

First as tragedy, then as farce? AUR and the long shadow of fascism in Romania

Via [International ViewPoint](#)

In the current political climate, witnessing an ascendance of far-right parties across Europe, and a more general shift to the right in mainstream politics globally, Romania was often pointed out as an exception in this respect, certainly when it came to the area of Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe. Since 2008, when the Greater Romania Party (Partidul România Mare, PRM) failed to meet the 5% electoral threshold for entering Parliament, there had been no far- or radical-right parties in the Romanian Parliament. As of the 6th of December, the date of the latest legislative elections, the 'Romanian exception' is no more.

A new political formation, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor), whose acronym, AUR, means 'gold' in Romanian, [won 9.07% of the votes for the Chamber of Deputies and 9.17% of the votes for the Senate](#), becoming the fourth largest party in the current Parliament. Their success is all the more remarkable since the party was established only one year ago, on 1 December 2019 – the symbolically chosen national day of Romania that harks back to 1918 and is known as the 'Great Union Day'. In this respect, the party recalls the electoral fortunes of the far right Alternative for Germany (AfD), which barely missed meeting the 5% threshold for entering the Bundestag some six months after its establishment in 2013, and had its first electoral successes in state (Saxony, Thuringia, Brandenburg) and European Parliament elections in 2014. [1] There is thus a case to be made for reading this electoral result within the overall framework of the evolution of right-wing 'populism' –

a term that has been however rendered almost meaningless by overuse and that glosses over significant differences within the political spectrum it covers – in Europe and elsewhere, and [that case has indeed been made](#). There are, however, also good reasons for looking more closely at the Romanian specificities of this instantiation of the contemporary European far right and its links with interwar Romanian fascism, and it is here that my contribution can hopefully be of some help.

Unlike the seemingly more benign ‘populism’ (something that is in itself problematic), the association made immediately by commenters on AUR’s electoral success was with ‘fascism’, and specifically the native form it took in interwar Romania, with the ‘Legion of the Archangel Michael’ / ‘Iron Guard’. [Experts on the topic were interviewed](#), offering valuable insights about [the role of the Romanian Orthodox Church \(Biserica Ortodoxă Română, BOR\)](#) in accounting for this result, pointing at [continuities with the national-communism of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s regime](#) (mistakenly, in my opinion), while others offered [valuable class-based analyses](#) that however ignored the specificities of interwar Romanian fascism or its legacies in post-socialist Romania. A characteristically clear analysis by one of the most prominent experts on the legionary movement, Roland Clark, was both the most direct and the most worrying, asking ‘Is fascism returning to Romania?’ and hinting toward a positive answer, inflected however by awareness of the different conditions of the 21st century and the importance of contemporary influences, from Donald Trump to Viktor Orbán, in accounting for AUR’s strategies. [2] My own take on the matter follows along similar lines, with a much more straightforward ‘yes’ answer to Roland’s question, and one that factors in one of the important structural similarities between interwar and present-day Romania, i.e. the absence of a credible, organised, electorally-powerful left as a driver of class-based, rather than national- / religious-based politics.

The first thing to note is the novelty of AUR in Romania's post-socialist political landscape. The very useful distinction made by Michael Shafir between parties of 'radical continuity' and 'radical return' within the spectrum of right-wing politics in post-1989 Eastern Europe is an important one here. [3] The former continued the nationalism of the socialist era, with 'continuity' clearly visible at the level of the elites (Corneliu Vadim Tudor, Adrian Păunescu, etc.) in the Romanian case; whereas the latter denounced communism in toto and harked back to interwar-era models, often related to the fascist 'Legion of the Archangel Michael'. It was the former parties, of 'radical continuity', that were prominent in Romanian politics in the 1990s, at a time when Romania was being singled out not for the absence of the radical right, as it has been during the last decade, but for its virulence. In contrast, until three weeks ago, despite the number of such organisations (from the 1990s Movement for Romania – Mișcarea Pentru România – through the 'All for the Country' Party – Partidul Total Pentru Țară – that took over the exact name of the Legion's political party organisation to the extra-parliamentary New Right – Noua Dreaptă) and their radicalism, they remained confined to the political fringe, with no credible bid for electoral representation.

Despite their many similarities in terms of nationalism and xenophobia, important differences also stand out, evident for example in their respective attitudes to Romanian history. For the 'radical continuity' parties, the historical reference point, and someone whose rehabilitation they incessantly sought, was Ion Antonescu: authoritarian dictator of wartime Romania, anti-Semite, genocidaire and the person ultimately responsible for perpetrating the Holocaust in Romania; but, importantly, not a fascist. Their attitude to the communist regime was also much more ambivalent, as too straightforward a rejection would have raised questions about their own leadership's affiliations with the former regime. For the 'radical return' parties and movements, the role models were

and are the members of the armed anti-communist resistance and the so-called 'martyrs' and 'prison saints' who had been victims of repression under the former socialist regime, both groups overwhelmingly dominated by former members of the legionary movement. [4] Eventually, the legionary leadership, much of which was assassinated or executed under King Carol II's dictatorship, was also exalted as 'martyrs' for the national cause.

In turn, the socialist regime was condemned in unequivocal terms, as a foreign imposition and an unnatural hiatus in the history of the nation, as anti-communism became (and remains with AUR) one of the core principles in the ideology of such groups. The difference is telling: for parties like PRM the historical references pointed to the state and its representatives, be they Antonescu or (more quietly) Ceaușescu; for neo-legionary groups, they are to an anti-establishment movement engaged in (occasionally armed) resistance and violent action against the state, be it the partial and fragile interwar Romanian democracy or the post-war socialist regime.

This brings me to an important clarification regarding fascism. I subscribe to the current consensus in academic studies of historical and neo-fascism that is inspired by Roger Griffin's definition of fascism as "a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism". [5] Understood along these lines, the palingenetic element that promises a rebirth or regeneration of the nation from an alleged present state of decadence and the populist appeal to 'the masses' are key to understanding fascism as a revolutionary ideology and form of politics. This allows us to distinguish fascist movements and regimes from conservative authoritarian ones – Antonescu never sought popularity and aimed to preserve the Romanian state, not to radically transform it – and to see them as the right-wing

revolutionary counterpart to the socialist challenge of the liberal-capitalist hegemony. A revolution from the right, denouncing the materialism of the left and elevating 'culture' above economic concerns; these are the terms according to which fascism should be understood. It is also why it may appear relatively meaningless and incoherent when approached from a strict materialist perspective: fascists' ideas about the economy, their notions of a 'third way' between capitalism and socialism, always fuzzy and poorly articulated, combining a condemnation of plutocracy with guarantees for private property, were always and still are less important than culture to the fascists themselves. It is also why they can easily gain the upper hand in matters of 'identity politics', always their preferred terrain, dismissing the economic inequalities that underpin it. Yet the intended outcome of the fascist project, in the interwar period as today, is not the preservation of the status quo, but its complete overhaul – the evidence from the cases where fascists did come to power providing ample evidence of this.

With these considerations in mind, we should be genuinely worried about the claims of one of AUR's co-presidents, George Simion, [to represent an anti-establishment movement against "a rotten system" and to be "a form of revolution"](#). Lest anyone has any doubts as to the specific form AUR's revolution might take, the webpage of Rost magazine, managed by AUR's other co-president, Claudiu Târziu, clarifies this in explicit palingenetic terms, self-identifying as ["a magazine for national and Christian resurrection"](#). The most recent article penned by Târziu on the Rost webpage, at the end of the electoral campaign on 4 December 2020, is significantly entitled ["the signal of the conservative revolution"](#). With statements such as these, we witness the return of a palingenetic, revolutionary type of ultra-nationalism to the Romanian parliament for the first time since the interwar period. And if George Simion might be a relative novelty in Romanian politics, [with his background in nationalist football](#)

ultras groups rather than political parties, Claudiu Târziu is extremely well-known in neo-legionary forums and among researchers of the legionary movement as someone with a long career promoting the legionary movement in Romanian public space. Târziu was also prominent in the 2018 campaign of the 'Coalition for the Family', an association of NGOs with direct links to AUR, for a failed referendum that sought to make gay marriage unconstitutional (despite it being already illegal under current Romanian legislation). The third member of the triumvirate making up AUR's leadership is the philosopher Sorin Lavric, notorious for his legionary sympathies, as well as for his extreme misogyny and racism. In an interview accounting for his reference to the Roma minority as "a social scourge", the writer clarified that "the inclination of the Roma ethnicity toward this type of crimes" (stealing, begging, and prostitution) is "well known and proven statistically", thus reproducing one of the most common racist stereotypes about the Roma in Romania.

Considering the backgrounds of the three leaders of AUR, the party programme and doctrine comes as no surprise. Founded on the four pillars of "family, fatherland, faith, and freedom", its doctrine identifies the party as conservative (although conservatives are historically not known for their revolutionary propensities), in favour of a "Europe of Nations" (a staple of historical fascism and the contemporary European far right), and "adamantly opposed to the colonisation of Europe with foreign populations" – a notion that would not be out of place in the manifestos of extreme right terrorists like Anders Breivik or Brenton Tarrant. Importantly, this is also aligned with the rhetoric of far-right parties in power in the region of Central and Eastern Europe, like Fidesz in Hungary or PiS in Poland, with regard to migration. While the latter is explicitly identified by the AUR leadership as a similar party and a model to emulate to a certain extent, the anti-Hungarian nationalism of AUR precludes any positive references to Viktor Orbán or Fidesz.

Interestingly when it comes to the language of AUR's programme, the opposition to 'colonisation' and the references to Article 3 of the current (and also of the first, 1866) Romanian Constitution that prohibits the colonisation of Romanian territory is another element that was missing from Romanian party-political programmes since the legionary interwar rhetoric of "Jewish colonisation". While the party is pro-European, its notion of 'Europe' is grounded in its "classical values" and three main "cultural paradigms (Greek philosophy, Roman law, and Christianity)", once again pointing at the exclusion of non-Christian groups – although there are no explicit references to Muslims, Jews, or other religious groups in the party programme. However, an updated, 21st century version of anti-Semitism – [via references to government representatives on George Soros' payroll](#) – is promoted by AUR party members on social media. A wholesale denunciation of the entire political class reminiscent of the legionary movement is doubled by strong opposition to ["any form of contemporary Marxism", with "camouflaged forms of the neo-Marxist scourge" including "political correctness, gender ideology, egalitarianism, or multiculturalism"](#).

The ideological similarities to interwar Romanian fascism – adapted to a 21st century context, as neo-fascist organisations are wont to do since uniforms have gotten out of fashion – are, however, only part of the story. The success the legionary movement in the interwar period had in growing from a group of five nationalist students to the third largest party in Romania in the 1937 general elections owed at least as much to its mobilisation strategies. Here as well there are important parallels with AUR. First off, the extra-parliamentary origins of its leadership and the fact they were not previously associated with other political parties lend credibility to their wholesale dismissal of the political establishment, just like the Legion consistently claimed to not be engaged in politics (all evidence, such as their parliamentary representation, to the contrary). The

“ideological war whose conclusion will be the removal of the current political class” that Sorin Lavric promises is not just an electoral tactic, however, because its distinct style staking a claim to a form of anti-political politics (animated by “the recovery of the mystic sense of being Christian” for both Lavric and the legionaries) is a constitutive feature of fascism. Second, AUR prides itself on its different style of electoral propaganda, its grassroots engagement with the electorate, online and offline, on foot, through personal communication, “at one marketplace after another”, despite the restrictions in place during the pandemic. In 1931, a police report accounted for the first legionary electoral successes with the “intense and permanent propaganda carried out in the villages by Corneliu Zelea Codreanu [the Legion’s leader] and his devoted cohorts”. It emphasised that legionaries knew how to engage the peasants, “how to reach their souls, enquiring about all their needs, taking the time to sit around a boiling pot of soup or polenta”, and saw in this strategy the “superiority” of legionary propaganda. Third, both AUR and the legionary movement emphasise(d) action, “deeds” as the legionaries called them, over words, whether this involves in AUR’s case protest meetings, national unionist marches (from Alba Iulia, the symbolic site of the 1918 Union, to Chişinău, the capital of the Republic of Moldova), violent clashes with members of the Hungarian minority over the memory politics of a First World War cemetery, or fundraising projects for building houses or a hospital. All of these recall (as they surely do for AUR leaders like Târziu or Lavric, who know their legionary history) the winter marches on foot of the legionaries, their resilience in overcoming restrictions to their activity and even police brutality (which George Simion also mentions), the endless instances of legionary violence against members of the Jewish minority, or their famous voluntary work camps building and repairing roads, churches, student dormitories and, yes, even a hospital. [6]

Whether intentional (which seems more plausible given the

familiarity of AUR's leadership with legionary electoral propaganda) or coincidental, in both cases such actions were and are used to further delegitimise the entire political class, dismissed as corrupt and either committed to personal gain or prone to foreign influence. This contrast is then employed to further emphasise the 'uniqueness' of the respective organisations as representative of the 'national interest' and their constituting the sole alternative to the 'politics as usual' of the other parties. In [his first speech in Parliament](#), Simion instigated Romanians to a 'tax strike', encouraging them to refuse to pay their taxes, since these will be misused by the government anyway. This direct contact with the electorate, unmediated by political institutions, is skilfully 'performed' in the videos posted on social media by George Simion – in one such example, tagged "[my Christmas present to the Romanians](#)" and posted on 24 December, he announced that he will be donating 90% of his parliamentary salary to different civic causes. The performance is carefully staged, set against the background of dramatic music and featuring Simion slowly approaching the camera down an aisle in the Chamber of Deputies, while addressing his electorate directly and staring intensely into the camera in a sense of establishing 'eye contact' with the audience. Viewers familiar with legionary propaganda may be excused for having an odd feeling of déjà vu. Moreover, many AUR members are wearing the traditional peasant 'national' costume in Parliament and at public meetings, as the interwar legionaries also did.

In one of the EU's fastest growing economies that is also consistently flagged as among the worst countries in the EU with regard to income inequality and where the Romanian officials' denial of the extent of poverty and discrimination against the extremely poor, especially the Roma was noted by the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, a party that is adamantly opposed to any form of egalitarianism as 'neo-Marxist' is bad news indeed. [7] It also begs the question why such a party would be appealing to

such a significant segment of the electorate. And here the absence of a credible left-wing alternative comes prominently to the fore, whether we are thinking about the popularity of the legionary movement in the interwar period or the recent electoral results. While the most stable political party in post-socialist Romania is the Social-Democratic Party (Partidul Social-Democrat, PSD), winner of the recent elections as well, its left-wing credentials leave a lot to be desired. For one, its involvement in the aforementioned 2018 referendum on gay marriage saw it enter an alliance with the 'Coalition for the Family', its instigators. [8] Incidentally, while some commenters have related AUR's success to the ongoing pandemic and its firm opposition to the measures implemented to contain the spread of the virus, as well as to the very low electoral turnout (33.3%), I remain sceptical of such explanations. [9] The reason for this is my anticipation in 2018, on the occasion of the referendum, that [an organisation that can muster 3 million signatures to support a referendum on changing the constitutional definition of marriage](#) will soon have parliamentary representation.

Returning to the PSD, its economic policies might have been more redistributive than those of the other parties, but that hardly put a dent in the neoliberal consensus in a country where social welfare measures consistently fail to prevent extreme poverty, including its racialised version affecting Roma communities. Absent any notion of international class solidarity and drawing instead on the same nationalism and association with the church that is the bread and butter of AUR, its continuing fortunes at the polls probably have more to do with having established (and to some extent continued) an early presence in the 1990s in the rural areas completely ignored by the other mainstream parties, which tend exclusively to the urban, educated middle class. This electoral advantage may soon vanish if AUR continues targeting that electorate. The attempt to propose a new type of left-wing party more attuned to issues of class than PSD ever was,

Demos, failed to attract virtually any electorate beyond its initial core of highly-educated, overwhelmingly urban, and often diasporic members, with its supporters clearly unable to cross the online/offline barrier.

The situation appears similar to the one in the interwar period, when the popularity of the 'revolution from the right' can be explained by its filling in the void of a mass left-wing party that would have represented the overwhelmingly poor majority of the population. With the communist party banned as 'anti-national' and the tiny social-democrats subject to extensive censorship and state control, a political system heavily tilted to the right produced its fascist challengers on the same side of the political spectrum, provided they were able to speak the language of the peasantry (over 80% of the population back then) in ways that the mainstream parties were not. So why does widespread poverty fail to lead to more mobilisation along class lines? In my view this is primarily because of a failure to understand inequality and poverty along the lines of class in Romania, with social antagonism coded instead along nationalist, anti-Semitic lines (in the interwar period), or according to a narrative pitching the 'deserving poor' against the more unfortunate recipients of social benefits, the reviled "socially-assisted" (asistați social) today. Regarding the latter, the production of this lumpenproletariat and the resulting undermining of class solidarity has become a virtual political consensus in post-socialist Romania and has successfully convinced the poor that the cause of their misery is to be found with the extremely poor rather than with the exploitative nature of capitalism and Romania's dependent position in the global economy. Add to this the racism that associates all Roma with the "socially-assisted" and much of this underclass with the Roma (recall Lavric's 'defence' mentioned earlier), and there is ample room for a nationalist and racist coding of class antagonism. Interestingly, shifting the scale of analysis from a national to a European one, as I have done in a recent blog post,

allows interpreting the entire Romanian diaspora as a disaffected and abused proletariat, particularly given its demonstrated expendability in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. [10] I argued there that, in the context of the pandemic, “the red line that connects the stories of precarious Romanian asparagus-pickers in Germany and vulnerable Roma communities in Romania is one of marginality and exclusion, of expendable lives and convenient scapegoats, where race and class are mutually imbricated and played out on different scales, from the local, through the regional, to the global”. Absent a politics of solidarity that takes stock of these intersections, we should not be too surprised if parties like AUR are able to capitalise on the precarious Romanian diaspora, all the while driving a nationalist wedge between it and other vulnerable groups. Indeed, AUR’s share of the diaspora vote was more than double its overall result, [with over 23% of the votes](#).

Anti-communism was in the interwar period and still is in present-day Romania a hegemonic discourse that further delegitimises mobilisation along class lines. With the collapse of socialist regimes and the proclaimed end of ‘grand narratives’, an anti-communist rhetoric heavily laced with anti-Semitism and Russophobia became prominent not just in Romania but across the region of Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe. [11] Its Romanian instantiation saw the return of the once-persecuted legionaries into public memory, not as members of a fascist movement, but as anti-communist heroes and victims of persecution. With national institutions dedicated to “[the investigation of communist crimes and the memory of the Romanian exile](#)” (with much of the latter of legionary inspiration) and the uncritical republication of the works of interwar luminaries of Romanian culture who had been members or sympathisers of the legionary movement (e.g. Nae Ionescu, Mircea Eliade, Constantin Noica, Emil Cioran), very good conditions were created for the ‘return’ of the legionary version of Romanian ultra-nationalism after 1989. After all,

the legionaries' was the most explicitly virulent version of anti-communism to draw on in Romanian history, and their victimhood at the hands of the socialist regime was all too real – and amply mediated through TV documentary series such as “The Memorial of Suffering” (Memorialul Durerii), which ran on prime time television between 1991 and 1996, and intermittently until 2004 (with numerous re-runs). Roland Clark is right that the general public in Romania has but vague notions of the legionary movement – but when they do, I found, it is much more often fond images of ‘the boys’ carrying out voluntary work and building things than of political assassinations or the gruesome January 1941 pogrom, – but I would argue that its memory was refreshed through the commemoration of victimhood under socialism. I would disagree with him on the risks involved in resurrecting the legacy of Romanian interwar fascism though. AUR does indeed dissociate itself from the historical legionary movement – because it has to, as doing otherwise would be illegal under Law 217/2015. But the reactions to that law and to the inclusion of the Legion in the category of fascist movements whose positive commemoration is banned, about which I have written elsewhere, show that those risks are minimal indeed, short of an explicit commitment to ‘finish what they started’.

[Allegations of collusion between legionaries and communists in socialist Romania](#) should be put to rest, as there is very little historical evidence to support them, far less than was the case for example in neighbouring Hungary with members of the Arrow Cross. The nationalism of Ceaușescu’s regime took over elements of Romanian nationalism that were indeed indebted to the fascist, anti-Semitic version espoused by the legionaries. This indeed speaks volumes of the long shadow cast by interwar Romanian fascism, even on a regime which rightfully saw them as its sworn enemies. It does not however [indicate any hybridisation between the two, let alone suggest that “legionaries were the strongest allies of the former communist regime”](#), as Mădălin Hodor seems to believe.

The national-communism of Ceaușescu's regime steered clear of direct legionary influences, preferring to rehabilitate radical right figures such as Octavian Goga or military dictators such as Ion Antonescu, just as neo-legionaries in post-socialist Romania (and AUR) are steering way clear of Ceaușescu's nationalism. What we are witnessing with AUR is unprecedented in post-socialist Romanian politics and represents a 'return' of sorts precisely because of this distinction, which consequently cannot be emphasised enough. As a historian I am not into predictions, and it remains to be seen if this return will turn out to be the contemporary farce to the interwar legionary tragedy. [Signs of AUR members of parliament being ridiculed are already here](#) and this does not bode well for a party that, in typical legionary style, takes itself far too seriously and is prone to a rhetoric of "traitors" and "ideological wars". Nor does sleeping in Parliament during its first session and claiming to have been in the "[vishuddha chakra position that activates special mental connections](#)" sit well with the unwavering commitment to the "national and Christian resurrection" of Romania. Signs of the farce might be there, but the dangers posed by AUR making further inroads into the electorate and benefitting from the attention associated with its presence in parliament are all too real.

As I was contemplating the differences between the interwar period and the present day with regard to a class-based politics in Romania for this blog post, I wondered if the legacy of the socialist regime did not itself, paradoxically, contribute to a disavowal of 'class' as a meaningful form of identity and mobilisation. After all, in a regime that referred to all of its citizens as (triumphant) proletarians, was class struggle not over and decisively won? And if this was the real existing socialist equivalent of John Prescott and Tony Blair's "we are all middle class now" slogan behind New Labour in a capitalist society that (only) values the middle class, should we be surprised that it is difficult to

resurrect (pun intended) class struggle as a call for political action in a post-socialist one? [12] Yet if the story of the defeat of fascism and of the central role played by socialism in its demise teaches us any lesson, it is that we surely have to keep trying.

11 January 2021

Footnotes

[1] Spiegel International, 25 September 2013 [“Will Germany’s Anti-Euro AfD Party Implode?”](#).

[2] openDemocracy, 22 December 2020 [“Is fascism returning to Romania?”](#).

[3] Radio Free Europe, East European Perspectives: January 12, 2000 [“Part III C: Radical Politics In Post Communist East Central Europe ”](#).

[4] Cultures of History Forum, 19 February 2018 [“Criminals, Martyrs or Saints? Romania’s Prison Saints Debate Revisited”](#).

[5] *Politika* [“Fascism: historical phenomenon and political concept”](#).

[6] Brill, 8 December 2017, Volume 6: Issue 2 [“Building a Fascist Romania: Voluntary Work Camps as Mobilisation Strategies of the Legionary Movement in Interwar Romania”](#).

[7] *Romania Journal*, 16 October 2019 [“Romania has among the highest levels of income inequality in the EU, report says”](#), United Nations Human Rights [“Romania “in denial about extent of poverty, UN human rights expert says”](#).

[8] *LeftEast*, 3 October 2018 [“The putsch that never was: Romanian PSD in turmoil”](#).

[9] *Emerging Europe*, 8 Decembner 2020 [“Romania’s wake up call”](#).

[10] Cultures of History Forum, 24 August 2020 ["Othering the Pandemic: Scales of Exclusion and Solidarity "](#), *LeftEast*, 11 May 2020 ["\[Thou shalt\] Honour the asparagus!: Romanian Agricultural Labour in Germany during the COVID-19 Season.](#)

[11] Sage Journals,
East European Politics and Societies: and Cultures, 23 March 2020
["Between Europeanisation and Local Legacies: Holocaust Memory and Contemporary Anti-Semitism in Romania "](#).

[12] *The Guardian*, 10 February 2011 ["We are all working-class now"](#).