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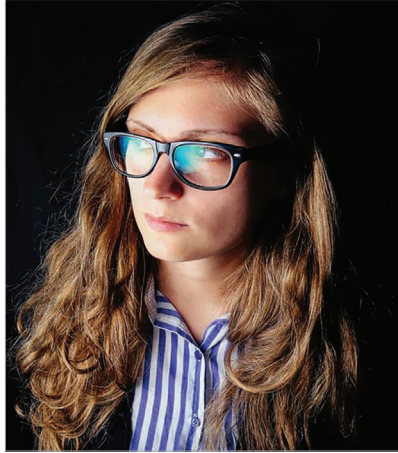
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# THE FASCIST KATECHON AND THE COMMUNIST ANTICHRIST: HOW AUR PARTY USES SOCIAL MEDIA TO REVIVE INTERWAR LEGIONARY MANICHEAN THINKING

Adina Marincea<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

In 2020, the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR) – a recently formed and then largely unknown radical right party – managed to win seats in Parliament. Described by many as populist, nationalist, or far-right, AUR began to reveal its affinities with the interwar Legionary Movement, the autochthonous permutation of fascism.

This paper examines how AUR integrates in their political discourse interwar fascist ideas with right-wing populism and further disseminates these narratives through its three leaders' use of social media. It employs a hybrid empirical approach combining Natural Language Processing with Discourse Historical Analysis to critically deconstruct the discourses of AUR leaders George Simion, Claudiu Târziu and Sorin Lavric.

**Keywords:** populism, fascism, Legionary Movement, radical right, discourse analysis, communism

The results of the 2020 parliamentary elections in Romania surprised many, with the unexpected success of the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR) which managed to win 9% of the vote and 47 seats, despite having been formally established only a year before the elections. Most opinion polls had failed to predict AUR's success, and some even failed to include it in their surveys.

AUR's entry into parliament marked the end of a decade in which Romania was perceived as a somewhat exemplary outlier (e.g., Ban 2016) due to the absence of far-right or right-wing populist parties in the

Parliament. The Greater Romania Party (PRM), the traditional far-right party, has not had any electoral success at European or national level since 2009, and no other new party has managed to cross the electoral threshold.

The newcomer AUR was initially described with various labels ranging from anti-system, nationalist, unionist, right-wing populist or far-right to the subsequent revelation of its affinities with the Legionary Movement – the Romanian permutation of interwar fascism. However, the repeated denial by AUR leaders of such links with fascist/legionary ideology, despite many arguments supporting the claim (Cârstocea 2021; Clark 2020; Clej 2020; Gheorghiu & Praisler, 2022; Grădinaru 2020; Marincea 2022a, 2022b; Rațiu 2020), together with often ambivalent or ambiguous discourse strategies, can cast further doubt on their ideological positioning.

In this paper, I will examine how AUR integrates interwar fascist ideas and narratives, most typically from the Legionary Movement, into its political discourse and further disseminates these narratives through its leaders' use of social media – especially Facebook and, to some extent, YouTube. One of the factors that have contributed to the electoral surprise of AUR was its communication strategy, which, similar to other populist, right-wing and far-right leaders or authoritarian regimes in Europe and beyond, has relied heavily on social media<sup>2</sup> (Akgül 2019; Bobba 2019). The appeal of these platforms lies primarily in their capacity to provide a direct, unmediated connection to “the people” by bypassing traditional media gatekeepers (Kriesi 2014; Esser et al. 2016), which are often captured by hard-to-permeate state or private interests (Marincea 2021). Traditional media organizations usually have legal safeguards in place to define, monitor, or sanction violations of professional journalistic norms, although they are often insufficient or inefficient. Circumventing more established/institutionalized journalistic organizations makes it easier to share content that abides by no such deontological norms, even if, we might argue, these norms are increasingly eroding in mainstream media as well.<sup>3</sup> This facilitates the unchecked spread of mis/disinformation, hateful and anti-democratic content, conspiracy theories, and far-right propaganda that we have seen in recent years on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter or TikTok.

AUR is still frequently analyzed in scholarly works through the theoretical framework of right-wing populism (Popescu & Vesalon 2022; Gușă 2021), more often than through the lens of fascism (Buti & Constantin 2021). There is ample evidence that AUR, through its three main representatives – George Simion and Claudiu Târziu (formerly

co-presidents) and Sorin Lavric (President of AUR's Senate) –, combines a mixture of ideological affiliations. In addition, since clear conceptual boundaries between terms such as far-right, radical right (populism), neo-fascism, post-fascism have become more difficult to draw and often overlap in recent research, my aim is to analyze how AUR representatives combine right-wing populist rhetoric with discursive features typical of fascism, and more specifically of the legacy of the local Legionary Movement.

Like fascism, the Legionary Movement is characterized by a strong ultranationalism and hostility to communism, coupled with an anti-liberal and anti-pluralist stance, often resorting to violence; it is anti-modern and builds on the myth of a Golden Age and the promise of national rebirth (palingenesis) (Clark 2015; Ornea 1996/2015; Weber & Miha 1995; Griffin 1991). The depicted “decay” of society is blamed on an internal enemy that threatens the nation – most often the Jewish people (Livezeanu 1995) and the ideological left. Like other forms of fascism, the Legionary Movement was action-oriented and driven by a charismatic leader (Iordachi 2004), promoted a masculinist (macho/patriarchal) culture, and combined mysticism and spirituality with the cult of death, martyrdom, and sacrifice, often manifested through rituals. However, unlike fascism and Nazism, the Legionary Movement was highly religious, with Orthodoxy as one of its driving forces.

## **1. Populism and the right-wing: The good, the bad, and the violent**

Populism is one of those concepts that has been rendered almost meaningless by overuse and conceptual overstretching. It has been used to signify both *demagogy* and *democracy*, while also being weaponized by political actors aiming to delegitimize their opponents' claims. Conceptualizations of populism vary from left to right, from positive to negative, and from minimalist (Urbinati 2019; Mudde 2004) to maximalist (Urbinati 2019; Laclau 2005; Laclau & Mouffe 2001). This leads to different operationalizations and empirical approaches in the study of populism.

Whether populism is conceived of as positive or negative depends, as Barker (2020) notes, on political assumptions about the capacity and desirability of people's participation in politics, which distinguishes between representative (liberal) and participatory (radical) democrats.

For scholars who argue for more direct democracy (Laclau 2005) or for anticolonial politics (Mabandla & Deumert 2020), the good side of populism is that it involves people more directly in politics. For these scholars, populism is the result of a political crisis (of neoliberalism and austerity, of liberal democracy) and functions as a “cry for help” with democratizing potential (McCormick 2017). On the dark side, populism is associated with demagoguery (Berend 2020; Grabow & Hartleb 2013), manipulative appeals to emotions (Aslan 2021), conspiratorial thinking (Bergmann 2018; Castanho Silva et al. 2017), right-wing nationalism, and anti-democratic, authoritarian regimes (Wodak 2015; Ekström & Morton 2017; Crowley 2020). From this perspective, populism is perceived as a threat to representative democracy (Müller 2016; Urbinati 2013).

In contrast to both elitist (*people should be ruled by elites*) and pluralist conceptions of politics (*compromise based on a diversity of perspectives*), populism gives sovereignty to “the people”, which is seen in opposition to “the elite” (Bergman 2020). Therefore, anti-elitism and the appeal to “the people” are considered essential elements of populism, along with an “exclusionary form of identity politics” (Müller 2016) and a Manichean good vs. evil binary thinking that is used to exclude the Other – on grounds of ethnicity, gender identity or sexual orientation, religion, ideology, etc.

Given these populist characteristics, scholars who study populism as a political communication style have identified four types of populist discourse (Jagers & Walgrave 2007): “empty populism” (referring only to “the people,” often through appeals to the “common man”), “anti-elitist populism” (attacks on elites and references to “the people”), “excluding populism” (references to “the people” and exclusion of out-groups), and “complete populism” (which includes all of the above).

Right-wing populism adds to these elements “a generalized claim to represent ‘THE people’ in the sense of a homogenised ideal based on nativist ideologies, thus on *traditional body politics*. This dogma is accompanied by a *revisionist view of history*. The *rhetoric of exclusion* has become part and parcel of a much more general discourse about strangers within and outside the ‘body’, that is, the nation state” (Wodak 2015: 21).

Going one step further, if we add to this mix a revolutionary aspiration to reshape society from the ground up, to create an entirely “New Order”, a “New Man” (because such ideologies are usually patriarchal and macho), with a very moralistic mindset, we enter the field of fascism. As Kershaw (2015) observed, the difference between fascism and other right-wing (ultra) nationalist authoritarian movements lies in its revolutionary dimension.



Unlike the latter, which sought to preserve the existing social order, as Kershaw notes, “fascism sought a revolution,” but not “in terms of social class, as Marxists advocated, but a revolution nonetheless – a revolution of mentalities, values and will,” one that “sought total commitment to the collective will of a united nation” and that “demanded soul as well as body” (Kershaw 2015: 235).

In the same vein, Roger Griffin’s definition of fascism – that I use in this paper – is one that has garnered the most scholarly consensus and has been described by some as a “truly minimal fascist minimum” (Richardson 2017: 448): “Fascism is a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultranationalism” (Griffin 1991: 26). In Griffin’s conceptualization, the core elements of fascism are a radical populist nationalism combined with the myth of national rebirth as a response to the (constructed) perception of national decadence. Unlike other far right ideologies – including, as Cârstocea (2021b) notes, Ion Antonescu’s political thought, which aimed to preserve the state, making it conservative rather than revolutionary – fascism is revolutionary, aiming for radical transformation or a “new order”. In Griffin’s words (1991: 35), “At the heart of palingenetic political myth lies the belief that contemporaries are living through or about to live through a ‘sea-change’, a ‘water-shed’ or ‘turning-point’ in the historical process. The perceived corruption, anarchy, oppressiveness, iniquities or decadence of the present, rather than being seen as immutable and thus to be endured indefinitely with stoic courage or bleak pessimism, are perceived as having reached their peak and interpreted as the sure sign that one era is nearing its end and a new order is about to emerge.”

Moreover, violence is a common trait of fascist politics, which appropriated some of the ideas behind the “propaganda by the deed” from 19<sup>th</sup>-century insurrectionary anarchism. However, unlike anarchism’s bottom-up violence directed at the state and ruling classes in reaction to socio-economic and political inequalities, exploitation, oppression, and repression by the rich and powerful, fascism’s violence was directed at those out-groups excluded from “the people,” most often – at least in Europe and the West – on the basis of their identity. Fascist violence was and is usually directed against minority groups (ethnic, racialized, etc.) or those already marginalized and vulnerable (e.g. LGBTQIA+ communities, immigrants, refugees), and has frequently benefitted the complicity of the state and its (military and security) institutions, such as the police (Clark 2015; Dunning 2004).

However, with the fall of fascist regimes and their ideological discrediting, and the establishment of liberal norms that govern the predominantly liberal/constitutional democracies in Europe and the Western world, fascist violence – be it symbolic, political, or physical – is no longer legitimate in its brute form. For this reason, fascist ideas and violence are now often disguised or transformed through strategies such as calculated ambivalence, denial (Wodak 2015), dog-whistling (Åkerlund 2021), reframing, downplaying, etc., or confined to the discursive level. Consequently, today's right-wing populism and different far-right movements contain the seeds of fascism, from which fascism in its most explicit and violent form can always grow, even if physical violence is absent in their current state. This illustrates Finchelstein's (2019) concept of "post-fascism," which he sees as an adaptation of Cold War ultranationalist politics to the current historical context dominated by democratic representation. For this reason, current "post-fascist" movements, often described as populist, can be compatible with or even part of representative politics and parliamentary structures, as opposed to the ideal type of fascism, which is anti-liberal, anti-democratic, and anti-parliamentary.

While this paper focuses mainly on the discursive dimension of AUR, it is important to add that AUR has displayed various forms of violence, coded or explicit, discursive as well as in its actions, both before and increasingly after elections. Some examples are George Simion's contribution to the escalation of the inter-ethnic conflicts that turned violent between Romanians and ethnic Hungarians in Valea Uzului in 2019, the physical aggression against unsympathetic citizens or his bullying of political representatives in Parliament – for example the Minister of Energy (PNL) or a USR deputy, and the frequent incitement of police and gendarmes at protests. Like Corneliu Zelea Codreanu – leader of the interwar Legionary Movement – and many of the leaders of the ultranationalist student movements, who displayed hooligan behavior that sometimes turned into physical violence, George Simion also has a hooligan profile. This was forged during two decades of active membership in the radical football stadium culture of the ultras, which included physical violence and altercations with the police. Simion was the founder of the magazine "Romanian Ultras" and a founding member of the xenophobic and racist football groups "Honor et patria" and "United under the tricolor" – whose members had committed physical attacks on antifascists (List 2018). Simion transformed his experience as an ultra

into a strategy of political action, both in his dealings with the police and gendarmes during his rallies, and in his activities in Parliament, increasing the level of political violence.

Some of the forms of political violence exercised by AUR have been the issuing of a press release minimizing the Holocaust (Marincea 2022c), for which a criminal investigation was opened and then closed, and their absence from the vote on the adoption of a statement on antisemitic manifestations and attempts to rehabilitate war criminals, which followed the antisemitic death threats received by the actress Maia Morgenstern (INSHR 2021). The author of the threats claimed that he was a member of AUR, which the party denied, and George Simion stated that “some sources say he is ethnically Jewish,” repeating an antisemitic trope that blames Jews for antisemitism.<sup>4</sup>

## **2. The enemy of my enemy is my hero? Rehabilitation of interwar fascism through the anti-communist cult of the “Prison Saints”**

I argue, in line with Raul Cârstocea’s (2008) observation, that the concept of populism may not be adequate to understand the political landscape in Romania, which, especially after the fall of communism, is better described as a combination of radical right politics and nationalism, the latter being one of the few common factors found both in the interwar period and in the national-communist regime. Nationalism has survived and flourished even after the fall of communism – with parties such as the Greater Romania Party (PRM) or the United Romania Party (PRU), but also permeated mainstream parties and now witnesses a resurgence through AUR. For this reason, it is necessary to go beyond the traditional left-right conceptualization of politics, which fails to capture and explain the Romanian context. This is partly due to the absence of a significant left (Bucur 2004), despite, or perhaps because of, the long history of communism and the initial resistance in the early 1990s to the strong neoliberal pressures in the region.

The radicalization of neoliberalism that began in the 2000s and solidified in 2010 after the financial crisis (Ban 2011; Vincze 2015), further undermining the chance of a redefinition of the left, was the result of several reinforcing factors. Among them was the articulation of a strong anti-communist sentiment, which the University Square protests

of the 1990s continued from the '89 Revolution. This was consolidated both by academics who promoted libertarian economics (Ban 2011) and by intellectuals on the right who uncritically adopted interwar and ultranationalist ideas through the literature of legionary sympathizers such as Nae Ionescu, Emil Cioran, Constantin Noica, Mircea Vulcănescu, thus laying the groundwork for the rehabilitation and resurgence of ultranationalism (Hodor in Rațiu 2020).

A significant contribution to this result was the cultivation of “fascist hagiographies” (Biliuță 2021) through the “Prison Saints” movement, which was consistently built since the early 1990s and the University Square protests by a network of former political detainees of the communist regime (including members of the Legionary Movement), together with some intellectuals of the right and even politicians, as well as Orthodox priests and “civil society” NGOs, all sharing (ultra)nationalist and (ultra)conservative views. Together they created a media and publishing infrastructure through which they managed to (re)circulate interwar and legionary ideas, reinforce anti-communist and anti-left hostility, and create an indiscriminate cult of martyrdom that ended up promoting fascist detainees as “Saints” who sacrificed themselves for democracy. It is argued here that this process of liberal-washing former members or sympathizers of the Legion, which contributes to the radicalization of politics to the extreme right and to a revision of history that serves to give respectability to fascist ideas and representatives, is also part of AUR’s communication strategy.

For the purposes of this paper and in the context presented, a more suitable theoretical framework is that used by Cârstocea (2008), following Shafir’s (1999) conceptualization, which distinguishes between “radical return” and “radical continuity” parties. While both appeal to xenophobia and extreme nationalism, what distinguishes them is the historical (and, implicitly, ideational) nationalist legacy on which they draw – anchored either in interwar fascism or in national communism. According to Shafir, “radical return” parties “look to the neotraditional values associated with fascist parties in the interwar period and find models in such leaders as Josef Tiso, Andrej Hlinka, Ion Antonescu, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, Ferenc Szálasi, and Ante Pavelić” (Shafir 1999: 213). On the other hand, “radical continuity” parties, according to Shafir (1999), draw their inspiration from the communist legacy and, in the case of Romania, specifically from the Ceaușescu regime, and are characterized by “discriminatory policies toward the Hungarian minority, the pursuit of a foreign policy

independent of the Soviet line, and the encouragement of a Romanian national identity” (Cârstocea 2008: 27).

Examples of “radical continuity” parties can be found closer to the 1990s and in Parliament: Greater Romania Party (Partidul România Mare, or PRM), the Socialist Labor Party (Partidul Socialist al Muncii, or PSM), and the Party of Romanian National Unity (Partidul Unității Naționale Române, or PUNR) (Shafir 1999b: 214). However, looking at the political spectrum, after the fall of PRM, a slow downward process of “radical continuity” emerged, as parties that lost power became irrelevant, while “radical return” movements were on the rise, though less visible to the mainstream eye. Due to the physical and historiographical repression of the various fascist movements and representatives during communism, a neofascist movement after the fall of communism started from a different, much less consolidated and institutionalized position of power compared to the heirs of communism. For this reason, “radical return” groups operated more on a grassroots/extra-parliamentary level and slowly built their way to the top of mainstream politics over the last three decades.

Cârstocea (2008) identifies Marian Munteanu’s Movement for Romania (Mișcarea Pentru România, MPR), registered on 23 December 1991, as the first “radical return” formation. The MPR shared with the PRM the anti-Hungarian, antisemitic, and anti-globalization views, but added to them a strong anti-communist position and a clear affiliation to the legionary legacy (Cârstocea 2008). Other parties and movements followed this ideological path, including the Party of the National Right (Partidul Dreapta Națională, PDN) and the New Christian Romania (Noua Românie Creștină, NRC) – 1992, The Party for the Fatherland (Partidul Pentru Patrie, PPP), founded in 1993 by a group of former legionaries, renamed in 2012 after the interwar party of the Legion “Everything for the Country” (Totul pentru Țară, TpȚ) and banned in 2015, and the New Right (Noua Dreaptă, ND) – 1999/2000, which became a party in 2015. The New Generation Party – Christian Democrat (Partidul Noua Generație – Creștin Democrat, PNG-CD), after businessman George Becali took over the leadership in 2004, also appealed more superficially to legionary symbolism, coupled with strong Orthodoxy, ultranationalism, ultraconservatism and aggressive, discriminatory language targeting different minority groups (Cinpoș 2012).

In 2008, a part of the PPP members also established the Ion Gavrilă Ogoranu Foundation, named after the legionary who was also part of the armed anti-communist resistance in the mountains (Fundatia Ion

Gavrilă Ogoranu), and who was one of the founders of the PPP and the continuator of the legionary ideas, becoming one of the cult figures of the contemporary neo-legionary movements. Also in 2008, the Orthodox Brotherhood of St. George the Great Martyr, Bearer of Victory (Frăția Ortodoxă Sf. Mare Mucenic Gheorghe purtătorul de Biruință) was born. In 2014, the Movement “Motivation: Romania” (Mișcarea “Motivația: România”) was initiated by Călin Georgescu, who in November 2024 would win the first round of the Presidential elections, which led the Romanian Constitutional Court to cancel the elections on grounds of Russian interference and neo-legionary affiliation.

Other organizations that followed were the United Romania Party (Partidul România Unită, PRU) – 2015, which in 2017, together with PRM and ND, founded the alliance The National Identity Block in Europe (Blocul Identității Naționale în Europa, BINE<sup>5</sup>), the Association Gogu Puiu – the Haiduks of Dobrogea (Asociația Gogu Puiu – Haiducii Dobrogei) – founded in 2016 in close connection with the Ion Gavrilă Ogoranu Foundation, and the Association Ancestral Land (“Pământul Strămoșesc”<sup>6</sup>), founded in 2021 by Călin Georgescu, etc.<sup>7</sup>. In order to promote their ideas, many of these organizations or their members have set up a publishing infrastructure (e.g. newspapers, blogs, websites, social media pages, magazines or publishing houses that print books, magazines, pamphlets, etc.) or have managed to publish literature through existing mainstream or fringe publishing initiatives through contacts with similar ideology (see Cardinal Points magazine and ROST).

What they have in common, beyond their often collaboration, is a more or less openly acknowledged affiliation to the Legionary movement, manifested through references and commemorative rituals for its “heroes” such as Codreanu, Moța, and Marin, the replication of the “nests” infrastructure, and typical legionary practices (e.g., work camps) and aesthetics (e.g., green shirts). However, the symbolic affiliation has also been complemented by more recent ideological transformations that respond to the challenges of the present: anti-globalization attitudes, often defined as a continuation of interwar anti-bolshevism and also in relation to anti-progressivism (opposition to so-called “gender ideology”, sexual education, right to abortion, feminism, etc.) – as a form of clinging to traditional values (e.g. “traditional family”). Added to this are strong anti-immigration demands, often mobilizing racist and ethnicist prejudices, and a “sovereignist” orientation that translates into anti-EU sentiments or opposition to any kind of supranational governance. Antisemitism

has also not disappeared from neofascist movements, but rather is often transformed or insinuated in other discourses, such as anti-Soros rhetoric or conspiracy theories about a financial elite plotting to dominate the world, transnational corporations, the “global occult” or “political correctness” (INSHR 2018), and is often intertwined with the anti-communist rhetoric that has become increasingly prevalent since the 1990s (Cârstocea 2021a).

AUR marks a significant victory for the “radical return” parties, which for the first time in decades have managed to enter Parliament and thus the mainstream of politics and power. As Raul Cârstocea aptly observes (2021b), AUR goes beyond the “seemingly more benign ‘populism’” that “has been however rendered almost meaningless by overuse and that glosses over significant differences within the political spectrum it covers,” drawing closer to interwar fascism through elements such as anti-communism and palingenesis.

The aim of this paper is to empirically and more systematically track evidence to support this claim about AUR’s ideological position, based mainly on what its discursive approach can reveal, coupled with some of its positions and actions.

### **3. Methodology**

Since AUR’s communication strategy relies heavily on the use of social media – especially Facebook, which, as shown above, is one of the preferred media for non-mainstream political actors, the corpus analyzed consists mainly of social media posts (in 2024 election campaigns, TikTok also became a popular channel for political actors). I have collected datasets downloaded with the CrowdTangle app before and after the 2020 elections, with content published on four pages: the Facebook page of the AUR party and the pages of AUR leaders George Simion, Claudiu Târziu and Sorin Lavric.

The parliamentary elections took place on 6 December 2020, and partial results were announced on 7 December. Therefore, my research corpus is divided into the following two intervals: before the elections (1 January 2020 – 6 December 2020) and after the elections (7 December 2020 – 1 June 2022). It is worth mentioning that in the pre-election period, only two Facebook pages were analyzed: that of AUR<sup>8</sup> – 537 posts, and that of George Simion<sup>9</sup> – 611 posts. This is due to the fact that Claudiu

Târziu and Sorin Lavric only started a public Facebook page after the elections: Lavric on 6 January 2021<sup>10</sup> and Târziu on 12 January 2022.<sup>11</sup>

The post-election corpus consists of 1,245 posts from AUR, 801 posts from George Simion, 248 posts from Claudiu Târziu and 136 posts from Sorin Lavric. This makes a total of 3,578 posts from four Facebook pages over the course of two years and four months.

I chose to focus more on the analysis of the pages of AUR representatives rather than the party's page because populist parties revolve around their – often charismatic (Iordachi 2004) leaders and gain popularity through a personalized style of politics (Engesser et al. 2017; Urbinati 2013; Roberts 1995). This is also visible in the number of followers of AUR's page – 153,000 as of July 2022, compared to George Simion – 1.2 million.

In analyzing the content of these posts, I have chosen a hybrid approach to compensate for the shortcomings of quantitative and qualitative methods taken individually. While quantitative approaches and the more recent computational methods have the advantage of facilitating the identification of patterns in big data corpuses, their limitation is that they may not seem to say much without in-depth qualitative interpretation. And for the latter, if used as a stand-alone method, it can raise suspicions of cherry picking and questions about the extent to which certain findings are present in the larger corpus.

In addition, the nature of the content itself generates some limitations on the use of certain analysis methods. For example, some of the Facebook posts contain short texts that are not well suited for automated topic detection (e.g., LDA topic modeling). Computational methods for text analysis can only be applied to the text of the posts, which means that they miss much of the actual discourse, which is often transmitted via (live) video. We know from previous research that (right-wing) populist leaders have a showman quality (Wodak 2015) and therefore prefer video posts, which they usually create themselves (Marincea et al. 2021b). Often, as in the case of George Simion, these videos can be very long, an hour or more. In order to apply corpus linguistic methods to the video content, transcripts would be required, which is very time and resource consuming.

In order not to miss this relevant video content, it was included in the current analysis using the computational methods used to identify the most popular posts or the presence of certain topics or keywords in the posts. For such video content identified as particularly relevant, important parts were extracted and translated to exemplify and strengthen the results of the quantitative analysis.



To sum up my hybrid research approach, in the first stage of analysis, I used Corpus Linguistics (Subtirelu & Baker 2017; Gries 2009) computational methods such as descriptive statistics (term frequencies) and unsupervised clustering algorithms to extract names and patterns, namely topics, from the posts using the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modeling method.<sup>12</sup> In the second phase of the analysis, I went deeper and qualitatively analyzed the most popular posts and those associated with the identified topics and keywords or frequently relevant terms. This was done within the framework of Discourse Historical Analysis (DHA) (Wodak 2001; Reisigl 2017), an approach from the field of Critical Discourse Studies (Wodak & Meyer 2015; Flowerdew & Richardson 2018).

This dual empirical approach was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. How do various AUR leaders combine elements of populist discourse (Kubát et al. 2020; Mudde 2007), such as anti-elitism, exclusionary politics, and people-centeredness, with characteristics of fascist (legionary) discourse, such as anti-communism, ultranationalism, Orthodoxism, mysticism, revolutionary politics, and palingenesis, etc. (Ornea 1996/2015; Clark 2015; Livezeanu 1995; Weber & Mișu 1995; Griffin 1991)?

RQ2. What are the discursive strategies mobilized by AUR leaders before and after the 2020 elections to recirculate fascist ideas in terms of tropes, visual elements, historical references, denial strategies that they use? Is there a visible radicalization over time, after entering Parliament?

#### **4. “Brothers” not “Comrades”: Orthodox patriotic conservative Romanians as “The people”**

When it comes to defining who belongs to “the people” and who is excluded, there are similarities between the three politicians, but also differences in focus. A shared understanding is that the “we/us” is constituted by Christian Orthodox nationalists, “patriots”, Romanian citizens (but there’s no clear consensus among the three AUR leaders on who and on what grounds can “truly” aspire to citizenship.

Like Trump, George Simion often uses references to “Patriots”, both before and after elections: “Oltenians, supreme patriots,” “a group of patriotic hearts (AUR),” “Romanian patriots.” Simion rhetorically asks the readers to choose a side, right after the elections, on 9 December

2020, creating a typical populist Manichean opposition of *good* (we, “the people”) vs. *evil* (them, elites or “the other”) opposition: “For every 9 bastards who hit AUR, 1 patriot appears! Are you with the bastards or the patriots?”<sup>13</sup>

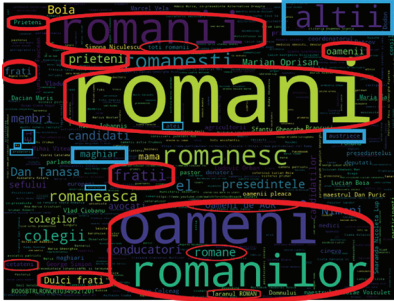


Figure 1. “The people” highlighted in red, “The others” in blue, in a Wordcloud based on most frequent words in George Simion’s Facebook posts before the 2020 election results

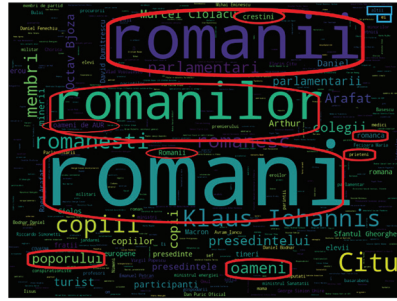


Figure 2. “The people” highlighted in red, “The others” in blue, in a Wordcloud based on most frequent words in George Simion’s Facebook posts after the 2020 election results

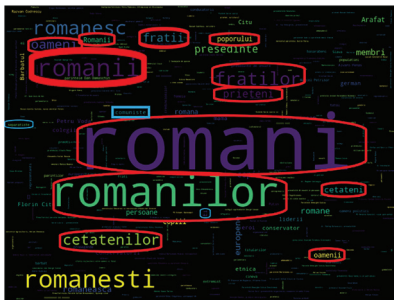


Figure 3. “The people” highlighted in red, “The others” in blue, in a Wordcloud based on most frequent words in Claudiu Târziu’s Facebook posts after the 2020 election results

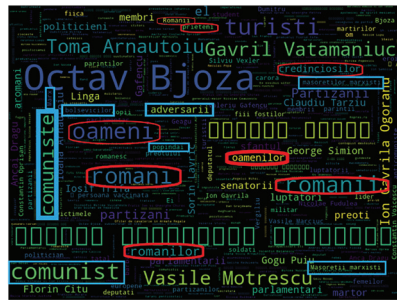


Figure 4. “The people” highlighted in red, “The others” in blue, in a Wordcloud based on most frequent words in Sorin Lavric’s Facebook posts after the 2020 election results

Children and, less often, parents are often referred to as part of “the people” or, especially in Claudiu Târziu’s posts, as gendered subjects, “man” and “woman”. Taken together, these words denote an appeal to emotion and conservative values such as the heteronormative family.

In the pre-election corpus, references to “(the) people” and specifically “Romanians” are among the most frequent words on George Simion’s page (Figure 1), which appears 143 times in the overall corpus and 146 times in the post-election corpus, making it one of the most common words in both intervals.

“We/us”, “the people” is also expressed by words like “(the) people”, “people of gold / AUR<sup>14</sup>”, “(sweet) brothers”, “the nation”, “fatherland”, “(His Highness) the Romanian Peasant”<sup>15</sup>, “citizens”, “friends”. (Figure 5, Figure 6). The same vocabulary is also common in the posts of Claudiu Târziu and Sorin Lavric (see. Figure 7, Figure 8). The colloquial term “brothers”, which indicates a high degree of closeness resembling family ties, stands out in the posts of both George Simion and Claudiu Târziu. Due to its greater informality, it is not a common form of addressing the electorate in mainstream liberal democratic politics. It is compatible with the populist style of direct, unmediated communication that aims to reduce the distance between the populist leader and “the people” and make him seem like a “common man” (Bobba & Legnante 2017). In addition, the term “brother” and its even more colloquial form used by Simion, “sweet brothers”, also has an ultranationalist symbolic charge, being frequently used by different prominent ultranationalist and legionary interwar figures (e.g. Codreanu 1940).

This can also be seen in the names of the various factions of these movements: among the first ultranationalist and antisemitic movements, founded by Amos Frâncu in 1919, was one called the Brotherhoods of the Cross. The same name was later given by Corneliu Zelea Codreanu to the youth divisions of the Legionary Movement. In his legionary guide (Codreanu 1940), he defined the Brotherhoods of the Cross as those “nests”<sup>16</sup> consisting only of urban young men between the ages of 14 and 20, who were to receive an education based on Christian and nationalist values, physical training (to prepare them to fight in defense of the Fatherland) and “sanitary” education (to protect them from “diseases,” especially venereal diseases, which were considered a sign of moral decay). Codreanu’s conception of the Brotherhoods of the Cross was also profoundly anti-communist from the start, and he gave instructions that “[the young Romanian] must be protected from communist literature

that rises up against God, against the Family, against property, against the Army.”<sup>17</sup>

This shows that the specific terminology of the Brotherhood is not chosen at random, but rather signifies Christian and (ultra)conservative, (ultra) nationalist and patriarchal values that complement each other. The nation is perceived as a family and citizenship as a unity of blood – based on ethnicity and religion. It is fundamentally opposed to Marxist materialism, where religion plays no role or is at best tolerated, and to socialist internationalism, where solidarity is ascribed along class lines and across national borders. These ideological differences are translated into different terminology: while the extreme right uses terms like “brothers” or analogies like “Fatherland” or “Mother tongue” (“body politics”), these are much less common on the left side of the spectrum, where the terminology is less driven by traditional family values or body politics and tends more towards solidarity based on common struggles or alliances, as implied by terms such as “comrade” or the Romanian form “tovarăş”, which are less common in radical or extreme right discourse or, when used, are often employed with an anti-communist goal (e.g. as a caricature of communist vocabulary). The extreme right and the Romanian adaptation of fascism (the Legion) have their own equivalent of the term “tovarăş”/“comrade”, which is preferred in order to distinguish themselves from their ideological opponent, namely “camarad”, whose closer translation would be “brother in arms”.

In our corpus, we can identify the following tendencies: AUR uses “tovarăş” (and its declensions) the most, both before the 2020 elections (2 posts) and after (4 posts), always in a negative context. The aim is to attack political and ideological opponents of the USR (the most frequent target, considered by AUR to be a progressive party), PSD and PNL, by associating them with communist dictatorships in Romania, North Korea or the Soviet Union and suggesting that they are continuators of these regimes. To this end, AUR makes extensive use of historical tropes: “USR – ILLIBERAL FAR LEFT PARTY [...] USR comrades, representatives of the LGBTQ+ International”<sup>18</sup> (Figure 9) (pre-election corpus), “comrades of the Central Committee of the USR”,<sup>19</sup> “Comrade Barna-USsR”,<sup>20</sup> “So let us understand, sir (or comrade?) Muraru, that you are an admirer of the Red Army?”<sup>21</sup> (post-election corpus). Moreover, in a post from 2021, AUR draws a parallel between “Bolshevik class-based discrimination” and discrimination based on “medical criteria” decided by “the new progressive order”.<sup>22</sup> This was a reaction to the decision of the liberal minister of education to give priority to vaccinated students with a green

certificates for accommodation in student dormitories. The parallel could also be seen as an implicit historical trope, recalling the ultranationalist student movements of the interwar period, which grew out of students' frustration with campus conditions and their sense of being discriminated against by the increased access of Jewish students to higher education.



Figure 5. Anti-communist post on AUR's page before the 2020 elections using the word "tovarăș" (comrade) to attack political opponents perceived as progressives for supporting legal provisions (the introduction of sexual education in schools). The post is meant as a caricature showing Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Mao and Che Guevara and aims to label USR (a liberal, center-right party) as "far left iliberal"

On the other hand, the right-wing term "camarad"<sup>23</sup> is used only once on the AUR page, in the post-election period, and it has a positive connotation of friendship and solidarity, which is allegedly threatened and "traded" by the government's anti-Covid-19 measures, such as the green certificate, which AUR strongly fought against.

Claudiu Târziu uses the word "camarad" in 2 posts, one in reference to AUR leader George Simion<sup>24</sup> as "friend and comrade [prieten și camarad]", and the other in relation to the Ukrainian soldier of Romanian ethnicity who was killed by the Russian army near Odessa during the war in Ukraine, along with other "comrades/camarazi".<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, Târziu also uses the left-wing equivalent term "tovarăș" in a post with an unclear addressee: "You meet extraordinary people unexpectedly. If you have an organ to feel them, you remain comrade [tovarăș] with them for life".<sup>26</sup>

While Sorin Lavric does not use the term “*țovarăș*”, he does use “*camarad*” in a post in which he pays a long tribute to former legionary Valeriu Gafencu, presenting him as holy, a “saint without relics [...] the symbol of Christian sacrifice under the evil plunder of the communist regime”,<sup>27</sup> whose prison “*comrades/camarazi*” put a Christian cross in his mouth, according to Lavric, “as a sign of recognition in the distant future”, to facilitate his commemoration as a “Prison Saint” – as Lavric advocates.

Interestingly, George Simion avoids using both terms in his written posts, which could be a sign of awareness of their symbolic charge and part of his strategy to deny or hide certain ideological affinities.

## **5. Communists, Marxists and the Left: the perpetual enemy of “the people”**

For all three AUR members, the main enemy – besides the political class – is the Left, which they most commonly define as “globalists,” “progressives,” “Marxists,” and “cultural Marxists”. This shows that they do not differentiate between liberals and the left, overlapping the two, seeing them as the direct heirs of the Bolsheviks and communists in general. For this reason, they share a strong anti-communist position, expressed in more direct or more subtle ways. The most openly virulent attacks come from Sorin Lavric, as will be shown in the following sections and as we can see from Figure 6 as well. Of the three AUR leaders, based solely on the text of their Facebook posts, Sorin Lavric manifests the most pronounced exclusionary and oppositional tendencies, and his most frequent enemies are “communists” and “Marxists”. This is often coupled with other types of exclusion, most commonly antisemitism, and with anti-establishment rhetoric. A case in point is his virulent posts about the so-called “Marxist Masorettes”, a readaptation of the old fascist trope of “Judeo-Bolshevism” (Wiesel et al. 2005):

“Europe is beginning to be littered with busts of Marx. And I have to pretend I don’t see them while President Iohannis talks about European values. What values? Those that come from the dictates of political correctness? The AUR party will ruin the plans of the Marxist masorettes: it will oppose their diabolical plan for planetary hegemony. You can’t fool us anymore, you can’t stop us. We are in Parliament, and from its benches we will give you a hard time, defending the Romanians from the egalitarian scourge with which you want to destroy European culture”.<sup>28</sup>

George Simion seems to have toned down his anti-communist rhetoric somewhat, especially during the pre-election campaign. In one of his top 5 posts<sup>29</sup> from the pre-election period, a live video of his campaign visit to Pitești on 5 November 2020, when the gendarmes come to ask him if the meeting is authorized, Simion replies: "I had heard that this is a red county, but I didn't think it was like this". And then he continues: "We are Romanians, not Securitate members, not nomenclaturists who send their sons to give you orders." The "others" excluded from "the people" are those associated with the former national-communist regime, and there is also a general hostility towards the left – including the political elites perceived as such (PSD), coded as "the reds".

A similar manifestation of anti-communism, which brings Simion closer to the anti-communist movements of the University Square in the 1990s, which ended in the Minerriads,<sup>30</sup> rather than to interwar ultranationalist and legionary anti-communism is his March 2020 post of an older video<sup>31</sup> of a famous and controversial scene in which he brought funeral candles to the house of former president Ion Iliescu on his 79<sup>th</sup> birthday. In the text of the post, he refers to Ion Iliescu as an "old Bolshevik". In this case, Simion seems to mirror the frustration and anger of the 1990s, when students protested against former communist leaders or party members like Iliescu coming to power through elections shortly after the Revolution.

In the run-up to the elections, Simion seemed to target the political establishment and the power structures of the communist regime rather than the ideology itself. His attacks target the Securitate and its collaborators, the PCR and the nomenklatura, as well as their successors. This is sometimes combined with nationalist, revisionist views and anti-Hungarian sentiments, as in his attack on the historian Lucian Boia. "Spit here!",<sup>32</sup> he writes, an incitement to hatred and violence based on the accusation that Boia may have collaborated with the Securitate, but also because of his historical works, which Simion calls "anti-Romanian" and "against the official Romanian conception of history".

Simion often incites inter-ethnic hostility against the Hungarian minority in Romania and especially against UDMR, the political party that represents them, which he calls "Green Plague". This is also done by spreading conspiracy theories about Hungary's alleged plans to annex Transylvania: "the Aurora plan of dismantling Romania still exists," he states in a live video on his page.<sup>33</sup> Anti-Hungarian sentiments are almost as central as unionism in the politics of Simion and AUR, and, as Traian

Sandu insightfully observes, they replace the antisemitism typical of the Legionary Movement (in Clej 2020).

After the 2020 elections and with the entry of AUR into the Parliament, Simion's anti-communist rhetoric seems more openly ideological, or becomes more ideologized, possibly also under the influence of Lavric and Târziu. He uses words like "Bolshevik", "communist" not only to attack his political opponents, but also to exclude the political other and other minorities (e.g. LGBTQIA+). Criticizing the Mayor of Sector 1 in Bucharest, Clotilde Armand of the USR party, for bringing contemporary art sculptures to a public institution, Simion considers that it was an insult to the national art of Brâncuși's "Coloana infinitului", which symbolizes the sacrifice for the ideal of the Romanian Union, which "disturbed the Bolsheviks". He then continued: "Unfortunately, dear madam, only the Bolsheviks can applaud exhibits with an uncertain gender, as Mr. Cioloș likes."

In this post, Simion also uses calculated ambivalence, sarcastically attacking progressive notions of "gender", or what the ultraconservatives call "gender ideology". Simion displays a general anti-communist sentiment, associating the new progressive left with the Bolsheviks, while also implying that center-right parties like USR-PLUS are heirs to socialism because of the perceived progressive stance on issues like LGBTQIA+ rights.

After winning the elections, Simion's anti-communism became more visibly entangled with elements typical of legionary rhetoric, such as the cult of sacrifice, the cult of martyrdom, the cult of the hero. He uses labels like "Bolshevik" loosely, as an attack against political opponents (see Popescu & Vesalon 2022), even against the Liberal Party, which is economically on the right of the spectrum and socially conservative rather than progressive and anti-capitalist. Thus, we see an instrumentalization of anti-communism for political/electoral purposes. Like Sorin Lavric, Simion also expresses his condemnation of the liberal prime-minister's decision to dismiss Octav Bjoza – a self-proclaimed sympathizer of the Iron Guard (Totok & Macovei 2016) – from the position of representative of anti-communist political detainees, seeing it as proof of the "true color of the ruling party: it is the bright red of Soviet, Bolshevik tanks."<sup>34</sup>

Simion also stepped up his attacks on "globalists". In one of his top 5 posts, he edits a video showing a child – David Dumitrescu – who is made to look like he is standing on the tribune of the Parliament reciting an ultranationalist poem. The video has attracted 235,000 interactions, over 133,000 shares and nearly 3 million views. It is also a virulent attack



on the political class, described in harsh terms such as: “thugs without honor,” “bastards,” “filthy scum,” “crooks, traitors, and bootlickers,” “sellers of Nation and Country,” etc. It is the “globalist” ruling class that is criticized for imposing progressive values that are considered incompatible with Christianity and nationalism:

“You’ve imposed immoral laws and *globalist* principles on us,  
Saying that the Cross and the Flag should no longer exist.  
And you forbade us our heroes who fought hard,  
And in their place you made us put the rainbow against our will”.<sup>35</sup>



Figure 6. Simion’s edited video showing a child reciting an ultranationalist poem in Parliament

Here, too, the ideological other – the progressive – is combined with a type of othering based on sexual orientation and gender identity that targets the LGBTQIA+ communities that are excluded from the accepted definition of “the people”. And this is again accompanied by the cult of the hero, as well as accusations of treason, threats of punishment – earthly and divine – “even beyond death”, tropes that are very common in ultranationalist and legionary rhetoric (see Clark 2015; Manu & Bozdoghină 2010; Ornea 1996/2015).

Similar to Simion in the pre-election period, Târziu also has some posts in which his anti-communism is primarily used as a political instrument to attack the political class – especially the government – for carrying on the “sinful heritage” of the communist regime and especially the Securitate.<sup>36</sup> He goes so far as to suggest that the government, following EU decisions,

is “installing a new dictatorship” by choosing “press censorship as a form of fighting disinformation and war propaganda [...] as in the days of communism” instead of “democracy, [...] transparency, honesty and professionalism”.<sup>37</sup> He uses communism to attack the establishment, namely the government and the EU for the decision to ban Russia Today and Sputnik.

However, these mentions are less frequent than the more ideological manifestations of anti-communism in his speech through attacks on the so-called “Globalist left” that “overturns and falsifies the norms and values inherited from generations”<sup>38</sup> or on “Globalist progressivism” that amounts to “toxic internationalism” and is compared to a “virus”<sup>39</sup> (body politics). These are opposed to “the moderation and sovereignty” promoted by conservatives.<sup>40</sup> Târziu also attacks the “Marxists” who promote gender ideology and sexual education: “This sinister ideology, of Freudo-Marxist origin, which, through the nonsense and confusion it promotes, is in fact a concerted attack on the family and normalcy [...], a tool of manipulation and indoctrination, and a pretext for a radically destructive agenda”.<sup>41</sup>

Târziu also often attacks the ideological “communist” other, contextualized with the help of historical tropes related to the anti-communist resistance<sup>42</sup> and the myth of the “Prison Saints”.<sup>43</sup> In fact, a significant part of the AUR leaders’ anti-communist rhetoric consists of the indiscriminate promotion of the trope of the “Prison Saints”, namely, the cult built around the anti-communist resistance who faced mass persecution by the communist regime through arrest and, in some cases different forms of torture.<sup>44</sup>

## **6. Cultivating martyrdom: rehabilitating anti-communist legionaries through the “Prison Saints” mythology**

Since the 1990s, there has been an active and concerted effort to recover the history of this anti-communist resistance and to invest it with an aura of martyrdom, heroism, and even sainthood; the “Prison Saints” have become a collective political actor, portrayed as a model of courage, integrity, and virtue in the defense of democratic values and in the struggle against the tyrannical dictatorship of the “Red plague”.<sup>45</sup> However, this claim is often factually inaccurate and revisionist, as it fails to distinguish between the many political detainees with different ideologies who were arrested for different actions, some of which were highly undemocratic and even

violent in themselves. As many scholars studying the archives have shown (Totok & Macovei 2016; Biliuță 2021), many of the “Prison Saints” that are celebrated today as heroes of democratic resistance were in fact militants, propagandists, and priests who had previously been active in the Legionary Movement and its different structures – like the Brotherhoods of the Cross or the paramilitary Iron Guard. Some were active during the genocidal Legionary Rebellion and held the same ultraorthodox, ultranationalist, pro-dictatorship and antisemitic views typical of the movement (e.g. Ion Gavrilă-Ogoranu). Among them, some of the survivors continued their pro-legionary propaganda and ideas after the fall of communism through different media, organizations and networks.

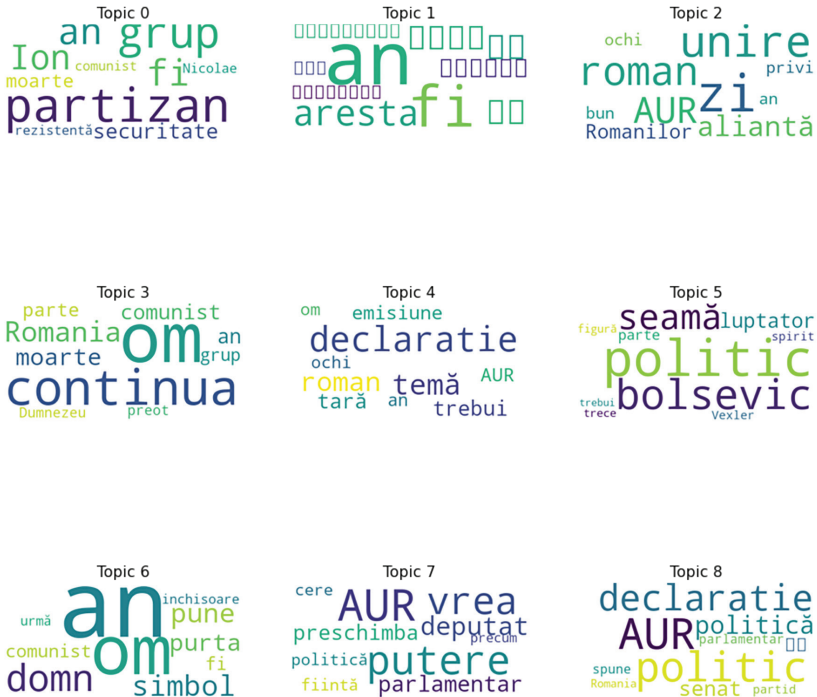


Figure 7. LDA Topic Model applied on Sorin Lavric’s posts. Topics 0, 1, 3, 5, 6 are about “Prison Saints” and anti-communist resistance

The automated text analysis carried out on the posts of Târziu and Lavric shows that they actively cultivate the “Prison Saints” cult and rehabilitate precisely those legionary figures among the members of the anti-communist resistance around whom a cult has been built in the neolegionary movements after 1990. This is especially true for Sorin Lavric, whose posts prioritize this theme above all others, as we can see from the results of the topic models applied on his Facebook page. Of the 8 main topics identified (Figure 14), 6 of them are related to this topic. The most frequently mentioned names, as the N-gram analysis and the name extraction complement show, are those of Ion Gavrilă-Ogoranu (the most frequent: 4 out of 136 posts), Gavril Vatamaniuc (3 posts), Valeriu Gafencu (3 posts), Vasile Motrescu (2 posts), Toma Arnăuțoiu (2 posts). While some of them were active members of the Legionary Movement (Ogoranu, Gafencu), others are considered to have had no connection with the legionaries (e.g. Arnăuțoiu, Motrescu), and others’ legacy is still disputed or claimed by some to be connected to the legionary past (Vatamaniuc). All of them are eulogized by Sorin Lavric publicly in Parliament and on his Facebook page, regardless of their affiliation or lack thereof with the Legionary Movement. Moreover, the same names are frequently taken together in the commemorations organized by the contemporary neo-legionary factions: the Ogoranu Foundation, Everything for the Country Party, the Romanian Federation of Former Political Detainees Anti-Communist Fighters and neolegionary press. These indiscriminate associations serve the rehabilitation agenda, “cleaning” the names of Legion members from their legionary past and from the Legion’s violent and antisemitic beliefs. If the anti-communist partisans are celebrated as heroes of democracy for fighting against a totalitarian regime, the same image is falsely associated with historical figures who were part of the highly anti-democratic, pro-dictatorial structure that was the Legion. Vladimir Tismăneanu (2015), head of the Presidential Commission for the analysis of the communist dictatorship in Romania, was one of the few anti-communist voices to publicly criticize and disassociate himself from this rehabilitation of the legionaries for the sole reason that they fought against communism.

Most of these names are also present in Claudiu Târziu’s posts, but with a lesser focus. While Lavric clearly prioritizes the rehabilitation of the “Prison Saints” and the legionaries among them, Târziu focuses on a greater variety of topics, ranging from AUR-related issues to the war in Ukraine or Christian and ultraconservative values. His emphasis is on

Orthodoxism, which is nevertheless linked to anti-communism and the cult of the “Prison Saints”.

He mentions Ion Gavrilă-Ogoranu in 2 out of 249 posts and Arnăuțoiu and Vatamaniuc in only one post, while Gafencu and Motrescu are missing from his mentions.

Târziu is particularly interested in commemorating priests with legionary affiliations or sympathies. The most frequently mentioned (3 posts) is the legionary orthodox priest Gheorghe Calciu Dumitreasa, who was also the initiator of the magazine “Rost” in the early 2000s. After his death, the magazine was continued in the same pro-legionary style by Claudiu Târziu and Răzvan Codrescu, the latter having also published several books, articles and interviews rehabilitating the Legionary Movement and some of its main figures, including Zelea Codreanu, and was editor-in-chief of one of the longest running and most explicitly neo-Legionary magazines – “Cardinal Points” (named after the book of legionary ideologue Nichifor Crainic), where Târziu was also a collaborator. Târziu and Codrescu had a long-lasting friendship and collaboration based on ideological affinities, organizing together many events commemorating the “Prison Saints” and rehabilitating legionary figures, promoting Codrescu’s books and views (see Codrescu 2010; Târziu & Codrescu 2019).

Other religious figures, legionaries (or sympathizers) and former anti-communist detainees mentioned by Târziu, with whom he had close relations and whom he calls “friends” or “brothers”, are the legionary priest Iustin Pârvu and the neolegionary nest Petru Vodă Monastery, Marcel Petrișor, Traian Popescu, Ion Gavrilă-Ogoranu, Nicolae Stroescu-Stânișoara and Răzvan Codrescu. Some of them are also mentioned by Lavric.

## **7. Ultrationalism expressed through the language of “Body politic”**

In the speeches of AUR members, the nation is often referred to with a vocabulary that draws an analogy to the human body. Such analogies between the body, various diseases, or parasites are reminiscent of the “body politics” of Nazi ideology (Musolff 2010), which also permeated the rhetoric of other interwar fascist movements, including the Romanian one (Bozdoghină 2012; Manu & Bozdoghină 2010; Volovici 1995). An example from the AUR election campaign: “When the body is estranged

from the body of the land / Today / The ancestors accuse us / And the bells are ringing!”<sup>46</sup> The additional reference to disease is used to create fear of threat, that the body is under attack. This is one of the rhetorical devices of exclusion used by right-wing populists (Wodak 2015), as well as by the extreme right, (ultra)nationalists and fascists, and has been central to eugenics policies (Solonari 2015; Cassata 2011; Turda 2009, 2007).

Interestingly, in the specific case of AUR and George Simion in particular, this rhetoric most often serves an anti-system function, with the political class being the most common target, defined as a parasite infesting the state<sup>47</sup> and making it sick<sup>48</sup> or as diseases that are highly symbolically charged because they have decimated populations, such as the “Red Plague”<sup>49</sup> (referring to PSD) or “the Green Plague” (referring to UDMR).

Body and disease analogies in the speeches of AUR members are also ideologized and serve their anti-left/anti-progressive/anti-globalization agenda. We see a clear example in Sorin Lavric’s podcast, who makes a clear analogy between the body and the nation, in order to create the warning of decay under the threat of the enemies of nationalism, namely “this current coming from Brussels, the extremely harmful neo-Marxist current”:

I will make the analogy between the nation and the organism. Just as the body has a metabolism without which it cannot exist, so the nation has a spiritual metabolism, which is nationalism. [...] The decline of a nation begins when its self-consciousness cools to a thermal threshold beyond which it loses its immunity and national instinct. And then you can be sure that sooner or later that nation will turn to dust.”<sup>50</sup>

In the same podcast, Lavric clearly specifies his vision of (ethno) nationalism as based on “ethnicity, language, religion” and as opposed to the definition of citizenship given by the “Brussels scribblers”<sup>51</sup> who want to “discredit the nation” by “inventing” the notion of a “civic nation” where citizenship is granted irrespective of religion or ethnicity. These beliefs are also shared by Claudiu Târziu, as can be heard in the podcast<sup>52</sup> that the two heads of AUR started together at the beginning of 2022.

## 8. The holy war between the Katechon and the Antichrist

In the face of such threats, which take on a religious dimension – being associated with the biblical apocalypse – AUR is portrayed as a Savior, a Defender, even a “Prophet” and biblical hero to fight the mythologized “war” against the Satanic neo-Marxists, globalists, progressives who are either allies or part of the national and supranational political elites (especially the EU) who allegedly want to destroy the nation, the family, Christianity and traditional values:

We are Christians, and because we are Christians, history for us has a linear course, at the end of which appears eschatology, the end. You remember Carl Schmitt’s [member of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party, active in supporting Nazism and antisemitism] theory that until the Last Judgment, if the Antichrist has not yet fallen into this world, and for us right now the Antichrist is this devastating neo-Marxism, if the Antichrist has not yet come, it is because there is a force that opposes the end of the world. And Carl Schmitt calls this the Katechon – which appears in the Epistle of St. Paul. May God let AUR be the Katechon of Romania that prevents the coming of the Antichrist. That’s how I see AUR. Because we did not enter politics out of political calculation, out of cunning, but as an act of faith and revolt. (Lavric in episode 2 of the “Conservatorii” [the Conservatives] podcast).

To this, Târziu replies that they must oppose “evil” neo-Marxism, just as their ancestors opposed communism, which saved us from becoming “slaves”.

Therefore, they argue, in the face of such “existential threats” and coming “catastrophe”<sup>53</sup> that nations have developed “antibodies” in the form of existing political parties that represent a mixture of right-wing populism, ultranationalism and ultraconservatism, far-right and neofascist politics: Fidesz in Hungary, Vox in Spain, Fratelli d’Italia (Brothers of Italy), Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice, PiS) in Poland and, of course, AUR in Romania.

The two ideologues of AUR, Lavric and Târziu, build an eschatological vision and attribute to themselves and their party a divine mission in a constructed war between the forces of *Evil* (“neo-Marxism”, the enemies of nationalism, etc.), associated with the Christian representation of Satan or the Antichrist, and the forces of *Good*, associated with Jesus Christ, manifested through AUR and other far-right parties. This weaponization of

Orthodoxy to construct a “holy war” against the enemy, which also draws on body politics, was an important feature of the interwar ultranationalist antisemitic rhetoric, especially that of A.C. Cuza and Nicolae Paulescu (Manu & Bozdoghină 2010), which contributed to the radicalization of violence against the Jewish “Other” (and the Communist “Other”, often portrayed as Jewish, and other minority groups such as the Roma population) that led to the Holocaust. It is also a patriarchal discourse that promotes a form of militarized spirituality similar to interwar rhetoric.

It is not nationalism that leads to wars, but the struggle between Good and Evil. This is our vision, and this is what separates us from all those who claim to want the Good of the country and the Good of the planet. I do not believe that peace can be brought about by legislation, no matter how well done. I believe that only when we do everything we can in the service of the Good, and the Good prevails, can we have peace. But there can be no peace everywhere, because Good cannot be established everywhere as long as Evil exists in the world.” (Târziu in ep. 2 of the podcast “Conservatorii”)

In fact, the vocabulary of war is very present, in different contexts or with different nuances, in all the posts of the three AUR leaders, pointing to this implicitly violent vision of politics and socio-cultural tensions. For all three, the common enemy is on the left of the political spectrum, especially the cultural left<sup>54</sup> and “globalists”, the perceived heirs of socialist internationalism, a threat to the nation. George Simion shares Lavric and Târziu’s belief in a war between Good and Evil, only the terminology differs slightly, bringing him closer to Trumpism. In the motion he presented at AUR congress in March 2022, entitled “The Rich Romania Motion: Christian and Democratic,” Simion states: “As the planetary battle unfolds today between patriots and globalists, between peoples and those without God, AUR stands firmly among the defenders of its peoples.”<sup>55</sup>. A reformulation of Lavric’s “Katechon” narrative, closer to national and religious conservative discourse. Simion also often uses war analogies to refer to opposition to the political establishment, which brings him closer to typical (right-wing) populist rhetoric.<sup>56</sup>

Claudiu Târziu also uses war-related vocabulary in his speech at the AUR congress: “We are the servants of a cause, not just party members, not to say soldiers, because now it is war [reference to the war in Ukraine] and we will be constantly asked to make sacrifices.” He thus asks AUR



members to be ready for such sacrifices.<sup>57</sup> And in episode 3 of the Conservatorii podcast,<sup>58</sup> he addresses the members of AUR and tries to cultivate in them the “spirit of sacrifice”, sacrifice in the form of money or even life at some point – *but not now*, he adds reassuringly, reiterating that they should be prepared. This consolidates AUR’s positioning as a “radical return” party, relying on rhetorical devices typical of the legionary movement, such as the cult of sacrifice, the cult of death, and also its fascist dimension, resulting from an implicit revolutionary vision:

No one is asking you to give up your life for the party or the country. No one is asking you NOW. Perhaps the time will come when we will be forced to choose: to live on our knees or to live on our feet, whatever the risks. Even at the risk of losing our lives. But now is not the time. But we have to keep in mind to have this perspective, to think that we can also get there. (Târziu in ep. 3 of the podcast “Conservatorii”)

## **9. “The Resurrection is our country project”: Orthodox palingenetic ultranationalism**

Returning to Roger Griffin’s (1991) conceptualization of fascism as “a palingenetic form of populist ultranationalism,” we have already seen the elements of populist ultranationalism in AUR’s rhetoric, but to what extent do the party’s representatives also display a revolutionary vision in which the current alleged decay of society would be replaced by a national rebirth?

Such a vision is clearly present in the beliefs of AUR ideologues Sorin Lavric and Claudiu Târziu, as shown in their discourses from the Conservatorii podcast presented earlier. They construct a sense of impending catastrophe, of a society in decay, of nations on the verge of extinction because of “neo-Marxism” – their Antichrist. At this turning point in the struggle between Good and Evil, Christians and the Antichrist (or those without religion, an implicit reference to atheist socialism), AUR is depicted as the “Katechon of Romania that prevents the coming of the Antichrist”, and implicitly, AUR members are prophets or “soldiers” with a divine savior mission.

The myth of national rebirth as a result of peak decay appears in different forms in the speeches of various AUR members. Immediately after the electoral success in December 2020, Lavric sent a public call

to intellectuals on the right to support AUR and “put their shoulder to the wheel of a spiritual rebirth”.<sup>59</sup> At the AUR Congress in March 2022, Claudiu Târziu spoke in his speech of a “national rebirth movement [...] to rebuild from the ground up, on the path of normality, a Romania lost in transition”.<sup>60</sup> This vision is similar to Lavric’s: “the rebirth of this nation on its true Christian foundations, full of love for country and nation.”<sup>61</sup>

George Simion’s motion to the Congress also paints a picture of a country in deep crisis, “where the demographic deficit has reached apocalyptic proportions” and the population is “impoverished, discouraged and hopeless”. This bleak picture of the present is contrasted with the promise of a brighter future, in which Romania would take its rightful place among the leading countries: “we can be reborn from our own ashes and we can be among the respected peoples of the world.”<sup>62</sup>

Similar to the interwar legionary movement, which was an autochthonous permutation of fascism adapted to the local context by the addition of radical Orthodoxism, contemporary permutations follow the same direction. This is most evident in the speech of Andrei Dîrlău<sup>63</sup>, a theologian and member of the AUR Senate, at the Congress, where the fascist myth of national rebirth is interpreted through a Christian lens, that of Christ’s resurrection:

I tell you that an era is ending, the period of the so-called transition, an endless transition into nothingness, into economic, social and demographic disaster [...] After 33 years<sup>64</sup>, the Resurrection is coming, Romania must be resurrected, and this resurrection will be done by you, who have brought AUR here, where it is now, through your courage and your work. You will resurrect Romania, you will be, you must be, the Resurrection of Romania, you will be, you must be, the Resurrection of this country. And you will be, because you already are. The proof is that you’re here. Together we will raise Romania from the deadly sleep of indifference, of betrayal, of theft, of lies, of enmity between Romanians and Romanians. **Resurrection is our country project [...]**

A similar revolutionary Orthodoxist thinking is shared by the ideologues of AUR in the 14<sup>th</sup> episode of their podcast entitled “Christ the Revolutionary”<sup>65</sup> where they draw a parallel between Christ’s Resurrection – that they deem “a turning point” – and the political mission of Christians. Claudiu Târziu states that Jesus “calls us to a revolution”, meaning “a process of restoring us as human beings”. This “personal revolution” is opposed by the alleged “counter-revolution” of the left,

which Lavric calls “the tool of the Devil”, whose aim is “the destruction of man, his dehumanization” by removing the “divine tremor” and isolating man from God. It is the duty of Christians, they add, to stop the Evil that is now coming through legislation (possibly alluding to issues of sexual education and gender identity) and to “better the other” not in a despotic way, but by personal example. Claudiu Târziu seems to calculate his words, using revolutionary terminology as a dog whistle, while calibrating his discourse with more mystical connotations on a personal rather than political or collective level. This may well be a strategy of calculated ambivalence in order to avoid being labeled an extremist, a clear concern for all AUR leaders, who have repeatedly denied such accusations (Marincea 2022c).

A similar strategy is used by George Simion, whose revolutionary mentions are more concise and/or ambivalent. Some examples: in January 2022, during the live video of the celebration organized by AUR in memory of the poet Mihai Eminescu (one of the leading figures of the legionary mythology), he states: “We must peacefully complete the revolution of the Romanian people”.<sup>66</sup> A similar ambivalence is present in an interview right after the 2020 elections, where Simion stated: “We are a form of revolution, our model is the conservatives in Poland.”<sup>67</sup>

It would appear from these statements that the AUR leaders are reframing the concept of Revolution in a peaceful, conservative, personal or spiritual way that would show them as moderates. However, in the context of their other discourses, where they construct a “holy war” against an ideological opponent and call on Christians and AUR members to be ready to sacrifice their lives when the moment comes, there are enough indications that the ambivalence is more of a dog whistle than an authentic political moderation.

In addition, the revolutionary dimension is also suggested by the cult of different revolutionary figures that is cultivated within the AUR in relation to the 1989 revolutionaries, the interwar legionaries or the revolutionaries of 1848. This clearly shows their affinity and admiration for revolutionary politics.

## **10. Conclusions**

AUR has often been described as a mixture of ideological affiliations ranging from far-right or right-wing populist to ultranationalist and (neo)

fascist or, more precisely, (neo)legionary. A conceptual clarity regarding their ideological position seems hard to achieve, not only because of the differences between the main leaders of AUR, but also because of the frequent ambivalence or contradiction between their actions and statements and their ulterior denials or reframings. This paper argues that this type of ambiguity is a calculated political strategy, and shows how AUR leaders use social media to revive and update fascist narratives in conjunction with right-wing populist rhetoric.

AUR is not the first political formation to return to interwar fascist politics – such parties or “grassroots” groups have emerged since the 1990s, as the paper shows. However, AUR is the first “radical return” party to succeed in entering mainstream politics. By reviving Legionary ideas and tropes such as the cult of death, sacrifice, martyrdom, by commemorating fascist figures, especially by proposing them for sanctification through the myth of the “Prison Saints”, they normalize fascism and bring it into mainstream circulation. All this while denying or using different discursive strategies to avoid being held accountable and sanctioned for promoting fascist ideas or symbols.

In answering the two research questions that guided the empirical research, the study shows how AUR leaders combine populist rhetoric with fascist elements, and that while they sometimes prioritize or frame topics differently, they share a common ideological substrate. The analysis focuses primarily – but not exclusively – on the discursive level, using a hybrid research approach that combines quantitative methods like Corpus Linguistics with the more qualitative DHA.

The analysis shows that AUR leaders tend to define “the people” in ethnonationalist and religious terms, while many groups are implicitly or explicitly excluded from the collective “we”. The most demonized by all three AUR leaders is the ideological other – the leftist, progressive (or culturally liberal), (neo/cultural) Marxist, communist, Bolshevik, or globalist – all terms used interchangeably to denote a strong and explicit anti-left and anti-liberal sentiment. Anti-communism is also used in attacks on political elites and in the exclusion – either subtle or overt – of different minority groups such as the LGBTQIA+ community, refugees, the Jewish minority, atheists. Antisemitic gestures or remarks, including the repetition of the fascist “Judeo-Bolshevism” trope, are also present in different forms, often disguised by different discursive strategies such as denial, calculated ambivalence, minimization.

The preferred target of exclusionary populism sometimes differs among the three AUR leaders beyond their clear anti-left consensus. In the case of Simion and Lavric, “the other” is often defined in ethnic and religious terms and expressed implicitly rather than explicitly. Simion has a clear anti-Hungarian agenda, which he promotes through conspiracy theories about plans for Hungarian domination of Transylvania, reigniting historical ethnic tensions between Romanians and the Hungarian minority. Lavric, on the other hand, is less concerned with Hungarian ethnicity and more hostile to the Jewish community, which he repeatedly refers to as “Marxist Masorettes”. As for Târziu, his exclusionary attacks are less often based on ethnicity and more often on conservative grounds, targeting LGBTQIA+ groups and progressives who promote “gender ideology” and sexual education and are perceived as a threat to traditional (family) values.

All three AUR members, as well as the party itself, manifest a rhetoric of “total populism” that combines anti-establishment positions with people-centeredness and exclusionary politics. Their political affinities and oppositions are also manifested at the linguistic level through the vocabulary chosen, which denotes Christian ultraconservative, ultranationalist and patriarchal values and overlaps to some extent with the terminology and tropes used by the Legionary Movement. Also similar is the instrumentalization of popular culture for political propaganda, as AUR and its leaders are very adept at promoting their views through audio-visual materials such as memes, (live) videos, poems and songs, aesthetics and symbolism, rituals and ceremonies.

AUR goes beyond mere populism and even beyond far-right politics by adding other elements specific to fascist politics, such as virulent anti-communism and ethno-religious ultranationalism combined with palingenetic and revolutionary visions. Like the Legionary Movement, AUR retains Orthodoxy as an autochthonous Romanian trait of local fascist thought and borrows from the legionary repertoire the cult of death, the cult of sacrifice and martyrdom, and that of the movement’s leaders. This process of mythologization is constructed through the anti-communist cult of the “Prison Saints”, which introduces mysticism into its politics.

The palingenetic and revolutionary dimension of AUR’s political vision is intertwined with Orthodox eschatological myths such as the resurrection of Christ and the Last Judgment. Lavric, in particular, borrows from a Nazi intellectual the political interpretation of the biblical Katechon as the force that defends Christians against the coming of the Antichrist and the End of the World. He instrumentalizes Christianity for political

and electoral purposes, as the interwar fascists had done before him, and defines AUR as the heroic Katechon fighting the biblical war against the “neo-Marxist” Antichrist.

This view is shared by Claudiu Târziu, who is well rooted in a network of former members and active supporters of the Legion – including priests and the neo-legionary publishing infrastructure that has been working for three decades to rehabilitate Legionary ideas and leaders.

On the other hand, George Simion initially seems less concerned with such complex ideological-spiritual-political devices. Orthodoxism, however, is a central element of his discourse, as are conservative values and virulent anti-communism. But while Târziu and Lavric could well be defined as AUR’s ideologues, Simion – a former football ultras and gallery leader – is more pragmatic and action-oriented, reminiscent of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, whom he also copies.<sup>68</sup> He draws inspiration not only from the Legionary Movement, but also from Trumpism and the alt-right, along with the far-right stadium culture. Although often on a more superficial level, his discourse and actions are intertwined with legionary symbolism (such as his Codreanu-inspired 2022 wedding) and ideas, possibly under the influence of Târziu and Lavric, especially after their 2020 electoral success.

Simion shares the Manichean patriarchal rhetoric of AUR ideologues about an alleged global war in which AUR is the defender of Christians against the evil, Godless Left. The main difference is the specific vocabulary they choose. While Lavric and Târziu return to Orthodox ultranationalist and fascist repertoire of the interwar period, Simion updates this terminology and anchors it in current international right-wing political rhetoric (e.g. “patriots” vs. “globalists”). This strategy may serve as a dog whistle, circumventing liberal and anti-fascist norms by drawing on the more respectable and less compromising language of populism and conservatism. But the fascist core that resides in palingenetic and revolutionary visions is also present in Simion’s discourse, as most clearly shown in his candidacy motion at AUR congress.

## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, AUR also complemented its online strategy with intense offline campaigning, travelling around the country, especially in rural areas, during the electoral campaign.

<sup>3</sup> Recent examples from two of Romania's leading TV stations (Digi24 and Antena 3) shared disinformation content: On 1 June 2022 on the Evening News, Digi24 aired a 14-year-old video of a Russian young boy being interviewed in a club, claiming that it was a present-day interview with a Russian soldier about the war in Ukraine. Antena 3 aired in March 2022 images from a video game, while the journalists and participants in the TV show commented as if it were real footage from the war in Ukraine, where a Russian plane being shot down.

<sup>4</sup> A similar strategy was used in May 2022 by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov who falsely claimed that Adolf Hitler had Jewish origins.

<sup>5</sup> The acronym BINE also means "good".

<sup>6</sup> The exact same name was used for the official newspaper of the Legionary Movement (see Clark 2015)

<sup>7</sup> Other recent similar organization can be found in Totok 2018

<sup>8</sup> Facebook page (FB): partidulAUR

<sup>9</sup> FB: george.simion.unire

<sup>10</sup> FB: pagina.sorinlavric

<sup>11</sup> His public pages can be accessed at: claudiutarziuaur. Previously, Târziu also had (and still has) a personal account (claudiu.rost), but due to privacy concerns (acknowledging, however, that the information set as public on Facebook is considered public similar to that on other platforms) and because CrowdTangle does not allow downloading of data from personal accounts, the posts from his personal profile were not included in the analysis.

<sup>12</sup> The computational scripts have been elaborated with the support of dr. Sergiu Nisioi, who is specialized in Natural Language Processing (NLP).

<sup>13</sup> FB George Simion, 09 December 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/2212856535602171/posts/2927970227424128>.

- 14 "Oameni de AUR". This is a play on words. In Romanian, AUR – the name of the party – means gold. So the implicit suggestion is that the members of the party are valuable like gold.
- 15 "(Măria Sa) Țăranul ROMÂN". The legionary discourse was also centered around rurality, making the peasant as the ideal typical Romanian.
- 16 "Cuiburi" – the name of the legionary groups that formed the infrastructure of the movement
- 17 Codreanu, 1940, Point 22, p. 18.
- 18 FB AUR, 11 June 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/103445844473825/posts/179412730210469>.
- 19 FB AUR, 04 January 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/103445844473825/posts/250765039741904>.
- 20 FB AUR, 24 July 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/103445844473825/posts/370952811056459>.
- 21 FB AUR, 30 April 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/103445844473825/posts/318920432926364>.
- 22 FB AUR, 05 May 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/103445844473825/posts/321611222657285>.
- 23 FB AUR, 10 October 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/103445844473825/posts/422873145864425>.
- 24 FB Claudiu Târziu, 25 April 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/100077113097685/posts/142439481669821>.
- 25 FB Târziu, 26 February 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/104417752138292/posts/125469820033085>.
- 26 FB Târziu, 16 May 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/100077113097685/posts/148169761096793>.
- 27 FB Sorin Lavric, 18 February 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/102671705122498/posts/116029047120097>.
- 28 FB Lavric, 01 March 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/102671705122498/posts/119298133459855>.
- 29 FB Simion, 05 November 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/2212856535602171/posts/360354055190348>.
- 30 The Minerriads were a series of inter-political and violent miners' uprisings that took place in the 1990s as a counter-reaction to the University Square (student) protests also known as "Golaniada" against the political actors who had taken power after the fall of Ceaușescu's national-communism and were accused of being heir of the former regime. The latter mobilized miners to (violently) repress the protests.
- 31 FB Simion, 03 March 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/2212856535602171/posts/2654572231430597>.
- 32 FB Simion, 22 January 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/2212856535602171/posts/2618624328358721>.



33 FB Simion, 23 May 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/100044563410651/posts/515998700220602>.

34 FB Simion, 16 March 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/2212856535602171/posts/3009036822650801>.

35 FB Simion, 27 April 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/100044563410651/posts/538456584316451>.

36 FB Târziu, 07 April 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/100077113097685/posts/137402768840159>.

37 FB Târziu, 11 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/104417752138292/posts/129261956320538>.

38 FB Târziu, 26 May 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/100077113097685/posts/150920784155024>.

39 FB Târziu, 12 May 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/100077113097685/posts/147250554522047>.

40 FB Târziu, 11 February 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/104417752138292/posts/120622217184512>.

41 FB Târziu, 24 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/100077113097685/posts/133530425894060>.

42 FB Târziu, 14 February 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/104417752138292/posts/121699170410150>.

43 FB Târziu, 12 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/104417752138292/posts/129491089630958>.

44 However, recent historical research has pointed out that the torture suffered by some of the legionary detainees in contexts like the infamous “Pitești experiment” may have been the source of legionary violence, rather than communist violence, as it has been widely claimed (see Demetriade in *Observatorul Cultural* No. 994, 08 November 2019).

45 The phrase was heavily used by the interwar fascist and ultranationalist propaganda internationally, as well as in Romania. Some examples of interwar newspaper articles using the “Red Plague” (“Ciuma roșie”) phrase to attack communism and promote fascist ideas can be found in newspapers like *Foiaia Poporului* Year 47, nr. 6, 5 February 1939, p. 3 and *România Nouă*, in articles praising Hitler and his antisemitic views or Mussolini’s fascism, or in unionist, anti-Soviet propaganda.

46 The verses are part of a longer nationalist poem recited by a 4-year-old Bessarabian child at a popular talent show on one of the leading TV channels in Romania and have a unionist claim: the Romanians and Moldovans are “blood brothers” and therefore the two countries should be united again. George Simion shared a video capture of this segment of the show on his page. This is his 3<sup>rd</sup> most popular post before the elections. In February 2020, it reached almost 3 million view on his page, and another 2 million on other 3 pages where it was crossposted (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2855395961216032>).

- 47 George Simion in a video of his speeches during the election campaign in different cities, post from 30 November 2020 titled: "In Arad and Oradea, about the infestation of the Romanian state with party membership cards" (<https://www.facebook.com/2212856535602171/posts/2918430901711394>).
- 48 Phrase from George Simion's pre-election campaign at a meeting with the people of Pitești. The live video from 05 November 2020 is his second most popular post from the pre-election corpus, reaching close to 3 million views and over 44,000 shares (<https://www.facebook.com/2212856535602171/posts/360354055190348>).
- 49 See also the previous note regarding the fascist origins of the "Red Plague" phrase.
- 50 In the first episode of Lavric's podcast called "Despot de Nuanțe" ("Despot of Nuances"). The episode is titled "NAȚIONALISMUL" ("Nationalism") and was published on 30 January 2022 (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=690688468616671>). He published only 4 episodes of the podcast, as he then launched the podcast "Conservatorii" ("The Conservatives") together with Claudiu Târziu, where they discuss the same political ideas. The other 3 episodes are on Lavric's activity in the Parliament, on Euroscepticism and on his anti-Marxist and anti-communist views.
- 51 In Romanian: "Conțopiștii de la Bruxelles". In Episode 1 of "Despot de Nuanțe".
- 52 Episode 2, "Nationalism", of the podcast "Conservatorii", published on YouTube on 3 February 2022 (<https://youtu.be/chIBgbAsDfM>) and shared on their Facebook pages.
- 53 Also in Episode 4 of "Conservatorii" podcast (<https://youtu.be/yMyeXvAjXNk>), titled "Conservatism", the two construct this narrative of impending doom caused by "devastating progress" and the Evil forces of neo-Marxism and induce the idea of a war between Good and Evil, as opposed to the "illusion of peace" and of AUR being the "Katechon" that defends the forces of Good against the Antichrist.
- 54 Sorin Lavric, in the first episode of his podcast on Nationalism: "The Antichrist is nothing but this neo-Marxism, disguised either in the political correctness, or in the LGBT movement, the doctrine of sexual identity etc."
- 55 FB Simion, 27 March 2022, "THE RICH ROMANIA MOTION: Christian and Democratic", <https://www.facebook.com/100044563410651/posts/518417639653679>.
- 56 E.g. In a live video from his electoral campaign, one of his top posts with almost 3 million views, Simion cites "The art of war" by Sun Tzu when talking about the political class.
- 57 A video of the Congress was posted on Simion's Facebook page, 27 March 2022 (<https://www.facebook.com/100044563410651/posts/703611214015619>), but was subsequently removed.

- 58 Episode 3. polls – unity – honour, published on Târziu’s YouTube channel  
on 8 February 2022 ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78Zo0v\\_gz5E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78Zo0v_gz5E)).
- 59 See: [r3media.ro/multumiri](https://www.r3media.ro/multumiri)
- 60 FB Simion, 27 March 2022, “THE RICH ROMANIA MOTION: Christian  
and Democratic”.
- 61 In Episode 12 of “Conservatorii” podcast titled “Anticommunism, necessity  
or trend?”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5f-xGIBCII>.
- 62 In George Simion’s post that publishes the text of his motion at the Congress  
of AUR.
- 63 At the congress held on 27 March 2022, when the new leadership of AUR  
was elected, George Simion and Claudiu Târziu (the two co-presidents of  
AUR) ran on the same motion. There was only one competing motion led by  
an AUR deputy from Constanța, Dănuț Aelenei, who stated that the reason  
for his candidacy was to prove that there is still democracy in AUR – hinting  
towards the criticism expressed by several (ex)members regarding Simion’s  
authoritarian leadership. Aelenei also complained that his motion was not  
sent to the party members. The lack of transparency was also denounced  
by the press, which was not allowed to attend the Congress.  
Andrei Dîrlău, who read the motion, was part of Aelenei’s team. The Congress  
changed the leadership structure: instead of two co-presidents, only one such  
position remained – that won by Simion. This strengthened the accusations  
of “dictatorship” that were already circulating within the party.
- 64 Previously, he made a religious analogy: “33 years since the 1989 Revolution,  
the same as Christ’s age when he died on the cross and resurrected”.
- 65 Published on 21 April 2022 on Facebook and YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VMm7NR3WUYY>.
- 66 FB Simion, 15 January 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/100044563410651/posts/532367194611605>.
- 67 See <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/interviu-george-simion-despre-cine-e-%C3%AEn-spatele-aur-legionari-rusia-%C8%99i-politicieni/30990612.html>.
- 68 Simion borrowed the aesthetic of the traditional shirt called “ie” that  
Codreanu used to wear, and organized his wedding in a similar fashion to  
Codreanu.

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