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Article

The Roles of Populism: Stability or Threat to Society?

Abstract: *The purpose of the present paper is to understand whether populism helps ensure social stability or poses a threat to it. In order to answer this research question, the paper relies on examining definitions and types of populism using some examples from around the world. This helps us understand the international, historical and political context in which populism appears. Populism has been seen as emerging in reply to crises in society. The response is a criticizing and rebellious one, wishing to bring*

changes. Populist parties can also lead to crises in society. The methodology section analyses the particular case of AUR party in Romania, based on its values, principles, and actions, and the way it resonates with definitions of populism. AUR was chosen for analysis since it embodies both tendencies, ensuring social stability in response to a crisis of values and lack of cohesion of the Romanians, and leading to social unrest through shocking questioning of values supported by the establishment, such as respect for minority groups, which are in their turn having as a purpose ensuring social cohesion. The data is collected from information on

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the party's site, in the media, and in previous research. The values and actions of AUR are not completely anti-establishment, and communication is adapted to various contexts and social classes.

Keywords: *communities; individualism; mainstream; minority; values*

1. Introduction

In politics, nowadays, populism is a proof that individual differences cannot be overlooked. In our times, individuals are no longer pressured to be like the others, but encouraged, instead, to be themselves, while belonging to subcultures related to a variety of lifestyles and values, and which are tolerated within mainstream cultures. Politics and ideology have to accommodate various needs, especially in contemporary times when individualism is on the rise everywhere in the world (Santos et al 2017).

Allowing freedom of expression, which is common to individualist, democratic, and liberalist societies, is achieved through Populism. Populism serves as a means of free expression of certain issues which have, until then, passed unnoticed by the elites.

Populism can compensate for issues and needs ignored by the elites. At its best, Populism can be understood as a means to appease conflict in society by addressing the needs of a neglected segment of citizens, while at its worst it can be a rebellious, unruly means of attacking mainstream politics and, in some cases, of changing the mainstream politics and even going as far as becoming itself the mainstream ideology.

Crises in society, be they economic (e.g. unemployment) or political (e.g. due to not trusting the elites' choices, for instance in the case of the European Union) have been considered causes leading to the emergence of Populism (Algan et al, 2017). Other researchers (Moffitt, 2017) see Populism as a means of creating such crises, by stirring social unrest.

A solution to prevent conflicts in society could be that of tolerating the Populists as a subculture within the mainstream culture in the world of politics. Once the until then neglected segment of population realizes that more people and even a political leader think like them, they may feel psychologically reassured.

Does Populism offer stability or can it be considered as a means of threat to a society's stability? This is the main research question, alongside which we are going to consider definitions of Populism, together with situations related to Populism in various countries.

2. Literature review

2.1. Populism

Populism as a term is controversial, and, based on the existing literature, we are left to wonder about its definition.

Mansbridge and Meedo (2019) call populism "vague." It is not easily definable as an ideology in the same way that other ideologies can be defined, such as liberalism, nationalism, democracy, individualism, and multiculturalism. For that matter, it can be seen as a combination of ideologies. In addition, populism is a heterogenous, not homogenous, movement, to the point where its representatives "can be left or right, conservative or progressive, religious or secular" (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017).

The phenomenon of populism has been noticed, according to Savage (2016) since research by Hofstadter (1964) and Hicks (1961) in America and by Germani (1963, 1978) in Latin America. Yet it goes even farther back in time, as ever since ancient times we notice the opposition between the people and the elites, between the commoners and the aristocracy, which was also the time when political parties defended different interests (Stockemer, 2019). According to Savage (2016), researchers expected populism to be a unitary movement and an ideology like any other one. Yet, they could not find "rhetorical or organizational characteristics that would unite the People's Party of the 1890s and Perón."

It is true that populism can distinguish itself through the following landmarks: it is anti-establishment, it acts against internal or against external factors, it opposes the pure people to the corrupt political elites (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017), or just to the elites (Savage, 2016), its leader is generous and honest, while the elites are self-centered and dishonest with the people, and it depicts the opponent negatively.

However, even the opposition between the people and the elites, commonly agreed upon, is just a main classification, using general terms. According to Mirza and Azhar (2021), we have the oppositions “us versus them, common man versus elite, nationalist versus anti-nationalist, citizens versus outsiders, patriots versus traitors, white Christians versus coloured populations,” which have “led to the rise of populist leaders in the United States.”

One of the difficulties to define populism comes from the fact that it depends on the orientation of the establishment and on the way the populists can act anti-establishment, function of the country. Stockemer (2019) shows how various populist leaders during various times fight against various establishment values and principles. In Argentina, populist leaders and parties fight against the establishment represented by European elites. This, the international context can become a subject of conflict. In France, Hungary, Poland, the Phillipines, and Turkey fight against the international and globalist tendencies, represented by the European Union. In the United States, they fought, through Donald Trump’s speeches, against the politically correct values established as world-level. Russian president Putin is considered populist since he fought against external influences coming from the West (Stockemer, 2019). However, Mamonova (2018) states that Putin does not classify as a populist leader, since he works together with the state and its institutions, and not against them. Thus, one well-known feature of populism can be challenged. Populism is not restricted to an anti-establishment attitude. It can also become mainstream, which is proved by populist leaders such as Trump in the USA, Putin in Russia, Erdogan in Turkey, as well as Emmanuel Macron, Mélenchon and Marine Le Pen in France.

Populism promotes leaders that are themselves part of the category of the common man, which they defend, and express the same dissatisfaction with mainstream politics. They can be of poor origins, with not much education, or making efforts to get past their current situation and succeeding. This can lead to a cult of personality, which can reach almost religious and mystical worship for the leaders, such as for Evita Peron, a young woman of very humble origins. Yet, leaders and the common man may very well be intellectuals, and then we can speak of intellectual populism (Stob, 2020).

Leaders can borrow the behaviour of the common man in their attitude towards the political elites, by swearing and showing obscene gestures (e.g. Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte cursing the Pope and Barack Obama, as well as showing his finger to the European Union) (Stockemer, 2019).

Populism is relevant to be studied since it is present in the entire world (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). Traditional parties have, worldwide, declined in popularity. Populist parties have, instead, been on the rise worldwide (Zaslave, 2008). A society is changing and, with it, populist parties and populist ideology are becoming more and more present. Populism is adaptable to the current situation, and to the current needs of the people.

2.1. Social Stability

According to Sengupta (2004), social stability is defined as “the condition of freedom from social disorder generally manifested in the form of inter-group conflict or violence.” It represents “the condition of sustainable development and well-being.” States and societies consider stability as “a basic quality as well as a goal”. Moreover, elements such as “order and cohesion” are what makes up social stability, or what holds a society together. The durability of the government, a mainstream state institution, ensures “the stability of the political regime.”

Why is social stability a matter worth discussing with respect to populism? Populism is a conflict between the people and the elites. Any conflict can threaten the established order by which society works and which ensures a certain sense of stability. The threat to stability from populism comes from stirring the public opinion, yet the extent to which it can lead to a major threat lies in the actions the citizens are drawn into. Mass protests can be triggered. Once there is a major change to political life, it may take a while for stability to return. A stable situation may be considered one where there is balance between acceptance of the current state of affairs of the majority in political life, which is intertwined with the personal lives of the citizens, e.g. due to their standards of living. Populism is a means of criticizing what is going on at a certain time, which can take aggressive and conflictual dimensions.

Mansbridge and Meedo (2019) have agreed upon a “common conceptual core” to populism in the people’s waging a “moral battle” directed at the elites. However, we notice a gradual adaptation to a more nuanced dimension of the basic opposition “us vs them,” which became more detailed by changing to us vs “corrupted bureaucracy,” and to them as an external influence, visible in the idea “our country first” (Bakker, Jolly and Polk 2020; Bernhard and Kriesi 2019; Ilie, 2022; Rodrik 2021).

Mansbridge and Meedo (2019) also identify non-core elements, such as “the people’s homogeneity and exclusivity, direct rule, and nationalism, as well as a single leader, vilification of vulnerable out-groups, and impatience with deliberation.” These can threaten democracies and, therefore, stability in democratic regimes, Populism becomes risky, in their opinion, once it reaches mainstream political power, while when it remains in its place as a means of opposition it is beneficial for democracies.

The conflict with other political ideologies is present in populism’s providing an alternative for what is missing in the mainstream. Populism offers a utopic, and sympathetic approach from political leaders, who are stirred by the same issues. Populist speech and ideology present populist leaders and representatives as the saviours (Kissas, 2020; Cover et al, 2022) offering the much wanted solutions. This, together with portraying the mainstream politics in a negative light, can lead to conflicts.

Populism invokes social justice when acting against mainstream institutions and against the establishment (Anderson, 2018), which can lead to revolts or to protests.

Populist leaders are raised by the common man to the status of hero to be worshipped. The basic notions and foundations of democracy are underlined to the highest point, until they seem to be a dream that came true. Social and political stability are, however, threatened, since, once they reach mainstream status, populist leaders leave out certain groups which they consider elitist. As an example, under the Romanian populist president Traian Băsescu (Dragoman and Ungureanu 2017), salaries for the educational sector became lower, especially with the international economic crisis. Teachers’ protests were frequent, and these could be seen as examples of social instability. As a specific feature, his speech was “anti-communist and pro-European” (Dragoman and Ungureanu 2017), marking a move towards becoming like other, higher income and highly developed countries.

The state and its institutions need to be trusted, so that citizens can cooperate with them and manage to ensure social stability. Populist parties can stir conflicts. Expressing opinions, having alternative perspectives, as well as being open to debate about political situations and decisions can be considered a rightful part of liberal democracies. This can, however, either lead to social instability or to avoiding conflict by allowing different opinions to be taken into

account. Scapegoating, or blaming others for something bad that has happened, or that someone else has done, can prevent violent social outbreaks. Discussing politics can be a form of scapegoating regarding what has been going bad in personal life. However, allowing freedom of expression through protests and negotiating with the political leaders and state for higher salaries for certain professional groups can be one thing, but eroding trust in and sabotaging state institutions can be another.

Populism both emerges from and reinforces distrust of mainstream politics. The citizens' mistrust in democracy can be exploited by populism, as it claims to offer a solution to this problem. De Witte (2020) writes about the dangers populism can bring to democracy, through the way it builds mistrust towards its mainstream institutions.

3. Methodology

The brief overview present in the examples and types of populism from all over the world can help contour the wider context of the political situation worldwide, and to situate Romania within it.

In Romania, the relatively recent and surprising success of AUR party, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians, led by George Simion, stands out.

What is significant about AUR is that it was one of the representatives of populism in Romania which managed to reach popularity, unlike other parties belonging to the far-right political spectrum, at a time when in other countries in Europe this phenomenon occurred much earlier (Ilie, 2022). In addition, it appealed to a younger audience, receiving the vote from a large number of "men under the age of 35 who are educated to an elementary or high school level," while "previous nationalist parties in post-communist Romania tended to appeal to more senior/ elderly voters" (Doiciar and Cretan, 2021). AUR made itself known during the legislative elections in December 2020, when it received over 9% of the total votes (Crăciun and Țăranu, 2023; Ilie, 2022). It was a freshly founded party, on September 19, 2019, when, in 2020, it rose to the status of the "fourth largest party in the Romanian Parliament" (Ilie, 2022). Its ascension was fast, since only two months before, in the local elections, AUR had received 0.29% of the votes (Crăciun and Țăranu, 2023). AUR had great impact, due to the relevance of its values and actions, which resonated with the mindset of a varied segment of population.

The author of this paper has chosen to focus on the AUR party since it exemplifies both ensuring stability and posing threat to society, through various actions taken and through the values they hold and promote, as well as through the way in which citizens and the media reacted.

The analysis is based on the data made available by the actions of the members of the AUR party, found in the media, by the information on their website, where they mention their values, intent, and objectives (AUR, 2024a), together with their governing programme (AUR, 2024b), as well as by previous research on AUR in the scientific literature.

The basic, or common core features of populist parties apply to AUR: the common man as leader, the opposition between pure people, or honest, common-sense, moral intentions of AUR and the evil elites, traits that make up the anti-establishment orientation, which goes both against the domestic political leaders, as well as against external tendencies. The external tendencies are established by the anti-European Union attitude, or Euroscepticism. Part of the anti-EU attitude is the nationalist orientation, visible with populism in other EU member countries. The nationalist component may, however, not be seen in opposition to the EU, since

the EU has been encouraging its member countries to have both a EU identity and a national identity. This attitude of AUR resonates, however, with the fears or anger towards the EU of some citizens, when they felt that the younger population was drawn towards other values, by neglecting the traditional lifestyle, of family with children, and working for their own country.

The nationalism of AUR reaches as far as supporting Romanians from all over the world, and unification of Romania with the Moldavian Republic. They took attitude when reminding of the annexation by the Soviet Union of Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina and Hertsa, on the 80th anniversary of this event, condemning it, and calling it an obligation of the Romanians to get these territories back. Not surprisingly, their majority of votes in the 2020 were received from the diaspora, from Romanians in Italy, Spain, France, and Cyprus (Marina et al, 2020).

Another Euroscepticist (Stoica and Voina, 2023) attitude is related to the rejection of actions supported by the EU. AUR reacted against the COVID vaccination, which was, in fact, its first action that was remarked and that gained the support of some citizens. One more Euroscepticist attitude lies in their rejection of politically correct attitudes, such as reactions against what AUR (2024a) calls on its site gender ideology, supporting the traditional pattern of the family, and minority rights, being accused of anti-Semitic and Magyarophobic attitudes. The Magyarophobic attitude resonates with an old conflict related to national pride regarding the territory of Transylvania claimed by both Romanians and Hungarians. However, AUR representatives have denied (Digi24, 2021; Popa, 2020; Tudor, 2022) the mass-media claims that they were against COVID vaccines, stating that they supported personal choice (Ghender, 2021). AUR denied the accusations of being anti-Semitic, Magyarophobic (by contesting the rights of Hungarian ethnic minorities in Romania), pro-Russian (when Romania associates it with the Socialist regime, and when Romania and the EU support Ukraine, while AUR believes the northern Bukovina region now part of Ukraine belongs to Romania), or neo-fascist. In the meantime, Marincea (2022) claims that AUR did minimize the Holocaust in one of their 2022 press releases, and that AUR's position remains ambivalent. Ilie (2022) claims, instead, that discriminations in Romanian society are reflected in AUR's position, showing "reservations about certain groups based on ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation, and at the same time blaming political correctness." The neo-fascist accusations of AUR may rely on its hate speech, which is similar to the interwar Legion of the Archangel Michael party (Gheorghiu and Praisler, 2022).

Based on these denials, we wonder whether AUR actually poses threats to social stability, or simply raises awareness to some other sides of the issue, such as in the case of the anti-COVID vaccine. At world level, discussions about the vaccine's negative effects were going on, to the point where it became more of a political rather than medical issue. AUR was reflecting some of the external tendencies in Romania. Liberty is one of the values in which AUR believes. This value translates in their actions of critical look at values and actions imposed by the representatives of the state or by supranational organizations such as the EU. AUR reflects the citizens' process of thought when certain laws and rules are passed by the mainstream institutions. AUR had the courage to challenge mainstream opinions and rules, through its representatives' "anti-restrictions rhetoric" (Ilie, 2022) during the COVID pandemic.

AUR supports the traditional family, made up of man and woman, which led to the 2018 referendum which banned same-sex marriages. Their campaign was not successful. In other parts of the world, same sex marriages were accepted. AUR, as a conservative party, supported the traditional family. For them, these views are common-sensical. AUR also supports

Christian faith, the majority religion in Romania (AUR, 2024a), and which is considered to uphold not only spiritual but also ethical values on which society is founded.

The patriotic values held by AUR are present in their practices, mentioned within their governing programme (AUR, 2024b), suggesting improvements in Romania. A dignified image of Romanians in the world, together with unity of Romanians comes first. Afterwards there are various measures for improving living standards and relying on Romania's own resources: agriculture, tourism, natural environment, natural resources, health of the nation, stopping demographic decline, supporting natality and families, ensuring energetic security, reindustrialization, the nation's health, school education, administrative efficiency, improving the Romanian village and relying on the villagers' products, all products made in Romania, together with the rule of law.

In his role of the common man, George Simion speaks from various social classes' positions, although he may be classified as an intellectual, since he has university studies, having graduated from the University of Bucharest and having received his master's degree in history from Alexandru Ioan Cuza University. Simion speaks to people from any educational background, and who are dissatisfied with mainstream politics. The issues he raises are of concern to all social classes and representatives of all professions, once they care about living well in their own country and about the fate of their own country. The intellectuals may be interpreted as representing an elite. Regardless of social class, financial status, and profession, everyone reacts emotionally to what is going on in political life, since there is an interconnection between political life and our living conditions. There may also be a clash of values between political leaders in power at a certain time, the values they promote, and our own, which can only lead to a conflictual situation. Moreover, by speaking the everyday language of the people, and expressing himself emotionally, he not only shows that he is like everyone else, and has the same concerns, lives in the same country, and sees the same reality., but also that he is honest and strongly convinced by what he is saying. Additionally, he presents himself as a real person, with both qualities and flaws, as someone who sometimes can lose control or let go his emotions. He is perceived as living in the real world and as being aware of everything that works wrong in political life.

Like any populist's, George Simion's speeches are invitational to dialogue and to active participation of the citizens, resorting to the use of social media during the anti-COVID vaccination campaign, where he communicated through comments and personal messaging, marking the difference between his closeness to the voters and mainstream parties' communication (Stoica, 2021). The party supports the value of democracy (AUR, 2024a). The populist leaders illustrate an extreme case of the democratic relationships, where the leader is chosen by the people and represents the interests of the people. Populism represents this otherwise normal reality pushed to an extreme level. In order to show that they represent the people and their interests, populist leaders identify themselves with the people and with the same interests, reaching as far as, according to Ilie (2022), developing "a symbiotic relationship [...] between politicians and their followers." The populist leaders do not conform to the usual image of the politicians, who are controlling their emotions and taking care of their image to be beyond reproach, diplomatic, showing that they are not by any means hypocrite, conformists, or hiding behind dishonest big words. The people are aware that perfection is not natural behaviour, and they appreciate someone who can be their true selves, which is suggested by the image of the apparent rebellious, unstudied behaviour and speech of populist leaders like George Simion.

Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) claim that populism has emerged in recently developed democracies. This could be explained since democracies are expected to allow freedom of personal expression. Populism can fulfill its role by expressing common concerns with the people related to various issues. The value of personal expression is also present in individualist societies. What is specific to individualist societies is their fragmentation, since there is no single ideology or party to keep the members of society together. Instead, there are several versions of ideology and a choice of parties, which can be tolerated within the mainstream ideology and parties. Populist parties show we are not able to accept impositions, but we are more inclined to consider what to accept or not. We are not willing to hand over control of our thinking to imposed ideologies and rules; instead, we resort to questioning and criticizing them.

Mainstream society and politics can feel restrictive to the individual, not allowing enough options for the individual. Populism allows more liberalist views in otherwise authoritarian political regimes. Freedom or a more organized society may be wanted. Populists lead to creating a sense of balance between what the external world imposes on citizens and their right to think and choose for themselves.

Previous experiences with authoritarian political regimes, such as communist ones, can make us react to restrictive measures at various times. In former communist countries, the relationship of the common people with mainstream politics was more conflictual. Thus, the rhetoric of the populist parties and leaders, who create their image as the common man and as outsiders (Stockemer, 2019) can help citizens resonate, once their views are opposed to those of the mainstream.

In the meantime, the discourse refers to social phenomena based on a collective and on an individual level (Savage, 2016). Thus, an ideological discourse should consider resonating with both a collectivity, or a certain group, and with the individual, according to Savage (2016). The individualist dimension can be applied to our contemporary society worldwide. Nowadays, in America, populism is the main ideology, just as individualism is its main frame of mind.

The AUR party in Romania can be included in this category, of an individualistic society, as it has had a considerable role in voicing some citizens' concerns with the negative and long-term effects against COVID-19 vaccinations. We notice here the disagreement with the mainstream idea that vaccination is beneficial for our health. Mainstream medicine research and vaccination history is being questioned. Alternative opinions and theories are being voiced. One role of this populist party is to show the other side of this state of affairs regarding vaccination and mainstream perspectives on it.

Ilie (2022) writes about "the anti-vaccination and anti-restrictions rhetoric promoted by the representatives of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians," which were the main factor "during the Covid-19 pandemic" that "enhanced the party's chances to obtain this unexpected result," which was the one of such a rapid rise in popularity (Doiciar and Cretan, 2021) when it was a party created about one year before the 2020 elections.

In the meantime, such a populist party like AUR can lead to negative effects as it can stir social conflict due to creating further feelings of mistrust in the state and its institutions. Crăciuna and Țaranu (2023) show how circumstances have led to the rise of AUR populist party in Romania, starting from the opportunity of the COVID-19 vaccine and other movements which are struggling to become part of the mainstream, such as gender rights and same-sex mar-

riages to which they opposed the traditional family. AUR had its appeal with the most religious communities.

Regarding the values promoted by AUR party, we should have in view the values of its founders. According to Ilie (2022), next to George Simion, “a young activist,” one co-founder was Claudiu Târziu, “a former journalist with a strong connection to the Romanian Orthodox Church, also known for his involvement in the 2018 referendum on the traditional family in Romania.” These are values held by its co-founders, in an honest way, which makes the values promoted by AUR all the more believable and convincing. We also see how AUR relies nonetheless on the support of establishment institutions such as the Romanian Orthodox Church, at least during the 2020 electoral campaign (Ilie, 2022; Gherghina and Mişcoiu, 2022).

In the meantime, Crăciun and Țăranu (2023) draw attention to the negative side of their discourse: AUR’s discourse is of a scandalous type, an aggressive type of discourse. AUR treats in an aggressive manner the mainstream politics of which Romania is part, as a member of the European Union. Therefore, AUR can be seen as a contradictory party, both religious, family-oriented, traditional in values, yet at the same time rebellious. “Faith, liberty, family and nation” present in their self-declared doctrine (AUR, 2024a) contrast with their rebellious and unorthodox use of language. At the same time, AUR both opposed and supports certain EU values and principles. AUR (2024a) resonates with the EU when promoting “Personal, religious, economic, political freedom,” together with “Rule of law, independent and functional justice,” “Equality before the law,” “Equal chances for all,” “Transparency, meritocracy, responsibility,” “Free market economy,” “Protecting, promoting and sustainable exploitation of national resources, ranging from the natural and cultural heritage to human resources,” “Active citizenship,” among others.

We can draw a parallel between the scandalous language used by AUR party in Romania and the international context with the example of populism in the Philippines. We frequently notice violent language in the case of the citizens with respect to the political elites, claiming that they are corrupt and that they do not represent their interests. Populist leaders show citizens how they are like them in this respect, which offers them a strong emotional connection with them.

AUR’s communication type is, however, not one-sided and cannot easily be condemned or ignored. AUR adapts its communication function of the audience and context. The language used when angry and willing to both stir and connect with the people contrasts with the well-argued programme and values it supports written on its site. AUR used social media communication acting like rebels and common men. It also let interpretable attitudes related to anti-Semitism, yet it also denied convincingly the media accusations of having a discriminatory attitude.

While supporting freedom of choice to COVID vaccination and critical thinking in general, when supporting religious faith as the grounds for moral values in the family and society, it claims it is against abortion, with no further nuances. Here it aligns not only with the church, but also with the values set at EU level. AUR shows a combination of ideologies, through adhering to some, and questioning others. AUR is building up a new ideology, with which it resonates personally. Personal beliefs and values for every person intersect with and differ from the ones set by ideology at a certain time, a process which AUR members go through and exemplify themselves.

The main purpose of politics can be either that of ensuring stability, or that of bringing change, the latter which starts with emotional reactions that the population has or which are

further underlined and stirred by political leaders. Political speeches including the strong emotional component of pathos (Kastely, 2004) are not unusual. Pathos is the appeal to the emotions of the audience, which populist leaders rely on, by making the speaker share their own anger, fears, or anxieties. It is likely to trigger change at the level of the entire society at some point, since its leaders try to raise awareness to problematic issues in society. With populist leaders, the pathos component of the speech is the dominant one. George Simion ensures his credibility since, by thinking like the people, or at least by that segment dissatisfied with the present state of affairs, they feel that he describes their own perception of reality which they believe to be the truth. The logical component lies in the argumentation of the speech, which is backed up with examples to support his point of view in such a way that it can sound perfectly reasonable to those citizens who are sharing the same views.

The emotional component of George Simion's party is reinforced by the associations that can be triggered by its very name. The abbreviation of this party means "gold" in Romanian, a term which can be associated, from the point of view of the author of the present paper, with the high value of this party, and of the ideals it supports. It can also bring to the citizens' minds the phrase "to have a heart of gold," meaning to be generous. We can also associate the heart of gold with this party's representative being honest and truly wanting to do the best for the people. George Simion can be perceived as generous, since he supports all the values and principles of the citizens and, once he has the power to decide, he presents these issues, raising awareness to them and seems very promising to actually manage to solve them once he can. There is another association to "gold," namely the one with the time to which old generations of Romanians refer to as the "Golden Age" of Romania, selected from the prosperous times under the Communist rule when nationalism and high economic development were at their peak. During this time, Romania had its own economic production, and did not rely as now on imported products. Therefore, the abbreviation, meaning "gold" has been chosen on the basis of its positive associations.

AUR is a nationalist-populist party (Ilie, 2022), for whom protecting Romania, with its values and identity, becomes a major issue. Populism, once it has a nationalist component, like that of AUR, can allow for a sense of community for those nostalgic about certain aspects in society which had existed in the past, e.g. patriotic feelings. Energy independence for Romania is a goal supported by AUR, showing clearly a nostalgic view of the times when Romania was autonomous and could rely on its own resources.

Social stability is a vague term, since there is no precise way in which to measure it quantitatively. What is considered relevant to the present paper is an understanding of social stability through the examination of the historical and world context, by considering the social and political reality, since populism is considered to bring a sense of balance between mainstream politics, or between the political leaders in power, and the populist representatives.

AUR party has been chosen for analysis due to its impact on Romanian society, since it resonated with topics which were not addressed by mainstream politics, due to political correctness or due to a neglect for a while of certain values and principles, such as a strong attachment to Romania, as well as its own products. One cause of neglecting nationalism and patriotism has been the very dissatisfaction with the living conditions offered by Romania and the dreams of finding better living conditions abroad, once the opportunities to live and work in EU member countries arose. The main change has been the fall of Communism and the wish for a better life abroad, at the time in the USA, admired for its freedom of thought, behaviour,

and self-expression. Gradual disinterest in the Romanians' own country followed, this factor contributing to the situation of economic values, and living standards status of this country.

What is interesting is that AUR party answers a need of stability which is in the interest of both mainstream and non-mainstream representatives. Non-mainstream representatives such as the populists which oppose the current political regime and distrust the current representatives of its institutions seek to reestablish the trust that should exist between citizens and political leaders in order to ensure social stability.

After 1989, and after Romania's joining the European Union, many Romanians dreamt of leaving the country, either to work or to establish themselves there. Joining the EU meant working abroad and families being separated for some time. Standards of living were low. Criticizing the country and the way it had declined after the fall of Communism became a usual practice. However, the positive sides of the past were remembered and idealized with respect to the Communist period. Part of the need for social stability can be met by ensuring social cohesion through respect of the same values, such as patriotic feelings towards someone's country, which are included in nationalism. AUR is an example of classical populist case where this party emerges as a response to a crisis in society, and, in the case of Romania, a crisis of values and an economic crisis, based on the low standards of life making many people work and live abroad.

AUR does not only go anti-establishment, but also exhibits mainstream tendencies, in particular those related to traditional values, which, once questioned, would set forth the way to lack of social cohesion. Its role is both to support values common with the mainstream and to stir the citizens by putting forth issues for debate.

4. Results

The analysis of AUR reveals how populism is put into practice in a specific case, in Romania. On the one hand, AUR resonates with and reinforces mainstream values (supported at both domestic level and EU level), such as the following, present on its site (AUR, 2024a; AUR, 2024b):

- Nationalism, patriotism, and related activities, such as supporting a positive imagine of Romania abroad, unity and solidarity of Romanians from the diaspora and Moldavian Republic, supporting Romanian identity, cultural heritage, its natural environment, its own products, its agriculture, its tourism, its villages and its related products, Romania's own energy production and reindustrialization;

- Promotion of traditional values: family in its traditional format, union between man and woman, having at least one child, encouraging natality to prevent depopulation, supporting moral values through religious faith and corresponding laws;

- Support for health, equal opportunities, education.

On the other hand, AUR is going against the EU's values and principles, in the following situations:

- Presenting the COVID vaccine in a negative light, or, in their declared intent, showing the side effects and arguing for freedom of choice, considering the restrictions of rights the unvaccinated had for a while, such as not being allowed inside certain institutions or to be served in cafes;

- Lack of support for same sex marriages;

- Lack of support for minority rights, or attacking them verbally, such as with respect to the Hungarian minority;

- Lack of respect for certain nations, e.g. through their perceived anti-Semitic attitude by the media.
- Not showing tolerance for differences, with respect to other lifestyles, e.g. atheism, secularism, or to other opinions.

Moreover, populist leaders have a shocking image, or, at least, one that stands out. They challenge the typical image of a leader having a diplomatic attitude and using polite language. AUR challenges even this expectation, showing features of both classical politician and populist politician, through its representatives' adaptable use of language.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The research question regarding whether populism ensures social stability or represents a threat to it has led to further questions based on analysing the case of the Romanian AUR party, such as to what extent is it anti-establishment? The values held and promoted by AUR resonate, to some extent, with those held by Romania and the EU. AUR relies, on the one hand, on common grounds with values promoted by the establishment while, on the other hand, it questions some of them, or it underlines the significance of others. The threat to social stability posed by AUR relies on bringing to attention problematic issues, which give rise to debates, and have strong emotional impact. By supporting traditional values, such as family, faith, homeland, AUR receives the support of establishment institutions, such as the Romanian Orthodox Church.

AUR creates for itself an image of a party which both fits in the mainstream, by resonating with some of its values, and rebels against it, but not totally, only as far as some values are considered to be challenged, and even their contestation is done on common-sensical grounds. It illustrates and exemplifies freedom of thought, and critical thinking which helps citizens not be brainwashed by ideologies. Since Communist times, Romanians have the fear of being controlled by the state and made to act and think in a so-called proper way. For them, wishing to be free means having the right to choose, think, and express themselves. This resonates with the individualist mindset present in the Western world.

The contribution of this paper lies in the analysis of AUR, and in the way it both challenges and resonates with the mainstream values. Based on its party values and objectives, AUR relies on values which are common sense, ethical, nationalist, and which are meant to ensure social cohesion. Its emotional expressivity of language helps underline them, while the same emotional component is at stake to underline the disruption caused by challenging traditional values through laws set by the EU and present at world level. Society is caught in-between traditional way of life and thought and modern ones, questioning the established order, which is, in itself, a factor having the potential to cause social instability through social unrest. AUR reflects the current state of living in a changing world, which leads to both inner and outside conflicts.

While populism claims in general to be free of ideology, the recommendation is to look carefully. The present paper shows how, in the case of AUR, populism can be integrated within mainstream ideology or to intersect with it in common points. AUR has not a pure Euroscepticism attitude, and does not wish to undermine the EU. It simply wished to offer a humanised vision of it, it agrees with some of its values, while it agrees with some others.

The limitations of this paper lie in offering just one perspective, that of its author, on a phenomenon as complex as populism and on a party as controversial as AUR.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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