

## **POPULISM DOES NOT DIE; IT BECOMES MORE RADICAL**

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### *Abstract*

The new Coronavirus pandemic which affected the world, along with the ongoing economic crisis, the war in Ukraine and other destabilizing events are generating social and political changes. The aim of this paper is to argue that populism does not lose ground, but on the contrary, strengthens and becomes more radical. I develop this idea by analyzing the electoral performance of various European populist and nationalist parties, while also defragmenting and understanding their discourse, political agenda and ideology.

On January 6<sup>th</sup> 2021, during the violent demonstrations in Washington DC, a bizarre character drew the attention of the world media, a personage which had this upper body covered in furs, his face painted in blue/red/white and bison horns on his head, holding the US flag in one hand. It was, without a doubt, the symbol of what the American press calls “the insurrection” provoked by Donald Trump in order to preserve his mandate as president of the USA, even if the numbers showed that he had not won the elections. This character introduced us Europeans to one of the strangest contemporary American conspiracies - QAnon, a conspiracy that, in its absurdity, unravels the most complicated springs of collective beliefs and behaviors, questioning humanity’s millennia of rational thinking and its civilization process. I will not reiterate the speculations underlying this conspiracy theory that seems to turn into a kind of quasi-religious belief, for the horned character in the Capitol considers himself a shaman of Q. I will only say that, as in any mythology, the QAnon cult is based on a strict Manichaeism: we are witnessing a phase of the eternal struggle of “the Good” (somewhat represented by Donald Trump, but not only) with “the Evil” (its best-known representative - Hillary Clinton) and as a result “the World” (the American society) will renew itself and will enter a new cycle.

Anthropology (Tylor, 2016) explains the phenomenon of the primitive man trying to frame itself into the world (or the environment) “Magical Thinking”. This implies a relationship at the suprarational level between nature’s phenomena and original elements, and the one executing the connection is usually a shaman or a priest, a person considered

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to possess special abilities in ritualizing the reality. Magical thinking does not need scientific explanations and is based exclusively on faith, which makes its theoretical model - non-scientific - exclusively based on the cohesion in faith of its members. The return to Magical Thinking, which can be observed worldwide, validates the concept of Post-Truth (McIntyre 2018), i.e. the introduction of subjectivity and emotionality in experimental knowledge. Post-Truth emerged as a reality in the United States, where various religious groups demanded and obtained - rather implicitly - the right to a two-sided truth, in the name of freedom of faith and expression. That is, "I do not deny that one can believe in the theory of evolution, but I choose to believe in the creationist theory" (McIntyre 2018): or more precisely science and faith can have the same value of truth, which is absurd in a logical sense, according to the identity principle. And this nonsense, imposed by the media and politically by the American conservative forces of the 90s of the twentieth century, received the current name of Post-Truth in 2015 (when it became the word of the year).

In Europe, Post-Truth has been viewed with caution and has even been ridiculed in the media and academia, but has not been explained, theorized or politically dismantled. Ridiculous or not, for the general public it seemed to be a way out from the "Totalitarianism of Scientific Thinking", the latter being defined as a form of Neo-Marxism. And this phenomenon was due to the fact that classical Marxism and socialist movements were the last bastions of critical thinking, logical analysis of reality, and the only ones that did not semantically equate scientific truths to emotional (or religious) truths. On the contrary, the right-wing parties and especially right-wing populist parties have supported this ambiguity, hoping they could take advantage (and they did) of the votes of those social groups who felt abandoned by the left's intellectual and scientific elite. Michel Wieworka points out that a great proportion of French trade union workers moved from parties which follow the socialist tradition (especially the voters of the Communist Party) towards National Front, more than ten years since American workers abandoned the Democratic Party (especially those in Rusty Belt) to vote for Donald Trump in 2016.

In a paper that has already become a classic, Cas Mudde (2015) defines populism as a movement that opposes "the pure people to the corrupt elite". It is debatable whether this definition is still entirely correct nowadays and whether it is outdated. But what is rather important is that the "people" voted more conservative and traditional as a reaction to the elite, including the intellectual, artistic or scientific elite (Draghici, 2018). It is not mandatory to explain the reasons why the lefties lost its ground or whether it abandoned its mission. What is necessary to observe is that in most polls organized in recent years, either in Europe or United States, the vote preference for the right-wing populist parties continued to be massive, even if they have not always won the government. And a particularity many authors highlight is that right-wing populist parties have used conspiracy theories - the Islamist conspiracy, the migration conspiracy, the Brussels bureaucracy conspiracy for multiculturalism, and so on. - as an engine for attracting adherents.

Conspiracy theories are not easy to define, because these theories defy the reality accepted by most. Conspiracy theories state that a historical fact, with results now known, arises not only from legitimate or at least obvious reasons, but also from - or exclusively - the action of the occult, illegitimate forces. The underlying element of any conspiracy

theory is the complicity of at least two persons acting in secret and with malicious intent. (Castillon, 2007).

As Jayson Harsin (2018) of the American University of Paris, one of the leading theorists of the Post-Truth, points out, it seems that never before in history have conspiracy theories and hatred been so present in our society as during the Coronavirus pandemic. The society was divided between the "holders of the truth" (conspiracy theorists and their followers) and the "useful idiots" of the system, as Stalin called them, mockingly named "snowflakes" or "sheep." The latter agree to be deprived of their freedom (economic, social, movement, etc.) by large pharmaceutical companies, information technology (Big Tech, Big Pharma), etc. destroying the last remnants of human freedom and democracy. The theory that Big Tech and Big Pharma would cooperate to introduce microchips to monitor human beings using the vaccine seems to have worldwide coverage.

Related to the apocalyptic text of the Bible number 666 and the end of the world's Armageddon, this theory faced an instant and resounding success from the United States to South Korea and from Romania to Brazil. And the behavior of some political leaders in addressing the pandemic has even strengthened the idea of a global conspiracy. Considering that Donald Trump in the US, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil or Boris Johnson in the UK (and these are not the only ones) had, at least initially, some reactions denying the pandemic and maintaining the previous situation as long as possible (business as usual), further split their societies, reinforcing the conspirators' perception that the occult forces (Deep State, Big Tech, Big Pharma, George Soros, etc.) want to seize political power to the detriment of the civil and democratic freedoms of the people. It is no surprise that the vast majority of populist and illiberal leaders reacted in line with religious or para-religious groups in order to train their supporters against the healthcare system, which is considered oppressive and obedient to occult interests.

But in comparison to other times when conspiracy theories were dominant (as these theories never ceased to exist, but were in different latencies), what is shocking is the immense potential of violence they brought and still bring along. And we are not only referring to a symbolic violence of civic disobedience against an oppressive state, but to a violence with a strong insurgence capability. When seeing the images of rioting masses in Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and many European countries one can see the explosive potential of these groups, which, paradoxically or not, seem identical in their self-assumed symbol: in refusing the medicinal mask as a reaction to medical "tyranny".

The demonstrations in Berlin on November 20, 2020 brought together the most unlikely groups to meet on the same side of a barricade: LGBTQ + groups with neo-Nazis with the portrait of Hitler, Christian-evangelical groups with hippies supporting Gandhi and more and more often QAnon believers (see *The Local*, 2020; Buchholz and Paulokat, 2020). The umbrella group that brought together all these seemingly opposing movements defines itself as Querdenker (Lateral Thinking) which virtually brings together all anti-covid conspiracy theories and synthesizes them into a quasi-anarchist manifesto that for freedom and hate of the establishment. Although Querdenker claims to be a pacifist group, the violence manifested in Berlin where 77 policemen were seriously injured as a result of clashes with protesters, was extraordinary intense, according to the head of the Berlin police, Barbara Slowik.

It seems there is no formal link between Querdenker and Alternative für Deutschland, but AfD is present (at least through symbols) at all the Querdenker events, and recently a Konrad Adenauer Stiftung poll showed that 24% of AfD voters strongly believe that the coronavirus is a supranational conspiracy, and 41% of the same voters say that is possible (and probable) that this is a conspiracy. Probably this is a factor why they are doing so poorly in Germany (Eppelsheim, 2020; Deutschlandfunk, 2020).

Yet the demonstrations in Germany are not singular, the Netherlands has faced large-scale demonstrations against the prolongation of the state of emergency, amid political tensions that led to the collapse of the Rutte government and preparation of early elections in March 2021 – won by Rutte, in the end.

And yet Jayson Harsin is not entirely right, there has been a similar political moment in history – the peak of European fascism. Few know that irrationalism and vitalism were the intellectual origins of fascism, anti-Enlightenment and anti-liberal gnoseologists, which are quite similar to Post-Truth. From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, irrationalism was an extremely popular philosophical doctrine among conservative and later fascist movements. It contrasted the gregarious materiality of the enlightenment (and therefore of Marxism) with the reality of spirit and intuition, will and even mystical experience. Names like Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche or (later) Albert Camus were brought on stage as commentators for Kant, Hegel or Marx. Critical reasoning was opposed by will, ethics by Nietzsche's masters' morality, experimental science by the pessimism of existentialism. Fascism has been fed by the idea that by will you can change the world and that by intuition you can overcome the difficult experiment (Milza, 1991).

In the eccentric areas of Europe, such as Spain or Romania, fascism also followed a conservative religious line, of mystical extraction, in which earthly democracy had to correspond to a transcendental dictatorship in the celestial realm. From this point of view, Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera (founder of the Spanish Phalange) and Corneliu Zelea Codreanu (founder of the Legion of Archangel Michael) are very similar, both sharing a hieratic vision of their country, against the political left and in favor of gaining power even through violence, if the democratic elections do not grant it. The notable difference between the two fascist movements is that the Legion was born as a declared anti-Semitic and xenophobic chauvinist movement. Both fascist movements glorified the struggle against the system and the political establishment, they had a strong attitude against both capitalism and communism, placing more hope in God than in a set of public policies that would lead them to modernity (Schmitt, 2017).

The tragedy is that in the November 2020 elections, in Romania, a party - the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (A.U.R.) - which is too reminiscent of the Legionary Movement, entered the Romanian Parliament with a score of 10%, outperforming some mainstream parties. And much of the resounding success of this political party came precisely from the fight against the "muzzle", that is, the medicinal mask that protects against covid infection.

In fact, the fight against the obligation to wear a protective mask was precisely the coagulant of this ideological conglomerate that A.U.R. as a populist political party is.

Almost no one heard about A.U.R. before the elections, although the party had been founded a year earlier by the unification of two radical right-wing formations, a pro-unification with the Republic of Moldova nationalist fascia and another religious one, mainly consisting of those who organized the pro-family referendum (Coalition for Family). According to their political program, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians was founded on four pillars: family, country (homeland), faith and freedom (Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor, 2019). Assuming these four pillars, A.U.R. openly positions itself as a nationalistic populist with strong irrational religious accents party.

The moment when AUR is formed as a legal party, January 24, 2020, is very close to the official start of the pandemic in Romania - March 16, 2020, when the President of Romania established a very severe state of emergency in Romania, limiting the right to free movement between cities, limiting and controlling the circulation in localities of those who are not essential for economics, the introduction of homework and online education for pupils and students etc. Within this framework, the Romanian authorities had a rather complicated stand in relation to religious communities, especially the Orthodox Romanian Church, closing places of worship and allowing the religious service between certain hours and in open spaces. And the fact that feasting the Orthodox rite Easter (which does not have the same calendar as the Catholic and Protestant rites) was allowed under extremely strict conditions, triggered a furious reaction of a part of the Orthodox community. That was the take off moment for this party, a small one until this time.

Theories of an alleged conspiracy of "neo-Marxists" and progressives who wanted to legislate same-sex marriage and accept the adoption of children by same-sex families had already appeared in Romania (as elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe) during the Family Referendum campaign (the introduction of the phrase "marriage is the union between a man and a woman" in the Constitution) in 2018, but they were considered ridiculous, which is why the referendum did not pass. But they have found fertile ground with the so-called conflicts between the state and the Church, and AUR has assiduously promoted them in the anti-mask demonstrations, during the summer of 2020.

This is the first time after the interwar period when high hierarchs of the Orthodox Romanian Church openly intervened in a party's activity and political propaganda, a party that, without a doubt, they supported and continuously do so (Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor, 2019; Ionițe, 2019). A.U.R. leaders have been deeply involved in religious propaganda for the allowance, in the midst of a pandemic, of pilgrimages to Iasi, Bucharest and Constanta (which imply large numbers of people and, therefore, an increased risk of spreading the virus), considered traditional and sacred. In return, the A.U.R. leaders benefited from the impressive media infrastructure of the Romanian Orthodox Church, which allowed them to run a substantial electoral campaign, but under the radar of the cultural and ideological mainstream system, hence the surprise all the other parties had when they were defeated by A.U.R.

What I observe very interesting is that A.U.R. was not original in this endeavor. A decade and a half ago, another radical catholic populist party, PiS (the current ruling party in Poland), used a similar recipe (Radio Maria, in particular) to overthrow the party that had been in power for ten years, the United Left Party, led by the former President Aleksandr Kwasniewski. Of course, it seems hard to believe that the PiS offered support to

A.U.R., but what is certain is that immediately after entering the parliament, A.U.R. sought an alliance with PiS conservatives at an European level.

It must be said that for the Romanian society the appearance of such party represented an extremely strong shock, because since 2009 no self-declared nationalist (and obviously populist) party entered the Romanian Parliament, and Romania seemed to be the only country in Europe not haunted by populism. Of course, a nationalistic populist current was shared among the mainstream parties, but none of them was too radical to be considered a right-wing populist party, such as PiS in Poland, FIDESZ in Hungary, ATAKA in Bulgaria or SmeRodina in Slovakia. Romanian political parties considered a distance from nationalist extremism and adopted a centrist stance on major European populist problems as migration or Euroscepticism, especially since Romania is rather a country of emigration than immigration.

Therefore, the emergence of A.U.R. was a surprise, because it replaced parties such as PMP of the former president Traian Basescu or ProRomania, led by the former prime minister Victor Ponta, which were connected to the institutional and press establishment. (Drăgan, 2021). We can't affirm that the voters of both parties went to AUR, but there is an interesting detail. Both parties, although apparently opposed to each other, practiced the same kind of soft populism: a traditionalist nationalism combined with a Romanian exceptionalism, an aversion to progressive movements and especially to political correctness and LGBTQ + activism. In addition, the PMP also had a special relationship with the Republic of Moldova, declaring itself in favor of the union of Romania with the Republic of Moldova within the European Union<sup>1</sup> (Trinitas TV, 2020).

Therefore, we observe that almost all the programmatic elements of AUR pre-existed in the Romanian society and politics even before the emergence of it. Moreover, in different directions and political components - the European and local elections – both parties performed somewhat the same (two MPs for each - PMP and ProRomania) and with a relative failure in local elections (in the sense that they did not win large mayors cities or presidents of county councils). And yet their place was taken by AUR, by summing up the numbers of both parties.

Which shows that taking on a radical populist and religious line, premodern irrational and appealing to legionary mysticism (the other two parties wouldn't have dared to do) represented the success element for A.U.R. But the most important element was the reaction against the political power on the pandemic dimension: anti-mask, anti-lock down and anti-quarantine. What differentiated A.U.R. from the other two parties was a grass-root activism regarding the freedom of movement and expression, doubled by an aggressive traditional and religious rhetoric.

Research by YouGov-Cambridge Globalism Project (MediaFax 2020, Radio Europa Liberă, 2020) in 2020 found that the support for populist party discourse tends to decline in the last year (2019-2020, the study period) compared to Cas Mudde's definition (see above). On the other hand, the same study notes another interesting fact, namely that those who abandon populist parties in Europe and the United States are predominantly moving towards conspiracy theories (Lewis and Duncan, 2019) - anti-vax, in particular

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<sup>1</sup> In this context, it must be said that the AUR leader, George Simion, also built his political career on the relationship with the Republic of Moldova, having a contract with PMP for a short period.

movements – topics not yet internalized by populist parties. That is why we can say that AUR did not fall into the category of populist parties before or after the elections, but radically far-right parties with a strong fascist character.

It must be mentioned that the party system in Romania is a perfect multiparty one, as defined by Giovanni Sartori (1976), the power being fragmented, parties are permanently forced to form coalitions in order to access or limit governmental power. For this reason, A.U.R. could not be isolated on the Romanian political scene, but on the contrary – it entered – despite the statements which meant to keep it a marginal party – the parliamentary system and managed to become a strong enough force to participate in an ad-hoc coalition which overthrew the Government in 2021. Even though the AUR remained in opposition as a result of this approach, it was perceived as a party system and increased in polls, becoming the third party in March 2022 as a voting intention, while in January had been the second party to vote (Zamfirescu, 2021; Stan, 2022).

The rise of AUR in 2022 was not necessarily due to the Coronavirus pandemic, but to the deep crisis of confidence in Romanian political parties, as well as the government's political indecision in the conditions of the economic crisis caused by rising energy prices. Unlike 2020, when AUR tried to get closer to the Polish PiS, in 2022 it reoriented itself to Viktor Orbán's FIDESZ model in Hungary. As is already known, Orbán introduced energy and food price-blocking systems - including capping fuel prices in Hungary - by virtue of its special relations with the Russian Federation and the ongoing contradiction with the European Union.

Thus, AUR is currently in an extremely complicated relationship with itself from a discursive point of view, although its supporters do not seem to notice this. The most important component of the A.U.R. was born in contradiction with the Hungarian minority in Romania, taking over the ethno-nationalist discourse of the 1990s on the territoriality of Romania and Hungary at the end of the Second World War. On the other hand, it shared, even undeclared, Viktor Orbán's pro-family and anti-abortion Christian conspiracy perspectives (alongside with the Hungarian minority party in Romania – DAHR Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania) with which, theoretically, finds itself in open conflict, as DAHR belongs to the governmental coalition with other mainstream parties. At the same time, A.U.R. endorses an anti-LGBTQ+ law introduced by DAHR (HotNews.ro, 2022), similar to the one initiated by Viktor Orbán's referendum.

Viktor Orbán is undoubtedly the emblematic figure of European populism, constantly inventing power-capturing techniques using the conspiracy theory (of George Soros, of the European bureaucracy, more recently of Vladimir Zelenski) and the instillation of social fears about the future (in crisis of migrants in 2015 spoke about "the Arabization and Islamization of Hungary and Europe) and present (today speaks of the desire of the United Opposition in Hungary to attract the Hungarian state in the war in Ukraine, he defined himself as a man of peace). But in Viktor Orbán's Hungary a new far right party emerged – Mi Hazánk Mozgalom (Our Homeland Movement), which demands the reinstatement of the death penalty (this seems to be a leitmotif of the far right), the reunification of Greater Hungary and, likewise A.U.R. in Romania, seems to be a pandemic party – its leader Laszlo Torockzai violently rejected vaccination (Link TV, 2022).

Romania and Hungary are no different among other countries in euro skeptical and new extremist landscape – in Italy, the hardest hit by Coronavirus European state – an extreme party such as Fratelli d'Italia seems to devour its populist colleagues in the voting intention (Politico, 2022) with a radical nationalistic and anti-EU ideology. Not even a pivotal EU state like France can escape radicalization, because although Marine le Pen did not win the presidential elections, 10% out of 42% of her voters were the ones who had voted for Eric Zemmour and who support leaving the European Union, promoting an ethnic and cultural nationalistic trend that even Marine le Pen's Rassemblement Nationale rejects.

The war in Ukraine and the extreme violence of the Russian invasion generated shock waves across Europe, bringing to light political and social behaviors and feelings that would have been difficult to unravel in other circumstances. The civil society in Poland, Romania, Germany and many other European countries immediately reacted with extreme generosity to refugees (especially women, children and elderly), providing them shelter, food or medical treatments. On the other hand, the same civil society was enraged towards the state for the raise of price of gas and energy, although the two phenomena – war refugees and increased prices for electricity and gas – are closely linked to the war. And this is not the only bipolar reaction of the European society: the treatment of Ukrainian refugees is infinitely better than the treatment of Syrian refugees, for example. Which shows that the new model of social thinking and action has become much more and deeply rooted in “Post-Truth” than in the ordinary rationality? Or, as I stated, the “Post-Truth” is the fertile ground for these political movements that go beyond classical populism and are moving rapidly towards a violent and vindictive far-right.

Putin will most likely lose the war in Ukraine and Europe will have to redefine itself according to the new realities. Only that these new realities will be closer to violence and nationalism than Eurocrats probably like and want to believe at this very moment. Post-war Europe will not be the same and will probably not be better. Trump's legacy in the United States is a huge division between classes, social and racial categories, and hatred is the only means for political coagulation. This legacy – including QAnon – seems to be moving rapidly towards Europe, and Europe will only resist such a rupture at the cost of a fundamental change of attitude. A.U.R., HMH, Querdenker, Fratelli d'Italia and many other post-populist radical parties are just a signal of a new reality we will have to fight off.



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