frontiers in Political Science

TYPE Original Research
PUBLISHED 25 August 2026
DOI 10.3389/fpos.2026.1815040

Check for updates

OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY
Ildiko Otova,
New Bulgarian University, Bulgaria

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Sorina Soare,
University of Florence, Italy
Alberto Ruiz-Méndez,
National Autonomous University of Mexico, Mexico

*CORRESPONDENCE
Henry P. Rammelt
henry.rammelt@politice.ro

RECEIVED 21 February 2026
REVISED 19 July 2026
ACCEPTED 28 July 2026
PUBLISHED 25 August 2026

CITATION
Rammelt HP and Bujdei-Tebeica V (2026) Parallel politicization: rethinking the demand–supply divide in populism. Evidence from parliamentary and protest discourse in Romania (2020–2024). *Front. Polit. Sci.* 8:1815040. doi: 10.3389/fpos.2026.1815040

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Parallel politicization: rethinking the demand–supply divide in populism. Evidence from parliamentary and protest discourse in Romania (2020–2024)

Henry P. Rammelt[1,2]* and Vlad Bujdei-Tebeica[1]

[1]Department of Political Science, National School of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), Bucharest, Romania, [2]Department of Sociology and Anthropology, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, United States

This article examines how populist politicization unfolds across civic and institutional arenas and what its temporal dynamics reveal about demand- and supply-side explanations of populism. Focusing on Romania between 2020 and 2024, it compares protest-related media coverage and parliamentary plenary debates to trace the circulation of five core populist themes. Rather than treating populism as either a societal attitude or an elite strategy, the study conceptualizes it as a discursive repertoire whose salience can be traced over time. Using a longitudinal, frequency-based design, the analysis tests whether politicization follows a demand-induced (bottom-up), supply-induced (top-down), or interactive logic. The findings show no consistent evidence of bottom-up diffusion from protest to parliament, nor of systematic top-down activation from parliament to protest. Parliamentary discourse exhibits a stable and routinized engagement with populist themes, whereas protest communication remains episodic and event-driven. Politicization is therefore institutionally insulated and only weakly coupled to civic mobilization. The article proposes the concept of parallel politicization to describe this configuration: a pattern in which similar populist repertoires circulate across arenas without stable temporal transmission or semantic alignment. The results suggest that populist politicization can persist without continuous feedback between citizens and elites, challenging linear demand- or supply-driven models and indicating that populism may endure as an institutionalized repertoire of political communication even when civic mobilization remains fragmented.

KEYWORDS
populism, parallel politicization, demand–supply dynamics, discursive repertoire, parliamentary discourse, protest, Romania

1 Introduction

Populism has been conceptualized in several ways: as a thin-centered ideology, a political strategy, a style of communication, and a discursive repertoire of political communication (Mudde, 2010; Kenny, 2025; Wodak, 2019). Among these different approaches, scholars also distinguish between demand-side and supply-side explanations (Rodrik, 2017; Mudde, 2010; Mols and Jetten, 2020;

Zulianello and Guasti, 2025). Demand-side approaches emphasize the social, economic, and psychological conditions that make citizens receptive to anti-establishment appeals, while supply-side perspectives highlight the agency of political actors who mobilize and shape these predispositions through discourse, organization, and leadership (Kenny, 2025). Although both perspectives are widely understood as complementary, empirical research still struggles to determine how they interact over time. This leaves open a central temporal question: do populist themes originate in extra-institutional contestation and diffuse upward into institutional politics, or are they activated within elite discourse and only later reflected in broader public contestation?

This question is particularly important when populism is approached as an empirically observable discursive repertoire. Discourse- and communication-oriented scholarship examines populism as a mode of political communication that constructs conflict through moralized binaries between "the people" and "the elite," often combined with nationalism, sovereignism, exclusion, and crisis rhetoric (Pirro, 2014; Enyedi, 2016; Wodak, 2019). Rather than treating populism as being tied to a single ideological position, this literature approaches populist discourse as a flexible repertoire that can be mobilized across different arenas and adapted to institutional and media environments (Norocel and Szabó, 2019; Macková et al., 2025). It therefore leaves identifiable linguistic "footprints" that can be traced across civic and institutional settings (Erhard et al., 2024; McDonnell and Ondelli, 2024). This article brings the demand–supply debate into dialogue with research on politicization. Politicization refers to the public contestation of political authority, legitimacy, and representation across multiple arenas. European integration represents a paradigmatic case of such contestation (Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Kriesi, 2009; Koopmans and Zürn, 2019), but the underlying logic extends beyond the EU: politicization concerns who governs, in whose name, and under what conditions of legitimacy. Populist actors and discourses play a central role in this process by embedding sovereignty and supranational authority within people–elite antagonisms, and by framing political power as captured by illegitimate elites and external constraints (Brusenbauch Meislová and Buckledee, 2021).

In this study, populist politicization refers to the public visibility and circulation of contestation articulated through populist themes. Empirically, it is observed through changes in the salience and temporal sequencing of five core themes: people-centrism, anti-elitism, exclusionary othering, sovereigntism, and crisis framing (Pirro, 2014; Wodak, 2019; Kajsiu, 2023; Brusenbauch Meislová and Buckledee, 2021; Sata, 2023). The argument is therefore primarily descriptive-analytical rather than normative. It does not seek to determine whether populism is inherently democratic or anti-democratic, nor to privilege one general theory of populism over others. Instead, it uses the demand–supply distinction as an empirical problem of temporal sequencing: whether populist themes become salient first in civic contestation, in institutional discourse, or in both arenas without stable transmission. The central research question is therefore: How do populist themes circulate across extra-institutional and institutional arenas? More specifically, do their temporal sequencing and cross-arena alignment indicate bottom-up diffusion, top-down activation, reciprocal interaction, or parallel politicization?

To address this question, the study compares two communicative arenas in Romania between 2020 and 2024: protest-related media coverage, used as a proxy for extra-institutional contestation, and parliamentary plenary debates, representing institutional agenda-setting.

This design directly operationalizes the demand–supply debate. From a demand-induced perspective, populist politicization should originate in extra-institutional arenas, where grievances and moralized conflict frames first become salient, and only later diffuse into parliamentary discourse (Benczes and Szabó, 2022). From a supply-induced perspective, political elites should activate populist themes in parliament and subsequently shape protest-related discourse through framing and amplification (Hutter and Grande, 2014; Kenny, 2025). Interactionist approaches predict reciprocal reinforcement or ambient politicization, in which populist discourse becomes simultaneously present across arenas without stable temporal sequencing (Golder, 2016). All three perspectives implicitly assume a degree of temporal compatibility between civic and institutional politics. Yet this assumption itself has rarely been tested empirically.

Romania provides a suitable context for this test. As a post-accession EU member state, it combines strong legacies of civic mobilization with increasing parliamentary polarization and populist rhetoric (Gubernat and Rammelt, 2021; Bujdei-Tebeica, 2023; Crăciun and Țăranu, 2023; Gubernat and Mărgarit, 2025). Recurrent protest waves have established the street as a central arena of political contestation (Rammelt, 2018), while parliamentary politics has become progressively shaped by antagonistic narratives around sovereignty, legitimacy, and representation (Bujdei-Tebeica, 2024). Romania is therefore theoretically informative because it combines repeated protest mobilization and visible civic contention, which make demand-induced politicization plausible, with parliamentary polarization and elite use of sovereignist and anti-system rhetoric, which make supply-side institutionalization equally plausible. The case provides a demanding test of whether populist themes diffuse between civic and institutional arenas, become routinized within parliamentary communication, or persist in parallel without stable transmission.

Methodologically, the study adopts a longitudinal, frequency-based approach to discourse analysis. Instead of reconstructing full frames, it tracks the salience of selected populist themes that function as indicators of wider discursive fields. This strategy follows recent work showing that populist communication leaves stable lexical patterns that can be meaningfully analyzed across large corpora and over time (Lewandowsky et al., 2022; Erhard et al., 2024; McDonnell and Ondelli, 2024). It is specifically designed to capture differences in political tempo, rhythm, and responsiveness across arenas. By using identical operationalizations in both protest-related media and parliamentary debates, the design ensures cross-arena symmetry and enables direct comparison of temporal dynamics, rhythm, and responsiveness.

This paper makes two contributions. First, it offers a dynamic and cross-arena test of the demand–supply divide, responding to calls for stronger integration of these perspectives through temporal analysis (Golder, 2016). Second, it reconceptualizes populist politicization as a discursive process structured by the temporal circulation of a populist repertoire, linking research on populist communication with scholarship on the politicization of authority and sovereignty (Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Brusenbauch Meislová and Buckledee, 2021).

2 Existing scholarship

2.1 Demand- and supply-side dynamics and multi-arena populist politicization

Across different conceptual approaches to populism, an important debate concerns whether it is primarily demand-induced or supply-induced. Demand-side approaches emphasize the social, economic,

and psychological conditions that predispose citizens to support populist movements, whereas supply-side approaches highlight the strategic agency of political leaders and parties in mobilizing and shaping this demand. Both perspectives illuminate different dimensions of the populist phenomenon, yet they have rarely been integrated into a single empirical framework that captures their interaction across civic and institutional arenas (Benczes and Szabó, 2022; Kenny, 2025). From a demand-side perspective, populism is commonly interpreted as a reaction to perceived systemic failure and declining political representation. This aligns with findings that post-communist socio-economic transformations are frequently moralized in public discourse through themes such as corruption and resilience, providing an environment in which grievances become politically legible (Hilmar, 2022). The economic voting hypothesis further suggests that citizens experiencing deteriorating living conditions are more likely to support actors promising immediate protection and national economic sovereignty (Benczes and Szabó, 2022). Beyond material conditions, identity-based and psychological mechanisms play a crucial role. Populist attitudes tend to cluster among individuals located at ideological extremes, particularly on the right, where anxieties about migration, cultural change, and perceived loss of status are more salient (Bernhard and Hänggli, 2018). In the regional literature, intergroup tensions and nationalism are explicitly linked to the demand conditions under which anti-immigrant claims become politically resonant, while also emphasizing that such predispositions do not automatically translate into mobilization without political supply (Kende and Krekó, 2020). Demand-side accounts thus conceptualize populism as a bottom-up reaction to structural insecurity and identity threat; a mass-level expression of dissatisfaction with representative democracy (Piquet Carneiro, 2011). In this view, demand primarily concerns the availability and intensity of grievance reservoirs, while the translation of these reservoirs into mobilization depends on political supply and communicative activation. Applied to multi-arena politicization, this perspective implies that increases in civic salience should precede institutional attention: protest-related discourse would act as an early signal of grievances later taken up in parliament. The counterargument, however, is that even intense civic mobilization may fail to enter institutional debate if media visibility, party incentives, or parliamentary agendas do not provide a transmission mechanism.

Demand-side explanations on their own, then, struggle to account for the timing and unevenness of populist mobilization. This motivates supply-side approaches, which conceptualize populism as a strategic response to shifting political opportunities. Political entrepreneurs capitalize on latent discontent by offering moralized narratives and anti-establishment appeals that bypass traditional party mediation (Kenny, 2023, 2025). Rather than merely responding to demand, political actors actively organize heterogeneous grievances into coherent repertoires of blame, identity, and representation (Campolongo and Olivas Osuna, 2024). In contexts where mainstream parties are discredited or fragmented, populism becomes a cost-effective strategy for mobilization, particularly through direct communication and anti-establishment framing (Piquet Carneiro, 2011; Kenny, 2023). The ideational variant situates this strategy within a "thin-centered" ideological template that frames politics as a moral struggle between people and elite, while the political-strategic approach emphasizes leader-centric mobilization that sidelines institutional intermediaries (Kenny, 2025). It has also been argued that these elements do not operate uniformly but combine in varying configurations across contexts and arenas (Olivas Osuna, 2021; Pamies et al., 2024). Empirically, supply-side activation is often expressed through agenda-setting and rhetorical escalation, including fear-based appeals, danger framing, and emotionally charged antagonism as mobilizing resources (Macková et al., 2025). Related work on populist "crisis performance" suggests that political actors can radicalize Euroscepticism and illiberal positioning through recurring narratives of threat and successive crises, thereby intensifying contestation even when socio-economic conditions do not change abruptly (Sata, 2023). When populists govern, the maintenance of public support through short-term expansionary policies and protectionist measures further illustrates how supply-side strategies can stabilize demand under long-term inefficiencies (Benczes and Szabó, 2022). From this perspective, parliamentary discourse should not merely reflect civic pressure but may actively structure the terms through which grievances become politically intelligible. The counterargument is that elite discourse may still be reactive rather than autonomous, responding to protest waves, media attention, or external shocks rather than generating politicization independently.

A growing strand of scholarship points toward interactive models in which demand-side predispositions and supply-side strategies mutually reinforce one another (Mols and Jetten, 2020; Dunin-Wąsowicz et al., 2025). This interactionist view is consistent with research showing that mobilization opportunities and the reach of political communication are shaped by media environments and communication channels, which condition what kinds of grievances can be activated and with what intensity (Norocel and Szabó, 2019). Large-scale social media studies likewise document that populist and radical-right communication is shaped by platform dynamics and post-communist context, suggesting that "supply" is not reducible to party strategy alone but is also mediated by channel-specific affordances (Almodt, 2023). Yet empirical work still rarely models these relationships dynamically or compares how they play out across civic versus institutional arenas. The direction of influence between extra-institutional contestation and parliamentary discourse, whether bottom-up diffusion, top-down activation, or reciprocal reinforcement, therefore remains an open empirical question. Interactionist accounts would therefore expect either reciprocal sequencing or concurrent shifts across arenas. A competing possibility, however, is that arenas remain active but weakly synchronized, producing parallel rather than mutually reinforcing politicization.

This also requires distinguishing between movement-based and institutionalized forms of populism. Movement-based populism is embedded in mobilization, protest, and contentious claims-making, whereas institutionalized populism operates through parties, parliaments, governments, and routine political communication. The two forms may be connected, but they should not be assumed to follow a single sequence in which grassroots mobilization simply precedes institutional uptake or institutional discourse automatically generates civic resonance. Work on institutionalized populist communication similarly suggests that populism in power or within institutions may operate through its own performative and polarizing logic, with implications for democratic representation and legitimacy (Ruiz-Méndez, 2024). The present study therefore treats movement-based and institutional arenas as analytically distinct but empirically comparable sites of populist politicization.

The demand–supply divide also intersects with research on politicization, which conceptualizes contestation as revolving around authority, sovereignty, and legitimacy across multiple

arenas. European integration has served as a paradigmatic case for this literature, especially in analyses of the shift from "permissive consensus" to "constraining dissensus" (Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Kriesi, 2009; Koopmans and Zürn, 2019). Within this framework, populism is often understood as mobilizing sovereignty claims and people–elite antagonisms against supranational authority (Hutter and Grande, 2014; Brusenbauch Meislová and Buckledee, 2021). While these literatures already intersect in research on European integration, sovereignty conflicts, and transnational cleavages, less attention has been paid to the temporal circulation of populist themes across civic and institutional arenas. The remaining gap is therefore not whether populism and politicization are connected, but how populist themes move, align, or fail to align across arenas over time. This concern resonates with Hurrelmann et al.'s (2013) argument that politicization research often insufficiently distinguishes between the arenas in which politicization occurs. Politicization may therefore be politically visible yet socially weakly consolidated, depending on whether it remains concentrated in elite arenas or reaches broader publics. Building on this insight, the present study examines whether populist politicization circulates synchronously across arenas, follows stable sequencing patterns, or remains institutionally visible but socially weakly consolidated.

Building on this arena-sensitive understanding of politicization, the present study treats populist politicization as a specific discursive form of politicization rather than as a general measure of political conflict. It is operationalized through changes in the salience of core populist themes in protest-related media coverage and parliamentary debates. These competing expectations lead to three observable temporal patterns. If demand-side dynamics dominate, populist themes should become salient first in protest-related media coverage and only later in parliamentary debate. If supply-side dynamics dominate, populist themes should become salient first in parliamentary debate and only later in protest-related media coverage. If interactionist dynamics dominate, the two arenas should move concurrently or exhibit reciprocal sequencing. The hypotheses therefore translate the demand–supply debate into empirically observable patterns of temporal alignment, precedence, and decoupling across arenas.

H1 (demand-induced politicization):

Increases in the salience of populist themes in protest-related media coverage precede increases in their salience in parliamentary debates, indicating a bottom-up politicization dynamic (Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Benczes and Szabó, 2022).

H2 (supply-induced politicization):

Increases in the salience of populist themes in parliamentary debates precede increases in their salience in protest-related media coverage, indicating a top-down politicization dynamic (Kenny, 2023, 2025; Piquet Carneiro, 2011; Hutter and Grande, 2014; Grande and Hutter, 2016).

H3 (interactive or diffuse politicization):

The salience of populist themes fluctuates concurrently or without consistent sequencing across arenas, indicating reciprocal reinforcement or an ambient politicization dynamic (Hurrelmann et al., 2013; Mols and Jetten, 2020).

In the empirical analysis, "populist themes" refer to the operationalizable discursive dimensions specified in Sections 2.2–2.3. EU/sovereignty-related contestation and democracy-related claims are treated as core components of this broader repertoire through which politicization is articulated.

2.2 Populist discourse

Whereas the previous section focuses on whether politicization is initiated bottom-up, top-down, or interactively across civic and institutional arenas, this section specifies the discursive repertoire through which such contestation becomes linguistically visible and comparable across arenas.

We focus on discourse-analytical and communication-oriented approaches that treat populism as an empirically observable repertoire of political language. The aim here is not to reconstruct the formal logic through which political subjects are constituted, but to identify recurrent thematic dimensions through which populist contestation becomes linguistically visible across arenas. Discourse-analytical approaches treat populism not only as ideology or strategy but as a repertoire of linguistic practices used to construct identities, assign blame, and redefine legitimacy (Wodak, 2018, 2019, 2025). In this literature, populist communication is associated with emotionalization, polarization, and the normalization of antagonistic framings over time (Wodak, 2015, 2019). In Eastern Europe, these dynamics are situated in trajectories of delayed democratization, contested statehood, and ambivalent Europeanization, where nationalism functions as a "host" ideology that provides content to the people–elite antagonism (Pirro, 2014; Enyedi, 2016). "The people" are frequently constructed as culturally homogeneous, historically rooted, and territorially bounded (Kajsiu, 2023), including through geopolitical narratives of heartland or civilization opposed to an external liberal or Western order (Sadecki, 2022). Similar analyses show that in parts of Central and Eastern Europe, attitudes toward Europe are embedded in historically layered geopolitical orientations rather than purely programmatic EU positions (Otova, 2025). These constructions draw on historical narration and memory politics, including selective accounts of suffering, resistance, or continuity (Hronešová, 2022).

Across studies, the defining feature remains the moral division between "the people" and "the elite," operationalized through anti-elitist framing, betrayal accusations, and enemy construction (Kajsiu, 2023; Macková et al., 2025). Within this repertoire, elites are portrayed as corrupt or treacherous and the people as collectively wronged (Pirro, 2014; Norocel and Szabó, 2019). A further specification concerns the people-as-in-group: "the people" can be defined primarily through opposition to elites and enemies rather than through a positive program (Kajsiu, 2023). Anti-elitism therefore appears as both a rhetorical device and a mechanism of mobilization (Almodt, 2023; Macková et al., 2025). This antagonism is often combined with ethnic or cultural "othering," producing compound frames that link anti-elitism with xenophobia or exclusionary nationalism (Norocel and Szabó, 2019). Minorities, migrants, and supranational actors can be positioned as internal or external enemies undermining cohesion (Linnamäki, 2024). Immigration is a stable pillar of this exclusionary repertoire. Anti-immigration narratives depict migrants as economic, cultural, or security threats (Linnamäki, 2024) and can be linked to welfare chauvinism (Cinpoeş and Norocel, 2020). Migration discourse also supports elite-blame, constructing migrants as symbols of elite irresponsibility and as competitors for scarce resources (Kende and

Krekó, 2020; Hilmar, 2022). Sovereignty is another recurrent organizing principle, frequently conceptualized through the merging of national sovereignty and popular sovereignty (Brusenbauch Meislová and Buckledee, 2021). In this discourse, supranational institutions, notably the EU, are framed as illegitimate constraints on democratic self-rule (Brusenbauch Meislová and Buckledee, 2021), including through depictions of the EU as undermining traditions, imposing foreign values, or weakening autonomy (Riishøj, 2007; Mach, 2022; Sata, 2023). Crisis rhetoric is frequently described as dramatizing conditions and presenting the nation as under existential threat (Macková et al., 2025), including cumulative narratives that link multiple crises into a condition of permanent danger (Sata, 2023). Victimhood narratives can reinforce crisis framings by portraying the nation as historically wronged and by mobilizing trauma or hardship for contemporary legitimacy claims (Hronešová, 2022; Lipiński and Szabo, 2023). Finally, populist communication is treated as context-sensitive: it adapts to institutional and media environments while maintaining recognizable antagonistic structures (Norocel and Szabó, 2019; Almodt, 2023). Social media can amplify emotional and polarizing language, while parliamentary arenas can routinize populist framings through repeated references to sovereignty, crisis, and elite betrayal (Macková et al., 2025).

Taken together, research points to stable discursive dimensions structuring populist communication in post-communist Europe: (1) people-centrism and in-group construction (Abellan, 2025; Zehnter, 2026); (2) anti-elitism and anti-system rhetoric (Pirro, 2014; Kajsiu, 2023); (3) immigration and exclusionary nationalism (Linnamäki, 2024; Cinpoeș and Norocel, 2020); (4) sovereignty and EU antagonism (Brusenbauch Meislová and Buckledee, 2021); and (5) crisis, threat, abuse, and victimhood rhetoric (Sata, 2023; Hronešová, 2022; Macková et al., 2025). While people-centrism and anti-elitism are closely intertwined in much of the literature, they are treated separately here in order to capture their potentially distinct temporal dynamics across civic and institutional arenas. These dimensions are suited to frequency-based operationalization because they rely on recurrent lexical fields (people/elites, migrants/outsiders, sovereignty/Europe, crisis/threat) that are identifiable and comparable across parliamentary and protest-related discourse. This makes them particularly appropriate for tracing the temporal circulation and cross-arena alignment of populist themes.

2.3 From discourse to measurement: operationalizing populist themes

A key problem in populism research is translating conceptual definitions into indicators that are comparable across arenas and scalable over time. Recent work therefore emphasizes detecting populist elements in large corpora, such as parliamentary speeches, party documents, campaign material, or social media, through computational approaches, dictionary strategies, and supervised classification (Debus and Florczak, 2022; Lewandowsky et al., 2022; Erhard et al., 2024). This shift is relevant for cross-arena designs (civic vs. institutional), and for comparisons across communicative venues, because it forces explicit choices about which discursive dimensions are stable and lexically recognizable.

Empirical research indicates that populist communication leaves detectable linguistic "footprints" that can be identified across different communicative venues. Multi-label transformer approaches detect core populist themes and "ideological thickening" in parliamentary corpora (Erhard et al., 2024), while quantitative scaling methods map distinctive populist language in plenary debates and institutional responses to populist challengers (Lewandowsky et al., 2022). Longitudinal analyses further show that these elements remain identifiable even as their configuration changes over time (Holt et al., 2025). Beyond parliament, keyness and concordance analyses distinguish populist vocabularies across countries and contexts (McDonnell and Ondelli, 2024).

At the same time, operationalization must remain sensitive to venue and channel; social media research, for instance, shows how populist narratives are reshaped by platform dynamics (Rivas-de-Roca et al., 2022; Acampa and Nunziata, 2024).

Given these constraints, this study selects five discursive dimensions that are (a) theoretically central to populist communication, (b) empirically stable across arenas, and (c) associated with lexical markers that allow systematic longitudinal tracking (McDonnell and Ondelli, 2024).

(1) People-centrism and in-group construction. Cross-national electoral discourse research examines how "people," "elite," and "others" are constructed in radical right communication (Rodi et al., 2023). Manifesto research indicates that in-group references can be constructed indirectly through negative depictions of out-groups (Zehnter, 2026). Proximity and affective strategies can also perform belonging and identification with "the people" (Abellan, 2025). Frequency measures can approximate this dimension through people-as-in-group references and synonyms (popor, oameni, cetățeni, români).

(2) Anti-elitism and anti-system rhetoric. Moralizing people–elite antagonism is detectable in parliamentary speech through computational classification (Erhard et al., 2024). Comparative vocabulary analysis distinguishes populist leaders through recurrent people-versus-elite patterns (McDonnell and Ondelli, 2024). Parliamentary dynamics studies also capture institutional competition and responses to populist challengers (Lewandowsky et al., 2022). Lexical markers such as sistem, elită, corupți, politicieni provide a tractable dictionary for identifying moralized people–elite antagonism.

(3) Immigration, nativism, and exclusionary othering. Long-horizon media research links immigration discourse to exclusion and alarmist rhetoric (Hovden and Mjelde, 2019). Linguistic work identifies derogatory speech acts in migration debates and on social media (Dufferain-Ottmann, 2023). Lexical markers such as imigranți, refugiați, migranți, străini are therefore suitable for frequency tracking.

(4) Sovereigntism and EU-related antagonism. Sovereignty is traced through rights-based claims linked to exclusionary nationalism and through EU-election rhetoric combining Euroscepticism with alarmist anti-establishment messaging (Miklin, 2024). European parliamentary research distinguishes competing "visions of Europe," including ethno-religious and civilizational framings (Beaudonnet and Hoyo Prohuber, 2023). Lexical markers (suveranitate, Bruxelles/UE, globaliști) allow operationalization in both arenas.

(5) Threat, crisis, and abuse. The broader literature often links crisis rhetoric to fear, abuse, and victimhood narratives. Parliamentary discourse analysis, for instance, identifies fear and anger in populist threat construction (Zykaj et al., 2025). Party-document research conceptualizes resentment as

measurable across variants (Damhuis and Rashkova, 2024), and campaign-focused social media analyses identify victimist and dehumanizing rhetoric patterns (Pérez-Escolar et al., 2025). Discourse-analytical accounts also emphasize conspiracy tropes and the normalization of antagonism as central components of crisis framing (Wodak, 2019). In this study, however, the operationalization captures the more lexically stable subset of this field: references to exceptional threat, institutional abuse, dictatorship, and emergency. We therefore treat this dimension as an indicator of crisis/threat and abuse framing, rather than as a full measure of victimhood discourse. Frequency-based proxies rely on markers such as criză, pericol, amenințare, dictatură, abuz.

These themes balance conceptual centrality with empirical tractability and align with frequency-based measurement across parliamentary debates and protest-related reporting (Erhard et al., 2024; Acampa and Nunziata, 2024; McDonnell and Ondelli, 2024). Retaining Europe-related discourse within the sovereigntism dimension also preserves the link to politicization research, treating "Europe" as part of a broader populist repertoire rather than a stand-alone indicator (Beaudonnet and Hoyo Prohuber, 2023; Miklin, 2024) and allows its temporal diffusion to be analyzed as part of a broader populist repertoire.

3 Data and method

This study combines two complementary corpora, media coverage of protest events and transcripts of parliamentary plenary debates, to examine the temporal circulation of populist politicization in Romania between 2020 and 2024. To address the research questions, we employ a multi-layered analytical design that moves from descriptive salience to temporal sequencing and structural coherence.

First, we apply longitudinal frequency mapping to both datasets in order to visualize whether both arenas react synchronously or exhibit concurrent fluctuations that would indicate an ambient or interactive dynamic.

To test H1 and H2 directly, we apply Granger causality tests within a bivariate Vector Autoregression (VAR) framework across the full 60-month period. This approach assesses whether lagged values of one arena's monthly populism rate systematically predict the other arena's rate once its own autocorrelation structure is controlled for, providing a suitable formal test for temporal precedence in observational time-series data. The lead–lag event snapshots are therefore retained not as the primary method for adjudicating directionality, but as illustrative complements to the VAR results. To reduce the risk that these snapshots reflect selective period choice, we examine six event windows: three theoretically motivated windows in which cross-arena transmission should be most visible, and three negative test windows—March 2022, April 2023, and April 2024 — characterized by low protest activity during active parliamentary sessions and no proximate major political events. The negative windows are expected to show baseline levels in both arenas and no cross-arena coupling, providing a within-sample falsification check for the event-window interpretation.

Finally, we employ a thematic overlap matrix based on Pearson correlations to test the internal logic of the populist repertoire. This allows us to examine whether politicization is structurally consolidated or merely episodic within each arena. A professionalized institutional repertoire would manifest as strong positive correlations between themes in parliamentary discourse, reflecting stable thematic bundling. By contrast, near-zero or negative correlations in the civic arena would indicate fragmented or weakly bundled contentious politicization. Together, these three steps allow us to assess what becomes salient, whether one arena precedes the other, and how populist themes are internally structured.

3.1 Sampling

To capture civic-arena discourse, the study employs a modified Protest Event Analysis (PEA) approach inspired by the PAPEA pipeline (Haunss et al., 2025), adapted to the Romanian and Moldovan media environments. Conventional PEA pipelines are typically optimized for Western data infrastructures and require substantial linguistic and contextual adjustments in post-communist settings, which are characterized by fragmented digital archives, heterogeneous journalistic practices, and weaker standardization of event descriptors.

Data collection yielded an initial harvest of 17,630 articles. The protest corpus was filtered in two stages to ensure thematic and geographic precision. Geographic filtering excluded articles reporting on non-Romanian protests, using an expanded foreign entity detection procedure checking article titles and the first 600 characters against a list of 40 + foreign location and political actor markers. Topical filtering removed cases where protest language appeared in metaphorical, cultural, or non-political contexts, retaining only articles containing active protest vocabulary alongside markers of socio-political contention (collective claims, public assembly, contentious interaction with authorities). After filtering, 9,089 articles were retained for analysis, covering January 2020 through December 2024 (60 months). Validation against a 100-article human-coded reference sample confirmed that 90% of out-of-scope documents are correctly excluded by the automated procedure, with five borderline cases requiring semantic judgment—an acceptable residual for a corpus of this scale.

The institutional-arena corpus consists of plenary debate transcripts from the Romanian Parliament covering December 2020 through November 2024. The complete raw dataset comprises 65,558 individual interventions. To isolate substantive debate contributions, the corpus was filtered to retain only interventions classified as substantive speech (excluding procedural, formulaic, and acknowledgment interventions) with a minimum of 50 words. This yields 23,428 substantive interventions for analysis. Both datasets were aggregated to monthly frequency counts of populist discourse, enabling direct temporal comparison across arenas.

3.2 Operationalization of populist themes

To operationalize populist discourse across both corpora, the study employs an expanded dictionary of 65 lexical anchors across five thematic dimensions (Table 1). Anchors were selected through a three-stage procedure. First, a candidate pool was assembled from Romanian-language populist vocabulary documented in the theoretical literature, yielding approximately 120 candidate terms. Second, all candidates were checked against raw corpus frequencies in both corpora; terms appearing fewer than 10 times were excluded as too rare to contribute to temporal trends, and high-frequency generic terms were flagged for semantic review. Third, generic anchors prone to false positives were retained but restricted through co-occurrence window

TABLE 1 Populist themes and lexical anchors.

Theme	Romanian lexical anchors	Discursive function
People-centrism	*popor*, *poporul*, *cetățeni*, *români* [+ moralization window]	Constructing "the people" as a unified, morally wronged subject
Anti-elitism	*sistem*, *corupți*, *corupție*, *hoți*, *trădători*, *penali*	Moralized blame against the political establishment
Immigration	*imigranți*, *migranți*, *refugiați*, *străini*, *minoritari* [+ threat window]	Constructing external others as threats to national cohesion
Sovereigntism	*suveranitate*, *Bruxelles*, *globaliști*, *interese străine* [UE/NATO + antagonism window]	Framing authority as captured by illegitimate external actors
Crisis, threat and abuse	*dictatura*, *abuz*, *abuzuri*, *pericol*, *amenințare*, *stat polițienesc*	Framing political conditions as exceptional, abusive, or threatening.

matching—counted only when appearing within a specified word window of a contextual marker confirming populist usage. For example, *romani*, *oameni*, and *cetățeni* are counted only when proximate to moralization markers (e.g., *trădat*, *dreptate*, *voința*); *UE* and *NATO* are counted only when proximate to antagonism markers (e.g., *impune*, *dictează*, *împotriva*). High-specificity anchors such as *globaliști*, *trădători*, and *dictatura* are counted without restriction.

The five thematic dimensions operationalized here are drawn from the literature on right-wing and radical-right populist communication in post-communist Europe. The analysis does not claim to capture left-wing populist repertoires, which mobilize different rhetorical fields.

Beyond individual theme scoring, the analysis employs a holistic populism measure as its primary analytical variable. A document is classified as populist only when it satisfies at least one of three co-occurrence conditions: Path A requires people-centrism and anti-elitism to co-occur (the definitional core following thin-centred ideology approaches); Path B requires anti-elitism combined with sovereigntism or crisis framing, capturing cases where the people are implicitly constructed through antagonistic structure; Path C requires sovereigntism and crisis framing to co-occur at elevated counts in clearly antagonistic framing. The monthly rate of documents meeting these criteria—populist_doc_pct—is the primary variable in the time-series analysis.

To validate this approach, a 200-document stratified validation sample was coded independently by both authors using a written codebook specifying construct definitions, coding rules, and positive and negative examples for each theme. Inter-coder reliability on the holistic *is_populist* measure after a calibration session: $\kappa = 1.000$, with both coders independently identifying the same 19 documents as populist across 152 in-scope documents (48 documents were flagged as out-of-scope and excluded from reliability calculations). Theme-level κ values range from 0.245 (Theme 5, crisis/threat) to 0.617 (Theme 1, people-centrism), reflecting the inherent difficulty of delimiting individual discursive dimensions in dense political text. These theme-level statistics inform descriptive analysis only; the time-series uses the holistic measure exclusively. Dictionary-vs-human comparison shows recall = 0.929 (the dictionary captures virtually all documents human coders classify as populist) and precision = 0.206, reflecting the known structural gap between token-counting and holistic judgment. For a frequency-based temporal measure, high recall is the appropriate design priority: the goal is to detect when populist language becomes salient, not to classify individual documents. Monthly aggregation smooths the effect of individual false positives.

3.3 Methodological limitations

While the longitudinal and cross-arena design of this study provides a robust test of the demand–supply nexus, several methodological constraints must be acknowledged. These limitations stem from the choices made regarding data proxying, dictionary-based operationalization, and the structural differences between institutional and media temporalities.

First, the use of protest-related media coverage as a proxy for the civic arena introduces a layer of journalistic mediation. As the analysis identifies an "episodic" and "spike-driven" pattern in the news (Figure 1), it is possible that this volatility reflects newsroom cycles and media salience rather than the actual duration or intensity of street-level mobilization. Consequently, what the study measures is not "public opinion" in a raw state, but "contested politicization" as it enters the public sphere through media filters. This mediation may partially explain the "contentious time" observed in the findings, where civic discourse appears more fragmented and reactive compared to the routinized "institutional time" of parliament.

Second, the dictionary-based strategy, while ensuring replicability and cross-arena symmetry, inherently privileges lexical frequency over deep semantic nuances. While the expanded dictionary substantially improves recall relative to the original design (0.929 vs. 0.55), dictionary-based approaches may miss populist expressions that avoid the anchored vocabulary. The known precision-recall trade-off—precision = 0.206, recall = 0.929—reflects a deliberate design priority: for a frequency-based temporal measure, detecting when populist language becomes salient matters more than classifying every individual document correctly. Monthly aggregation smooths the effect of individual false positives.

Third, the disjunction between datasets in terms of volume (23,428 parliamentary interventions versus 9,089 protest articles) required extensive normalization. While normalization to frequency per 10,000 words mitigates this imbalance, the sheer density of the parliamentary corpus means that even small fluctuations in elite discourse represent a much larger absolute volume of communication than similar spikes in the protest arena. This structural difference may contribute to the finding that parliament is a site of "thick" and "bundled" discourse, whereas news themes appear as loosely connected thematic elements. The high correlation of themes in parliament (e.g., *Anti-elitism* ↔ *Crisis*, r = 0.71) might be intensified by the professionalized and programmatic nature of institutional speech compared to the event-driven brevity of news reports.

Finally, the temporal scope (2020–2024) and the single-country focus on Romania limit the generalizability of the "parallel politicization" model. Romania's specific post-accession context, marked

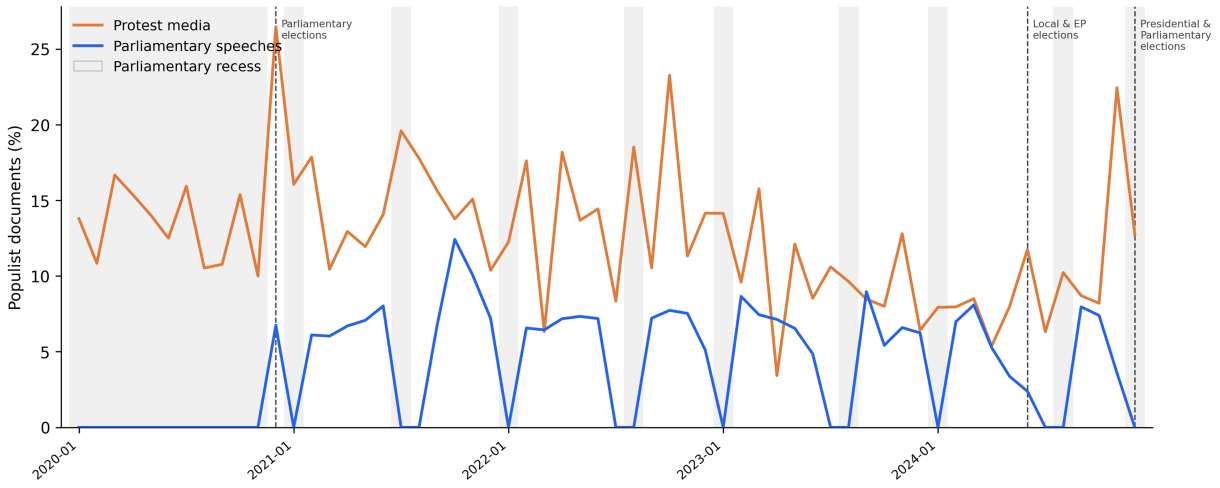


FIGURE 1
Monthly populist discourse rates in protest media and parliamentary debates, Romania 2020–2024. Shaded areas indicate parliamentary recess periods. Vertical dashed lines mark elections (December 2020, June 2024, and November 2024).

by low social trust and high institutional insulation, likely shapes the observed lack of a "transmission belt" between the street and the legislature. As the paper concludes, future research must determine if these "asynchronous temporalities" are a unique feature of the Romanian case or a broader characteristic of contemporary populist politicization in other peripheral or post-communist EU democracies.

4 Findings

Figure 1 presents monthly populist discourse rates for both corpora across the 60-month study period. Romania has experienced several recurrent protest waves in the preceding decade (Gubernat and Rammelt, 2021; Rammelt, 2018); the 2020–2024 window captures a period of increasing parliamentary polarization alongside sustained civic mobilization (Gubernat and Mărgarit, 2025), making it theoretically suitable for testing competing demand-side, supply-side, and interactive expectations. Both series show meaningful variation over time. Protest media populism peaks sharply around the November 2024 presidential election cycle and during the 2021–2022 anti-government period. Parliamentary populism follows a different rhythm, structured by legislative session cycles, with elevated readings in late 2020, late 2022, and the 2024 electoral cluster. The two series are visually asynchronous: parliamentary peaks do not immediately follow protest peaks, and vice versa, providing a first descriptive indication of temporal decoupling.

Figures 2 and 3 disaggregate this pattern by theme. News discourse shows higher volatility and sharper spikes than parliamentary discourse, especially around crisis framing, people-centrism, and isolated immigration-related surges. Parliamentary discourse, by contrast, remains comparatively stable and strongly shaped by the institutional calendar. The standardized thematic intensity plot further shows that even when protest salience peaks, parliamentary discourse may remain silent or move according to legislative time. These patterns provide descriptive support for the parallel politicization argument: similar repertoires appear across arenas, but without consistent sequencing or stable coupling.

While the descriptive time-series reveals distinct arena-specific temporalities, visual inspection alone cannot adjudicate the directional precedence required by H1 and H2. To test whether populist discourse in one arena systematically predicts developments in the other, we employ Granger causality tests within a bivariate VAR framework, as described in Section 3.

4.1 Granger causality and VAR results

Prior to estimation, both monthly series were tested for stationarity using augmented Dickey-Fuller and KPSS tests. Both series were first-differenced for analysis. Optimal lag length was selected by AIC across models with 1–6 lags, yielding VAR(4) as the preferred specification ($n = 55$, AIC = 5.746).

Granger causality F-tests find no significant predictive relationship in either direction. Lagged protest populism rates do not significantly predict parliamentary populism rates (H1: $F(4,46) = 1.67$, $p = 0.172$), and lagged parliamentary populism rates do not significantly predict protest populism rates (H2: $F(4,46) = 0.45$, $p = 0.773$). One individual coefficient warrants mention for transparency: the lag-4 protest coefficient in the parliament equation reaches t = 1.99 ($p = 0.047$), which is marginally significant in isolation. However, Granger causality requires joint significance of all lagged terms, and the joint F-test is clearly non-significant ($p = 0.172$); this marginal result should not be over-interpreted given the multiple comparisons inherent in examining lagged coefficients.

These results are robust to the inclusion of electoral calendar controls (dummies for election months: December 2020, June 2024, and November 2024) and parliamentary session indicators; neither direction achieves significance under the controlled specification. Within-arena autocorrelation is strong in both series—parliamentary populism is strongly predicted by its own lags, and protest populism exhibits negative first-order autocorrelation consistent with monthly reversion dynamics in media framing—but neither series is systematically predicted by the other.

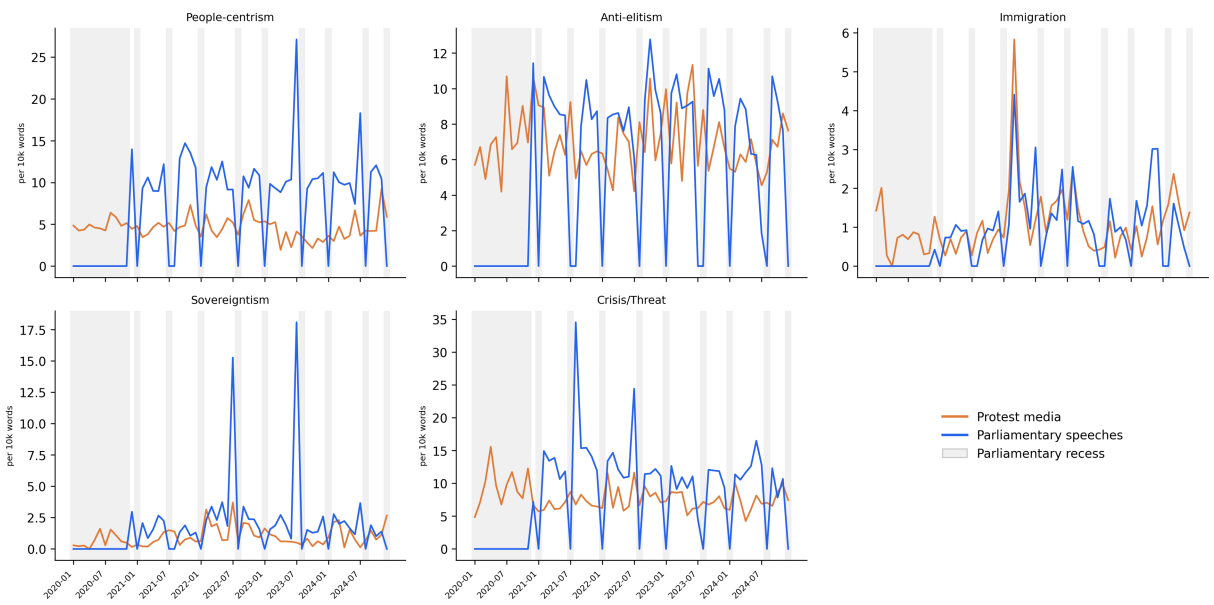


FIGURE 2
Thematic salience in parliamentary vs. protest media discourse (2020–2024).

To illustrate the temporal patterns identified by the VAR analysis, and to provide within-sample falsification checks as required by the review process, we examine six 5-month event windows: three theoretically motivated windows and three negative test windows selected for being theoretically uninformative (low protest activity during active parliamentary sessions, no proximate political events).

Figure 4 presents six 5-month event windows examined as illustrative complements to the Granger results. The November 2021 window captures a period of elevated parliamentary engagement with Anti-elitism and Sovereigntism—likely driven by internal coalition shifts and EU policy cycles—while the protest arena remained relatively dormant, consistent with the structural autonomy of parliamentary discourse. The September 2023 window documents a peak in protest-related Immigration salience that coincides with a scheduled parliamentary recess, illustrating how the institutional calendar itself can block any potential civic-to-parliamentary transmission. The June 2024 window captures a rise in protest media populism across the local and European Parliament campaign, from roughly 5.4% in April to 11.8% in June, met by a monotonic decline in parliamentary attention over the same months, from 5.3% to 2.4%, while parliament was still in session. Even a substantial civic salience surge, occurring during an active parliamentary session, fails to register in institutional discourse.

The negative test windows (April 2023, April 2024, and March 2022) display the expected null pattern, both series at baseline, no cross-arena coupling, confirming that the asynchrony observed in the event windows is not an artifact of period selection.

Together, these snapshots demonstrate that the problem is not the absence of civic politicization, but the absence of an effective transmission mechanism between civic and institutional arenas.

Although the Granger results document the absence of cross-arena temporal precedence, they do not illuminate the internal discursive logic that allows populist themes to persist within each arena. To examine the internal discursive structure of populist communication in each arena, we apply a thematic overlap matrix based on Pearson correlations. This step is necessary to determine if populist themes function as a professionally bundled institutional repertoire or as fragmented, weakly bundled thematic elements in the contentious arena. Figures 5, 6 report the results of the thematic co-occurrence analysis and reveal two fundamentally different modes of communication.

In the parliamentary arena, themes display predominantly strong positive correlations, as can be seen in Figure 6. People-centrism co-occurs closely with Anti-elitism (r = 0.71), Crisis/Threat (r = 0.58), and Sovereigntism (r = 0.63); Anti-elitism co-occurs with Crisis/Threat (r = 0.65) and Immigration (r = 0.62). One notable exception is the Anti-elitism ↔ Sovereigntism pair (r = 0.18, $p = 0.176$), which falls below significance, suggesting that while most populist themes travel together in parliamentary discourse, sovereigntist framing retains some independence from direct anti-elite attacks. Overall, this pattern confirms that Romanian parliamentary discourse employs a thick, professionalized populist repertoire in which people-centrism, crisis, and anti-elitism are assembled into a cohesive and programmatic package.

In contrast, the protest-related arena exhibits a more fragmented thematic structure (Figure 5). Anti-elitism is largely decoupled from the other themes, showing near-zero or negative correlations across the board (Anti-elitism ↔ Immigration: r = −0.17; Anti-elitism ↔ Sovereigntism: r = −0.16; Anti-elitism ↔ Crisis/Threat: r = −0.07; Anti-elitism ↔ People-centrism: r = 0.12). A partial Sovereigntism cluster is detectable—People-centrism co-occurs with Sovereigntism (r = 0.35) and Crisis/Threat (r = 0.31), and Sovereigntism co-occurs with Crisis/Threat (r = 0.30) — but this cluster is structurally weaker and less encompassing than the parliamentary pattern. Immigration ↔ People-centrism, which was previously reported as negative, is now near-zero (r = 0.04). The overall picture is one of partial and uneven thematic coupling: civic discourse does not entirely lack internal structure, but its assemblage is episodic and restricted rather than the professionally bundled repertoire observed in parliament.

H1: Demand-Induced Politicization (Bottom-Up).

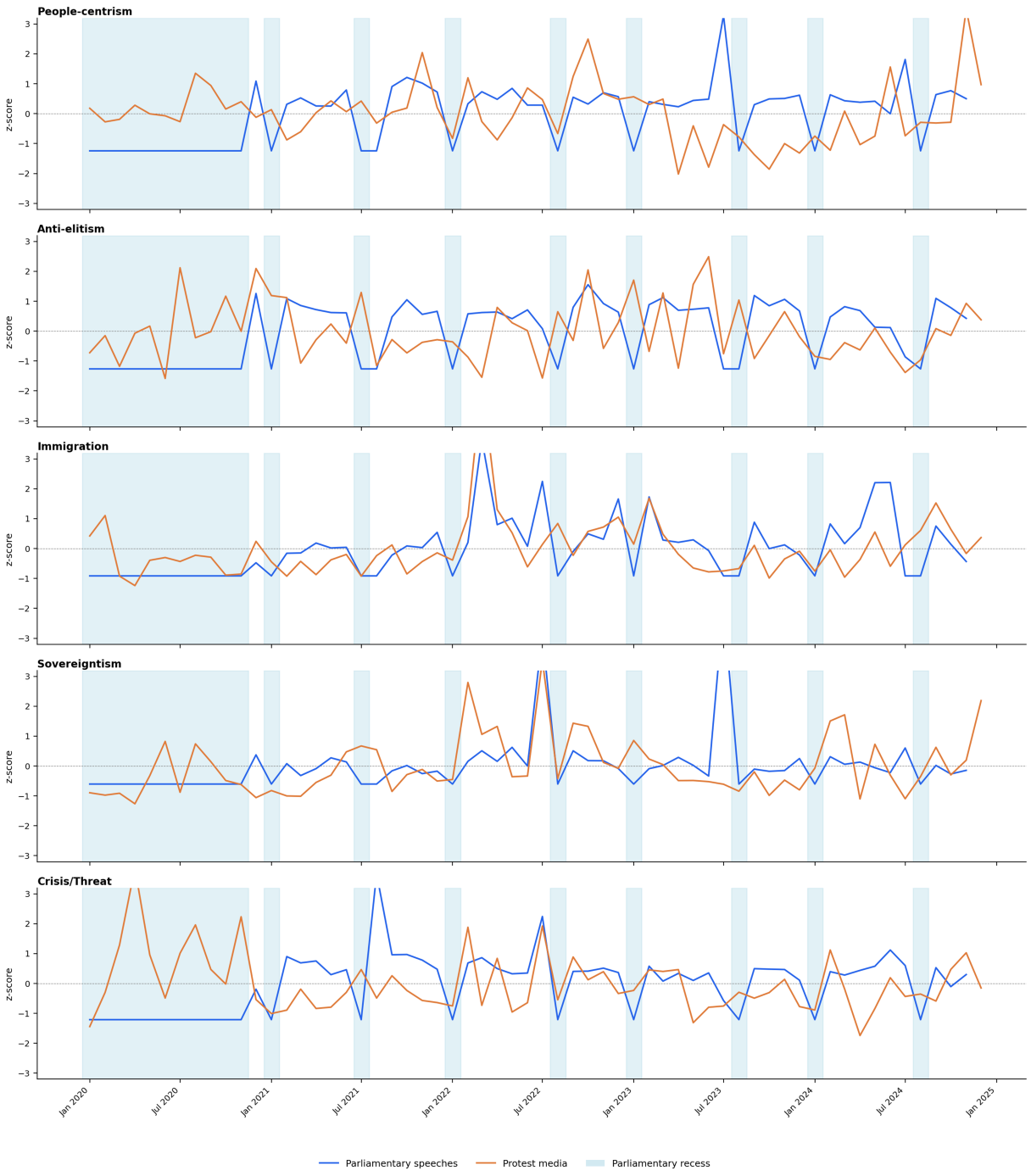


FIGURE 3
Standardized thematic intensity by arena (2020–2024).

This hypothesis predicted that increases in the salience of populist themes in protest-related media would precede increases in their salience in parliamentary debates. The empirical evidence provides a basis for rejecting this hypothesis. While the protest-related corpus captures significant "bursts" of activity, such as the massive news spikes in People-centrism in mid-2021 and early 2024 (Figures 2, 3), these surges do not trigger a subsequent rise in institutional attention. Instead, formal Granger causality tests find no significant predictive relationship from protest to parliament ($F(4,46) = 1.67$, $p = 0.172$), confirming that civic salience surges do not systematically translate into parliamentary attention. H1 is rejected not because civic politicization is weak, but because it remains institutionally untranslated.

H2: Supply-Induced Politicization (Top-Down).

This hypothesis posited that political elites act as primary agenda-setters, activating populist themes in parliament independently of, or ahead of, civic mobilization. The Granger test finds no significant top-down predictive relationship

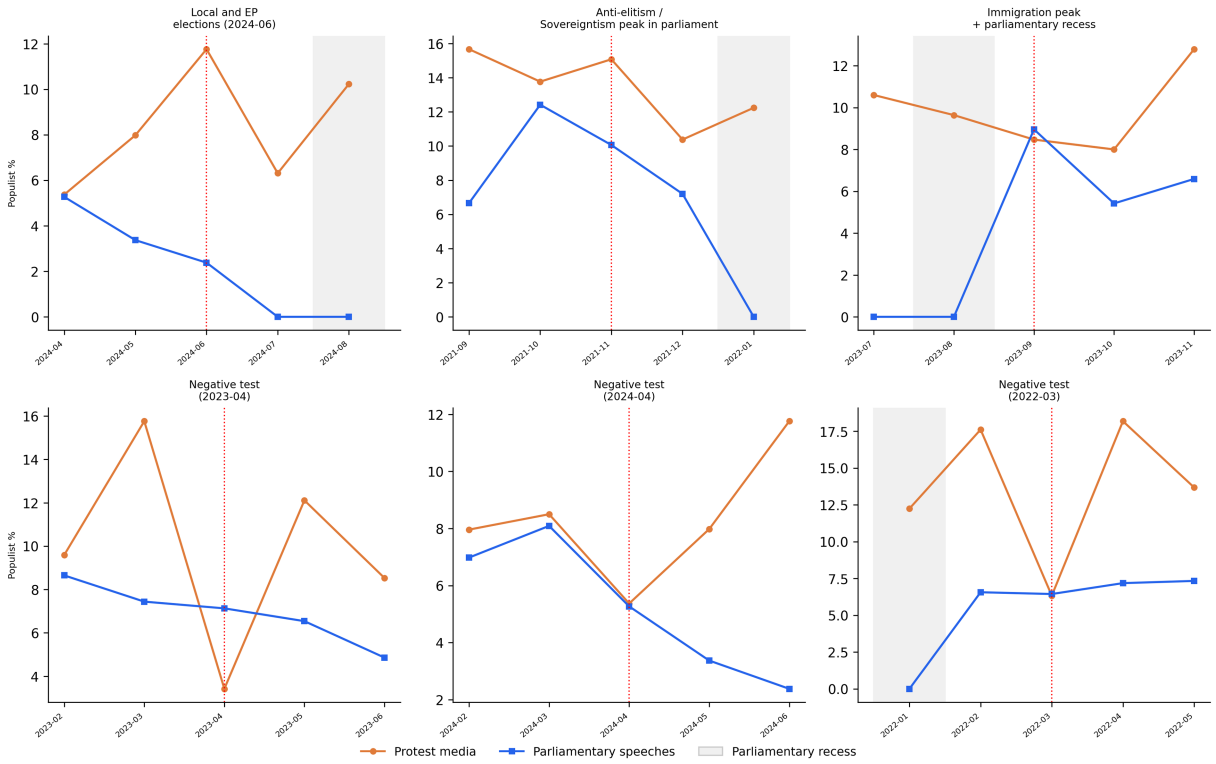


FIGURE 4
Six-panel event snapshots: three theoretically motivated windows (November 2021, September 2023, and June 2024) and three negative test windows (March 2022, April 2023, and April 2024).

($F(4,46) = 0.45$, $p = 0.773$), meaning parliamentary salience does not systematically precede protest salience. H2 is therefore not confirmed in its directional form. The structural characteristics of parliamentary discourse — thematic bundling, session-bound rhythm, and internal coherence independent of protest dynamics — nevertheless indicate institutional autonomy rather than supply-side causal primacy: parliament operates according to its own logic without demonstrably driving civic discourse.

> *H3*: Interactive or Diffuse Politicization.

H3 suggested a reciprocal reinforcement dynamic where populist themes would fluctuate concurrently across both arenas. While there are isolated moments of overlap, such as the shared salience of Sovereigntism in early 2021, the overall findings point toward parallel politicization rather than synchronized interaction. The sharp contrast in thematic assembly, where parliamentary themes are highly correlated but protest themes are fragmented, including near-zero or negative correlations involving anti-elitism, suggests that the two spheres operate according to distinct logics. The same populist themes may circulate in both arenas, but they are weakly coupled and assembled differently. Rather than reciprocal reinforcement, the data point to parallel but autonomous politicization processes operating under distinct temporal and semantic logics.

Overall, the findings support neither H1 nor H2 in their directional forms. The bilateral absence of Granger causality, combined with the structural asynchrony between arenas, supports H3 in its parallel politicization variant: two simultaneously active but temporally and semantically decoupled arenas, each operating according to its own internal logic.

5 Discussion of findings

By tracing the temporal sequencing of five populist themes as frequency-based indicators of populist politicization, the study set out to test whether it is primarily demand-induced, supply-induced, or diffuse. The findings indicate a pattern of parallel politicization: populist discourse is routinized within parliamentary communication but only episodically activated in protest-related communication. Rather than a top-down dynamic, the arenas operate according to different temporal and discursive logics, producing sustained institutional politicization without consistent civic resonance.

From the perspective of the classic demand–supply divide in populism research, these results complicate linear models of political influence. Demand-side theories expect surges in civic salience to precede subsequent parliamentary attention to the same themes. Yet the longitudinal frequency series and Granger causality tests provide no consistent evidence of this pattern (protest → parliament: $F(4,46) = 1.67$, $p = 0.172$). Protest-related mentions fluctuate irregularly around short-lived grievances, while parliamentary discourse follows a relatively stable, session-bound rhythm. Rather than operating as a "transmission belt," civic bursts are frequently met with institutional flatlining or decline, undermining the expectation of bottom-up diffusion.

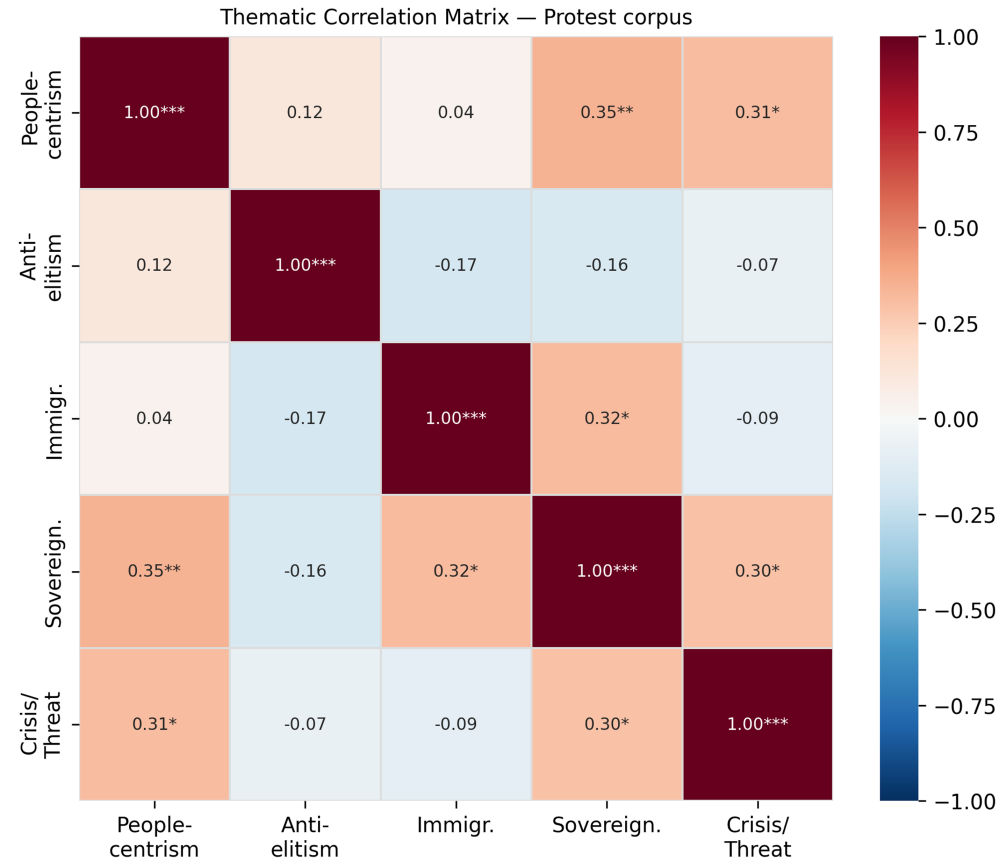


FIGURE 5
Thematic overlap matrix—protest media (monthly correlations).

At the same time, the absence of a demand-led sequence does not imply simple elite manipulation or unilateral control. Instead, it points to a structural disconnection between arenas and a lack of resonance between the temporalities and repertoires of civic and institutional politics. Protest communication, embedded in affective and reactive modes of mobilization, operates on what can be described as contentious time: short, intense bursts of salience around concrete events or grievances. Parliamentary communication follows institutional time: cyclical, bureaucratic, and embedded in legislative procedures and policy agendas. Because these rhythms are asynchronous, the two spheres rarely align. What emerges is not unidirectional causality but a pattern of arena-specific politicization, in which each arena produces and reproduces meaning according to its own internal logic. In this sense, politicization persists "in parallel": sustained as an institutional repertoire on the one hand and activated as episodic contentious signaling on the other. We refer to this configuration as parallel politicization: a condition in which civic and institutional arenas remain simultaneously active but weakly synchronized in both timing and meaning.

The internal composition of populist discourse further clarifies this separation. In parliament, most populist themes display strong positive correlations, indicating a relatively cohesive institutional repertoire, even though anti-elitism and sovereigntism are not strongly correlated with each other. Parliamentary discourse bundles people-centrism, crisis framing, sovereignty, and elite-betrayal narratives into a routinized discursive package. This resonates with Wodak's (2019, 2025) argument that populism becomes powerful when normalized and embedded in routine political communication. By contrast, protest-related communication activates similar elements only episodically and without stable thematic consolidation. The contrast is therefore not merely one of intensity. It points to qualitatively different forms of populist communication: institutional populism is more coherent, durable, and routinely assembled, while protest-related populism remains more fragmented, event-contingent, and weakly bundled. These findings also refine postfunctionalist research on European integration, which has often interpreted politicization as the transformation of Europe from a technocratic project into a contested cleavage (Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Hutter and Grande, 2014). In post-accession Romania, EU-related and sovereigntist themes are institutionally entrenched but weakly consolidated in protest-related communication. Parliamentarians invoke Europe, Brussels, and sovereignty primarily as resources of positional differentiation, often in response to external events such as Schengen negotiations, the war in Ukraine, or EU budgetary disputes. Protest-related references to Europe or democracy, by contrast, appear sporadically and attach to immediate grievances rather than sustained master frames. This supports Hurrelmann et al.'s (2013) argument that politicization is unevenly distributed across arenas, while resonating with Zürn's (2019) and Hutter and Kriesi's (2019) view that authority conflicts may unfold across multiple arenas and levels without following a single logic of resonance. The Romanian case extends this insight temporally and discursively: the same signifiers circulate across settings but perform different political functions. The divergence is therefore not only temporal but semantic, reinforcing parallel politicization rather than cross-arena diffusion.

Taken together, demand–supply dynamics, postfunctionalist politicization, and discursive articulation point to a single configuration: institutional politicization is continuous and structured, while

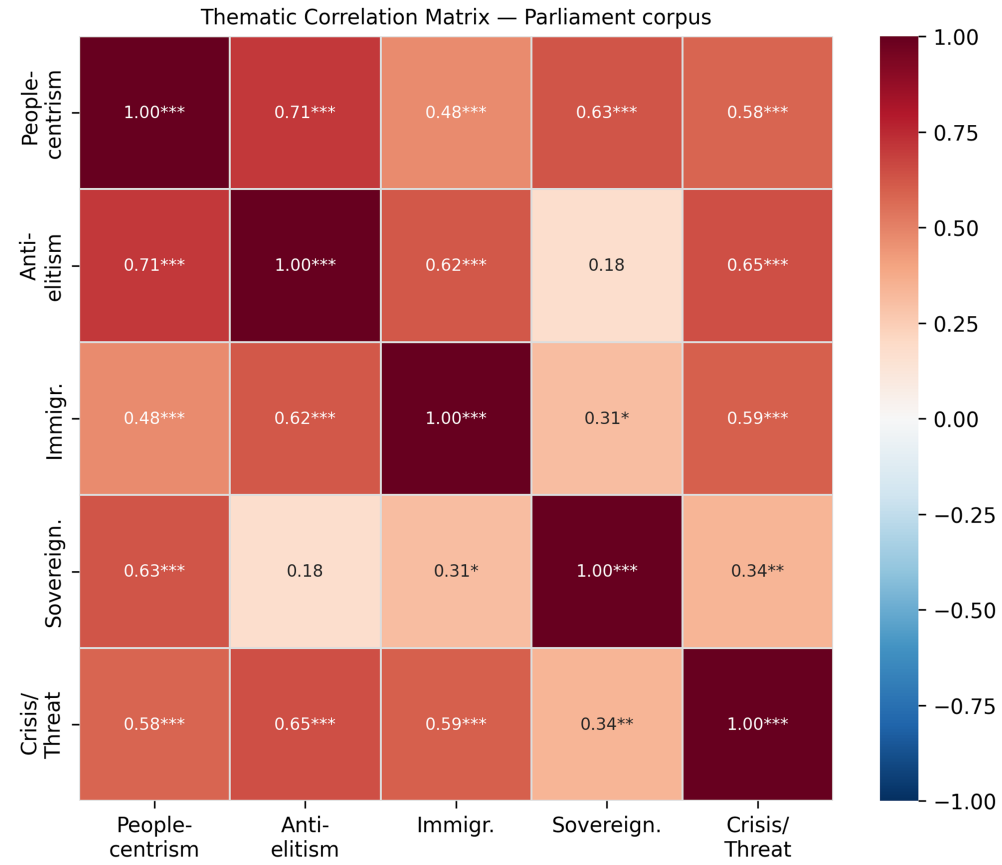


FIGURE 6
Thematic overlap matrix—parliament (monthly correlations).

contentious politicization remains episodic and reactive. The arenas coexist but rarely intersect, explaining the absence of stable sequencing.

The broader theoretical implication is that politicization can persist without strong democratic transmission between arenas. This complicates both demand- and supply-side models: populist politicization does not require continuous feedback between citizens and elites to survive, but can endure as an institutionalized repertoire even when civic resonance remains episodic or weak.

6 Conclusion

This paper examined how populist politicization unfolds across civic and institutional arenas and what its temporal sequencing reveals about the relationship between demand- and supply-side dynamics. By comparing protest-related media coverage and parliamentary plenary debates in Romania between 2020 and 2024, and by operationalizing populist politicization through five core populist themes, the analysis moved beyond static conceptions of populism as either a societal attitude or an elite strategy. Instead, it approached populism as a discursive repertoire whose circulation, assembly, and temporal rhythms can be empirically traced across arenas. In doing so, it responds to calls for a more differentiated and arena-sensitive understanding of politicization (Hurrelmann et al., 2013), showing that elite and societal arenas may remain politically active yet weakly synchronized.

The central finding is that populist politicization in Romania is institutionally insulated and socially decoupled. Parliamentary discourse exhibits a stable, routinized, and internally coherent engagement with populist themes, while protest-related discourse remains episodic, reactive, and weakly consolidated. Rather than revealing a clear bottom-up or top-down sequence, the results point to a dual temporality: protest discourse follows contentious time, marked by short-lived bursts around concrete events, whereas parliamentary discourse follows institutional time, structured by legislative sessions, policy agendas, and bureaucratic procedures. The concept of parallel politicization is therefore intended primarily as a descriptive-analytical contribution: it does not evaluate populism as inherently democratic or anti-democratic, but identifies a specific configuration in which civic and institutional forms of populist communication remain active while failing to generate stable transmission.

A second contribution concerns the distinction between movement-based and institutionalized forms of populism. The findings show that populist discourse does not simply move from protest into parliament, or from parliament into protest, but is assembled differently across arenas: as a routinized institutional repertoire in parliamentary debate and as episodic, weakly bundled contentious signaling in protest-related media. This matters for the broader study of populism as both movement-based practice and institutionalized communication. The Romanian case suggests that these modalities should not be assumed to form a single sequence in which grassroots mobilization

precedes institutional uptake or institutional discourse automatically generates civic resonance. Rather, they may coexist while following different temporalities, organizational logics, and discursive structures. In this sense, parallel politicization adds a cross-arena and temporal dimension to work on populist configurations in Central and Eastern Europe (Crăciun, 2026) and on institutionalized populist communication or populism in power (Ruiz-Méndez, 2024). The findings also refine politicization research by showing that contestation over authority, sovereignty, and legitimacy may become unevenly distributed across arenas even when similar vocabularies circulate in both. These findings suggest a model of populist politicization that is neither demand-led nor fully supply-driven in the classic sense, but institutionally anchored and socially decoupled. Populist discourse can persist not because it is continuously fed by visible civic mobilization, but because it has become embedded in the routines of institutional communication. This reframes populism less as a direct expression of societal demand than as a repertoire that can reproduce through legislative routines and institutional competition even where sustained democratic transmission remains weak. The implications extend beyond Romania. In contexts where democratic institutions remain formally stable but social trust is low, politicization may become increasingly symbolic rather than participatory. This has ambivalent implications for democracy. On the one hand, the continued circulation of populist themes within parliament indicates that institutions remain responsive to conflict at the level of political language. On the other hand, when this circulation is weakly connected to civic mobilization, politicization may exacerbate crises of representation and legitimacy by institutionalizing antagonistic discourse without rebuilding democratic transmission between citizens and elites. Parallel politicization therefore helps explain how democratic institutions can remain discursively active while becoming weakly integrative.

Several avenues for future research follow from this. First, comparative studies are needed to test whether dual temporalities of politicization characterize other post-communist or peripheral EU democracies, and whether similar patterns emerge in older Western democracies. Second, future work could disaggregate parliamentary discourse by party family to examine whether all parties participate equally in the routinization of populist language or whether this process is driven primarily by populist-right actors. Third, future research could also examine whether parallel politicization is a transitional condition, a stable feature of weakly integrated democracies, or a broader mechanism through which populist discourse becomes normalized within representative institutions.

In sum, this study shows that populist politicization is not only a matter of who mobilizes first, but of whether political arenas remain temporally and semantically compatible. In Romania, they are not. Populism endures less as a channel between society and elites than as an institutionalized repertoire that reproduces itself in parallel to civic contention. This insight shifts attention from mobilization alone to the infrastructures of political communication through which populism becomes self-reproducing within institutions.

Data availability statement

The derived data underlying the statistical analyses, together with the analytical scripts and coding materials, are included in the Supplementary Material. The full-text media corpus is not redistributed because it contains copyrighted third-party material. Parliamentary debate transcripts were obtained from publicly accessible sources and are not reproduced in the Supplementary Material. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

HR: Investigation, Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Validation, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Project administration. VB-T: Visualization, Investigation, Writing – review & editing, Validation, Formal analysis, Supervision, Resources, Methodology, Software, Data curation, Project administration, Writing – original draft.

Funding

The author(s) declared that financial support was received for this work and/or its publication. This research was supported by the EU project "Protest as a Democracy Test: Protest Culture under Transformation and as a Transformative Power" funded by the European Union's Horizon Research and Innovation Actions scheme under the grant agreement No. 101177963.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Adriana Iamnitchi, Seongcheol Kim, and Jose Javier Olivas Osuna for their valuable feedback on earlier versions of this paper, as well as the reviewers and the special section coordinators for their helpful comments and suggestions during the review process. Any remaining errors are, of course, our own.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that Generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. The data processing, visualization pipeline, and analytical scripts for this revision were developed with AI-assisted coding using Claude (Anthropic). Language editing assistance was provided by AI tools; all substantive content, analytical decisions, and arguments remain the authors' own.

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