings suggest that the populist predispositions identified in the survey are clearly echoed in the discursive strategies and programmatic positions of AUR. The party's emphasis on national sovereignty, the defense of „the people" against corrupt elites, and resistance to external influences closely resonate with the attitudinal profiles revealed by our data. Ultimately, AUR's political messaging (supply) directly mirrors the populist attitudes found in the electorate (demand), validating our integrated analytical approach.

The conclusions of our study make significant theoretical and empirical contributions. Using a previously tested methodological adaptation of the framework for measuring populism enables a more detailed exploration of this phenomenon in the context of a post-communist democracy, where themes such as anti-corruption and antagonism towards elites are particularly significant. Classifying the public by the intensity of their populist inclinations lays a foundation for complex analysis of the phenomenon and highlights the relevance of national specificities in efforts to aggregate general models and characteristics of populism and its political parties. By correlating these findings with existing literature, we contribute to expanding the theoretical framework regarding the relationship between populism and the dysfunctions of democracy (Mudde, 2004; Rosanvallon, 2008; Rooduijn, 2014).

Empirically, our findings are consistent with arguments in the literature about the characteristics of radical right populist parties, such as nativism, authoritarianism, and anti-elitism (Mudde, 2007), and particularizes them for the Romanian context by emphasizing national and religious themes. They also contribute to understanding the mechanisms through which populist parties capitalize on popular disillusionment with traditional elites, reflecting similar observations from other regional studies (Pirro, 2015; Enyedi, 2016). Thus, Romania serves as a clear example of how the demand and supply sides of populism influence each other in a context where traditional cleavages are reconfigured by new political and cultural dynamics.

Our results provide empirical support for theoretical arguments about the rise of populism under conditions of dissatisfaction with the political and economic system (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Guriev & Papaioannou, 2022), and extend them by highlighting particular traits of Romanian populism, specifically a discourse emphasizing tradition, nation, and religious values. Consequently, the Romanian case contributes to understanding the diversity of populism and radical right movements in Europe, underlining the importance of adapting general theories to the socio-cultural and historical specificities of each country.

Notes

[1] Data collection was conducted by the national polling agency Verifield, employing a random digit dialing (RDD) sampling technique. The sample consisted of 2,714 respondents: 51.8% female, 16% with higher education, mean age 47 years (M = 47.18, SD = 17.11), 44.6% residing in rural areas. The survey response rate was 13%. Weighting adjustments were applied to ensure the representativeness of the sample, and weights were constructed based on known population distributions for gender, age, education level, and area of residence. The margin of error was ±1.88% at a 95% confidence level.

[2] We focused exclusively on Facebook pages, given the centrality of this platform in the Romanian online ecosystem. Facebook is used as a news source by 55% of Romanians (Newman et al., 2023), making it the main arena for political communication.

[3] A public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook.

[4] In the findings, we report only statistically significant differences, with a minimum threshold of +/-**5%**. This ensures that the relationships and variations discussed are robust. Non-significant differences are excluded to maintain the clarity and reliability of the results.

[5] The table includes absolute numbers for each party's voter base to ensure statistical significance. The values reflect enough cases for meaningful statistical analysis.

[6] Physicist, member of the Legionary Movement, and interim leader of the Legionaries who operated clandestinely after 1941. In 1948, he was convicted in the „trial of the group of conspirators, spies, and saboteurs" and died in detention.

[7] Philosopher and economist, Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of Finance during Ion Antonescu's government. Convicted in 1946 for war crimes, he died in detention. In 2016, Vulcănescu's youngest daughter asked the court to acknowledge the political nature of his conviction; in 2019, the Bucharest Court of Appeal rejected the request after the Tribunal had recognized it.

[8] Lavric refers to the 2000 Supreme Court of Justice decision that rehabilitated Netta Gheron, of Jewish origin, Finance Minister in Ion Antonescu's government, convicted in 1948 for war crimes and deceased in prison in 1955. The AUR senator questions the court's differing rulings: „The reason is simple, Gheron was Jewish, and Vulcănescu was Romanian".

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