Article

Towards a New Common sense? A Gramscian Analysis of the Discursive Strategies of Romania's Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR)

Abstract: *Right-wing populist-nationalist parties in Europe have been challenging the established liberal order for an extended period, and the year 2024 poses numerous challenges. With the growing gap between traditional political parties and social strata, there is an urgent need for a deeper understanding of the discourse employed by right-wing populist-nationalist parties as they attempt to address this rupture. In Romania, recent polls indicate that the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) holds the third position, positioning it as the primary opposition party, as the top two parties, PSD and PNL, have formed a coalition since 2021. Originating during the 2018 referendum debate on redefining the family, AUR has grown, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, employing a discourse that incorporates nationalist, religious, and traditional family elements. This paper seeks to analyse the discursive elements employed by the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) party, utilizing a Gramscian approach. In a year marked by European, local, general, and presidential elections, understanding how this party is shaping a new common sense to counter the existing hegemony is crucial, as the common sense plays and important role in the functioning of democracy. The paper identifies the alternative narratives proposed by AUR and examines how symbols and references to traditions are incorporated into their discourse. Common sense, as Gramsci describes it, is not a homogenous set of ideas, but rather a multitude of ideas that are constantly changing. The task of this paper is to identify the elements that form the discourses of AUR and how they form an alternative common sense.*

Keywords: *AUR, common sense, discourse, Gramsci.*

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1. Introduction

In the recent years, the right-wing populist discourse is on an upward trend, reaching more and more followers and generating more votes. 2024 is a year with elections all over the globe, with European elec-

tions of a crucial importance for the faith of the European Union. In Romania, 2024 is a year with 4 types of elections, local, general, presidential and European. In this context, it is of highly importance to better understand the discourse populist parties use, as AUR has rapidly gathered attention for its confrontational rhetoric, populist strategies and a strong opposition towards the political establishment. This article aims at identifying and analysing the discursive elements used by the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), undertaking a critical approach towards the discursive strategies, by unpacking the linguistic and symbolic elements that shape its narrative. The main question is what are the elements that compose the common sense of AUR? Further, I will seek to analyse the discursive strategies they have adopted and whom they address.

First, I will discuss Antionio Gramsci's notion of the common sense, as it serves as an important element in the construction of hegemony. In the first part of the paper, I try to shape the theoretical lens through which we can understand the way common sense works and its importance in the hegemonic battle. As Gramsci argues, hegemony implies a moral an intellectual leadership over the social groups and as this can be reached discursively, by shaping the common sense, I argue that in order to better understand the power relations in the political landscape, one has to identify the main discursive elements of the discourses that are targeting the hegemonic structure.

In the second part I am analysing the discursive elements of the AUR party. Then, I will try to identify the core ideological principles and the way in which they are articulated. I will try to describe the historical context, consider events and figures that are important in shaping their discourse. I will briefly discuss the communication strategy and the public it addresses. First, I will review the literature, to better understand and display the macro practices of AUR, the channels of communication they use, the context it has appeared and grown, the public it addresses. Second, I will critically analyse the language used by the party in the official communications, speeches and public statements, look for recurring themes, key phrases and rhetoric devices. I will use the official website of the party (https://partidulaur.ro/), as it includes a vast archive containing official statements of the party and the party leaders. I will focus on the articles posted in 2024, since this is the year of multiple elections, as mentioned before. Since January, the website has featured a total of 189 articles, which will be the primary focus of my analysis.

Ultimately, this study paper aims at contributing to the understanding of the AUR party's political strategy, and of the discursive mechanisms through which it seeks to challenge the status quo, mobilize its base, and reshape the political discourse in Romania.

2. Gramsci and the common sense

Gramsci stated that every person is a philosopher, in the sense that every man thinks, every person has „a conception of the world and life". Further, Gramsci states that thought is „proper to man as such, or at least to any man who is not a pathological cretin" (Gramsci and Hoare 1985: 662). In the formation of the conception of the world, common sense is a crucial element, in the sense that in a nexus of judgements, common sense is the element that identifies the exact cause, it applies a „principle of causality" and thus enables the person to avoid any „pseudo-profound, pseudo-scientific metaphysical mumbo-jumbo" (Gramsci and Hoare, 1985: 661–63). Furthermore, Gramsci states that philosophic activity does not resume to the

formation of a worldview at the individual level, but rather it refers to the cultural battle aimed at shaping popular beliefs, to spread philosophical ideas into the society in order to universalize them, to make them socially accepted. This process happens in the spheres of culture, which has the role of standardizing the levels of social strata, in the sense that they encounter and understand different modes of expression. Gramsci says that only a "collective man", a group that has similar worldviews, that has reached a "cultural-social" unity and has common aims can perform a historical act (Gramsci and Hoare, 1985: 663–66). Common sense can be defined as a set of universalized assumption and beliefs, a uncritical worldview formed by a set of heterogenous ideas (Gramsci and Hoare, 1985: 625). It is important to note, as Liguori highlights, that common sense has a negative connotation, in the sense that it is both incoherent and takes the shape of the "multitudes" that have philosophized it. In other words, common sense is a result of a certain social subject and it is this common sense that needs to be first addressed and replaced by any revolutionary theory (Liguori, 2021: 129). Crehan states that common sense should be understood as a conglomerate of constantly changing separate beliefs and opinions that lead to a normalized way of understanding the world. Common sense is heavily influenced by the course of history and by the different contexts of socialization in which individuals participate (Crehan, 2011: 286).

Common sense plays a crucial role in the process of establishing a hegemony. A group becomes hegemonic only if that group is able to exercise a moral and intellectual leadership over the other groups and to do that, a group needs to start its hegemonic process before reaching power. A group has to manage both the material forces and to reach the moral leadership (Gramsci and Buttigieg, 1992: 57–59). So, in order for a group to reach hegemony and to manifest it over other groups, first it needs to build a "system of alliances" with the other groups and thus to reach a consensus. To do that, a group has to become aware of the cultural problems of all the other groups and to universalize the problems. This can only be achieved through the universalization of a certain worldview (Simon, 2005: 26–27). Hegemony is reached by forming a type of active consensus in the society, reaching, as Gramsci said, a national-popular will. Thus, the transformation of the worldview is central for the formation of hegemony and the common sense becomes the cornerstone of both the dominant ideology and the forms of resistance to the dominant ideology (Simon, 2005: 28–29). But, as mentioned already, the common sense is not unitary, it has multiple facets. On the one hand it is shaped by the economic conditions and on the other it is shaped by the everyday practices, historically and continuous. This is why, according to Gramsci, intellectuals are highly important, as they are the ones that can and should coordinate the process of "sedimentation" of ideas, and to prevent them to being abstract (Jones, 2008: 54–55).

It is important to note that Gramsci sees ideology as being the element that can "organize" society and that can generate the sense of belonging of individuals to the society (Gramsci and Hoare, 1985: 707). So, as Mouffe argues, ideology is a battlefield, where different groups fight for the consciousness of the individuals, as a self-consciousness can only be reached through an ideological process, involving discursive and non-discursive elements. The result of this battlefield is a socially-determined ideological field (Mouffe, 2014: 185–86). Furthermore, one should note that a worldview, as earlier argued, includes various ideological elements from different sources, that need to be unified into a "hegemonic principle", that implies a set of values which are however tightly connected to the role the hegemonic group plays in the system of production. This means that the ideological entail a class principle. Further, as

Mouffe states, the ideological battle is a constant process of articulating, de-articulating and re-articulating of ideological elements (Mouffe, 2014: 193–94).

Norman Fairclough's concept of common sense is very similar to that proposed by Gramsci. He considers common sense a crucial „factor for social change", making it a focal point in the process of Critical Discourse Analysis. This analysis aims to diagnose and transform social reality, aligning closely with the principles of common sense.

Fairclough sees common sense as a form of "everyday thinking", which serves as a guideline for understanding the world. Common sense is a continuous process that entails incoherent ideological assumptions. Common sense can change the social reality if it is used properly, Fairclough argues (2015: 14–15). Further, he states that the ideology, to reach the people and become effective, depends heavily on the common sense of a discourse (Fairclough, 2015: 101). Fairclough states that a critical approach toward discourse seeks to identify the means through which certain ideological elements become naturalized, and thus part of the common sense. This implies analysing both the micro and the macro level and the relationship between the two levels, the conditions in which discourse appears and the verbal events themselves (Fairclough, 2013: 31). Further, he states that the process of naturalization of certain ideas is a "significant property" of discourse through which certain ideological elements become part of the common sense, becoming thus invisible to the subjects. Here, it is important to note that Fairclough sees the subject as the result of the accumulations of "ways of talking" and "ways of seeing", in other words, of ideology. Every discourse includes a certain amount or a certain base of knowledge and any such base entails ideological elements, which means that when being exposed to discourses, one is also exposed and is acquiring ideological norms (Fairclough, 2013: 44).

Before concluding this section, I need to make a slight return to the relation between hegemony and common sense, in order to highlight the importance of the latter in the shaping of power relations. Luke states that not all texts and discourses have similar effects in the world, in the sense that even if all of them have a normative character, they do not have the same effect in the construction of subjects, or in the distribution of symbols. Not all types of discourses reach every economic, social and cultural strata and thus, not all of them generate the same differences. He further argues that the everyday texts are the ones that have the role of articulating, de-articulating and re-articulating hegemonic interests (Luke, 1995: 20). This means that the everyday texts have a crucial role in naturalizing certain ideas and so, in the reproduction and (re)legitimation of certain discourses. We should look at the relation between hegemony and common sense less as a relation of imitation, but more as a relation of mutual support. As mentioned earlier and as argued also by Donoghue, common sense is an important pillar in the structure of hegemony, in forming and contesting it. The struggle around hegemony cannot be resumed to the battle around the common sense of the population, but rather one should see common sense as one of the battlefield around hegemony (Donoghue, 2018: 8–9). Of course, common sense should be organized in order to become of central importance for the construction of hegemony and this process implies both that discourse has an ideological function and that discourse is tightly related to power relations, as they have a "discursive nature. The "framework" which encompasses the process of shaping ideologies, worldviews and class interests (Donoghue, 2018: 10).

Having in mind the relation between the formation of common sense and the process of hegemony, I find it highly important to focus on the constitutive elements of the common

sense proposed by the AUR party in Romania, as, as I will further argue, the party is among the most important in the voting intentions in Romania and so, it is one of the potential hegemonic blocks that conduct a hegemonic battle with the leading coalition. I will now focus on reviewing the literature around AUR party, in order to better highlight the discursive elements that they use and, maybe even more important, to have a better understanding of the macro structure it uses.

3. The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) – the building of a common sense

Romania has a long history of populist discourses, in fact, as Taranu and Nicolescu argue, populism was always present in the public discursive realm after the 1989 revolution. First it was used by president Ion Iliescu in the early 90's, then it was used by president Basescu and it's party, followed by the People's Party – Dan Diaconescu in 2012 and particular elements were to be seen even in the discourse of the USR party (Țăranu and Nicolescu, 2017). A radical discourse was used by the Greater Romania party, which relied heavily on nationalist elements. Ilie argues that, after the disappearance of the Greater Romania Party, several politicians have used a national-populist or even anti-European rhetoric, as was the case of the former leader of the Social-Democratic Party Liviu Dragna (Ilie, 2022). We can argue that AUR has found a fertile soil for nationalist-populist discourses, since, even if this type of discourse was used by various politicians, there was no party embracing it directly. The Alliance for the Union of Romanians was founded by Claudiu Târziu, a journalist, and George Simion, a former activist, in 2019. George Simion was one of the important figures in the *Uniți sub Tricolor* football fan group, which is well known for its nationalist messages and for promoting the idea of uniting Romania and Moldova. An important event that stimulated the appearance of AUR happened in 2013, when the Coalition for Family attracted attention, an association of NGOs that initiated a referendum (held in 2016) which aimed at changing the Constitution to ban same-sex marriages. The referendum has not reached the minimum threshold, but the conservative-Christian discourse became very present in the civil society (Crăciun and Țăranu, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic served also as a stepping stone for the party, as AUR has adopted a virulent discourse against the governmental measures, claiming that those measures were restricting the liberties of the population. Further, they have included religious, arguments in their counter-rhetoric, and also they have focused on family and fatherland while contesting vaccination and other measures taken by the government to limit the spread of the virus, as Doiciara and Cretan argue (Doiciara and Crețana, 2021: 244). The pandemic served as a fertile soil for the growing of populist parties all over Europe, as it has enabled various discourses that criticized the neoliberal economic policies, in the context of the disproportionate effect the pandemic had over different classes. Many low skilled workers were affected by the pandemic and the unemployment rate grew in that period, besides the fact that the power exercised by the governments became more visible. All these elements have fed the anti-establishment and anti-government discourses (Doiciara and Crețana, 2021: 245).

Another important factor for the growth of AUR party was the anti-corruption discourse. Corruption is a recurrent theme in the Romanian politics. The former president Traian Băsescu has based his candidacy in 2004 on eradicating corruption and during his time, the corruption scandals were not a rarity. The anti-corruption discourse was heavily used also by the USR

party which became the third party by the number of seats in the Parliament of Romania. In 2019, a huge protest emerged in Romania, which quickly adopted the anti-corruption discourse. The leaders of the AUR party have seized the opportunity and adopted a strong anti-corruption discourse, portraying themselves as the true saviours of the pure people from the corrupt establishment (Guşă, 2021).

AUR has relied heavily on social media communication, as Fântânescu argues, using short and direct messages that can quickly go viral. Also, they use paid ads and are sharing their messages in small internet communities (Fântânescu, 2022). The most present figure on the social media platforms is one of the co-presidents, George Simion. He has around 1.3 million followers on his Facebook page, where he has a constant presence, posting almost daily, either short messages or videos of himself. He also uses TikTok heavily, having 417 thousand followers and 6.4 million likes. Ilie argues that by using social media, AUR has managed to create o strong relationship with their electorate. They have even managed to create their own "bubble", mainly by using Binder Nation. Another important facet of their social-media presence is the transmission of messages to the diaspora (Ilie 2022, 157). AUR has reached young people using this strategy, as around 50% of their voters were young men, up to the age of 35. The most of their votes came from the regions of Moldova and Transylvania and from the diaspora, mainly Italy and Germany, meaning that their messages have also reached the Romanians leaving abroad (Ilie, 2022: 149). It is no wonder that AUR is receiving the votes of young people, as the trust of the youth in political parties is very low, only about 4% of youngsters declared that they trust political parties, according to a IRES study. Furthermore, the trust in Romanian democracy is also low, around 76% of the respondents to the same study declared that they trust the democracy to a small or very small extent. The youth is mainly using social media for information purposes, most of them still relying on Facebook. Even though most of the youth that participated in the study declared that they have not yet decided who they will vote, 25% of those who already know their preference tend to vote for AUR. AUR is the second party in the voting intention of youth, 5% below the alliance between PSD and PNL (IRES, 2024). At a general level, AUR is the second party in the voting intentions for the European elections, according to a study made by INSCOP in March 2024, having a score of 20.6% (INSCOP, 2024).

On the official website, the "disunion" of Romanians is discussed, as Romania is one of the countries with the highest level of emigration. The message in the "vision and objective" states that nearly half of Romanians are living abroad and that the country is depopulating, as the trust in the political elites has decreased. The main goal of the AUR party is to form a union of the Romanians, no matter if they live in Bucharest, Iasi, Cernăuți, Timoc, Italy or Spain, as "our existence as a nation" is important. The main values of the party are the family, understood as the basis of any healthy society, the nation, as a communion of everyone with a common language, history and culture, the Christian belief and freedom. ("DESPRE AUR", n.d.) Thus, as Crăciun and Țăranu have argued, AUR is at the crossroad between nationalism and conservatism (Crăciun and Țăranu, 2023: 3).

As of December 2023, the president of AUR, George Simion has stated that the party will no longer be an opposition party, but will act like a party that is ready to take over the government (Simion, 2023). Therefore, I will concentrate on the discursive elements the AUR party has employed from the start of 2024 up until April.

One element that is very present in various forms in the discourse of the leaders of the party is the "theft" or "theft" of democracy in Romania. In a statement posted on the website, issued by the "patriotic parties" in Romania, the "suppression of democracy" in Romania was condemned. The statement was issued following the decision of the government to merge the European and local elections in Romania. Further, the parties are arguing that the high number of signatures which must be collected to participate in the elections is undemocratic. Further, they state that the "oligarchic" regime led by the coalition between PSD and PNL "smoothes Romania's road to tyranny" (AUR, 2024a). Further, one of the representatives of AUR in the Romanian Parliament argues that there is a "complex process of falsifying the democracy in Romania", motivating that the leading coalition was formed with the goal of ensuring that there is no alternation in government, that several important positions in the state were militarized and that the Parliament was transformed into a notary office (AUR, 2024b). Further, Claudiu Târziu, one of the leaders of AUR, has declared that the leading coalition aims at establishing a dictatorship in Romania (Târziu, 2024a). The term "dictatorship" was used also in the context of the protests of the farmers and transporters. The protesters were not allowed to enter into the center of Bucharest by the police forces and the leaders of AUR have concluded that this is just another step in the progress of authoritarianism and a contempt shown by the government towards the fundamental rights of Romanians (AUR, 2024c).

The leaders of the party have heavily focused on the "elements of national identity", including here the Romanian language, national costumes, the flag, the traditional songs and the Christian belief. They see Romania as an old civilization, an European civilization which is facing a neo-Marxist threat. Also, they have offered historical examples of events when the "faith" of the country was negotiated by other countries (AUR, 2024d).

Freedom is also used, as the leaders declare themselves as the fighters for a free Romania and Europe. Even if they often criticize the European Union, especially the Commission, the leaders of AUR mention that they do not seek a "ROExit", but they feel the need for "patriots" in the European Parliament. They see Romania as being led from "the outside" by the European elites. In an article posted on the website, it is stated that the PSD-PNL coalition is selling Romania to the Austrians.

In another discourse, Claudiu Târziu. clarifies the position of AUR towards the EU. He says that AUR is a "eurorealist" party, not Eurosceptic. He sees the current form of EU as a bureaucratic machinery which sees the member countries as "some vassals to the Commission". Further, he argues that nothing happens in Romania without the allowance of the European Commission. The bureaucratic machinery is herself controlled by the wealthy countries in the Union. The bureaucracy, according to the leader of AUR, aims at taking over the essential attributes of national governments and so, at reducing the sovereignty of countries. Further, it aims at creating a European superstate that will impose gender identity, will ban traditions, diminish the role of the church, rewrite history and promote eco-Marxism. He further adds that all this is a neo-Marxist vision of the European Commission (Târziu, 2024b). The theme of the European superstate is present in various other articles on the website of the party. George Simion, in a speech held in the USA, said that "us, the conservatives", the Romanians and Europeans need to fight together against the forces that want to impose a unique worldview and that aim at destroying liberty. He has criticized again the actions of the government during the pandemic, for the prevention of the spread of the COVID-19. The "globalist" forces are the ones that wanted to impose a medical dictatorship and a world government. He

said that they are the only ones that can reignite the hope of the people, as they address the people and fight for the Romanian people (Simion, 2024). Globalism is defined by Târziu as an ideology that uses globalization to impose a new form of totalitarianism at a global level, where a new normality will be projected, where cultural differences will vanish and natural liberties and legal rights will disappear. He states again that AUR is a conservative party and only conservatives can save the world based on values such as "nation, faith, family and liberty" (Târziu, 2024c).

4. Conclusions

We can conclude that the AUR party focuses on themes related to nationalism, the decline of democracy and sovereignty. They portray themselves as the protectors of the nation, by defending the Romanian culture, language, and traditions putting a high emphasis on national identity and unity, as they are the ones seeking to unite the Romanians everywhere. Their discourse relies heavily on symbols associated with the national identity, such as the flag, national costumes, songs and use historical moments as arguments in their discourse building. Further, they also see Christianity as embedded in the foundation of Romanian identity. By framing their discourse in terms of these values, the leaders of AUR position themselves as the guardians of traditional morality in the face of perceived cultural and ideological threats.

Second, the critique of political elites, at local, European and global level is also a recurring theme. They accuse the leaders of the PSD-PNL coalition of forming an oligarchy and of stealing, not only resources, but democracy itself from the people. Further, they have framed the government's action as undemocratic, authoritarian or dictatorial, positioning AUR party as the sole defender of democracy and freedom. By referring to the actions of the government as "theft of democracy", "suppression of democracy" or "dictatorship", it aims at creating strong emotions among the public. Such terms cast the government in a negative light while positioning the AUR party as the righteous opposition fighting against corruption and tyranny.

Regarding the other important theme, the critique of the European Union, focuses on portraying the institutions of the EU as bureaucratic entities that undermine the sovereignty of states by imposing a neo-Marxist agenda. These terms used frame globalization and further European integration as existential threats to national sovereignty and cultural identity. From the European level, they move to the global level, where globalism and cultural homogenization are seen as threats to national identity and sovereignty, as the formation of either European or global governments seem as immediate threats. The AUR party employs a direct, strong rhetoric, employing terms such as „dictatorship," „totalitarianism," and „constant threats to democracy, rights, and sovereignty," to cultivate a narrative of crisis and urgency. By framing themselves as the saviours, they seek to impose a sense of siege mentality among the population, positioning themselves as the only viable solution to the perceived threats facing Romania. They seek to maximize the impact of their discourses by condensing the messages, having short and punchy statements.

Further, it is important to state that the two leaders, Simion and Tarziu seem to be the most important communicators of the party and thus, they are the main persons holding the authority to shape the common sense among party members and supporters.

The discursive process of AUR aims at creating the impression that Romania and Romanians are under siege, both from the external forces and from the internal "oligarchy". The pro-

cess of sedimentation is working towards generating a sentiment of crisis, at naturalizing the idea that democracy is not working and that the political elites are corrupt, and that AUR is the saviour of Romanian democracy and conservatism is the force that protects the global society from the dictatorship of the neo-Marxists. There is also an attempt at creating the sense of unity for the Romanians, no matter where they live by referring to historical events, various national symbols. The common sense of AUR includes on the one hand illiberal ideas, mainly by including an anti-gender rhetoric, advocating or the traditional family and rejecting reproductive rights, as Dragolea has discussed (Dragolea, 2022). On the other hand, it includes a strong anti-elite element and thus it tries to construct the image of the saviour. Through its rhetoric, the party constructs a narrative that taps into the common sense of its supporters, framing itself as the guardian of Romanian identity, sovereignty, and democracy. By leveraging symbols, historical references, and emotive language, AUR shapes the common sense of its audience, positioning itself as the solution to perceived threats and crises.

Before ending the paper, there are some points of discussion I want to raise. If AUR is the second party in the voting intentions, according to recent surveys, can we assume that its discourse is the main counter-hegemonic one? It is difficult to answer such a question, I would rather argue that it is on the verge of unifying different elements that might at some point become the main counter-hegemonic discourse. It is interesting to look at the structure of the population it addresses and at the structure of their voters. According to recent studies, youth people are more likely to vote for them, as are the ones financially deprived. The supporting reasons are various, from the lack of discourses that address the problem of youth, to the importance of the nationalist discourse among the population, to the absolute lack of a left-wing discourse addressing the problems of the financially deprived. What one can conclude after analysing the strategy and the discursive elements of the party, one can reach the conclusion that the elements are still free floating, not unified and thus the hegemonic force of the party is not that important yet. It is impossible however to know what will happen in the future. AUR does not have a clear direction and, nevertheless, it has reached and important part of the population. Will it be able to become a proper contestant of the current hegemonic structure? This last question is not to be answered now, but what is clear to me is that the process has somehow started.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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