POPULISM ASCENDANCE IN EUROPE: EXPLORING BACKLASH DYNAMICS AND THE DUAL PROCESS MECHANISMS THROUGH A ROMANIAN LENS

Doina GAVRILOV

PhD, National School of Political and Administrative Studies - SNSPA (Romania)
E-mail: doina.gavrilov@yahoo.com

Abstract: *Over the past two decades throughout Europe, there has been a noticeable increase in public demonstrations of populist discourses, and the rise to power of populist political factions. With the aim of comprehending the reasons behind this phenomenon and identifying the factors underlying the growth of populist parties, this study centers on the Romanian case. The objective is to offer insights and solutions to ensure a stable democratic path of the European countries. For this, the study embraces a mixed approach of the cultural backlash theory and the dual process theory to explain the social change in the light of the current international events, and identifies reasons and motivations of the voters turning towards populist ideologies. The paper begins with a historical analysis of the development of Romanian political parties to discern potential variations in the preferences of the Romanian electorate. Then, the study follows the emergence of new parties in Romania over the past four years, aiming to assess the balance between pro-European and populist parties. In the end, the study follows the discourse delivered by representatives of populist parties in Romania, identifies keywords and specific subjects in their speeches, and emphasizes their impact on voters' choice.*

Keywords: populist parties, backlash theory, the dual process theory, fear, discourse

1. Introduction

After the second World War the vote share of populist parties in Europe has been rising from 5.3% in 1946 to 12.4% in 2017 (Döring, Manow, 2016, apud Norris & Inglehart, 2019). The populism has spread and flourished even in the "richest and most egalitarian European societies, with long-established democracies like Austria, Norway and Denmark, in societies with mass unemployment like Greece and Bulgaria, and recently has taken root in Netherlands, Germany" (Norris & Inglehart, 2019: 9), and in the UK, that it pushed towards Brexit (Miliband, 2020).

Muis and Immerzeel (2017) argue that the rise of radical populist parties was possible because of the way the other political parties position in the political space. "When they ideologically converge, they leava a 'gap' in the electoral market" (p.913).

Others say it is Globalization that divided the electorate in the ones that enjoy the freedom of movement and international competition, and the ones that fear the opened borders. Yet, the populist party voters are not necessarily those who have not found themselves in the lifestyle brought by globalization, but actually those who shared the fear of open borders (Rodujin, 2018) or other fears in moments of crisis. And since the fear of open borders is not something that defines a specific member of our society, but rather the behavior of individuals in certain circumstances, the populist electorate is not stable and relies on fear.

Quite important is that "the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" (Lovecraft 1927, apud Carleton, 2016). So, when the populist speeches direct the public attention towards fears and the unkown they gain the public simpathy. Yet, one question remains unanswered: What makes people turn towards the populist parties and believe their speeches?

2. Research methodology

To answer the question of this study we use the case-study and the historical analysis to collect data and identify the evolution of the political lanscape in Romania after the 2nd WW to help us understand the the transition of the European states from nationalism to the idea of European unity. We also use the comparative research method to highlight the difference in the political preferences of the Romanian political parties and electorate and the specific contexts influencing voters choice.

Then, we use the social media screening to analyze the use of Facebook by the political parties. This method helps us diferentiate between active and inactive parties and their speeches. In the same line we use the discourse analysis and content analysis to identify discourse strategies and keywords of the populist parties.

3. Populist parties in the 21st century

In 2019 the populist parties were defined as: "anti-establishment, anti-pluralist and authoritarian" political groups (Guth & Nelsen, 2019: 2) which encourage the creation of a corupt elite with complete powers, promising to fully represent the society while guaranteeing benefits only to themselves. They are present in the whole political spectrum (Santana & Rama, 2018), but manifest specific individual ideologies (Mudde, 2016). Meaning, generally, populist parties suport nativism, authorianism and populism. But individually they have specific ideologies like anti-semitism, welfare chauvinism, xenophobia, ethno-religion, etc.

In the past, these parties were the traditional ones. Nowadays, however, they are the opposition (Guth & Nelsen, 2019: 2) and the traditionalists are the parties supporting diversity, pluralism, democracy, and all that the Globalization brings to us.

EU seemed to temper the nationalist and extremist tendencies of the Europeans that led them into destructive wars (Hoffmeister, 2012; Bărbulescu, 2015; Birchfield, Krige & You, 2017; Gavrilov, 2020). Through the accession treaty it required the member states and their parties to comply with its values. For this reason, in the current European governments we find a sort of 'political octopus', with populist, globalist, liberal and traditional, "left-right variations in the party composition of government" (Imbeau, Petry & Lamri: 2). And it is only the public discourse the sole means to identify the populist and extremist parties.

Over the past decade the populist parties have witnessed a notable increase in their influence and presence (Norris & Inglehart, 2018: 11). Defined as "a style of discourse reflecting first order principles about who should rule, claiming that legitimate power rests with 'the people' not the elites" (ibid. p.5), populism remains silent about the necessary actions to reach a purpose.

3.1 Defining the populist parties electorate

We used to associate the populist electorate with the old people, believeing they inherited the ideology from their families, or with the poor people, the young, the less educated and/or religious, or the ones with a lower social status in need for special policies and help (Guth & Nelsen, 2019).

Akkerman (2012) and Immerzell et al (2015) confirmed this belief showing that the electorate of the populist parties manifest anti-immigration attitudes. In the same line Norris and Inglehart (2018) argued that the populist voters are moslty men, old people, religious and less educated people together with the ethnic majoritarian populations, nostalgic for an old model of social organization.

Meanwhile, the European Social Survey has shown that there is no such a thing as the populist voter. But to find it Rodujin (2017) recommended to follow the demands of the electoral market instead of looking at the electorate supply, meaning, rather than focusing on the party ideology and leadership style, to analyze the voters, their needs and motivations.

By doing so, Spruyt, Keppens and Van Droogenbroeck (2016) have found that the electorate of populist, autocratic parties is dependent on the number of people facing social,

politic and economic vulnerability, and the number of those with difficulties in finding a social identity in the Globalization context.

Considering these, to comprehend the surge and expansion of populist parties in Europe, we will examin the central tenets of the Cultural Backlash theory.

4. Cultural Backlash theory: theoretical insights

In 1995 Hochschild laid down the basics of the backlash theory. She embraced a feminist approach and starting from the impact of women in various sectors of the social life since entering the workforce she explained the cultural impact of this phenomenon on the social organization, dynamics, behavior and choice.

To explain the social resistance to change, the sudden support for tradition, and the strong opposition to progressive ideas, Hochschild introduced the term backlash. Along with this, she also proposed the concept of conservative countermovements describing people resistance to progress and support for values and ideas representing 'the traditional'.

The theory focuses on the impact of work environment but also of the family on the social movements. In this way it highlights the importance of a wider perspective considering both the public and private aspects when trying to understand social problems, behavior and decisions (Gotz, 2013).

For understanding the rise of populism, the backlash theory turns its attention towards fears, and shows that the influence of change in the social roles has a huge impact on economy and raised a reaction of resistance, particularly in those who are affected by the change in the workforce and the gender roles withing the family. The change of social roles together with multiculturalism, highlighted the identity problem in the context of threatened traditional values which made "society members feel they had become strangers on their own land" (Norris & Inglehart, 2019: 35).

Another aspect to is the deep - rooted values that guide the lifestyle of our society (Norris & Inglehart, 2019: 35). They are about social priorities and define the society members, their roles and the social aspirations. They are crucial in people's lives and highlight their characters, attitudes and opinions. Thus, touching these values will trigger a sense of insecurity and enhance the identity crisis. In this context Globalization is nothing but another trigger of fears with a specific impact on culture and economic inequality.

Among the greatest fears raised by the contemporary lifestyle we also mention the fears of a higher rate of divorces, a lower rate of natality, a higher rate of immigrants, etc. All of these highlighting a change in the social lifestyle, making people feel like their grounding pillars of life are shivering, thus their future being under the question mark. But, to better understand the impact of fear on our decision making we turn towards the dual process theory.

5. The dual process theory

In 2011, Kahleman proposed the dual process theory (DPT), which explains human cognitive, decision-making and behavioral processes considering the basic mechanism of brain functioning. Starting from the way the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex work, this theory describes the waltz of the decision-making process.

Kahleman differentiates between two systems of decision: System 1, is the automatic mode of interpretation and response to external stimuli, often known as the "fight or flight" reaction, which focuses on the interpretation of immediate and imminent dangers, being responsible for survival; and System 2, is a complex system of thinking that allows solving problems that do not threaten our existence and are described by an advanced degree of complexity.

Kahleman distinguishes between automatic and conscient decision-making, yet highlighting their connectedness when "most of what we think originates in our System 1" and when the "System 2 has often the last word" (Kahleman, 2011: 26). In spite of this, System 1 is always the first to analyze any impulse, and the System 2 functions when the alert state was

exceeded. And even then, the direction of thinking is always established by System 1. It is also the System 1 that constantly "generates impressions, intuitions, feelings and intentions for the System 2" (ibid.) to analyze and decide what is to be transformed into beliefs, impulses, voluntary actions and what is to be ignored.

Thus, fear is the main aspect the populist parties use to get the public's attention. It is raised with alarmed speeches about peoples' well-being, future and existence. Hence, individuals tend to opt for familiar routines and practices, seeking a sense of security, rather than embracing novelty and change (Gavrilov, 2023). Yet, how do populist parties manage to transform false statements and half-truths into absolute truths in the minds of voters?

To answer this question, Kahleman proposed the concept of cognitive ease, describing a pleasant state of familiarity achieved through specific techniques like repetition, rhyme and recognition.

Familiarity is the first way to transform some statements into truth. The DPT underlines that an effective method of making people believe something false is through the use of repetition. The secret is about people's difficulty to differentiate familiar from truth (ibid., p.64). So, when we hear a statement that seems familiar but we don't remember the source, we take it for granted just as it is almost impossible to check the source of all the information we are exposed to. And even more, when parts of the sentences we hear often are used in other speeches we come to believe the whole story because we are very familiar with one part of it.

Another way to make something seem true is through rhymes (ibid., p.66). This is the reason we have rhyming aphorisms at protests and in political contexts. Rhymes trigger a deep judgement of the words meaning and penetrate deeper in the human mind.

Thus, the populist parties juggle with the use of rhymes, when they want society to make clear associations and the use of repetition to emphasize keywords and transform ideas into truths. This is why the populist parties' resort to rhetoric endorsing traditional values, nurturing a sense of familiarity, security, representation, connection and confidence among their supporters.

6. The rise of populist parties in Europe: The Romanian case-study

Between 1946 and 1965 Romania was governed by the Romanian Workers' Party (PMR), but from 1965 to 1989 it fell under the communist dictatorship of the Romanian Communist Party (PCR) (The Presidential Commission for the analisys of the communist dictatorship in Romania, 2006). The discourse of regime representatives was about worthy intentions, which is why Romania fell into the trap of the communism in the first place. However, in order to achieve its goals, the party recorded serious violations of human rights, the reason why in 1989 Romania put an end to the communist regime and followed the European model.

Thus, Romania has not a very distant past with an authoritarian regime. The question is: What makes the Romanian citizens attracted to such speeches again? To answer the question, we take a closer look at the political dynamics, the votes and the parties' discourse in Romania since 1989.

6.1 Political parties in Romania since 1989: evolution, votes share and discourse

On December 20, 1989, Romania created the Political Party of the December Revolutionaries to lead the revolution and leave behind the communist regime. Yet, Romania has met the political pluralism only after the decree of 31 December 1989. Following this, the parties dissolved by the Communist Party in 1965 re-appeared and others were founded: the Christian-Democrat Peasant National Party (re-established), the National Liberal Party (founded), the Romanian Socialist Democratic Party (founded), the Romanian Social Democratic Party (re-established), etc. The last one was quite close in the past with the Communist Party. Their closeness was marked in 1946 when its representatives participated under joint lists in elections with the ones of the Communist Party, and in 1948 it merged with

the Communist Party forming the Romanian Workers' Party, that in 1965 was renamed the Communist Romanian Party (PCR) (The Presidential Commission for the analisys of the communist dictatorship in Romania, 2006). The two Socialist and Social Democratic Parties merged in 2001 building the Social Democrat Party (PSD) (PSD, 2024).

Other political formations we can name are: the Ecological Movement of Romania (MER), from which a formation laid the foundations of the Ecological Federation of Romania (FER) that merged with the Popular Action Party in 2004; the Romanian Environmental Party (PER); the Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania (in response to the communist treatment of the Hungarian community); the Romanian Unity Party (PUNR) (in response to the creation of the Hungarian Democratic Unity of Romania) which, disappeared by joining the Conservative Party; the Liberal National Party - Young Wing (formed because of the divergences between the members of the National Liberal Party).

At the moment, Romania has over 30 political parties, but only 7 of them got regular votes during the years. So, let us take a closer look at the Romanian parties and their ideologies (see Table 1).

Table 1: Leading parties in Romania in the last 10 years and their ideologies

Party	Year	Ideology	Classification
Social Democrat Party (PSD)	Founded in **1983** as Social-Democratic Workers' Party of Romania (PSDMR), it reappeared as PSDR in 1993, and changed its name once more in 2001 after its merger with PSDR.	Has its roots in classical socialism supporting progress and the well-being of all, with emphasis on the nation and the country. A center-left wing party, claiming to support competition, globalization and fight against the climate change.	Populist Pro-European
The Save Romania Union (USR)	Founded in **2016**	A center-right party, supporting freedom and responsibility, market economy, human rights, diversity and Euro-Atlantic values.	Pro-European
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats Party (ALDE)	Appeared in **2015** after the fusion of the *Conservative Party* (recognized before 2005 as *The Humanist Party* from Romania) and the Liberal Reformer Party (built in 2014).	A center-right party supporting the middle-class workers, the entrepreneurs, the liberal professions and human rights.	Pro-European
The National Liberal Party (PNL)	Founded in **1875**, dissolved by the communist regime, and rebuilt on January 15, 1990. It had alliances with the *Conservatory Party* in 2011, and nowadays with the *Social Democrat Party.*	A center-right party, supporting the rule of law, the human rights, diversity, pluralism along with other values and principles of the EU.	Pro-European
Pro Romania Party	Founded in **2018** by the former president of the Social Democratic Party (*PSD*). It merged with *ALDE* from October 8, 2020 until January 26, 2021 for the parliamentary elections.	A center-left party, with a pro-European and a socialist ideology. Is focused on: the minimum income during crises, the economic support during crises, the national program of testing, re-opening schools and respect towards the militaries.	Populist

Popular Movement Party (PMP)	Founded in **2013** after the divergences between the former president of Romania between 2004 and 2014 Traian Basescu, and the Democratic-Liberal Party (PDL). For the 2024 European parliamentary elections, *PMP* joined forces within the United Right Alliance together with *USR* and the *Right Force Party*.	A center-right party with European - oriented objectives. Focused on: a free nation, the rule of law, efficient and trusty administration, healthy and prosperous families, justice, free economy, free press, environment, etc.	Pro-European
The Right Force Party	Founded in **2021** by the ex-president of the National Liberal Party.	A center-right party with a liberal, conservative and Christian-democratic ideology.	Pro-European
Hungarian Democratic Union from Romania (UDMR)	Founded on December 25, **1989**. It represented the third governmental force in Romania in 2020 alongside the PNL and PSD. Since 2023 it is in opposition.	A center-right party, defending the rights of the Hungarian minority in Romania, their identity and the expansion of this minority rights and territory.	Pro-European, separatist
Freedom, Unity and Solidarity Party (PLUS)	Founded in **2018**, merged with USR in 2021. In 2018 it merged with *USR* and created the *USR-PLUS* alliance to fit the social needs.	A center-right party. From November 15, 2015 it had a technocrat government that dissolved on January 4, 2017.	Pro-European
Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR)	Founded in **2019**	A right/ extreme-right party. Promotes family, nation, faith and liberty. The official governing program focuses also on liberty, the rule of law, transparency, efficient governing, etc. The party intends to rebuild the national conscience, giving special attention to the Christian religion, to the traditional family, and the love for the nation.	Populist

Source: Author's table after Camera Deputatilor (1989), PSD (2024), USR (2024), AUR (2024), RDMSZ (2024), PRO Romania (2024), PNL (2024)

The society differentiates the parties mostly at the level of speeches, and divided them into pro-Europeans and Eurosceptics. The first ones are centered on human rights, equality, liberalism, globalization, multiculturalism and diversity, while the second are nationalist, populist, anti-globalist, and traditional.

To understand the surge of populist parties in Romania, we examine its political preferences dating back to 1990, as well as the factors that might have played a role in the emergence and strengthening of populist, nationalist, and extremist parties.

6.2 Votes share in Romania since 1990

After the Revolution, there was a noticeable eagerness for democracy within Romanian society. But during the years the Romanians' presence at the polls decreased, except when it comes to electing their representatives in the European Parliament (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The presence of Romanians at the polls from 1990 to 2024
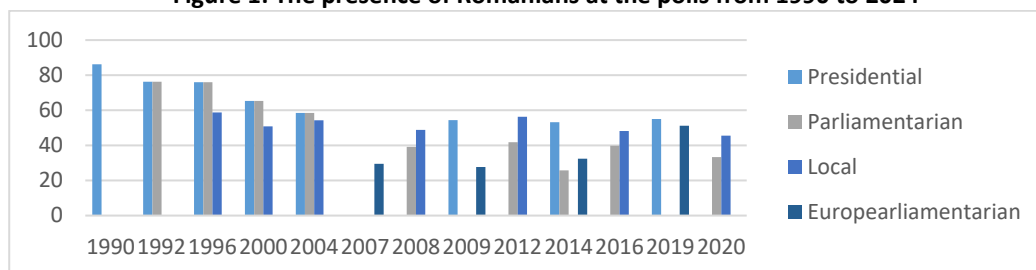
Source: Author's figure after Rezultate Vot (2024)

A real change in Romania is to be observed in the Europarliamentarian elections where the presence at the pools increased over the years. The first sign of change towards a European Romania is to be found in 1996, when the presidential elections were won by a member of the CDR[1], an alliance with a liberalist ideology, and not the PDSR[2], a populist party.

In 2007 Romania became a member of the EU, with all this, there are regular political movements questioning the political orientation of Romania. In 2018, for example, Romania had a Referendum for the traditional family, signalling the activism of populist groups, such as the Coalition for the Family, made up of 40 NGOs, foundations, associations and federations supporting the promotion of the traditional family (Coalitia pentru Familie, 2024). The referendum intended to modify the Romanian Constitution and define the family in a traditional way in spite of the European values and ideas encouraging the single-parent family and the women's rights. The referendum was not validated since 78.9% of Romanian did not vote. However, of those present, 19.32% voted for amending the constitution.

So, we are wondering about the political preferences of the Romanian voters during the years. For this we follow the evolution of the votes in the locals, parliamentarian, presidential and Europarliamentarian elections since 1990 (see Table 2).

Table 2: Parties votes share between 1990 and 2020

Year	Locals (mandates)	Parliamentarian (%)		Presidential (%)	Euro (%)
2020	2931 PNL 2966 PSD 1771 PMP 1599 PPR[3]	*Deputies Chamber* 28.9% PSD 25.18% PNL 15.37% USR-PLUS 9.08% AUR	*Senate* 29.32% PSD 25.58% PNL 15.86% USR-PLUS 9.17% AUR		
2019				66.09% PNL 33.91% PSD	27% PNL 22.36% USR-PLUS 22.5% PSD 6.44% PR
2016	2973 PNL 2923 PSD 1869 ALDE[4] 1602 PMP	*Deputies Chamber* 45.48% PSD 20.04% PNL 8.87% USR	*Senate* 45.68% PSD 20.42% PNL 8.92% USR		

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[1] Romanian Democratic Convention (CDR), is a political alliance built in 1991 by PNTCD, PNR, PSDR, PER, PAC and UDMR to balance the power of FSN. In 1992 the National Liberal Party-Democratic Convention (PNL-CD), National Liberal Party the Young Wing (PNL-AT) and the Ecological Federation of Romania (FER) joined the alliance (RFI Romania, 2020). Until 2000, the year of its dissolution, the CDR represented the main political force to direct Romania towards its European path.

[2] PDSR is a centre-left party with a socially liberal ideology. It is the predecessor of the PSD, but also the successor of the FDSN.

[3] PRO Romania Party – centre-left ideology, liberalist ideas.

[4] Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, centre party.

		6.19% UDMR	6.24% UDMR		
2014		Deputies Chamber 38.83% PSD + UNPR – PC 27.25% PNL 8.06% PDL 7.76% PMP[1]	Senate 51.07% PSD + UNPR – PC 14.86% PNL 12.83% PDL 8.94% PMP	54.43% PNL 45.57% PSD	37.6% PSD + UNPR – PC 15.01% PNL 12.23% PDL 6.82% Independent Candidates
2012	2455 – PPDD[2] 2037 USL (PSD + PNL-PC) 1830 PDL 1131 PRM	*Deputies Chamber* 58.63% USL (PSD+ PNL-PC) 16.51% ARD (PDL + FC+ PNTCD) 13.99% PPDD 5.14% UDMR	*Senate* 60.10% USL (PSD + PNL - PC) 16.71% ARD (PDL + FC + PNTCD) 14.65% PPDD 5.24% UDMR		
2009				52.33% PDL 49.67% PSD	31.08% PSD+ PC 29.71% PDL 14.52% PNL 8.92% UDMR
2008	3025 PDL 2995 PSD 2874 PNL 2177 PRM	*Deputies Chamber* 33.10% PSD+PC 32.36% PDL 18.57% PNL 6.17% UDMR	*Senate* 34.16% PSD+PC 33.57% PDL 18.78% PNL 6.39% UDMR		
2007					28.82% PD 23.12% PSD 13.45% PNL 7.79% PLD[3]
2004	2999 PSD 2938 PNL 2844 PD 2737 PRM	*Deputies Chamber* 36.61% PSD+PUR 31.33% D.A. PNL-PD 12.92% PRM 6.17% UDMR	*Senate* 37.13% PSD+PUR 31.77% D.A. PNL-PD 13.63% PRM 6.23% UDMR	51.23% PD 48.77% PSD	
2000	2803 PDSR 2739 APR[4] 2649 PD 2552 PNL	*Deputies Chamber* 36.61% PDSR+PUR+PSDR 19.48% PRM 7.03% PD 6.89% PNL	*Senate* 37.09% PDSR+PUR+PSDR 21.01% PRM 7.58% PD 7.48% PNL	66.83% PDSR 33.17% PRM[5]	
1996	2369 PDSR 2160 CDR 268 PSDR 1307 PSM[6]	*Deputies Chamber* 30.17% CDR 21,52% PDSR 12.93% USD[7] 6.64% UDMR	*Senate* 30.70% CDR 23,08% PDSR 13.16% USD 6.82% UDMR	54.41% CDR 45.59% PDSR	

[1] Popular Movement Party (PMP), centre-right ideology, conservatory social liberalism.

[2] People's Party- Dan Diaconescu (PPDD), left wing nationalism.

[3] Liberal Democratic Party (PDL), centre-right ideology, conservatory liberalism.

[4] The Alliance for Romania (APR), a centre-left party until 2001, and a centre-right party until its dissolution in 2002. It followed a liberal, social democratic ideology.

[5] Great Romania Party (PRM), extreme right ideology.

[6] Socialist Labor Party (PSM), left wing nationalism.

[7] Union of the Democratic Party (PD) and the Romanian Social Democratic Party (PSDR)

1992		Deputies Chamber	Senate	61.43%	
		28.31% FDSN	27.75% FDSN	FDSN[1]	
		10.38% FSN	10.17% FSN	38.57% CDR[2]	
		20.19% CDR	20.05% CDR		
		8.13% PUNR	7.73% PUNR		
1990				85.07% FSN[3]	
				10.64% PNL[4]	

Source: Author's table after Rezultate Vot (2024)

In Table 2 we observe that despite the formation of the CDR alliance in 1991, the 1992 elections reveal a majority of nationalist parties exerting influence over both chambers of the Parliament (FDSN, FSN, and PUNR).

Another detail is that the CDR's effort to offset the influence of populist and extremist parties was successful until 1999. But the public support for CDR dropped when the government expressed its support for NATO's decision to bomb Serbia during the Kosovo crisis which raised a fear among Romanians of a conflict with their Hungarian minority. The repercussions were evident in the 2000 elections, where liberal parties saw a significant decline in votes, paving the way for the return of nationalist parties to power (See 2004 in Figure 2).

Figure 2: Party vote gains in local elections
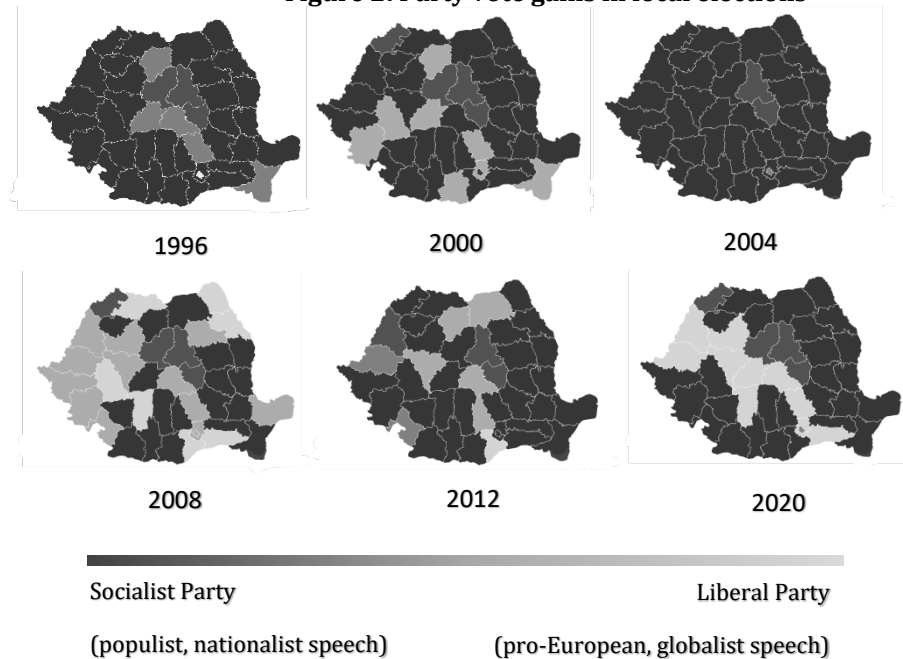
Source: Author's figure after Rezultate Vot (2024)

In Figure 2 we can see that the Socialist Party dominated the Romanian map in the local elections since it adresses the masses and comes with social aid policies.

Then, in 2008, Romania had a populist outbreak when the PPDD party, with a nationalist ideology of the extreme left, gained the most mair mandates in the country. The results raised concerns within the political body about the future of Romania which prompted

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[1] National Democratic Salvation Front (FDSN) left-wing populist party.
[2] Romanian Democratic Convention (CDR), a liberal party with a centre/centre-right ideology.
[3] National Salvation Front (FSN), a centre-left wing populist party.
[4] National Liberal Party (PNL), a centre-right party with a conservatory liberalism ideology.

the Liberal Party (PNL) to join forces with the Socialist Party (PSD) in 2012 to counterbalance the extreme nationalism of the PPDD.

Ideologically speaking, both PNL and PSD claim to embrace democratic values and the European project, since this is constitutionally a national purpose. But, the target audience for these parties is different, and their alliance and further cooperation caused confusion in the Romanian electorate that now have little trust (37%) or verry little trust (55%) in all political parties (IRES, 2026). Given the political crisis, we focus further on other crises that may have influenced voters choice during the years.

6.3 Crises, voters' and parties reactions in Romania

We start with the migrant crisis from 2015 which translated in an anti-immigrationist social movement of a part of the Hungarian minority. UDMR, representing the Hungarian minority in Romania, did not comment much on this subject, which is why in 2022 a new vocal party emerged, The Transylvanian Hungarian Alliance (Erdélyi Magyar Szövetség), through the merger of the Hungarian People's Party of Transylvania and the Hungarian Civic Party. The leader of the new party shows his admiration for the anti-immigrationist speeches of Viktor Orbán. But he argues that his reactions are about the "illegal migration, which started in 2015, which is not in the same principles and values and rules that were established within the European Union" (Digi24, 2022).

Then, in 2017 Romania went through a political crisis. This is when the president of the Social Democratic Party (PSD), that was ruling back then, brought in the public space the concept of 'parallel state' that was blamed for all the shortcomings and problems of the Romanians and the poor governing. It referred to a group of Romanian elites to whom the rules did not apply, who governed the state from behind the scenes and which created a hole in the state budget. This idea conquered the anti-elite masses but also confused the Romanian public. During these disputes, the PSD government fall several times until 2019, when the PNL has won more votes in the European Parliament and the presidential elections, and one year later also in the local elections.

With the intention to win the masses, in 2019 the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) was founded. It is an extremist party supporting the traditional family, nation, internal affairs and religion, and with a highly populist speech in the 2020 parlamentarian elections AUR gained ~ 9% of votes in both chambers of the Parliament. This signaled the return of populism in Romania.

In other parts of the Europe everything began with the populist discourses of the European states during the migrant crisis from 2015 (Ayhan, 2024). The waves of Eurosepticism from the very heart of Europe, from the discourses of Marie Le Pen (Thiebaut Lovato, 2024), from the motivations of the Conservative Party of the United Kingdom that made Brexit possible (Curtice, 2023), from the speeches of populist governing parties from the Eastern Europe, have touched the Romanian public. This is how the more we approach 2024, the year of local, parlamentarian, presidential and Europarliamentarian elections, the more populist parties are founded. The electoral support gained by AUR in the parliamentary elections of 2020 indicated the existence of a segment of society that identifies with populist speeches. So, we examine the Bucharest Court data on new party formations between 2020 and 2024 (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: New parties in Romania between 2020 and 2024
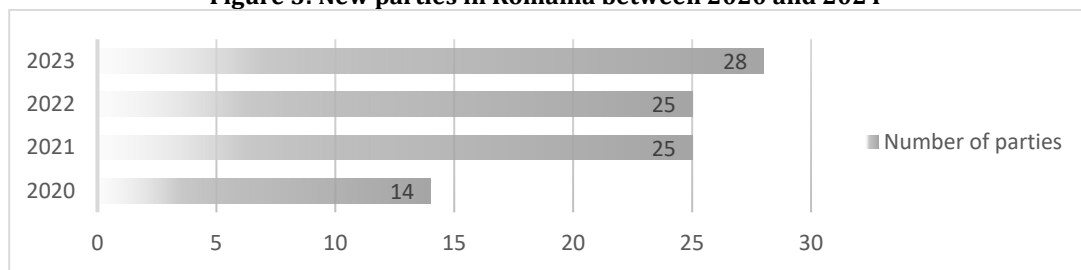
Source: Author's figure after Tribunalul Bucuresti (2024)

In this period we witnes a gradual increase in the number of new founded parties. Notably, a majority of these parties exhibit a nationalist and populist orientation (see Figure 4). In is only in 2023 that more pro-European parties were founded, focused rather on ecology and sustainability than on Europeanization as a lifestyle.

Figure 4: New parties, political orientation and activity between 2020 and 2024
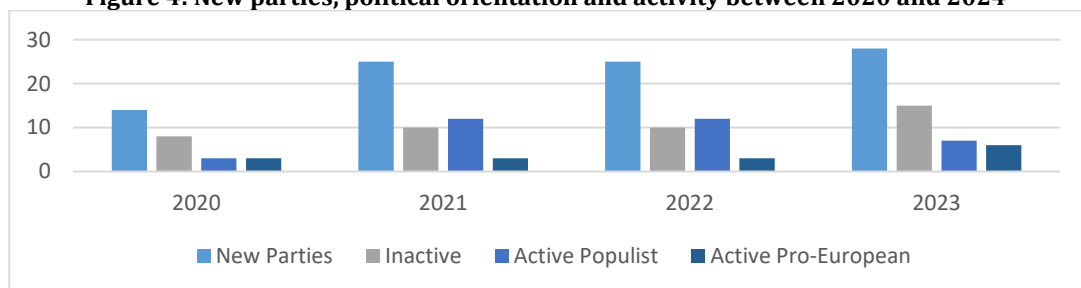
Source: Author's figure after Tribunalul Bucuresti (2024)

Since 2020 in Romania have been founded 34 new active populist parties, contrasting with only 15 active pro-European parties. Thus, we focus on other crises, the discourse of populist parties and society's reaction to them.

6.4 The discourse of populist parties in Romania

When analyzing the rethoric of the populist parties in Romania we distinguish a clasic speech, calling for the grace of the nation, and the well-being of all while blaming the system and the governing parties for all the shortcommings, and a concise speech, addressing specific topics raising social fears. The latter made it difficult to manage the recent crises, and triggered other crises based on fear (Gavrilov, 2022).

The clasic speeches come from parties like the National Renaissance Alliance (ARN), arguing that "*Romania has no right to remain silent to the repeated attempts of the rulers to weaken the authority of the natural Romanian family and to strengthen a police state*" (ARN, 2023). In the same vein the Romanian Left National Party (PNSR) demands *"free means of transportation for pupils and students in Romania!"* (PNSR, 2024). The Social Democratic Party (PSD) adopts a similar dialogue, pleading for the welfare of the needy and comes with solutions like free transportation for the vulnerable and help for those dependent on social aid programs.

Then we have the National Movement Party (MN) arguing that we witness a foreign occupation that *"means an education from which the pages of history and culture of national identity are broken and replaced with the history of other people and a so-called sex education. … the foreign occupation when the Bâstroe channel destroys the Danube Delta, when we were imposed in the past years almost mandatory vaccination and the green certificate, when the multinationals defy Romania and outsource their profits, when the country's agricultural land is*

sold to foreigners, when the capital of foreigners suffocate the Romanian companies, when we are imposed the lowest minimum wage in Europe and our brothers are sent by to work worldwide".

Likewise, the Sovereign Romania Movement Party (MRS) puts a special accent on *"fighting to regain the independence and sovereignty of the state policy, for the protection of the traditional family, of the Romanian producers, of a society dynamic based on integrity, professionalism and the Romanian values that created Romania".*

Another subject approached by the populists is the national pride. For example the Alliance for the Nation Party (APP) promises *"a model of society in the spirit of national pride, respect for the homeland, family, faith, the cultural and social tradition of Romania, the Romanian model of ethnic and confessional coexistence, rejecting any act of discrimination against the Romanian people, regardless of whose side it may come from".* In line with this, the Alliance of the Sovereign People (APS) makes a permanent call for unity, sovereignity and nation's rights: *"we urge you to be sovereign. Justice is in your hands"* (APS, 2023).

All populist speeches evoke dissatisfaction and amplify certain fears. For example, the president of SOS Romania party constantly argues that *"Romania is nothing but a "colony" in the EU",* that is not independent, that its territories are under threat given the Hungarian minority. Then, emphasizing the right of a nation to decide its own destiny, she argues that Romanias' union with Moldova must have been done a long time ago regardless of NATO, EU and USA opinions (Digi 24, 2023). In the same spirit the Nation, People Together Party (NOI) assert that *"Romania behaves like a country of edge, when it actually is in the middle"* (Digi 24, 2022).

The range of populist topics expanded during the COVID - 19 crisis when the populist parties used fear to gain the public's attention while making it hard for the authorities to manage the crisis. In line with this we have the Patriots Party (PP) saying that: *"The medical dictatorship is and will be the most dangerous virus of all time!"; " The European Union is the dictator of Europe and Romania"; " Stop the blackmail of Romanians with experimental serums!"* (Dinca, 2022).

Then, parties like AUR and SOS Romania make anti-vaccination campaigns. The negative impact of such activism is to be seen in the epidemics of misles in Romania, that on January 3, 2024 registered 2805 cases, and 3 deaths (National Institute of Public Health, 2024).

Authorities' efforts to deal with the COVID-19 crisis have raised fears about the individual rights to master his own destiny. These fears were incorporated in the populist speeches and correlated with the impact of globalization on the national lifestyle and with the identity crisis. Given the circumstances, the Romanian Family Union Party (PUFR) said they will *"promote young people and fight for family rights. The party will have a pronounced nationalist tint that will position against globalist ideas".* Similarly, the Patriots of the Romanian People Party (PPR) say *"no, to the globalist system that aims to delete the identity of people"* (PPR, 2024). Alike, the Law, Education Unity Party (LEU) argue that they *"are an alternative to the globalist current that has proposed to destroy the identity and culture of the people"* (LEU, 2024).

In the same vein, Action Party for the Welfare of Romanians (PABR) argues that *"we are witnessing the failure of multiculturalism and exacerbated intra - European centralism. The national identity and solidarity are fundamental values of our nation, values that have been severely affected in recent decades. That is why we advocate for their restoration within the nation as well as to return to identity and social patriotism".*

In paralel we have the Erdélyi Magyar Szövetség (EMSZ) which take an atiglobalist position as well arguing that *"in today's world, in which values are lost, in which globalization is increasingly present, the world more materialistic and self - centered, communities are facing the danger of their disintegration"* (Zakariás, 2023, apud Ghilas, 2023) pushing on the minorities' fears of being under threat of dissapearance.

In this context, some parties have linked globalization to other fears like the national pride and independency. For example the new party RoExit, argues that the "multinationals take advantage of us. We cannot restore agriculture and production if we stay in the EU. We will have a strong economy if we stop the orders from Brussels".

Then, we have the Qanon Patriots Party (PPQ) calling the society to get back to the survival insticts for governing the country: *"We had presidents with higher professional preparations. Are you happy? No! Why? Because we do not look at their honest fight for survival, justice or family!".*

The content analysis helped us identify keywords, like: family, religion, God, nation, sovereignty, globalization, values, identity, unity, patriots, truth and justice. These words are present in populist speeches although the topics adapt to crises and the problems resing social discontent and fears. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant focus was on the imposed measures and the apprehension of losing the autonomy to determine one's own fate. Then, during the war in Ukraine the focus was on national security, access to resources, unity, the violation of Romania's borders and sovereignty, stimulating the fear of war. And in between, most of the speeches adress the identity crisis and the impact of globalization on social values, relying on the empathy of those dissatisfied with the impact of multinationals and globalization.

7. Discussion

The study identifies three major topics of discussion in the discourse of populist parties: change, globalization and identity crisis. All topics are approached with fear and an alarming note.

Referring to change the populist parties emphasize only the drawbacks, while the positive aspects are taken for granted. And since the normal reaction towards novelty is to approach it with caution and fear (Kahleman, 2011: 68), in the moment we are consciously reminded to fear we associate novelty with insecurity.

When discussing about globalization the populist parties overlook its impact on the economic growth, and highlight only its impact on culture, identity and the crises. They blame the identity crisis on globalization, which intensifies the effect of change, giving a feeling of "lost" even to the younger generations in search for development and personal growth (Erikson, 1994).

In the end the populists call for the closed model of social organization, without highlighting the disadvantages of such a system.

8. Conclusions

The current study addresses the escalating prevalence of populist supporters and vocal populist parties in Europe. To comprehend the phenomenon, the research focuses on the case of Romania, studying the impact of crises on the political discourse, the social action, and the interdependent relationship between the existence of populist parties and social fears.

The results show that the new European lifestyle and Globalization have caused an identity crisis in Europe, where people go through a transition from the national identity to a globalist one, which is quite difficult to grasp (Chopin, 2018).

In the same idea, the intensity of change enhanced the waves of crises in different fields. These crises reinforce the association between the new lifestyle and insecurity, which is used by populist parties to develop the social resistance to new while using the cognitive ease to make the voters believe their statements. With the help of repetition, familiarity and rhyme they grow in people the perception of relatedness and understanding, thus feeling represented.

The content analysis helped us identify in the populist speeches' keywords like: identity, globalization, nation, multiculturalism, traditional values, tradition, family and religion. In most speeches, they appeal to return to traditional values, to fight against the globalization, multinationalism and multiculturalism.

With these in mind, we propose the following series of solutions for the pro-European parties for preserving and perpetuating the current system:

1) Not to engage in populist speeches in order not to confirm the agenda of the populist parties (Eatwell, 2000, apud Muis and Immerzeel, 2017);

2) To emphasize the good aspects of the current system and to explain what it would mean for society to lose the things we take for granted;

3) To understand the problems of the current society and of those who feel represented by the populist parties, and to address their problems through governing plans.

Research Data
The research data used for this study is available at: doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.25 175663.v1

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