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Biographical note

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WHEN THE CIVIC BECOMES EXTREME: ACCOUNTING FOR FAR-RIGHT GROUPS' READINESS FOR ACTION IN ROMANIA*

Manuel Mireanu

Abstract

This paper begins by observing that contemporary grassroots Romanian far-right groups have a penchant for taking action, going beyond speeches and imagery and into the field of voluntary political activism. This activism is rooted in a securitizing discourse that drives far-right groups to defend themselves against perceived threats. This paper asks: *how can we empirically and theoretically account for the contemporary grassroots Romanian far-right groups' affinity for security-infused actions?* Methodologically, the research employs ethnographic tools alongside historical and discourse analysis. The 'actionism' of the Romanian far right is in tune with middle-class calls for civic engagement. It also serves as a means of supplying security in response to a perceived deficient state. This paper draws three arguments from the empirical and theoretical analysis of Romanian groups: first, far-right action seeks to legitimise violence as spectacle; second, far-right activism aims to permeate mainstream liberal politics; and third, far-right actions and events create temporary zones where fascist futures are enacted.

Keywords: Romanian politics; far-right groups; security; ethnography; political violence

1. Introduction

Over the past few years, the Romanian far-right has shown that it is more than capable of acting on what it wants to see happen. The Romanian far right is increasingly engaging in practices that go beyond declarations, speeches and social media posts, from organising various rallies and trainings (Marincea, 2022) to committing isolated but worrying acts of violence against marginalised groups (Crețan and O'Brien, 2019). All this is happening in a volatile international context, where the far right has managed not only to gain political and parliamentary power (as in Austria or Italy), but also to have a constant presence in public spaces, a presence that ranges from marching against immigrants (as in Germany) to forming patrols against Roma (in Hungary) (Mireanu, 2024) or assassinating political opponents (as in Greece) (Mireanu and Gkresta, 2013). The activism of the extreme right is also a central element of the conflict in the current Russian invasion of Ukraine (Townsend, 2022).

1.1 Literature review

So far, with few exceptions (Marincea and Popovici, 2022), the scholars that research the contemporary Romanian far-right groups have focused mainly on analysing their discourse (Chiruta, 2022), symbolism (Zavatti, 2021) and ideational universe (Clark, 2020). This in itself is a praiseworthy exercise, as it allows us to sketch a comprehensive image of the narratives and the imaginary that stand behind both the rhetoric and the actions of these groups. Despite what may seem at times like an inflated concern for gathering empirical material, the value of the current research on far-right extremism is indisputable (Totok and Macovei, 2016).

However, this focus on the discursive aspects leaves a number of unanswered questions: what role does the readiness for action play in Romanian far-right politics? Is it a revolutionary role that hopes to establish (or reinstate) a particular social order? Or does it function as an exercise of civic duties and is therefore complementary rather than antagonistic to state institutions? What are the resources employed by these groups when they take actions? How do these actions relate to the mainstream public that may or may not legitimise such practices?

In my own research I focused on the various mechanisms of far-right actions, exploring instances from different European countries. I have initially researched vigilante groups, which are predominantly far right,

and which perform patrolling acts in order to defend what they see as threats to the society (Mireanu, 2015). Subsequently, I shifted my focus to individual actors that, while not affiliated to the far right, carry out, at times, similar efforts by enacting violence against marginalised groups (Mireanu, 2021). In recent years I undertook research on the phenomenon of Romanian paramilitary groups after World War I, which is a concern for a set of proto-fascist practices that stand at the very foundation of the modern Romanian state (Mireanu, 2023).

In all these studies, extremist action followed a similar pattern, whereby actions were determined and justified as means to tackle security threats. The literature on security studies shows the mechanisms of threat construction, through which societal actors articulate a danger to the community, using a friend versus enemy logic to establish the legitimacy for pursuing violent acts (Williams, 2003). Such acts are performed by paramilitary and/or vigilante groups that contest the state's monopoly on violence and derive their legitimacy from providing security in response to demands of various social groups. Scholars have underlined the similarities between the mechanisms of security and those of far-right activism – historical and contemporary (Neocleous, 2009). At the same time, these scholars have pointed out that far-right groups see the political realm as being imbued with the same logic of fear that runs through the ontology of security: the adversary is 'the enemy' that threatens 'us', and if 'we' do not take action (exclusionary violence) 'the enemy' will eliminate us (Huysmans, 2008).

On the other hand, recent ethnographic studies on vigilantism look beyond this security function. Such studies ground their analyses in an array of empirical data. This data shows how the actions of these groups are embedded in their social environment (Yonucu, 2022). These scholars talk about 'regimes of vigilance', whereby the state fosters a climate of constant alertness, in which citizens are called upon to be watchful and report on the social and political so-called enemy (Ivasiuc et al., 2022). Vigilance shows the intersection of discourses, practices, measures, materialities, technologies, images, situations etc, which is needed to construct a culture of continuous awareness towards potential threats.

When we turn our attention to the Romanian far-right groups, we can see that they rarely perform vigilante functions (i.e., responding to security demands from the population). They also do not always take heed of the state's requests to be vigil.

At the same time, these groups do employ a security discourse, whereby they see themselves and their community as being threatened by various factors (such as secularism, modernity, foreign conspirators, leftist social movements etc). Their readiness for action is constructed as a self defence mechanism against the attacks of these multiple factors. Moreover, they strive to enforce a culture of vigilance that runs parallel to the state's security efforts, which are seen as incapable or useless. This culture of vigilance seeks to defend the memory of the glorious past, the cult of national heroes, Christian values and ethnic purity.

Romanian far-right groups engage in a variety of forms of actions that range from marches, ceremonies, instances of spectacle, displays of military uniforms and upholding places of memory associated with the fascist past (Zavatti, 2021), all the way to military training camps (Totok, 2018; Marincea, 2022), martial performativities and acts of riot such as the attempts to storm the parliament (Chiruta, 2022, pp. 153 – 4). The regime of vigilance employed by the far right thus becomes itself a danger to the state's monopoly of violence and ultimately, to the democratic rule of law.

1.2 Analytical aspects and the research question

How do the far-right groups themselves account for this focus on actions? In a video-podcast published in 2023 on their website, the leader of the Cluj-based group called 'Comunitatea identitară' explains that Romanian 'nationalist' groups are too small and scattered to form a veritable political opposition. Hence, their energies must be directed towards a long-term struggle against the current corrupt system. Nihilism and scepticism are to be avoided at all costs, as are comfort and complacency. One has a duty to act. One must build and maintain character, must develop patience and must train the body and mind. Yet, above all, we are told, the 'nationalist' lifestyle is centred on Christian-Orthodox faith, which is a lived experience. He goes on: '*we shall combine education with militantism, with going in the streets to undertake actions that are necessary for the cause, our deeds will be our discourse, we will train ourselves to get used to constant effort. To us, nationalism is a belief, not only an ideology, and will be therefore lived by us as a lifestyle. We will organise community work actions, defeating any trace of laziness. We are soldiers of Romania, thus we despise comfort and love the trenches*'[1]

Leaving the far-right tropes aside for a moment, what is striking in this message is the emphasis on public engagement, involvement and

effort for others, for a community, for the nation and for the future. This emphasis resonates to a great extent with more mainstream and large-scale movements from the second half of the 2010's in Romania. The imperative to 'get in the streets' and enact societal and political change as well as the idea that one has a duty to act for the common welfare of the nation have been fuelling the engines of anti-corruption protests such as the *Rezist* movement of 2017. Consider these quotes from Ruxandra Cesereanu, a Cluj-based poet and anti-communist writer: '*The true goal of the 2107 protests was the fight against passivity.* […] *There was a palpable vitality, a spectacle that resembled a kind of communion between all those present.* […] *We observed a dose of* bonton [sic] *pragmatism among the protesters, who stopped whining, stopped lamenting on the streets.* […] *In Cluj, the protesters kept shouting to the people living in communist flats: "Wake up! Join us, for we try to awaken the entire country"*'.[2] One notices that the call for civic action against the corrupt state comes from a place of vitality, of rejecting passivity and scepticism, of positive engagement with perceived social problems.

The Romanian contemporary far right is grounding its activism on similar tropes as the ones used by the *Rezist* movement. In fact, the two movements have not been entirely separate. A number of violent incidents that have occurred in the first day of the anti-corruption protests have been blamed by the authorities on football supporters. Some of them were members in far-right groups, such as *Honor et Patria*, which has links to the leader of Romania's largest far-right group, the party AUR.[3]

Veda Popovici has argued that the Romanian middle class has been able to accommodate and facilitate fascism by including and even welcoming actors with far-right ideas in its milieus, and especially in civic movements such as the '*Rezist'* protests. Referring to the cohabitation of AUR's leader within liberal protests, Popovici argues: '*It's this kind of social dynamics and type of organizing that have actually accommodated and empowered fascism, allowing it to rise, as we can see in the present* (Marincea and Popovici, 2022).' To this, McElroy adds that Romanian neoliberalism has been able to foster fascism by endowing the local middle class with '*technological fantasies*' of '*gaining Silicon status*' – a corruption-free, technologically advanced post-socialist future (McElroy, 2024, p. 103).

In tandem with these authors, I argue that the capacity of the mainstream Romanian middle class to cohabitate with fascist practices (up to a certain point) is given by a shared belief that ethical considerations should be

translated into action. The concept of civility plays a key role here. For the middle class, part of aspiring to be as 'the West' is to be actively engaged in the life of the *polis*. It means being a proactive citizen that notices, reports and solves problems in the community, without expecting the involvement of the state. The Romanian far right taps into this modality and brings its own agenda.

I therefore argue from the premise that many of the methods used by far-right groups – civic engagement, protests, denunciations – are imbued with the same respectable, ethical and civic ethos as those of the middle class' repertoire, from which far-right groups get inspiration. However, the 'problems' that citizens are called to solve in order to preserve the welfare of the *polis* pertain to the far-right imaginary, in which threats and security play a central role.

The research question of this paper is: *how can we empirically and theoretically account for the contemporary grassroots Romanian far-right groups' affinity for security-infused actions?*

This question has two dimensions. The first is the *empirical* one, in which I will undertake two tasks: I will situate the centrality of action in Romanian far-right groups in a historical context, tying it to a paramilitary ethos that present throughout its history (Section 2); I will then present my own ethnographical findings on contemporary far-right groups (Section 3).

The second dimension is the *theoretical* one, and I will also divide it in two tasks: I will first discuss contemporary far-right action in Romania, and how it relates to the middle-class ethos shaped by neoliberalism (Section 4); subsequently, I will analyse how practices of security and discourses of threat play into far-right groups' actions (Section 5).

1.3 Methodological considerations

The research presented here aimed to be what Kathleen Blee (2007, p. 121) calls an 'internalist' study of the far right. Methodologically, it is be based on what Christian Bueger and myself (2015, p. 118) call 'proximity to practice'. In other words, rather than providing yet another take on the discourses, narratives, imagery and symbolism used by far-right groups, in this study I chose to focus on practices. I shift the focus from what the far-right groups say to what they do.

This focus is, of course, not constructed in opposition to the discursive level, since the point is not to establish a dichotomy between speech and action. Language is clearly capable of actively instantiating effects –

social actors can 'do things with words' (Austin, 1962). My purpose in this paper is rather to show how political actors are able to transform their ideological programs into corresponding activities. As such, the practices that I am interested in are not the unintentional and un-reflexive actions informed by habitus and routines that Bourdieu and others refer to. Instead, I focus on programmatic behaviour, forms of practice that are aligned with the actors' intentions, motives, preferences and interests.[4] Whether far-right groups organise rallies against their opponents, or they engage in voluntary work or in commemorative rituals, they act with purposes that are clear and transparent to them, and which have to do with furthering and accomplishing their political and social ideals. They transpose discourse into action.

The methodological tools that I found to be most applicable to study these practices come from ethnography. This toolkit contains activities such as immersion, participant observation, 'hanging out' and talking to people. I have employed them in various degrees in my research, with the objective of getting as close as possible to the groups I wanted to write about. There were, however, considerable limitations to these tools, and to the degree of proximity I was able and willing to achieve. Issues of time, safety and political affinity came into play.

I have therefore complemented my methodology with historical research. The paper contains a thorough historical analysis of Romanian far-right groups, one that is able to flesh out the continuities and innovations in terms of the practices employed by these groups. I also used internet and social media sources as a way of documenting actions and events, and also as a source of information regarding various aspects of the groups under scrutiny. Lastly, I used insights from secondary literature in order to focus on various elements of the political and social context in which these groups operate: neoliberalism, postsocialism, the ethics of the middle class, and so on.

2. A Century of Far-Right Activism and Paramilitarism

The year 1918 can be considered the starting point of the modern Romanian state. Emerging victorious after a dramatic and strenuous war, the country enlarged its territory, incorporating lands that were inhabited by Romanian speakers and that were historically considered to be part of the 'mother land'. The Romanian army became a pivotal actor in this

historical event, as the enlargement was mostly secured through military means. The new borders were the results of military campaigns against the armies of Hungary, Germany, Bulgaria, Soviet Russia and Ukraine. Certainly, diplomatic discussions played a key role in preserving the territorial conquests and ensuring international recognition. Yet, the army succeeded in placing itself at the centre of the Romanian national unity process.

It is therefore safe to argue that Romanian nationalism has a pronounced martial character. Bellicose violence appears as the essential ingredient for constructing the nation-state, for eliminating foreign enemies and for maintaining internal peace. Being invested with such a primordial role, violence becomes difficult to contain within the confines of the state's institutions. Since Romanian nationalism has historically been a project embraced by most strata of the society, and since this nationalism has martial characteristics, it is not farfetched to argue that violence is easily legitimised as a method of dealing with political adversaries and as a constituent factor of the way in which the Romanian society perceives itself nationally.

This has been visible from the outset. The crown jewel of the so-called great union of 1918 was the joining of Transylvania to the Romanian territories. To this day, the foremost Romanian national holiday celebrates this act. Yet, the history around this event is marked by violence. Despite 'the union' being celebrated as a democratic assembly in which people freely voted for Transylvania to become part of Romania, history paints a far more violent picture. It is essential to note that this violence did not always emerge from the state, it was not always the violence of the army or police. Rather, it was paramilitary violence.

Paramilitary groups that functioned on their own or under the control of a temporary local authority were a common phenomenon in 1918 in Transylvania, especially after the Imperial authority of the Austro-Hungarians collapsed. The local Romanian elites sought to centralise these groups and place them under their control, in order to enforce their dominion over Transylvania. As such, these groups contributed to the imposition of Romanian authority in the province. They also facilitated the imposition and preservation of peace, in a territory that was ripe with inter-ethnic conflicts, and that was left in a state of destruction after the war (Mireanu, 2023).

The Transylvanian paramilitaries operated in the months of November and December 1918, before the Romanian army could claim full

control of the province. Their acts of violence were mostly directed against Hungarians and Jews, who were seen as potential contenders for the political and economic domination of the province. These two enemies were often conflated into a single one, namely Communism (or Bolshevism). The fear of the 'Bolshevik threat' was already discernible from the first signs of revolutionary unrest (Szász, 1999, p. 272). The communist threat was discursively constructed as one of the justifications for the use of force against any rebellious act. The label 'communist' was often more useful than 'traitor to the nation', especially as the rebels often included Romanians.

The first victims of this repression were uprising peasants, who would take advantage of the dissolution of the gendarmerie, and attack the properties of wealthy local landlords. These uprisings were quickly quenched, as the Romanian Transylvanian elite considered the peasants to be 'infected' by bolshevism (Constantinescu and Pascu, 1971, p. 299; Liveanu, 1960, pp. 528 - 30). Local republics and self-governing bodies (such as the one built by the Romanian and Hungarian miners in the Jiu valley) were also violently suppressed using paramilitary forces, as were social protests and strikes. Any alternative political vision that did not correspond to the nationalist line established by Romanian politicians was seen as being anti-national, and paying lip service to Budapest or the Soviet Union.

It would be a stretch to consider these paramilitary groups or their leaders as having clear far-right or even proto-fascist ideas, as it had been the case in Hungary (Bodó, 2019). However, one cannot conceal that their violence was motivated by discursive articulations that are closely related to what would become Romanian fascism. Beside anti-communism, these groups were animated by feelings of antipathy towards foreigners, especially Hungarians. In fact, many paramilitaries were incorporated in the Romanian army and in the spring and summer of 1919 fought against the Communist Republic of Hungary, led by Bela Kun. Romania's victory in that war is considered to this day a testimony of the country's aptness to 'defend' Europe and its civilization against bolshevism (Mireanu, 2019). Another antagonism was expressed towards the Jewish population of Transylvania, and there were numerous instances where paramilitaries opened fire against Jewish establishments and buildings (Bodó, 2019, p. 51).

The ensuing Romanian fascist groups established a link between their actions and the violence perpetrated by the Transylvanian National

Guards. The 1918 paramilitaries and their deeds became part of the origin story of the Iron Guard. One actor stands out in particular, namely the Transylvanian lawyer and politician Amos Frâncu. He led his own battalion in November 1918, and was also trying to get hold of the Romanian troops (formerly part of the Austro-Hungarian army) stationed in Vienna (Mireanu, 2020). His grandfather had also participated in paramilitary activity in Transylvania during the 19th century, when Avram Iancu led his 'legions' against the Hungarians (Voicu, 1992: 29). In 1919, he formed a nationalist group called 'the Brotherhood of the Cross' (*frăția crucii*). (Agrigoroaiei, 1977, p. 422). This group was initiated in Cluj, and it sought to fight for the Romanian nation (Onofreiu et. al., 2018, pp. 272 – 3). In the next year, Frâncu's group established a wing in Iași, where C.Z. Codreanu had been leading 'the Guard of the Nationalist Consciousness' (*garda conștiinței naționale*), a group engaged in constant violent confrontations with 'leftists' (Veiga, 1995, p. 48). Codreanu refers to Frâncu as a hero and inspiration, along with other fighters in the paramilitary National Guards of Transylvania. In 1933, Codreanu attended Frâncu's funeral in Cluj (Voicu, 1992, pp. 37 – 8)

I will not dwell on the Romanian interwar fascist activism, embodied in groups such as the National Christian Defense League or the Iron Guard, since this phenomenon has received considerate attention over the years.[5] In its classical and consolidated form, to which contemporary far-right groups tirelessly relate to, Romanian fascism developed paramilitary death squads, various forms of collective aid, training and work camps as well as various voluntary work projects (Axinia, 2025). Taking matters in their own hands against their enemies was the main propaganda tool for the Romanian interwar fascists. These groups exhibited clear traits of a 'voluntaristic [and] activist ideology' (Cârstocea, 2017, p. 193), where 'the deed' was a tool for acquiring political legitimacy. By the late 1930's, all this activist work resulted in the Legion having established a parallel state, a plethora of grassroots organizations that ran independently, without the need for support from the Romanian state (Cârstocea, 2020, p. 149).[6]

This model of practicing grassroots politics was superseded when the far right gained parliamentary and executive power in the early 1940's. The Romanian state actively began repressing far-right groups after 1944, and especially after the Soviet Union invaded the country and established a so-called communist rule. Many legionaries left the country, while others went into hiding, mostly in the mountains. Hiding from the authorities,

they self-organized in various groups, desperately trying to survive and avoid the reprisals of Romania's new self-declared antifascist government.

Thus, the mythology of the 'resistance from the mountains' was generated in the political imaginary of the far right. Certainly, not all groups and individuals hiding in the mountains shared fascist ideas. One can imagine that the zeal and lust for political revenge displayed by the Romanian socialists, through the repressive apparatus of the *Securitate*, made ideological conflations possible and probable. The Workers' Party enrolled thousands of former legionaries in and redistributed them throughout the state's administrative bodies, including the repressive ones. This gives a certain degree of plausibility to the hypothesis that state violence against illicit groups was also continuation of far-right violence, serving as a means for settling scores.

Notwithstanding this, it is clear that the interwar organization of the far right extended beyond 1945 through the practices of these groups that were hiding in the mountainous areas of the country. Apart from membership, the two threads that connect these groups to the Iron Guard are anticommunism and religious fundamentalism. The groups that ran to the mountains habitually attacked communist authorities, planned sabotaging actions and aspired to overthrow the government. As such, they were considered paramilitary organizations and repressed accordingly. The religious aspect was manifested through a belief that Christian Orthodoxy was under an unprecedented attack from the communists, and that these groups and the people that were supporting them were the defenders of faith, the guardians of Orthodoxy in a besieged Romania.

These two dimensions – anticommunism and radical Orthodox Christianity – ensured a discursive continuity of interwar fascism throughout the four decades of state socialism. The Bucharest authorities ultimately managed to wipe out any form of paramilitary organization (and to form their own groups instead). Yet some of their members survived long into the final decades of the century and continued to uphold – in more or less concealed forms – the ideas of the Romanian far right.[7] This survival was most likely made possible by Ceaușescu's right-wing turn during the 1970's. He and his entourage established a personality cult around himself (Fischer, 1981), re-legitimised a number of far-right intellectuals and introduced a radical form of nationalism[8] in Romanian politics. In the latter years, the regime also reached out to exiled legionaries in order to co-opt them in feuds against Moscow (Meurs, 1994, pp. 252 – 3; Totok and Macovei, 2016).

When the regime crumbled and the dust settled, the interwar far right emerged largely unscathed and managed to gain tremendous political ground. In the early 1990's, various far-right groups formed around former legionaries, who were now considered anti-communist heroes. Publishing houses, cultural institutions and political parties sprouted overnight, making little effort to conceal their fascist genealogies and aspirations.

However, the new Romanian far right had updated its discourse on fear and threat. If, in the first years after 1990, the Hungarian ethnic minority appeared as the main antagonist of hypernationalist articulations, it quickly became clear that the far right was constructing another 'enemy': the Roma people. Having survived centuries of slavery in pre-modern Romania, and having been subsequently deported and persecuted by the Antonescu regime of the early 1940's, the Roma population of the country has constantly faced stigmatisation, marginalisation and violence from the state and the society, including under the socialist regime.

Heavily looked down upon by right wing intellectuals such as Cioran, Eliade or Steinhardt, Roma people found themselves targeted by the first far-right political formations of the 1990's (Nicolae and Slavik, 2003). The same period witnessed various attacks of Roma rural (Foszto and Anastasoaie, 2001, pp. 358 – 9) and urban (Pavel, 1998, pp. 69 – 70)[9] communities; the perpetrators were groups of Romanians, at times in tandem with the police or aided by state authorities.

The epicentre of far-right activity against Roma people has been the western town of Timișoara. There, an urban myth regarding rich Roma clans that have acquired a number of houses in the downtown area has taken hold of the local imaginary. A number of far-right actors have mobilised in what they see as a struggle to resist the spread of Roma 'clans' in Timișoara. In 2008, a newly emerged far-right group called '*Noua Dreaptă*' (the New Right, established in 1999) organised the first 'March against the real estate mafia'. The 'real estate mafia' was a euphemism for what the group considered to be illicit Roma groups. The rally took place every year until 2015, and it featured a series of far-right symbols and slogans, most of which contained racial slurs and calls to violence against Roma people.[10] The march also served as a meeting point and a reference to other groups from the radical right scene.

One such group, which participated alongside Noua Dreaptă in the march from its first editions, was also established in 2008 in Timișoara. This group, the Autonomous Nationalists, has been arguably the most radical of its kind, until its dissolution in 2013. Utilizing imagery that referenced

directly to Nazi Germany, the group, clad in black and with concealed faces, engaged in various actions in the town.[11] Their program openly advocated 'national socialism' as a political alternative to capitalism. In the following years, it sprouted branches in other Romanian towns. Apart from a virulent discourse against Roma people[12], the group openly supported the remembrance and commemoration of interwar legionaries (Totok, 2013). It became notorious in 2013, when it posted a text in the form of an advertisement that offered a sum of money to Roma women who would prove that they have sterilised themselves. This provoked public outrage, and the Romanian authorities cracked down on the group (Fati, 2013). At the time of writing, their blog is, however, still available online.

Noua Dreaptă is still an active group, participating in actions in 2024, as I will show in the next section. Throughout the 2010's, the group became known for its radical practices that went beyond speeches and online posts. According to researchers, Noua Dreaptă has been '*performing charitable actions for some elderly Romanians living in the countryside, while at the same time developing a reputation for cruelty towards the Roma over the past decade.*' (Crețan and O'Brien, 2019, p. 839). It has also been involved in violent acts against the Hungarian minority, as well as against the LGBTQ community. The latter group, in particular the annual Pride March, have become favourite targets of the Noua Dreaptă, as well as a converging point for numerous far-right groups that have constructed this community as their newest enemy. The Romanian far-right groups articulate this antagonism as a way of dealing with a complex threat, which includes what they consider to be attacks on the traditional family, the Orthodox church, on the Romanian nation, on human nature etc. The LGBTQ community is seen by these groups as embodying a number of vilified elements, such as sexual liberation, feminism, Western influence, gender politics, abortions and so on.

The involvement of far-right groups in attacks against this community have been more acute especially after 2020, when the Pride started to be held in other cities apart from Bucharest. I consider these attacks to be the main form of violence perpetrated by far-right groups in Romania at the moment. For this reason, the next chapter will provide an empirical account based on my observations during actions taken against the Pride march, as well as other convergent practices of the Romanian far right-groups.

3. Contemporary Far-Right Groups

3.1 The 'Meeting for the Family' in Cluj

It is a hot summer day in Cluj Napoca, in June 2024[13], and the Pride Parade has just ended in the main square of the town (*Piața Unirii*), which is also considered the Hungarian civic centre, due to the 14th century gothic catholic cathedral that dominates the space.[14] Just a few meters away, the Romanian state built an orthodox cathedral in the years following the 1918 unification, in an attempt to shift the urban focus away from the Hungarian church. Yet despite a century of various attempts to re-signify this square as the Romanian centre of Cluj, it remains an ambiguous urban space, surrounded by traffic and being of secondary symbolic importance at best. It is, however, in this space, in the square between the cathedral and the statue of Avram Iancu, himself a predecessor of the Romanian paramilitary phenomenon, that the local far-right groups organise each year a counter-protest to the Pride Parade.

I have attended several of these protests over the years, since their beginning in 2017 (the same year that the first Pride was allowed in Cluj). I have always managed to blend in and keep a low profile in order to observe the groups, speeches and actions from a close distance. Despite its display of civility and the high presence of police and gendarmes, one rarely gets a feeling of safety during these events. In contrast to the carnivalesque and colourful atmosphere of the Pride, the counter-protests have a gloomy countenance, as most people are dressed in black and the only colours that seem to be allowed are the red-yellow-blue of the national flag. As a matter of fact, the very first such event was marked by a violent incident: local actress and activist Oana Mardare showed up at the counter protest wearing a white t-shirt with one of the Pride slogans ('*say it straight*'); at the moment in which the speaker on stage claimed that the Pride Parade had been 'obscene', Mardare shouted that it was not true. She was immediately heckled from the stage and by the crowd by men dressed in black who claimed that it was a 'provocation', and then dragged out of the protest by gendarmes, and subsequently fined for her presence there.

My own intervention two years later was much more cautious and subtle. I designed a colourful sticker with an explicit message against the far-right groups. I printed it in a large format (half of an A4 page), which made it quite visible, but also more difficult to post. I went to the square in front of the cathedral one hour before the protest was announced, while

the square was still empty, and posted several of these stickers on various surfaces in the square, trying my best to go unnoticed. I then left and returned during the protest to find all of the stickers removed or torn off.

Returning to the summer of 2024, I was again present in the square, this time with the explicit aim of observing the protest in a more systematic manner. I paid attention to the actors and groups that were present, to their messages and t-shirts, I listened closely to their speeches and took a copious number of photos and videos. In terms of the prevailing discourse, the themes were unaltered from the previous years: the LGBTQ community is an 'abomination', its members are 'living in sin', the Pride March is a 'provocation' and the local administration is 'morally corrupt' for allowing it to happen.

The official name of the counter demonstration was 'The Meeting for the Family'. The organisers and most of the speakers seemed to belong to the 'Comunitatea identitară' group, and there were several flags from 'Noua Dreaptă'. The banners had messages such as 'we love the family but we hate degeneracy', and 'mental illness is not love'. There were also flags with the map of greater Romania and with the logo of Comunitatea identitară. One banner had a quote from Romanian 19th century poet Mihai Eminescu, calling for a 'moral revolution' among the Romanian people. Between the banners and the cathedral stood the speakers, who were addressing the crowd using a microphone. Behind them there was a large Romanian flag held horizontally by few people, including a woman who was wearing the symbols of the AUR far right political party. She seemed to be the only representative of any parliamentary political group. A group of children were allowed to play and frolic under the flag, in an image that was meant to show how the nation protects its children, who grow under its three colours. This was also constructed as a disjuncture from the rainbow flag used in the Pride March. It was also paralleled by a widely used far right sticker that shows members of the 'traditional family' hiding under a red-yellow-blue umbrella from the LGBTQ rainbow-coloured outpour. Another symbolic usage of flags was a board on the side of the protest, onto which the organizers pasted a Pride flag, in a remarkably larger format than the one actually used in the march; this flag had four concentric circles and a cross imprinted on it, in order to resemble a target – thus, protest participants were encouraged to throw darts at this flag, in a clear ritual of symbolic violence.[15]

Overall, the protest appeared as a static demonstration of far-right opposition, marked by spectacular outbursts of chanting slogans and

playing nationalist music in the loudspeakers. The only moment in which this static nature was interrupted was when the organizers suggested the crowd to gather in front of the church for a group photo. This idea disrupted the placement of the protesters, since now they all came closer to the steps of the cathedral. Somebody quickly noticed that in this situation, a group photo would include the horizontal flag, under which some children were still playing; yet the flag would now be reversed, its colours being blue-yellow-red, which seemed to upset the organizers. As such, they asked the flag-bearers to re-group so that the colours would be in the right order. The bearers slowly began rotating the flag under the scorching afternoon sun; after a couple of minutes of this choreography, somebody noticed that it would be easier to simply flip the flag – which the bearers diligently did; yet, now, the problem was that the flag was still in a skewed position in relation to the church, and therefore the group photo would still come out wrong. I was thoroughly entertained by these manoeuvres, as they showed the limits of the otherwise very strict and militaristic layout of the event.

Beyond such farcical moments, the protest was one of the biggest gatherings of far-right actors in Cluj, and as such, it brought together various subjectivities, attitudes and practices. There was no shortage of violence. One journalist who was trying to interview attendees was roughed up by one member of the Comunitatea identitară, who forced him to leave the protest while berating him: '*I don't come to your Pride, you shouldn't come to our event!*'

The same member of the far-right group got involved in another incident after the official ending of the protest. In an attempt to get a closer look at some of the participants and maybe get a chance to talk to them, I sat on the steps of the cathedral, as the crowd dispersed and only a handful of organizers were left chatting with sympathisers. The Comunitatea members were encouraging people to sign their names and phone numbers on a list in order to receive the group's newsletter. As these talks were unfolding and the square was vacated, a group of tourists made their way towards the cathedral. Among them was a child waving a small Pride flag, the same kind which the LGBTQ community was handing out during their march.

The child was quickly noticed by the Comunitatea people, and the same man who had been involved in the altercation with the journalist earlier now dashed towards him shouting '*hey, hey, where did you get that flag from?!*' As the child ran towards the cathedral and his family, the

man approached the child's mother and asked her in English where she was from. When she replied 'Netherlands', the member of Comunitatea identitară replied: '*maybe there it's normal, but here we don't tolerate this. Either you put that flag away, or you throw it in the garbage. This is a fucking church!*' Visibly frightened, the woman took the flag and hid it in her backpack, as more of the black clad organisers rushed towards the steps of the cathedral, a few meters from where I was also sitting. The scene became worrying when the man who seemed to be the child's father intervened and the situation appeared to escalate. The gendarmes stepped in and removed the far-right people, despite their protestations that the sacred space of the church was being profaned by a child carrying a Pride flag. One of the gendarmes replied: '*But what is the problem? They are the traditional family that you also claim to celebrate, right?*'

I remained by the cathedral to observe the last attendees as they left the square. To my surprise, everything was not yet over. At the very last minute, when the protest seemed completely over and the square was populated only by its usual merchants, tourists and pigeons, a man in a robe appeared. The attire resembled some Christian monastic uniform, yet it did not seem (to my untrained eye) to be an orthodox monk's clothing. The man was also wearing a colourful backpack and was carrying a bucket full of water. With great diligence he started to stroll around the square, sprinkling water on the pavement, in a gesture which I interpreted as baptising the streets. I had heard of such gestures from orthodox priests after Pride marches, yet this man was performing his ritual in the same area where the 'Meeting for the Family' had just taken place. I followed him as he continued his stroll and sprinkling through one of the city's main boulevards.

3.2 The 'March for Normalcy' in Bucharest

To my surprise, I saw the same man in the same attire three weeks later, in Bucharest, in another event that was meant as a counter protest to the Pride event – the annual 'March for Normalcy'.[16] Here, he was among a small group of priests that was leading the march. Unlike its Cluj counterpart, the Bucharest event was not a static one. The organizers prepared a 4 km walk through the city centre, from the government's headquarters to the main orthodox cathedral in the capital. In contrast to the Cluj event, this was a show of force, a gathering of hundreds of people marching and chanting through the capital's main boulevards.

The march was organised by the far-right party Noua Dreaptă, and it hosted a plethora of other groups and individuals. I saw a small group from Comunitatea identitară, with their flags and banners, yet most of the paraphernalia consisted of ND's green flags, as well as a myriad of religious symbols. Christian orthodox representatives seemed to be in far greater numbers in Bucharest than at the protest in Cluj. The anger and violence appeared to be more dispersed among the participants, rather than emerging from the organizers. Another contrast to the Cluj event was that the Bucharest march was held a few hours before the Pride march. It was also more heavily policed.

When I arrived at the meeting point, some people were already assembled on the sidewalk, while the organizers were giving speeches. I initially watched from the other side of the boulevard, worrying that I might get into some unwanted quarrel. After a short while, however, I realised that I could use the bus stop on the side of the protest as a pretext to stand there and look around and maybe take some photos with my phone. Since people started marching quite late, I found some nerve to escape the shelter of the bus stop and walk around the fringes of the crowd. As in Cluj, it did not feel safe to get deeper among the ranks of the participants. As soon as the march began, I found my safe space along the sidewalk, as the protesters walked on one lane of the boulevard, accompanied by a number of journalists and by-walkers. I walked with them for more than one hour towards the city centre, after which fatigue got the best of my ethnographic ambitions, and I left for the other march.

The event was notable on three accounts. First, most of the objects, images and banners had Christian orthodox connotations: people held crucifixes, icons, messages containing bible quotes etc. Second, shortly after the march began, most of the attendees' attention was drawn to the presence of Senator Diana Șoșoacă, head of a small and recent far right party and former member of AUR. She was walking at the front of the cortege, surrounded by people filming her. She was also broadcasting her presence live, using her phone. Throughout the march, the politician spoke to her live and online audiences about the perils of homosexuality and the need to uphold national as well as Christian orthodox values. Third, the participants relentlessly chanted slogans throughout the entire time I accompanied them. There seemed to be a plethora of chants. Most of them revolved around the idea that homosexuality is an abominable sin, which goes against human nature, Romanian traditions and, generally, against God. I found one chant to be particularly intriguing: as we were

approaching one of the central squares (*Piața Romană*), the cortege started shouting what in English would be something along the lines of: '*Homo propaganda, go back to the Netherlands*' (where 'propaganda' rhymes with the Romanian word for the Netherlands - *Olanda*). This was particularly outlandish for me, as the Romanian national football team was about to face the Netherlands in the kick-off stage of the European Championship in a couple of days, and naturally my preference went against the West-European team; at the same time, I was about to participate in the LGBTQ pride as an ally of the queer community in the same day.

3.3 The Ultras

Not only did the Netherlands not become a haven for the Romanian queer community, but its team also defeated Romania that summer, thus serving a twofold blow to the local far right. However, Romania's presence in the final tournament of the European Football Championship marked a significant rise in the activity of far-right groups. Since the tournament began in mid-June in Germany, scores of supporters rushed to attend Romania's matches. Due to their enthusiasm, the local media was quick to celebrate the supporters as a complementary to the football team's performances. As I was watching images and footage from the games, I noticed familiar flags and symbols: maps of greater Romania, Celtic crosses, the Dacian wolf, the crossed-out hammer and sickle and many t-shirts from the Radical Entourage shop. Browsing through the latter group's social media, it became obvious to me that a consistent part of the Romanian supporters' loudness and proudness could be associated to local far right groups that went to Germany.[17]

The politicisation of football fans is a widespread phenomenon, as the stadium is a space where political dissent can be expressed and publicised (Glathe and Varga, 2018, pp. 24 – 5). At the same time, such practices of dissent escape the confines of the supporters' terraces, spilling over into, and intersecting with various social movements. The inflamed and unrestrained peculiarities of ultras' political culture resonate well with the far right's antagonistic worldview. The result is a shared imaginary of war, where the ultras see themselves as an army that defends the honour of the team, the city, the nation and of values such as tradition, Christianity, family etc.

The links between Romanian Ultras and the far right are not entirely straightforward. As Guțu (2017, p. 5) historicizes, the first ultras groups

emerged in mid-1990's, and were mainly oriented towards a specific territory, since the football teams were also more localized. At that time, the ultras engaged in violent confrontations with each other and with the police and gendarmerie. This violence let to increased state repression and control. Despite the fact that this repression never reached the intensity seen in other parts of Europe, where football hooliganism is associated with 'irrationality' and 'bestiality' (Tsoukala, 2008, p. 144), Romanian ultras have developed attitudes of resentment towards the state. The ultras display a violent aversion towards the Romanian political elite, the institutions and the state's authority. As one member of the Romanian ultras group present at the European Football Championship stated for the New York Times, the ultras intend to '*show people we need to be against the police and against the* [Romanian Football] *federation'*.[18] It is plausible that this attitude provided a fertile ground for far-right ideologies, since they both stem from entrenched feelings of disconnection between political beliefs and realities.

Romania has witnessed various incidents featuring extremist violence emerging among and from the ultras. The terraces of the leading football clubs are less a medium for supporting one's team, and more a canvas for various Fascist symbols and slogans. In 2023, a number of supporters' groups joined the 'Nationalist Bloc', an alliance of far-right groups that aims to defend European values and the traditional family (Despa and Gočanin, 2023).

I have encountered these groups sporadically at various points in time in Timișoara, Cluj and Bucharest. The encounters were accidental, usually before or after some football match, as I happened to be in their proximity. The interactions were mostly indirect, through a genuine 'sticker war' that has been taking place in these cities. The far-right ultras are pasting their stickers, most of them with ultra-nationalist, racist and homophobic messages, and antifascist activists are either taking them off or covering them with other stickers. This 'war' led to a few confrontations between far-right ultras and activists.

My observations of the far-right ultras groups became more systematic during the European Championship. In June, in Cluj, as I was watching the projection of a group match, along with more than 2000 people in the main square (*Piața Unirii*), a group of local ultras climbed a statue and started to chant nationalist slogans. To the consternation of the crowd, the group lit torches, exploded firecrackers and chanted vigorously.

During my time in Bucharest, I attended a big celebration in the centre of the city (*Piața Universității*), on the night of Romania's qualification in the knock-out stage of the European Championship (July 2024). Hundreds of people came from all corners of Bucharest to express their joy. Some ultras arrived as well, with their flags, torches and chants. A few of them even climbed one of the statues in the square, the equestrian monument of medieval ruler Mihai Viteazu, considered a national hero in Romania. The image of a member of the ultras on the marble horse, holding a torch and shouting nationalist chants is emblematic for the ways in which the cult of the past blends into the far right's practices.

3.4 The cult of the past

In November 2023, the Romanian national football team defeated the rival team from Kosovo, in a game that was interrupted for more than half an hour, due to the Romanian ultras displaying a banner saying '*Kosovo is Serbia*' and throwing torches on the field (Șancu, 2023). The message was an explicit nod to Serbian ultranationalists, with whom the Romanian far right groups have long-standing connections.

I managed to get close to an event that celebrated these links a few months later, in February 2024, when the Comunitatea identitară group organized a commemorative protest in Cluj. The event marked the death of Baba Novac, who was a Serbian mercenary in the army of the aforementioned Mihai Viteazu.

Far right groups have been historically known for their cult of the dead. Fascism is built on visions of heroism and past glory. Mark Neocleous (2005, p. 34) argues that '*the body of the dead becomes the sacred body of a dead hero, giving rise to the cult of the dead in the most literal and obvious sense: the sanctification of the dead.*' Contemporary Romanian far right groups have indeed been demanding for years that anti-Communist martyrs be sanctified. The veneration of the dead in Romanian Fascism has been researched by Raul Cârstocea, who found that the Legion's penchant for worshiping the deceased '*rendered salient an emotional notion of nationhood that resonated with the public more than the state's modernizing project*' (Cârstocea, 2020, p. 155). Paying homage at various monuments that commemorate figures of the past that the Romanian far right look up to has become a standard practice of these groups over the years.

To return to Baba Novac, he is celebrated by the Romanian far right for being an outlaw (*haiduc*), which is to say, a fighter against centralized state authority, much in the spirit of modern-day vigilantes. Additionally, Baba Novac is considered a 'defender of Christianity', having fought alongside Mihai Viteazu ('the Brave') against the Muslim Ottoman Empire in the late 16th century. Yet the issue that was most present during the commemorative event as I witnessed it seemed to be the fact that Baba Novac was executed by the Hungarian aristocracy. This detail had been written on the statue placed in the centre of Cluj, where the event was taking place. The inscription had been erased in 2013, without anybody being prosecuted for this act. This allowed the Comunitatea identitară group to claim that the Romanian authorities are complicit in a 'politically correct' effort to 'erase' Romanian memory and identity. The speakers at the event abundantly referenced this alleged complicity, as their speeches became increasingly directed against the local Hungarian minority.

In contrast to the counter-Pride events that I recounted earlier in this paper, the Baba Novac commemoration in Cluj seemed to me more ominous. Partly because it took place during the night, partly because it was attended by people dressed in black and carrying torches, my proximity to this event did not feel safe. As I was walking past the participants, trying to get a view of the banners, I was constantly looked at with suspicion. It must have been clear that I did not belong there, especially as the participants were all wearing clothing with far-right messages and images, and they all seemed to know one another. The music was a blend of menacing heavy metal and distressing lyrics, while the participants' shouting loomed intimidatingly in the cold night.

4. Neoliberalism in Romania

Since the end of the post-socialist transition period, Romania too has entered a phase of neoliberal economic and social policies. As capitalism is restructuring itself, neoliberalism appeared to be the most natural solution to the 2008 financial and economic crisis. As head of the government, the Romanian president imposed neoliberal solutions in 2009, through the end of the welfare state, social policies and public spending in Romania. Subsequent governments have furthered this project ever since.

As Cornel Ban argues, the Romanian neoliberal aspirations were modelled on the interwar conservatism and on the Orthodox Church's

anti-modernism (Ban, 2014, p. 175, footnote 14). In such circumstances, Romanian neoliberalism became an ethical project, mostly concerned with the re-integration of the country in the civilized West. As Atanasoski and McElroy (2018, p. 282) frame it, '*such aspirations of Western becoming* […] [impose] *a continual need for Romanians to prove they have moved beyond their backward socialist past.*'

Indeed, the ethical project of neoliberalism was constructed and articulated in an explicit tension with Romania's communist past, represented by the so-called Social Democrats. The apex of this tension was reached in early 2017, when the demonized Social Democrat party passed a controversial bill that sparked outrage in all political corners. Tens of thousands took to the streets, and soon the anti-corruption '*Rezist*' protests became the hallmark of the neo-liberal axiological and cultural project (Crimethinc.com 2017). At the heart of this project was the new middle class with its demands for upholding its values.

The Romanian middle class has been seen as an essential condition for the establishment of a stable market economy and a functional capitalist system (Crăciun 2017, p. 4). The first Romanian middle class consisted of former communist cadres who managed to convert to entrepreneurial activities in the 1990s (Stoica 2004, p. 271). In subsequent years, however, having a 'communist past' began to be seen as a serious drawback for any managerial position (Simionca 2012, p. 143). This past was seen as an array of behaviours, mind-sets, beliefs and attitudes that were in stark contradiction to the direction in which the country should go.

As in other parts of the Eastern Europe, the sprouting Romanian middle class became ideologically involved in building and supporting the neoliberal order (Buchovski 2008, p. 49). Presently, those who identify as belonging to the new Romanian middle class tend to do so relationally, in contrast, on the one hand, to an upper class characterized by privilege, excess and doubtful morality, and on the other hand (and primarily), with the lower class that is characterized by laziness, lack of education, failure and incapacity to adapt to society (Crăciun 2017, p. 7). Against all of these traits, the new middle class posits a programmatic aspiration towards doing things properly and more ethical than they have been done before. Romania is witnessing the rapid '*empowering of the middle class, which uses the discourse of honesty and* anti-corruption […] *in order to take the low strata of society out of political fight'* (Mitev 2017). Ethics becomes a crucial part of self-identification with the middle class.

Simultaneously, ethics places the middle-class ethos within a 'civic perspective'. This is able to generate a political project for the middle class, in which active interventions in public matters, street protests, petitions and publicly made demands become tools for disseminating its values. The apex of this came during the protests of 2017, when '*middle class virtuousness, grounded in an ethics of personal responsibility, manifested not only through calls to civic engagement and support for technocratic anti-politics, but also through demands for moral and physical cleanliness*' (Deoancă 2017, p. 3).

This 'moral cleanliness' is a crucial stake of civic participation in matters of public order and security. In order to assert its superiority and defend its privileges, the Romanian middle class uses morality. Romania is seen as a corrupt society in need of rehabilitation. The Communist past serves as the 'Other' of the neoliberal present, and this otherness is constructed as '*not only economically untenable but morally wrong*' (Simionca 2012, p. 138). Thus, if the values of the Romanian middle class are to succeed in replacing the anachronistic 'communist' ones, the latter need to be criticized on every occasion. Within such a perspective it is no wonder that the middle class in Romania endorses various moral panics ignited by the media and the police.

In their practices, the grassroots far right groups from Romania amplify this intersection between anti-communism and morality. In their discourses, they state more explicitly than any other political force that communism is evil, impure and monstrous, it goes against human nature and it is therefore at the root of the current societal degeneracy. A large part of their current imagery is based on practices of resistance and fight against communism. The 'fallen heroes' are mostly people who have been repressed during the socialist regime, and who the far-right groups now consider to be 'martyrs'. Commemorative marches, monuments, remembrance literature, flags and symbols are all mobilized to empower a discourse of intense opposition and moral loathing towards communism.

Yet, as Popescu and Vesalon (2023) tirelessly argue, the trope of communism that these far-right groups relate to is an empty signifier. This is especially the case if one notices the absence in Romania of any political force that explicitly identifies itself as 'communist' or adheres to 'communist' values. However, it is crucial to underline the fact that despite this absence, the construction of communism as a political enemy in Romania in the 2010's and 2020's functions as a tool of acquiring political, electoral and symbolic capital. Popescu and Vesalon (2023, p.

155) claim that '*political actors condemning communism gain a privileged moral position which is then converted into political capital*'.

A number of ultraconservative intellectuals and far right political figures have tapped in the anti-communist discourse, extracting legitimacy and public credentials from it. At an intellectual level, they insert themselves in a genealogy that dates back to the interwar period, when various philosophers, writers, economists and sociologists embraced far right ideas from an anti-communist standpoint (Bejan, 2019, p. 216). The discursive novelty of the contemporary artisans of far-right ideologies is the addition of 'neo-Marxism' and of 'gender ideology' as societal dangers to be fought. If the former is seen as the contemporary articulation and ideological update of communism, the latter is a more innovative addition to the far-right repertoire.

The term 'gender ideology' is an umbrella under which Romanian far right groups lump together a plethora of tropes such as sexism, misogyny, homophobia and transphobia. Generally perceived as a threat to the 'traditional family', what these groups see as being gender ideology is a blend of feminism queer theory, and 'political correctness'. Groups such as Comunitatea identitară are vocally opposing sexual education being included in the schools' curricula, on the grounds that it will foster homosexuality and 'sexual degeneracy'. There is also fierce opposition towards teaching 'gender studies' and feminism. Thus, Romanian far right groups '*target* […] *any feminist-emancipatory perspectives in society*' (Popescu and Vesalon, 2023, p. 162).

5. Supplying Security

To return to the research question, this paper is concerned with the far right's affinity for actions that are imbued with security meanings and articulations. After the above empirical and theoretical reflections, I am in a position to argue here that security occupies a central spot in the actions of the Romanian far right. This centrality is given by the fact that these groups perceive the state as being deficient in providing insurances that various threats could be tackled. In this way, far right groups take it upon themselves to perform and provide security. Through their array of activities that range from physical training and martial arts to protests and violence against political enemies, Romanian far right groups actively engage in tackling what they see as dangers. They see themselves as

defenders of Christian values, European civilisation, local traditions and Romanian nationhood. This chapter will elaborate these ideas, by providing wider theoretical arguments related to global phenomena.

I will begin with the 'deficient state' argument. At first sight, it would appear that far right activism germinates on a field left fallow by the retreat of the state and by its incapacity or unwillingness to fully engage social and political issues. While discursively, the Romanian radical right refers to the state as being contaminated by a corrupt political elite (Popescu and Vesalon, 2023, p. 158; Marincea, forthcoming), the actions of these groups enlist a type of violence that is meant to supplement the state's lack of reaction. Indeed, it is precisely because the state does little or nothing to address the spread of 'gender propaganda' in the public space or to curb the moral corruption of society, that far right groups feel compelled to step in and take matters in their own hands.[19] The main area in which the state is perceived as doing too little is in terms of providing security. This is translated in the lack of protection, justice and safety that should come from the competent authorities of the state.

On a more general level, the contemporary neo-liberal policies entail the withdrawal of the state from certain segments of service provision, including security (Eick, 2006). During the current stage of globalization, this withdrawal is seen as a solution to the destabilizing forces of the global markets. States choose the strategy of cutting back on spending in key sectors, in order to create incentives for direct investment. This leads to the privatization and outsourcing of security to private agents such as security companies (Goldstein, 2003, p. 23). This in turn leads to an unequal supply of security, based on the ability to acquire services. Gated communities, the mushrooming of private security and military companies – these are all aspects of this phenomenon (Low, 2017). Complementary, the withdrawal of the state generates a discourse of self-reliance, in which the idea of 'community' becomes essential. As such, neighbourhood patrols and the self-provision of security services at the local levels replace the role of the police (Eick, 2006). At the same time, the state also assumes a neutral role, unable to interfere in the different conflicts within the society and thus insulated from any responsibility (Sundar 2010, p. 114).

The withdrawal of the state is causing severe imbalances in some parts of the world. Outsourcing security means that large numbers of people are left prey to organized crime and local bandits. This leads to a generalized climate of insecurity, in which every day is fraught with threats and risks (Donmez, 2008). For those people which cannot afford to buy

security from private actors, such generalized fear is a daily reminder of the disappearance of the state. Such people may sometimes organize in vigilante groups, or can actively support and legitimize groups of vigilantes (Mireanu, 2015). Unlike security companies, these groups may protect poor or marginalized people in the absence of remuneration.

The destruction of large identities creates a vertical polarization within the society. The polarization separates the elites from the rest of the society, creating a cosmopolitan globalized group at the top and an indigenized and localized group at the bottom. This localisation is an attempt to find roots in a de-nationalized state, and it can lead to ultranationalist and pro-racist movements. The common denominator of all these local movements is the belief in the value of the collective, in community and communitarianism. As such, it overlaps with fundamentalism and generates violent exclusionary practices. These localised groups perceive themselves as being in a conflict with the globalised and cosmopolitan state.[20]

How do far right groups fit into this? Security underlines the far-right political project by positing the existence of an enemy that needs to be eliminated through violence. During the Nazi regimes, the state officials used the logic of security in order to legitimize numerous acts of exclusion that led to the 'final act of extermination'. (Neocleous, 2011, p. 190)

Far-right beliefs are formed and upheld at the societal level, and they are spread throughout society, in a relative autonomy from the state's direct intervention or indoctrination (Inglehart, 1990, pp. 272 – 3). These beliefs generate more or less coherent societal demands for action against various forms of discontent: the eroding importance of national identity and its related forms of affiliation, the eroding economic and social protection guaranteed by the welfare state, growing multiculturalism, increased poverty and unemployment and so on (Norris, 2005, pp 132 – 4).[21]

Far-right articulations of dangers aim to provide security to a community that feels threatened and that demands security. Far-right actions are the exceptional side of an existential discourse articulated by far right groups and based on various fears. These groups are there to 'rescue' society from a common enemy, against which the state is either helpless, or in complicity with. They exploit deeply rooted fears that they are able to articulate and unify in a single ideology.

The practices of the far-right groups show that security they offer has an exclusionary and oppressive character. Through far-right ideology, security is practiced as a brutal mechanism of rejecting categories of

people which are vulnerable and in need of security themselves, such as illegal immigrants, Roma people and asylum seekers.

A far-right version of security articulates its public as a homogenous group that is equivalent to 'the nation'. This articulation is vital for the support of far right groups. This support comes from the security demands of actors that could otherwise not easily transpose their fears into action. These fears are deeply rooted in the society, and they usually take the form of racism, which is appropriated by the far-right security discourse.

Far-right security is inherently and explicitly exclusionary, violent and discriminatory, with straightforward racist and homophobic overtones. Such articulations can be seen as providing security to a community that feels threatened and that demands security. Throughout Europe, paramilitary far right groups such the Golden Dawn have claimed to 'rescue' society from a common enemy, against which the state is either helpless, or in complicity with (Mireanu and Gkresta, 2013). They exploited deeply rooted fears, which they were able to articulate and unify in a single ideology. The far-right groups do not address the entire population, but only those people that can resonate with their far-right politics, and whose support the groups are able to use to legitimise its actions, precisely because of this resonance. The security articulations of these groups are rooted in deep-seated perceptions of fear and insecurity that come from everyday interactions and routines at the societal level (Ochs, 2011).

6. Conclusions

I have started this paper by observing that contemporary grassroots Romanian far right groups have a penchant for taking action, for going beyond speeches and imagery and into the field of voluntary political activism. I have also observed that these actions function by mechanisms of security, whereby political activism is articulated as a response to perceptions of threat and dangers. Simultaneously, the 'actionism' of the Romanian far right is in tune with middle class calls for civic engagement.

Bearing all this in mind, I asked how we can account for this penchant for action if action is grounded in security and roused by civility. I identified two aspects of this question, one empirical and one theoretical. After the empirical parts outlined the main groups, events and actions that I focus on, the theoretical part was also split in two: on the one hand, I looked at

how Romanian neoliberalism fosters an ethic of civic involvement onto which the far right constructs its scaffolding for its actions; and on the other hand, I outlined the mechanism of far right security supply in the context of global neoliberal policies.

At this stage I will pull the threads together, in order to delineate some concluding arguments about the far-right groups' willingness to act.

The first outcome of the analysis relates to violence. I have shown how the Romanian far right has performed political violence throughout its history, and continues to do so presently. Groups with far right ideologies employ violence against their enemies and also among themselves. However, it is clear that in a liberal democracy, few practices are more frowned upon than political violence. Therefore, today's far right groups have learned to camouflage violence as spectacle. Events such as the rally for the family, with its flags and paraphernalia, or the impressive pyrotechnics of the Ultras, serve to couch the brutality of violence under the illusory glamour of the spectacle. Spectacular events move people, impress a certain range of emotions and create images of a new reality. In this respect, the spectacle engenders the social and symbolic capital through which these groups legitimate violence. Engaging in various actions catalyses the spectacle in ways in which purely discursive politics could never do.

The second outcome relates to outreach. I have insisted on the concatenation between far right groups and middle class ethics because it signals a way through which extremism permeates liberal politics. By being engaged in actions and by labelling this engagement as 'civic acts', far right groups show that they aspire to have a voice in the mainstream political battleground. It shows that they want to participate in widespread political and social debates – such as anti-corruption, or education; and, conversely, that they want their themes to become mainstream – such as racism and homophobia, the defence of the traditional family, or worshipping anti-communist martyrs. The strategy works, as the Romanian public opinion appears at times to be quite accommodating to various far right practices and discourses.

Finally, the third outcome of my research is concerned with the future. Through their ability and willingness to engage in actions, Romanian far right groups uphold a culture based on feelings of duty, positivity, enthusiasm and determination. In the context of a generalised feeling of anxiety brought by the insecurities of daily life, this culture of activism fosters a sense of community and belonging. However, I take a step forward

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and argue that through their activities, these groups create temporary zones of revolt against the state and other political enemies. Far right events and actions are spectacular moments that temporarily instate a set of conditions that align with certain ideas about how things should and could be. These events have their own hierarchies, symbols, acoustic and visual elements that create a specific landscape. Unlike the spectacle, this landscape is concave – bent inward toward the group members, who are the main recipients of this milieu. There is a strong sense of who belongs at the event and who does not. The activities in which these groups engage in – such as commemorating heroes or participating in rallies – bring members together in shared activities and in a shared lifestyle, in which the utopia is lived now, in the present. In short, far right actions temporarily create Fascist futures.

On an ending note, the rise of far right activism brings unease to any democratically-oriented political subjectivity. Each step taken by far right groups away from passivity, from speeches and literature and towards actions in the streets and institutions is one additional source of concern. Ignoring these actions, diminishing their importance, or subsuming them under the aegis of 'civil engagement' only adds to the far right's encroachment on daily politics and life. This paper has been meant as a contribution to understanding contemporary far right activism, its history, sources, motivations and mechanisms. Such an understanding is of utmost importance if fascism is to stay not in the future that its current proponents are envisioning through their activism, but in the dustbin of history, where it belongs.

Endnotes

[1] Video by Comunitatea identitară, titled 'Pentru Camarazi Capitolul 7 – Lupta continuă! Timpul istoric și timpul individual', available at https://comunitateaidentitara.com/pentru-camarazi-capitolul-7-lupta-continua-timpul-istoric-si-timpul-individual/. The quote starts at timestamp 21:40.

[2] The first two quotes are found already translated here: https://ruxandracesereanu.wordpress.com/2019/09/09/from-piata-universitatii-to-rezist/; the following two quotes are translated by me and can be found here: https://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/tema-saptamanii/piata-universitatii-piata-victoriei-631394.html

[3] The source for this information is Stoica, 2018. More on the connections between football supporters and far right groups in Chapter 2 of this paper. For *Honor et Patria*'s links to AUR, see Marincea, forthcoming.

[4] This view is inspired by what Emirbayer and Mische (1998, pp. 983 – 4) have called '*the projective dimension of agency*', whereby social actors are capable to generate new avenues for action based on an engagement with future plans and objectives.

[5] For an introduction, see Weber 1964. See also Zavatti, 2021

[6] It is noteworthy that the Romanian state emulated some of the Legion's practices, establishing its own structures for nationalist education, such as the so-called Country's Sentinel – *Straja Țării* (Radu, 2011; Cârstocea, 2017, p. 190).

[7] This phenomenon is thoroughly documented by Totok and Macovei (2016)

[8] There is no room here to fully discuss the intersection between communism and nationalism, two seemingly divergent ideologies. Van Meurs (1994, p. 234) talks about '*the nationalist corruption of communist ideology*', whereas Verdery (1991, p. 119) talks about '*reinserting the national past*' into socialist thought and practice. I am more inclined, along with Popovici (2016), towards an interpretation that sees socialism as having tweaked nationalism into a discourse intended to serve social and political emancipation. My own analysis of nationalism during communism as being influenced by interwar social-democrat ideas is in the unpublished research '*The Historiography of the Romanian-Hungarian War of 1919 during Romania's Communist Regime: Between Nationalism and Social-Democracy*', available at https://www.academia.edu/42289487/The_Historiography_of_the_Romanian_Hungarian_War_of_1919_during_Romanias_Communist_Regime_Between_Nationalism_and_Social_Democracy

[9] Interestingly, Dan Pavel considers that the first Romanian government after the 1989 Revolution 'leads the crusade' on nationalism, and 'attempts to substitute racial ideology for Marxist class ideology' (1998, p. 72).

[10] For more details on this rally, see Crețan and O'Brien (2019, p. 843). Also my short analysis, in Romanian, available at: https://casisocialeacum.ro/archives/7197/despre-mafia-imobiliara-din-timisoara/

[11] Some photos of their posters in Timișoara can be seen here https://na-db.blogspot.com/

[12] https://natm88.blogspot.com/p/programul-nationalistilor-autonomi_88.html

[13] This chapter is mostly based on my field notes as a participant observer in the winter and summer of 2024, in Cluj and Bucharest.

[14] It is worth mentioning that in the first three editions of the march, the local Cluj administration did not allow it to happen anywhere near the city centre, as opposed to the far-right counter demonstration, which has always taken place in the Avram Iancu square.

[15] https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=869942531846696&set=pcb.869943871846562

[16] He can be seen in this video, recorded on the day of the march: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BTAZuYgpqk

[17] For a report on other national far-right groups present at the European Football Championship in the summer of 2024, see https://www.sportspolitika.news/p/euro-football-extremist-far-right-politics

[18] https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/26/world/europe/euros-ultras-hungary-carpathian-brigade.html

[19] The state, in this respect, should be conceived of as a social relation that crystallizes the balance of the dominant forces in a society (Jessop, 1990, p. 256). Hence, rather than being only a set of administrative institutions that govern through technocratic governmentalities, the state can be thought to incorporate the hegemonic discourses, practices and groups within a society (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

[20] This paragraph draws from Friedman , 2003, p. 25

[21] It is worth noting that the economic factors are not the only sources of far-right discontent. There is a consistent body of scholarship, now largely discarded, that focuses on psychological factors, such as an authoritarian personality, cognitive rigidity, repression of emotions and so on. The classical references are 'The Authoritarian Personality', by T. Adorno et. al., and 'Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia', by G. Deleuze and F. Guattari (as well as Foucault's 'Preface' to this book). For a synthesis, I use Michi Ebata, 'Right-Wing Extremism: In Search of a Definition', in 'The Extreme Right. Freedom and Security at Risk', edited by Aurel Braun and Stephen Scheinberg, Harper Collins, 1997, pp. 22 – 4

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