

A shift further to the right. Radical parties are gaining popularity in Romania

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Over the past year or so, Romania has seen a rapid increase in the popularity of radical and Eurosceptic right-wing parties which are unwilling to provide military or financial support to Ukraine and sometimes openly advocate for cooperation with Russia. According to polls, the political forces that represent these views could garner over 25% of the Romanian electorate's votes in total. The largest party on this part of the political scene is the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), the fourth strongest force in the Romanian parliament. Currently, it enjoys up to 20% support and is competing for the second position (after the Social Democratic Party – PSD) with the National Liberal Party (PNL), which until recently was the main right-wing representative in Romanian politics. At the same time, the popularity of the pro-Russian S.O.S. România party has surged, as it has gained about 6% of supporters in recent months.

Given the fact that a full package of elections (European Parliament, local, parliamentary and presidential) is scheduled this year in Romania, the rising popularity of radical parties may have a particularly strong impact. Although it is highly unlikely that the parties representing this ideological trend will be able to take power in the country or push through their candidate for president in the near future, their growing role in parliament and local structures may necessitate certain adjustments in mainstream Romanian politics.

The radicals' profile: nationalist Eurosceptics...

The AUR party was established in the second half of 2019, yet it managed to garner over 9% of the votes in the parliamentary elections in December 2020. This outcome came as a great surprise to both observers of the Romanian political scene and a significant portion of the electorate. The party was considered so marginal that it hardly featured for in opinion polls (when included, it barely reached 2–3% support). The AUR has been a conglomerate of nationalist, ultra-conservative, Eurosceptic and anti-establishment circles since its inception. Its representatives also include numerous politicians promoting popular conspiracy theories.

The AUR's political manifesto is based on four pillars: the nation, the Orthodox faith, the family and freedom. This party's ideology is sovereigntist and Eurosceptic (though the term Euro-realism is preferred in its political agenda). Its leaders do not call for leaving the EU, but they want their country



to maintain as much independence as possible from community structures and they oppose the EU federalisation project. They also strongly criticise any 'progressive' ideas promoted within the EU and disapprove of granting any rights to sexual minorities (especially introducing civil partnerships or same-sex marriages in Romania). Despite its anti-Western rhetoric, the AUR supports Romania's membership in NATO, believing it to be an essential instrument for ensuring the country's security.

The party has a clear nationalist profile and claims that it cares for the well-being of not only the country's residents but also the Romanian diaspora. The Republic of Moldova is of particular interest

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to this party; AUR members view it as a temporary entity, whose statehood is an artificial consequence of a Soviet republic being established in territory which was taken from Romania by the USSR in 1940. The party advocates for the integration of Moldova into Romania as soon as possible. Like the entire Romanian political scene and the overwhelming majority of the Romanian public, the AUR believes that ethnic Moldovans living in Moldova are actually ethnic Romanians.

The two main figures in the AUR are its founders: George Simion and Claudiu Târziu. Simion, who has strong links with football fan circles, has been known for years in both Romania and Moldova as the main promoter of 'unirea' or the unification of the two countries. In 2011, he created the Acțiunea 2012 (Action 2012) platform, bringing together over 30 'unionist' (pro-unification) non-governmental organisations, primarily from Romania and Moldova, but also representing the Romanian diaspora in other countries. The platform has organised numerous marches and events promoting the idea of unification over the years. Simion has never attempted to conceal his nationalist views or his aversion to minorities living in Romania, including ethnic Hungarians. He is also known for criticising the Ukrainian government for the way they treat the Romanian minority.¹ In turn, Târziu is a journalist strongly associated with Orthodox church circles. For years, he has been involved in the Coalition for the Family, a conservative NGO that led to a referendum on including the definition of marriage as a union of a woman and a man into the Romanian constitution being held in 2018 (the referendum was invalidated due to the low 21% turnout).

Since its inception, the AUR has been accused by its critics and most mainstream media of drawing on the traditions of the Iron Guard and the Legion of the Archangel Michael, the Romanian fascist and anti-Semitic organisations which operated in the interwar period and during World War II and which co-governed the country after Marshal Ion Antonescu took power in 1940–1941. AUR leaders try to fend off these accusations, but they are not groundless. Many members of this party (including Târziu) have repeatedly expressed approval for the acts of those organisations' representatives in the past. Călin Georgescu, who gained notoriety for numerous controversial statements – for example, in 2020, he claimed that Ion Antonescu and Corneliu Codreanu (the founder of the Legion of the Archangel Michael) were heroes – was the AUR's honorary chairman and was promoted by the party as a potential candidate for prime minister in 2020 and 2021.²

¹ Simion not only consistently accuses the government in Kyiv of restricting the Romanian minority's rights to preserve their language and culture but, above all, he criticises Ukraine for recognising the Moldovan minority (around 250,000) as distinct from the Romanian minority (around 150,000). From Simion's perspective, as well as that of the Romanian state, Moldovans are part of the Romanian nation, and Kyiv is attempting to artificially diminish the size of the Romanian minority in Ukraine.

² 'Cine este Călin Georgescu, propunerea AUR pentru funcția de premier', Digi24, 13 December 2020, digi24.ro.

The AUR is also traditionally accused of being pro-Russian, or even having ties to Russian secret services. However, these accusations are mainly based on circumstantial evidence and have not yet been credibly proven. Nevertheless, for these reasons, Simion is considered *persona non grata* both in Ukraine and Moldova.³ In its political manifesto, the party defines itself as unfriendly towards Russia, viewing it as a threat to Romania's security. At the same time, it also looks unfavourably upon Ukraine and Romania's involvement in the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, which leads to its political opponents accusing it of harbouring pro-Russian sentiments.

...and pro-Russian promoters of conspiracy theories

At present, the second most popular radical party in Romania is S.O.S. România, which was formed in November 2021 and has been led since May 2022 by Senator Diana Șoșoacă, who entered parliament on the AUR ticket. She became known to the wider public mainly due to her extremely radical views (even compared to those represented by the AUR leadership) and calculated sensationalism, expressed through scandalous statements and political gestures. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the senator became one of the leading representatives of the anti-vaccination movement (publicly branding those opting for vaccination as "sheep going to slaughter") and an opponent of sanitary restrictions (as part of a protest, she even appeared in parliament wearing a muzzle, meant to mimic a face mask). She openly advocates for Romania to leave the EU.

Since Șoșoacă was expelled from the AUR in February 2021 due to her extreme behaviour and refusal to adhere to the party line, she embarked on developing her own

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political project. S.O.S. România under her leadership is a party that is not only strongly nationalist and anti-Western, but also irredentist, anti-Ukrainian and openly pro-Russian. In March 2022, shortly after Russia launched the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Șoșoacă visited the Russian embassy in Bucharest in order to – as she described it – discuss Romania's potential declaration of neutrality in the ongoing conflict and mediation in the process of any peace negotiations between Moscow and Kyiv.⁴ A year later, she presented a bill in parliament proposing that Bucharest annexe the Ukrainian territories that had belonged to Romania before World War II, including northern Bukovina, Budzhak and Snake Island (for which she was deemed a 'threat to national security' by Kyiv and subjected to sanctions).⁵ Her activities are consistently promoted in the Russian media, including the Romanian-language version of the Sputnik portal, which in 2021 hailed her as 'politician of the year'.⁶

Why are the radical parties becoming so popular?

The surge in popularity of radical parties observed in Romania over the past year or so has several underlying causes. Primarily, it stems from the weakness of the traditional Romanian political elite, dissatisfaction with the way the government handled the COVID-19 pandemic and growing frustration with Romania's position in the EU.

³ V.Vițu, 'George Simion, liderul AUR, interzis în Republica Moldova pentru încă cinci ani', RFI România, 14 February 2024, rfi.fr.

⁴ A. Ghiorghe, 'Diana Șoșoacă, Dumitru Coarnă și alți parlamentari au discutat cu ambasadorul Rusiei despre neutralitate și negocieri de pace la București. Cum a reacționat PSD', Adevărul, 31 March 2022, adevarul.ro.

⁵ D. Vulcan, 'Ministerul de Externe al Ucrainei cere sancționarea senatoarei Diana Șoșoacă', Radio Europa Liberă, 25 March 2023, romania.europalibera.org.

⁶ I. Birzoi, 'Sputnik o nominalizează pe Diana Șoșoacă drept „omul politic al anului 2021” din România. Argumentele invocate', Ziare, 15 December 2021, ziare.com.

This phenomenon seems to be driven above all by the electorate's growing sense of fatigue and disillusionment with the mainstream right and centre-right parties, notably the PNL. This party has been the strongest right-wing political force for a long time and has been present on the Romanian political scene since the early 1990s. Now, its support levels are the lowest in over a decade, ranging between 16–19% according to surveys (it garnered 25% of the vote in the parliamentary elections in December 2020).

The disillusionment with this party became clear in the second half of 2021, following the breakup of the centre-right coalition formed by the PNL and the Save Romania

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Union (USR), supported by the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR). The public responded negatively to this move, and the national liberals were blamed for precipitating a political crisis during the fourth wave of the pandemic. The PNL's image suffered even more when, in December 2021, in order to retain power and avoid early elections, the party leadership decided to form a 'grand coalition' with its main political rival, the PSD. For years, the PNL had consistently accused the PSD of corruption and breaching the rule of law (particularly during the tensions between Bucharest and the European Commission in 2017–2019). When the PNL decided to form a government coalition with the PSD, some of its voters viewed this as a betrayal.⁷

The PNL's image was further tarnished by a series of internal conflicts; as a result of one of them, the former prime minister and PNL leader Ludovic Orban (along with 16 MPs and senators) left the party in November 2021. On top of this, Klaus Iohannis, who is closely associated with the PNL, is extremely unpopular and as he approaches the end of his second term he has a 16% public trust rating (for comparison, when he took office in 2015, 65% of the electorate trusted him).⁸

As a result, some right-leaning voters (not necessarily radicals) are turning towards the AUR or, less frequently, S.O.S. România, seeing these parties as authentic, uncorrupted representatives of the conservative movement. Paradoxically, some voters who until recently supported the PSD are joining the electorate of these parties because they perceive the PSD as a sovereigntist force (the Social Democrats often clashed with the European Commission).

The COVID-19 pandemic was one of the key factors that allowed the AUR (and Şoşoacă, who cooperated with it at that time) to break into the mainstream of Romanian politics during the parliamentary elections in December 2020. Activists of this party, who opposed sanitary restrictions and vaccination campaigns, capitalised on growing public discontent and the increasing popularity of pandemic-related conspiracy theories. They organised numerous protests and published critical content against the government on social media, and this was quickly disseminated by opponents of sanitary restrictions and those who considered COVID-19 to be a supranational conspiracy aimed at restricting the freedom of citizens. Even though the pandemic has ended, the opposition continues to use the scandals related to it, including corruption scandals⁹ for propaganda purposes.

⁷ K. Całus, 'Wielka koalicja po rumuńsku', OSW, 2 December 2021, osw.waw.pl.

⁸ R. Eremia, C. Morozanu, 'Încrederea în politicianul Iohannis a intrat la apă după 9 ani de mandat. Cum a avut loc prăbuşirea bruscă', Adevărul, 4 January 2024, adevarul.ro.

⁹ A scandal broke out in Romania at the end of 2023, when it was disclosed that the centre-right government led by Prime Minister Florin Ciţu had purchased too many doses of the COVID-19 vaccine, which was immediately picked up by both parties (instead of approximately 37.5 million, a total of over 90 million were ordered, as a consequence of which the treasury may have lost around €1 billion). See M. Necsutu, 'Romanian Prosecutors Seek Lifting of Immunity for Former Govt Members', Balkan Insight, 24 November 2023, balkaninsight.com.

The rising disillusionment with Romania's EU membership in recent years has also contributed to the popularity of radical nationalist groups. This is because a significant section of the Romanian public share the opinion that their country is not treated equally within the EU or is even exploited by its Western partners. One of the triggers for these sentiments is the fact that Romania's accession to the Schengen area has been blocked for political reasons by some EU member states (previously by the Netherlands, currently by Austria). As a result, in 2021 (immediately after the AUR's electoral success), as many as 78% of Romanians declared that they felt like 'second-class EU citizens,' and 54% felt discriminated against within the EU.¹⁰ At the same time, 56% of citizens were inclined to agree with the statement that foreign (Western) companies are responsible for environmental pollution in Romania, and 35% claimed that 'foreign powers' were blocking the construction of in their country.

Although pro-European sentiments are predominant in Romania, as many as 26% of its citizens believe that their country should leave the EU.¹¹ One in four Romanians living abroad voted for the AUR in 2020. One of the main reasons for this was its social media campaign targeted specifically at emigrants. The ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war also contributes to the consolidation of the radical electorate, making the slogans raised by AUR and S.O.S. România more appealing, as these parties insist that Romania should not be involved in this conflict and should reduce or completely withdraw support for Kyiv.

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Electoral strategies...

AUR leaders, who have successfully doubled the party's electorate over the past three years (from 9% in the parliamentary elections at the end of 2020 to around 20–21% in current polls), are aware that in order to attract new voters, the AUR must tone down its rhetoric and avoid unnecessary scandals that would be off-putting for the less radical but still right-leaning part of the electorate. Back in November 2023, Simion, who had been regularly accused of anti-Semitism and sympathising with the legionary movement, met the Israeli ambassador in Bucharest and acknowledged Romanian responsibility for the Holocaust committed by Antonescu's government in the territories occupied by Romania, and expressed "deep regret" for this.¹²

At the same time, the AUR, which used to be ambivalent, if not sceptical, about Romania's presence in the EU (suggesting that leaving was entirely possible and admissible), has been trying to emphasise for some time that leaving the EU is not on its political agenda. In early March, referring to the campaign ahead of the European Parliament elections, Simion explicitly stated that his party does not want to 'leave Europe', but is rather fighting for Romania to take its rightful place within it.¹³

One sign of the 'de-radicalisation' of the AUR's profile is its declared willingness for its future representatives in the European Parliament (expected to be around 7–8 out of the 33 allocated to Romania) to join the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) rather than the more extreme Identity and

¹⁰ 'Majoritatea românilor consideră că sunt priviți drept „cetățeni de mâna a doua” în UE. O treime crede că în România construcția autostrăzilor e blocată de puteri străine', *Economica.net*, 29 March 2021, [economica.net](https://www.economica.net).

¹¹ A. Traicu, 'SONDAJ Cum se raportează românii la apartenența la UE și NATO și câți ar lupta ca să-și apere țara', *Adevărul*, 6 December 2023, [adevarul.ro](https://www.adevarul.ro).

¹² M. Bachner, L. Berman, 'Israeli envoy meets head of Romanian party accused of antisemitism, drawing rebuke', *The Times of Israel*, 28 August 2023, [timesofisrael.com](https://www.timesofisrael.com).

¹³ 'Apărătorii Patriei Române în Europa. Noi, românii, suntem APĂRĂTORII SECULARI AI EUROPEI', 2 March 2024, [georgesimion.ro](https://www.georgesimion.ro).

Democracy (ID) group.¹⁴ Both Simion and other AUR politicians are consistently trying to build the best possible relationships with Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, who plays an important role in the ECR. In December 2023, the leader of the AUR called her the "lioness of Europe" and the Brothers of Italy party she leads as a "political model" for his own party.¹⁵

One unintended consequence of the AUR softening its political narrative is the rising popularity of S.O.S. România, which appeals to radicals dissatisfied with this evolution (only a year ago, S.O.S. România had 1–2% support, but it now stands at around 6%). Another factor helping this party gain increasing numbers of supporters is the enormous prominence of its leader, who receives a lot of publicity in both traditional and social media due to numerous scandals and controversial statements that have resonated widely among the Romanian public. In March 2024, Șoșoacă was recognised by 94% of Romanians, achieving a better result than Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu (93%), Senate speaker and PNL leader Nicolae Ciucă (88%) and Simion (85%).¹⁶

” The pressure from the radical parties will make Romanian political discourse evolve towards nationalism. Nevertheless, Romania will remain a staunchly pro-Atlantic state.

...and the possible scenarios after the elections

It seems certain that the June elections to the European Parliament (and to a lesser extent, local elections held on the same day) will be a political success for the AUR, which will not only allow it to introduce its deputies to the parliament but, more importantly, will strengthen the party ahead of the parliamentary and presidential elections planned for the end of the year. Since the PSD and the PNL will be running on a joint list in the European elections, the AUR (with around 20% support) will be able to argue that it has in fact taken the second place and doubled its support compared to the 2020 parliamentary elections. However, it is uncertain whether its MEPs will ultimately join the ECR. Despite earlier announcements, AUR leaders have threatened they will not join this group, if it decides to cooperate with the Hungarian Fidesz.¹⁷ If this scenario comes true, the Romanian nationalists may join the ID (the AUR keeps contacts with this group).

As regards national parliamentary elections, both radical parties are expected to garner a total of about one-fourth of the votes. However, they have no chance of being included in the future government. None of the mainstream parties see the AUR or S.O.S. România as potential coalition partners. The PSD and the PNL, which are in the present government coalition, will likely win a total of around 45–50% of the votes, and so they will likely be compelled to seek support from the remaining two political forces that opinion polls predict will be in parliament. However, this will not be easy, as the United Right Alliance (ADU), including the USR and the Right Force led by the former PNL leader Orbán, can count on about 15% support and is very reluctant to cooperate with the Social Democrats. Nevertheless, it may decide to join the parties which currently form the 'grand coalition' to prevent early elections and a further rise in the popularity of radical parties. The 'Hungarian' UDMR (around 5%), which has previously cooperated with both the PSD and the PNL, may also join the coalition without any ideological objections.

¹⁴ The members of the ID group in the European Parliament include Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the French National Rally (RN), co-led by Marine Le Pen.

¹⁵ A. Draghici, 'George Simion, discurs alături de Giorgia Meloni pe care a numit-o 'leoaica Europei': Modelul nostru politic nu este Ursula von der Leyen', *Stiripesurse.ro*, 17 December 2023, stiripesurse.ro.

¹⁶ D. Popa, 'Sondaj INSCOP – Klaus Iohannis, politicianul cu cea mai mare notorietate, urmat de Gabriela Firea. Pe locul al treilea, Diana Șoșoacă', *HotNews.ro*, 13 November 2023, hotnews.ro.

¹⁷ M. Griera, 'AUR amenință că va renunța la intenția de a se alătura Grupului Conservatorilor și Reformiștilor Europeni din cauza FIDESZ: Ungurii au revendicări teritoriale / Ne e imposibil să fim în aceeași alianță cu ei – presă', *G4Media.ro*, 14 February 2024, g4media.ro.

Even though neither the AUR nor S.O.S. România will be forming the government in the next term (Simion and Țoșoacă also have no real chance of success in the presidential elections, as they currently have about 13% and 14% support respectively), their growing role in parliament and local structures may force the new government coalition to consider some of their demands or at least express an opinion on them. The PSD will be the dominant party in the future government and it may, under the influence of the AUR's narrative, start drawing upon nationalist slogans (including economic protectionism) and resume the sovereigntist narrative it used, for example, during the 2017–2018 dispute with the European Commission regarding the rule of law. Attempts to win over at least part of the nationalist-leaning electorate in this way will likely lead to tensions inside the coalition (especially with the PNL).

Romania will remain a staunchly pro-Atlantic state, nor will its stance on Russia significantly change. However, the evolution of Romanian political discourse towards nationalism will be driven not only by the pressure from the radical parties but also by the actual views of the Romanian electorate. The Romanian public are expressing their sentiments increasingly strongly and, according to opinion polls, they are disappointed with Romania's weak position in the EU and largely represent national and conservative views.