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# Hate speech revisited in Romanian political discourse: from the Legion of the Archangel Michael (1927–1941) to AUR (2020–present day)

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Ultra-conservative, ultra-Orthodox, nationalist and xenophobic, advocating “family, nation, Christian faith and liberty”, the party Alianța pentru Uniunea Românilor (henceforth AUR—which translates as “GOLD” in Romanian) [Alliance for the Unity of Romanians] campaigned in an insidious manner, both in social media and in the poorer rural areas of Romania, gathering a momentum that few could foresee in the 2020 elections. It is in the hands of discourse experts to deconstruct such hate speeches and warn both policymakers and the general population against allowing them to proliferate in the public sphere. Accordingly, drawing on the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), this paper aims to analyse samples of a speech of one of the leaders/ideologists of AUR, comparing them with the inflammatory discourse that paved the way to the Legionaries’ coming to power in 1940.

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## Introduction

Carefully swept under the rug of history by the post-World War II communist regime, the extreme-right party of the Romanian interwar, founded in 1927 as *Legiunea Arhanghelului Mihail* (the Legion/League of the Archangel Michael) by Corneliu Zelea-Codreanu, later relabelled *Garda de Fier* (The Iron Guard)<sup>1</sup> and *Total pentru ţară* (All for Fatherland) is one of the harbingers of doom that brought havoc upon Europe during the war through their genocidal attacks against the Jewish population. Advocating a fascist doctrine, the legionaries differed from the similar political (and paramilitary) organisations of the time—the German Nazi Party and Mussolini's Fascist Party—because of a peculiarity that one may be tempted to assign to a national propensity towards Orthodox spirituality and mysticism. This apparent contradiction is made obvious starting with the initial denomination, which brings together the name of the largest military unit of the Roman Empire army and that of the warrior archangel who led the armies of the heavens against Satan in the *Book of Revelations*. The party's name, doctrine, press and actions leave little room for interpretation, pointing to an *in-your-face* fascistoid and violent organisation brought to power with catastrophic outcomes.

Although they sentenced the legionaries to hard time in their terrifying prisons, which accounts for another gruesome episode of Romanian history, the communists constantly struggled to minimise the importance of the fascist party on the stage of Romanian history, employing a “regional” form of Holocaust denial that was to survive long after their fall in 1989 (see Lobonț, 2004; Ionescu, 2017). However, as the second part of this study will emphasise, the ultranationalist discourse of legionary inspiration begins to proliferate during the last thirty years, especially after Romania's accession to the European Union, in 2007, which is why the impact of this movement should not be overlooked, an opinion supported by the rich historiography available.

This re-emergence of aggressive discourse comes to enforce the claim of discourse theorists that “intertextual and interdiscursive relationships [are established] between utterances, texts, genres and discourses, as well as extra-linguistic social/sociological variables, the history of an organisation or institution, and situational frame” (Reisigl and Wodak, 2008: p. 90). As the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), a Discourse Studies subcategory rooted in Critical Theory, rests mainly on historical context in its analysis of the language in use as an instrument of power and as “a medium of domination and social force [which] serves to legitimate relations of organised power” (Habermas, 1970 q. in Wodak, 2011: p. 626), the method employed further selects two analytical principles, namely a brief introduction to the history and doctrine of the two political organisations under the lens, followed by the analysis of samples of speeches, with the aim of proving the affiliation of the contemporary party to the ideology, values, and discourse of the interwar one. The critical investigation of societal issues, political positions and related ideologies are, first and foremost, obvious in the language and in the discursive strategies used as vehicles for propaganda and manipulation. These are the central preoccupations of Critical Discourse Analysis, where they are seen as producing, distributing and consuming knowledge, therefore, impacting the very society they are generated by and that they aim to represent. In other words, and in connection with the topic approached here, analysing discourse (texts and interactions) sheds light on the mechanisms of “representing desires as facts, representing the imaginaries of interested policies as the way the world actually is” (Fairclough, 2003: p. 204). With discourse—“including language, but also other forms of semiosis, e.g., body language or visual image”—figuring “as a part of the social activity within a

practice”; “in representation”; “in ways of being, in the constitution of identities” (206), it is essential in: (a) decoding the public statements made by politicians (if being a politician is having a profession); (b) interpreting the construction of the self and/against the other, and (c) seeing how individuals and parties are constituted and classified “discoursally”. Decoding, interpreting and identifying a hierarchy of representations is closely dependent on context-related aspects, which both reflect the contamination with the current situation and highlight competing rewritings of history, shifting the point of interest to the phenomenon of “recontextualization” (Wodak and Richardson, 2013). To this end, the principles laid out by the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) are usually employed.<sup>2</sup> The dynamics of re-writing the past and recontextualizing the present are tackled here in accordance with the more practice-based, interdisciplinary “research areas, which have recently earned critical attention by discourse historical analysts [...], right-wing populism and fascist discourses in Europe” (Reisigl, 2017: p. 47), which mainly foreground politics, identity, history, and the media, integrated within a contextual framework, whose four dimensions are of particular interest: on a micro-level, “the immediate, language-internal co-text and co-discourse”; “the intertextual and interdiscursive relationships between utterances, texts, genres, and discourses”; “social factors and institutional frames of a specific context of situation”; “on a meso- and macro-level, the broader socio-political and historical context.” (2017: p. 53)

In the last few years, one of the preoccupations of critical discourse analysts has been the proliferation of hate speech, with emphasis on the radical right/fascist discourses. In our attempt to prove the connection AUR has with the unquestionably fascist party of the interwar period, we will mention only a few studies that make reference specifically to the Romanian type of fascism because, as will be further demonstrated, it has local “flavours”, which are less likely to be encountered elsewhere. Diana Mădroane lists them in her chapter dedicated to the more obvious fascist organisation New Right, who openly declared themselves neo-legionaries:

The dominant features of Romanian right extremism are xenophobia, chauvinism, racism (less pronounced), ultranationalism mixed with religious beliefs, revisionism, self-victimisation, the (partial or total) denial of the Holocaust, the cult of ancestral heroes and martyrs, traditionalism, antisemitism without Jews (one of the paradoxes of the post-communist radical right), anticapitalism, antiliberalism and anti-Westernism. (Mădroane 2013: p. 258)

As Wodak and Richardson note in their introduction to the collection *Analysing Fascist Discourse: European Fascism in Talk and Text* (2013), “one justification for using the generic term “fascism” is that it enables appreciation and comparison of tendencies common to more than one country and more than one period in time—and also that it helps draw out the interconnections between these different periods in time” (Wodak and Richardson 2013: p. 6). The findings below rest on macro-level analyses of broader intertextualities rather than on specific linguistic realisations, which is one of the reasons why we have opted to employ the wider, umbrella term “hate speech” instead of downright labelling AUR as a fascist organisation, all the more so as their presence on the political stage is too recent for critical discourse analysts to draw a definitive conclusion in regard to their status. Indeed, some hasten to consider them just a populist, more vocal/radical extension of another Romanian party, the Social Democratic Party (PSD), whose name is self-explanatorily leftist. For example, Stoica, Krowel and Cristea mention the

party's left-wing appeal in what concerns the economic measures they propose for the "salvation of the nation":

AUR voters are clearly conservative, for example opposing abortion rights, same-sex marriage and immigration. This finding matches the position of the AUR in the Romanian political landscape, based on its political programme, where the party displays a mix of deeply conservative stances on the cultural dimension but is moderately left-wing on the economic dimension. (Stoica et al. 2021).

This view is shared by Gușă, who cites the definition of populism from Mudde and Kaltwasser (2018), stating that it is "a set of ideas, which depict society as divided between the pure people and the corrupt elite, as well as its claim that popular sovereignty should be the main purpose in politics" (2021: p. 31). AUR would be an ideological mix:

Thus, in terms of ideological views, they seem to randomly embrace only the ones which serve to advance Romanian exceptionalism. AUR assumes a role to revive this exceptionalism and fight what they consider to pose a threat to it: anti-traditionalists, immigration, Magyar irredentism, the corrupt and illegitimate political class, etc (Gușă, 2021: p. 35).

While such opinions are far from being wrong, they seem to disregard (or dismiss as less relevant) the aspects, which would really lead to the conclusion that Romania is now facing a fascist threat just as dangerous as the legionary one proved to be in the interwar and in the years of the Second World War). Interestingly enough, Gușă actually mentions their appeal to memory and a "glorious past" but fails to make the connection:

The nation relies, according to AUR, on the Romanian language, ethnicity, past memory and Christian-Orthodox faith. They also consider themselves the voice of the unionist movement with the Republic of Moldova, as well as the voice of the large Romanian diaspora. Their concept of elitism is, however, reversed, as they consider themselves to be the elite—a group of young, educated and competent people—part of them returning from abroad to act as saviours of the country. Through this, they seem to intend to re-create the romantic image of the nineteenth-century politicians who built modern Romania after they had come back from the West. (2021: p. 35)

Other scholars are much more trenchantly geared towards regarding AUR as the heir apparent of the Legion in the twenty-first century. Ban (2020) states that "the fact that a lockdown was imposed onto the religious institutions and mass patriotic events brought the church and state into a conflict, which was ably dramatised by AUR as a form of persecution of Christians by a "traitor" globalist elite. This, in turn, galvanised grassroots religious support for AUR, whose nimble merging of ethnonationalism and religion is reminiscent of the tactic of the Iron Guard, Romania's fascist movement of the 1930s, one that had enjoyed wide popular appeal and support from large sectors of the church." Cristian Pîrvulescu, a well-known political analyst, states that "AUR is not a conservative party. Maybe only in the sense that Putin says he is a conservative, by rejecting Western values. It is not just illiberalism, it is not just nationalism but promoting a view characteristic of the legionary movement that can only be found today with the Greek Golden Dawn." (2020, our translation) Further, he explains the difference between conservatism and populism on the one hand, and fascism on the other, emphasising that conservatism accepts diversity and acknowledges the legitimacy of other orientations, while the ideologists of AUR see these as weaknesses.

Both the Legion and AUR are animated by ultranationalism, both are mystic Orthodox (ready to promote rigid Orthodoxy, which justifies the unavoidable allusion to the distinction between Islam and Islamism), both rely on antagonist strata—intellectuals and journalists, who construct the discourse of hatred, and the uneducated, who rally to the principles enounced, with or without a clear understanding of them. Symptomatically in this respect, the party leader, George Simion, compared himself with the Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, applauding the latter's undemocratic actions:

I am the Viktor Orbán of Romania because AUR and FIDESZ have the same ideology. [...] For us, FIDESZ is a model because it militates for the preservation of the Christian roots of Europe. [...] The best policies are made by the governments in Budapest, Warsaw and

Ljubljana. I've read the declaration of values signed by Orbán, Salvini, Meloni and many other politicians<sup>3</sup>—if we gather more in support of these shared values, we could have a powerful group. If we split in three, it won't be good [...] Every patriotic, Christian party that supports national sovereignty must impose the same politics at the level of the [European] Union. (2021, our translation) (DIGI FM, 2021)

Moreover, as Cristian Pîrvulescu rightfully remarks, the fundamentalist Christian discourse of some of the members of AUR is by far more aggressive and more radical than that of FIDESZ. The ideologist of AUR, Sorin Lavric, whose speeches constitute the main corpus of our analysis for the simple reason that his voice is one of the very few allowed to express themselves in the public sphere besides the Party's Leader, Simion, gets his inspiration from philosopher Nae Ionescu, the ideologist of the Legionary movement, and "clearly uses this intellectual-conservative tradition. Moreover, this ideology led Romania, through its anti-Westernism and anti-democratism, to a historical dead-end from where it only escaped with the 1989 Revolution" (2020, our translation).

Another convincing study that draws the conclusions that AUR may be, justifiably so, considered neo-legionaries and fascists is the article "Is Fascism on the Rise in Romania? An Analysis of the Political Programme of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR)" (2021). Starting from four different definitions of fascism (see Paxton, 2005; Gentile, 2004; Mann, 2004 and Griffin, 2006), the authors assess that

[t]he confrontation of AUR's political programme with the fascist ideological model highlights the existence of complementarity and an area of intersection of values and ideas. Thus, in the case of AUR, we find an ultranationalist approach, a feature underlined extensively in the literature as defining for fascism, complemented by a type of expansionism that takes the shape of unionism and the propensity to achieve a homogeneity of the national body, which has a collective identity and whose fundamental characteristics are invariably under the sign of language, ethnicity, tradition, the common past, and Christian faith, corresponding, in a broad sense, to the definition proposed by Paxton or Gentile. [...] AUR's political programme is also the expression of a theocratic vision of the world, the party assuming the role of defender and promoter of Christianity. Having a monistic approach, it affirms the superiority of the Christian faith, which it inextricably associates with tradition and the nation. AUR defines itself as fundamentally anti-Marxist. From such a position, it categorically rejects multiculturalism, materialism, gender ideology, and diversity that alter tradition,

faith, and nation, thus approaching the definition used by Mann or Griffin. From this point of view, the party displays a homophobic, intolerant, and discriminatory attitude (Buti and Constantin, 2021: p. 304).

In what concerns the differences between the two political organisations, the most significant is the anti-Semitism of the legionaries, having largely disappeared from the ideology of AUR, which may be contextually accounted for by the absence of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century “Jewish Question” in contemporary discourse or, more particularly, by the quasi-total absence of the Jewish minority on the Romanian territory<sup>4</sup>. As will be shown here, AUR’s hate speech remains focused on ethnicity, the “victims” of predilection being the Roma and the Hungarian minorities, but finds new targets in the LGBTQ+ community and, anachronically, in women, regarded as having a second-class intellect by a representative voice of the party.

All in all, siding with the scholars who consider AUR an extreme-right party of neo-legionary inspiration, this article rests on recontextualization with a view to proving that the discourse of the party ideologists and leaders draw inspiration, intertextually, from the speeches that paved the way to the Legionaries’ coming to power in 1940. The analyses of instances taken from a single speech delivered by Sorin Lavric will be prefaced by a necessary contextualisation and by bringing back to the collective memory the main landmarks of the legionary discourse.

**The legionary discourse through the lens of social history.** The values mentioned above are “tradition, respect for the culture and history of European states, respect for Europe’s Judeo-Christian heritage and the common values that unite our nations” or “our belief that family is the basic unit of our nations”. AUR does not have MPs in the European Parliament, but the declaration applauded by Simion was signed by the representatives of the Christian Democratic National Peasants’ Party, a “relic” of the historical party of the same name, which is advocating “Christian values for a united Europe”. At the discursive level, the real problem that hides behind these “Christian values” or “Judeo-Christian heritage” much vehiculated by the right-wing parties of today is that they actually refer to birth-control policies, anti-abortion laws, “pro-family” referenda and other similar undemocratic measures marketed to the Orthodox majority as “God’s will”, with the (mostly) tacit support of the Romanian Orthodox Church. The latter’s involvement is rarely made official by its highest ranks, but isolated statements along these lines and the support offered to these political organisations by part of the clergy are not discouraged. In fact, all nationalist and/or isolationist tendencies are, ironically, pan-European, in the sense that these radical organisations basically say the same thing (adding specific national overtones), but it is this militant Christianity that draws AUR near the interbellum legionary party, for whom religion was much more than just a political framework, but a genuine state of mind. In fact, in their early years, the legionaries declared themselves “a movement, not a political party”. One of the leaders, Ion Moța, inaugurated the first issue of the newspaper *Pământul strămoșesc* (Fatherland) with an article entitled “La icoană!” (To the Icon!). British historian Roland Clark, an authority in the history of this party, quotes from this editorial in his book, *Holy Legionary Youth. Fascist Activism in Interwar Romania*, asserting that “Christian virtue was not a goal in itself but a means for the ultranationalist movement to overcome its enemies with divine assistance.” (Clark 2015: p. 66)

We do not do politics, and we have never done it for a single day in our lives. We have a religion, we are slaves to a faith. We are consumed in its fire and are completely

dominated by it. We serve it until our last breath. We lost our way for a while, carried along by worldly values. [...] In this consists salvation, with freedom from the Yids and from all the deadly plagues that consume us: in restoring fruitfulness in the godly vineyard<sup>5</sup>, which today is sick and barren, in our nation (at least here), fallen into satanic claws that lay waste to the soul and bring it loss (Moța in Clark, 2015: p. 66).

In fact, this pervasive Christian sentiment is what seems to have ensured the Legion’s incredible expansion in the rural areas, inhabited in the 1930s by a preponderantly illiterate population, and only to a lesser extent its rabid anti-Semitism, which addressed mainly students and intellectuals (some of them, resonant names in the history of Romanian culture). The peasants in the Old Kingdom (including Wallachia and Moldavia) would have been hard to persuade to join the Legion had the legionaries resorted to their virulent attacks on Jews for the simple reason that, according to the *Final Report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*, “the Jews represented 13.6% of an urban population of c. 3,632,000 persons and only 1.6% of the rural population, which amounted to almost 14,421,000 persons. More than two-thirds of the Romanian Jews lived in cities and towns, and less than a third in rural areas” (Final Report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania 2004: p. 1). A different trigger was needed for the massive involvement of the peasantry, which was necessary to bring the Legion success in the elections. The religious sentiment of the dwellers of “deep Romania”, enhanced by interventions of the rural intelligentsia (the priest and the primary school teacher, who were documented in many cases as supporting and aiding the legionary cause) was heavily exploited. Social historian Oliver Jens Schmitt rightfully observes, in his article, “Eine mächtige Bewegung auf den Dörfern”: Mechanismen der politischen Mobilisierung der rumänischen Legionärsbewegung im ländlichen Raum (1933–1937) [“A Strong Current in the Countryside: Mechanisms of the Legionary Political Mobilisation in the Rural World. Preliminaries to a Social History of the Iron Guard”]<sup>6</sup>, that post-communist historiography has focused almost exclusively on political or intellectual figures, therefore, on the artisans of the legionary ideology, using the same corpus of “legionary writings, memoirs and contemporary media, complemented, here and there, by fragmentary archival material” (Schmitt 2011: p. 154), and disregarding the manipulative forces employed to move the masses. In the Austrian scholar’s opinion, the means of achieving this end was represented by the sustained involvement of the legionaries in the cultural-religious life of the villagers through their participation in religious feasts, consecration of churches, weddings, christenings, Sunday horas, fairs, etc. “The Legion’s success in many villages is due to the fact that many peasants did not regard the legionaries as an alien element but as peasants like themselves, usually young, who lived according to tradition and to the deeply rooted religious identity.” (2011: p. 167) The songs chanted during marches, reminding those of the military troops, with patriotic lyrics in a simple, penetrating metre, written by their intelligentsia, like the poet Radu Gyr, praising the Captain and showing the legionaries’ readiness to die in gaols for the country and for the Church (e.g., *Holy Legionary Youth, Arise, Gheorghe, Arise, Ioan!, Hymn to the Fallen Legionaries, Nothing Holier Than This, Death Squad, To Arms!*) were among the most successful forms of manipulation and mobilisation. Many themes present in these songs, like the heroic Dacian heritage, the religious spirit, or the lower status of the Romanian peasant, turned into a menial servant in his own country under the crushing oppression of the foreign Other, are easily recognisable in the discourse constructed for similar

audiences by AUR. The Other has changed, now it is the European Union. The violent calls to arms and the fury against the Jews are missing, but otherwise, the persuasion strategies take the same routes, resumed by an anonymous legionary quoted in the volume *Tara, Legiunea, Căpitänul. Mișcarea legionară în documente de istorie orală* [The Country, the Legion, the Captain. The Legionary Movement in Oral History Documents]: “you cannot address the masses, the peasants, with foreign affairs matters or with philosophy. You’d be ridiculous! He [Codreanu’s father] had the gift of combining personal and regional husbandry issues with the religious feelings of the peasant, which were dominant at the time” (Silvestru et al., 2008: p. 123).

Equally significant for the attempt to connect the extremist discourses of the Legion of the Archangel Michael and AUR is the former’s view on women, which is undeniably influenced by their fundamentalist religious mindset. Thus, according to Clark, who cites the document, which stipulates the organisation of the Legion, published in *Pământul strămoșesc*, “married legionary women were to be mothers and to provide moral guidance, which included disapproving excessive makeup, Jewish fashions, and immoral dancing. Single women were called “Sisters of the Legion” and were told to organise craft exhibitions to display legionary handiwork.” (2015: p. 68) If the legionary “New Man” was supposed to be, according to the inflammatory writings of their leader, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, “an Orthodox Übermensch, a heroic martyr embracing the ascetic ethos inspired by the Eastern Christian faith, but at the same time espousing a martial vitalism and will for power that rendered him ruthless, unforgiving, and cruel” (Rusu, 2016), women were relegated to a life of domesticity, and their only roles in the organisation were feeding the men, cleaning the headquarters, sewing, knitting, etc. These “commandments” are listed in Codreanu’s “guidebook, *Cărticica șefului de cuib* [The Nest Leader’s Manual]. However, one could note that, in his personal history of the movement, *Pentru legionari* [For My Legionaries], written later, in 1936, the Captain addresses his men and women as if they were equal or, at least, equally involved in the fight:

Let us all unite, men and women, to carve another destiny for ourselves and for our people. The hour of Romanian resurrection and deliverance is approaching. He who believes, he who will fight and suffer, will be rewarded and blessed by this people. New times knock at our gates! A world with an infertile and dry soul is dying and another one is being born, belonging to those who are full of faith. In this new world everyone will have his place, not based on his schooling, intelligence, or knowledge, but above all in accordance with his faith and character (Zelea-Codreanu 2003: p. 187).

The imposed domesticity, women’s sole usefulness as mothers, nurturers and house workers is gradually replaced by an opposing paradigm, that of the masculine, virago woman, comparable to warrior-women models like Joan of Arc. Embracing martyrdom and showing ruthlessness, this “New Woman” would, in the opinion of philosopher Constantin Noica, one of the ideologists, “repair some of the weaknesses affecting her” (q. in Rusu, 2016). It is, then, obvious that, although they started urging women to become their comrades in arms, the patriarchal legionaries could not depart significantly from the ancestral ideology, which regards women as weak and secondary. It should not come as a surprise that the present-day philosopher of AUR, Sorin Lavric, advances similar views, although his misogyny is even more condemnable in the twenty-first-century context.

The legionaries’ thanatic obsession with martyrdom, amplified after Codreanu’s assassination in 1938, which only gave the Captain a messianic aura and more force, as well as a thirst for

revenge to his comrades, will find its fulfilment in January 1941, in the quelling of their rebellion, ordered by Marshall Ion Antonescu, who had brought them to power in September 1940 to help him force the king to abdicate. Losing political support, the party leaders flee to Germany, while 9,000 documented members are tried and sentenced to hard prison. The complete end of their mystic and bloodthirsty dictatorship is reconfirmed with the communists’ coming to power at the end of 1947. Known for their policy of imprisoning their political adversaries, the communists persecuted, arrested, imprisoned or sentenced to death thousands of people on more or less legitimate accusations of involvement with the legionary movement.

**Post-communist ultranationalism and hate speech.** After more than forty years of communism—a regime that lasted from 1948 to 1989, and which imposed a single, omnipotent, party—the Romanian political landscape started changing gradually, moving towards a pluri-party parliamentary system. It covered, at least in theory, a wide array of political groups, alliances and coalitions of various doctrines and ideologies, oriented towards the left, the right or staying at the intersectional centre. In a country that was healing from past communist wounds, two main phenomena became manifest: on the one hand, (few) political parties addressing “the nostalgic” remained vigorous, while, on the other hand, (numerous) others declared themselves democratic, professed European values and showed more or less detachment from anything which might have been labelled leftist. The population was thus divided, taking sides and being constantly in opposition with the dreaded Other.

Within this frame of division and fracture (lacking extreme manifestations, however), in 1991 there emerged Partidul România Mare (PRM) [the Greater Romania Party]—an ultranationalist political group that was intended to separate itself from the dominant trend of Occidentalism and to revive older iron fist “values” of military and/or political dictatorships (like those promoted by Ion Antonescu and, later, by Nicolae Ceausescu). The party’s name was deliberately chosen due to its historical connotations, both referring to the nation-state of all Romanian speakers formed after the First World War (including Transylvania, Bukovina, Bessarabia, as well as parts of Banat, Crisana and Maramures), and alluding to the loss, following the Second World War, of Romanian territories, which are now part of neighbouring countries, particularly the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. Its scores in the elections for the Senate, for example, ranged from a decent start of 3.86 and 4.54 in 1992 and 1996, respectively, to its peaks of 21.01 and 13.63 in 2000 and 2004, decreasing gradually to 3.57, 1.47, 2.95 and 0.65 in the following elections (of 2008, 2012, 2016 and 2020)<sup>7</sup>. The initial development of PRM, its notoriety and, later, its downfall were especially due to its leader of 24 years (1991–2015), Corneliu Vadim Tudor—poet, writer, historian and journalist with a strong personality and memorable rhetoric of xenophobia and homophobia, who managed to come second in the 2000 presidential election, after Ion Iliescu (who was associated with old school, Russian type communism, and who became president because of Vadim Tudor’s running for office, rather than for personal merit).

Some thirty years later, in 2020, the younger and more brazen, ultranationalist party (self-proclaimed conservative union) was founded in Romania: AUR. Its insidious ascension (mirrored in the incredible results obtained in the parliamentary elections) stunned everyone, but the grounds it grew on and the ideologies it aligned with, at home and abroad, should have long betrayed its worrying fast mutation and daunting presence in the country’s parliament today. What studies now show is that the growth of AUR was facilitated by social media, where communities of like-

minded nationalists find the perfect stage and the ideal audience. “The decision to rely on social media content only comes as a result of the party’s access to mainstream media being limited, whereas their presence in local media and few national broadcasts has generally just been shared by their social media pages. In fact, AUR’s entire political campaign was designed and delivered via Facebook, using tens of pages intended for each Romanian region and for every other country where there is a consistent Romanian emigration” (Gușă, 2021: p. 30; see also Pîrvulescu and Pora, 2020). They also indicate that the founding party members learned from similar experiences elsewhere, understanding that it was imperative to exploit electoral potential, which had not really been tapped into (in the case of Romania, those living in poorer rural areas, which is exactly what the legionaries did in their day), instead of trying to dissuade people from voting as they had always done.

The statute of AUR<sup>8</sup> mentions *faith, liberty, family* and *nation* as pillars and core values. Central to the party’s doctrine is the *Christian faith*, which implies “church, tradition, and nation”, to be preserved and defended against atheism—“an error caused by the arrogance of those who claim that an anthropological view on the universe is superior to a theocentric one”, as well as against “left-wing forces of a Neo-Marxian ideological extraction, seeking to implement their secularist agenda” who are attacking our “strongly Christian nation”. The second principle, *liberty*, is defined as “the identity of the spirit in action, i.e., an act of free assertion and manifestation of the commitments induced by faith, family, and patriotism”, which confers dignity and which pervades our society, once again described, undeniably, in terms of being “shaped by a Christian moral culture”. *Family values*, explicitly in close association with the notion of *traditional family*—“primordially, naturally, religiously, morally, and bioethically [...] made of one man and one woman”—is another institution, which is under assault and needs protection against “left-wing political correctness, Neo-Marxist ideological attacks, which try to destroy it under the pretext of modernisation, and invoking the false flag of “human rights”, of Western extraction”. *Nation* and *national identity*—“objective and complex historical, geographical, political, cultural, linguistic, spiritual, religious and psychological realities”—are further validated by “natural feelings” like patriotic loyalty and love of one’s land, which introduce the brief section on its international policies.

The pathos woven into this reflective, essayistic, almost literary style complies with “the self-laudatory narratives and mythologies, which rely heavily on the absolute, incomparable self-victimisation of the majority ethnic groups often portrayed as innocent prey to their minority enemies” (Lobonț, 2004: p. 442). In Romania, as elsewhere in east-central Europe, the “enemies” have traditionally been the Jews and/or the Gypsies, with the Holocaust (pogroms in Iasi, București, Dorohoi) and genocide by deportations (to Transnistria)—negated, overlooked, sometimes even justified in mainstream historical discourse—looming large over the recent past, contaminating our present and influencing the foreseeable future. Romanians have also played “the dangerous game of falsifying history” with regard to the Hungarian minority (representing roughly 6% of the population), mostly inhabiting the north-western part of the country’s territory, in Transylvania—which has been disputed for centuries (with assertions based on the historical right from the Hungarians, and arguments drawing on the ethnic principle from the Romanians) and which remains subject to an ongoing controversy on the political stage, with clashing versions still being marketed to voters.

Lately, increasingly, the so-called “purification” of history has become “an essential part of the populist political discourse, a means of legitimising the present (or its transformation) and

designing the future. Mainstream historical discourse started to be transferred into mainstream political discourse and became embedded in it” (Lobonț, 2004: p. 442). From the mid-1940s to the present day, historical and political discourse showed clear signs of manipulating memory. Initially, the goal was to “legitimise the new system of power in Romania after the end of the Second World War” and build the credibility of that system by changing history (Ionescu, 2017: p. 167). After the fall of communism, as far-right extremism intensified, the purification of history and the manipulation of memory became the building blocks of ultranationalist discourse, reflected in the contemporary proliferation of hate speech (as practised by AUR in the Romania of 2021–2022).

Relevant for illustrating how extremist, fundamentalist positions are seeping through the Romanian political discourse are any of the positions openly assumed, in parliament and in the media, by some of the most vocal and actively engaged representatives of AUR, including Sorin Lavric, the political ideologist and AUR Senate President, and George Simion, the party’s founder and co-president (together with Claudiu Tărziu). The former, a university professor, is notorious for his racism and misogyny, cleverly hidden under pompous formulations with pretensions of philosophical considerations. The latter, a prominent football ultras group member, is frequently heard/seen spouting xenophobic messages and claiming deeply ingrained patriotism supported by references to and quotes from well-known Romanian literary works. The demonstration here focuses on an interview for the Digi24.ro television channel<sup>9</sup>, given by Sorin Lavric in December 2019, when he was expelled from the Romanian Writers’ Union, in which he practically summed up his world view and expressed anger towards the unjust (in his opinion) condemnation of the principles he stands for. His hate speech is directed against other politicians, the Hungarian minority, the Roma community and, of course, women.

Typically, political discourse is aimed at the electorate, on which politicians depend. Its functions are therefore to impress, persuade and manipulate in view of attaining more or less personal goals, wrapped inside packaged ideals/projects, which are shared and which are intended to serve all of the populace, healing old wounds and rekindling hope. Its rhetoric, however, shows clear signs of insincerity and meaninglessness. In Lavric’s case, the obvious efforts of the speaker to capture the listener’s attention, to side with the many, and to define himself and his newly found party as potent and right(eous) play on the general dissatisfaction with everything political and on the disillusionment with electoral promises.

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Sample 1 I am so disgusted by politics that I had to become a politician. [...] I found myself in the ideas expressed by George Simion and Claudiu Tărziu. [...] We openly represent the political right. [...] There are no ambiguities in our doctrine, and we do not wallow in equivocation. Moreover, we do not hide behind words (the translations from Lavric are ours).

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Though subtle, the manipulation is present. Initially, the discourse is rooted in acknowledged realities, which indicates knowledge of the current state of affairs and desire to do right by the electorate. Apparently, the argumentation has force due to the absence of contradictory evidence or to the “difficult heritage”<sup>10</sup> obliquely referenced (AUR is new, young, enthusiastic). However, questions remain unanswered, criticism is combated with criticism, and justification is turned into an expression of arrogant self-complacency with patriotic overtones.

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Sample 2 I don't know what extremism is. Whenever we use such degrading and tarnishing labels, we push any movement, any party into a dark corner. We are a party of the right, Christian, conservative. [...] We always invoke those organic entities, which define any individual, namely: nation, church, family, ethnicity, language, past, forefathers. [...] If this is extremism for you, then we are extremists.

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In defence of AUR, increasingly accused of reinstating the ideology adopted and imposed by the Legion of the Archangel Michael<sup>11</sup>, Sorin Lavric brings one of his most controversial statements, whereby the Legionary movement was important in shaping Romanian conservatism, promoted now by the “golden” Alliance for the Unity of Romanians. In words he does not hide behind, he somehow rewrites an interval in the country’s past (which, for obvious reasons, had not been covered by history books or taught in schools during communism). In other words, he exploits the gaps in the knowledge Romanians have about the neuralgic topics related to the revolutionary fascist Legion.

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Sample 3 We are “neo-legionaries, fascists, etc.” (*ironical*). We know all the stamps and labels attached. To be very clear: the legionaries were an interbellum episode, which has definitively ended. [...] It was an important moment in what we call the conservative trend in Romania. However, the conservative ideology does not end with the legionaries. It continues later. There are some traits of the conservative ideology which, even if present with the legionaries, do not only define the latter: bringing together nation and the Christian spirit. [...] To people obsessed with fundamentalism, this pair, nation-church brings a whiff of the Legion.

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Manipulation gains momentum in the sections dedicated to Romania’s place in Europe, where Lavric talks about general Christian values but omits to mention the narrower Romanian Orthodox Christian Mysticism, which was deeply ingrained in the discourse of the Legion (openly indicated as the precursor of AUR). The political component is added in the instigation against the European Union, described in negative terms only. Strangely enough, the EU is accused of the very principles AUR declares itself to be a supporter of: political power in the “right” hands, administrative force concentrated in one body, social policy benefitting all members. The reference to socialism, especially painful to a nation who has lived it, is deliberately (and efficiently) made to instigate further and to ridicule western principles having colonised us, Romanians.

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Sample 4 Romania’s place, traditionally, is in the midst of the European occident. However, for us, Europe means a club of Christian nations. In no way does it mean a federal super-state, led by a single party, and with this malefic bureaucratic apparatus in Brussels that emanates this destructive socialism, which is generally called political correctness.

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The same fear of losing Romanian authenticity and national identity, in danger of being contaminated by others, is instilled through his intolerant, ethnocentric, xenophobic (legionary-like) notes on minorities, two in particular: the Hungarians and the Roma. Both statements underpin stereotypes and fuel public discontent, although apparently emphasising ideological flaws or

governing errors committed by the post-communist political system in Romania and reflected in the economic policies implemented by the latter.

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Sample 5 I am a total admirer of Hungarian culture, especially of its architectural stylistics. [...] But this does not prevent me from saying that the idea of a party formed on ethnic criteria is an aberration.

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Sample 6 Those who returned are those who could not beg, steal and engage in human trafficking in the Occident any longer. Moreover, they are mainly, statistically [...] the Roma, that is the gypsies. Not all of them. God forbid! We have a very large Roma group in AUR.

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Lastly, Lavric’s comments on women<sup>12</sup> shocked audiences and brought sharp criticism to the senator, who defends his positions by appealing to generalisation and turning the tables on all men, supposedly incapable of speaking their minds and cowardly enough not to uphold good old-fashioned patriarchy. Bizarrely, he insists on objectifying women and denies them a brain, while he offends men by alluding to the fact that they are mostly driven by sexual drives. Moreover yet, he sees no problem in any of it, victimising himself and turning the whole discussion into a political confrontation.

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Sample 7 The most frequently invoked expressions are: no man seeks profoundness, intelligence or lucidity in a woman; I am not an admirer of women. You can only admire someone whom you think is above you; [...] I cannot say that women excel in logical thought, especially in philosophical aptitudes. I’m sorry! Philosophy is an almost exclusively male field. [...] What did I say that was so dramatic? I told truths that we all know, but few dare to utter. [...] So, the crusade is not against me, but against my allegiance to a party whose ascension has stupefied everyone.

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The focus is shifted from the individual to the group, from the personal to the public. Throughout the interview, the central principles promoted by AUR in their statute are thus touched upon, then reinforced, producing and distributing ideas, which have the potential to impact society and generate change. Explicit references are made to Christianity (especially the “right” creed, Orthodoxy), which is glorified at the expense of all other religions, and to national history/identity, which is revered as the greatest value that defines human beings. Implicitly, the move is towards prejudice and intolerance with regard to racial, ethnic or gender issues (derived principles), and towards isolationism (ensuing politics).

## Conclusions

Legitimising the current situation and announcing a (b)righter future, the political discourse associated with AUR discloses the mechanisms of this particular type of social activity or the recurrent practices generally in use with the profession. Within it lie representations of the ideology and ideologists advertised, as well as misrepresentations of the denigrated opposition. Once occurring frequently enough, it becomes easily correlated to the addresser, being recognisable even in the absence of the original source or of its proponents. Moreover, the process is ongoing. Purifying history and manipulating memory, AUR narratives linger on in the collective unconscious and are

allowed to proliferate because, in Romania, at least for now, they seem to be dismissed as exotic and harmless, commonly being perceived as a lesser evil than they actually amount to. While the frequent interventions and public rantings of George Simion, the AUR senator and civic activist, are dominated by widely recognised populism, the party's underlying ideology, formulated and advocated by its architect, Sorin Lavric (as exemplified here) poses greater threats at democracy and normalcy, being indisputably indebted to that of the Legion (as identifiable intertext). Like its interbellum extreme-right precursors, Lavric's hate speech is militant, antagonistic, ultranationalist, and Orthodox. Like previous cases of legionary allocutions, it objectifies women and targets the Other, although anti-Semitism has been replaced with an anti-minority politics, which degrades ethnic groups (particularly the Roma and the Hungarians) and refutes gender identity.

Since the situational frames are significantly different, recontextualization, "concretely manifested in the intertextuality and interdiscursivity of texts" (Wodak and Richardson, 2013: p. 8) remains essential in reading into the palimpsest of AUR and identifying the similar orientations and hate speech of the Legion of the Archangel Michael.

## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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## Notes

- 1 "The Iron Guard (Garda de Fier) was the military wing of the League of the Archangel Michael (Legiunea Arhanghelului Mihail) [...]. Some Anglophone scholars use "the Legion", "Legionary Movement" and "legionary" when referring to the movement and its members, others prefer the looser terms "Iron Guard" and "Guardists" (Deletant, 2006: p. 288, f. 89). This study employs the former terms throughout.
- 2 A pertinent example, also in connection with Romanian history in the making, is provided by Irina Diana Mădroane, in "New Times, Old Ideologies? Recontextualizations of Radical Right Thought in Postcommunist Romania". *Analysing Fascist Discourse. European Fascism in Talk and Text*, Ruth Wodak and John E. Richardson (eds), New York and London: Routledge, 2013, pp. 256–276.
- 3 "Sixteen European right-wing populist parties, including several in government, joined forces [...] to rail against the EU's political direction, declaring the bloc to be "a tool of radical forces" trying to build a super-state. The parties that signed the declaration include Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Fidesz, Poland's governing Law and Justice, France's National Rally, led by Marine Le Pen, Austria's Freedom Party, Spain's Vox, and Italy's League and Brothers of Italy, led by Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni, respectively." <https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-marine-le-pen-matteo-salvini-eu-integration-european-superstate-radical-forces/> POLITICO.EU (2021).
- 4 According to the President of the Federation of the Jewish Communities from Romania, Aurel Vainer, the last census recorded <4000 Jews in Romania (2011). In 1930, the Jewish community was made up of more than 700.000 persons, half of whom were killed during the war. The rest emigrated after the war, in successive waves AGER PRESS (2018).
- 5 Mistranslated as "the godly way" in Clark. The original text was published in *Pământul strămoșesc* 1 (1), 1 August 1927, pp. 9-10.
- 6 The article was published in 2010, in Vienna, in German. This study cites a Romanian translation, published by the Romanian National Archives in 2011 (*Revista Arhivelor*, 1/2011, pp. 153–178). The excerpts have been further translated into English by the authors.
- 7 The information is available at <https://reultatevot.ro/elections/52/results> Reultate vot (n.d.).
- 8 The statute is made public via <https://partidulaur.ro/english/> Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor (n.d.).
- 9 Available at <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/sorin-lavric-nu-sunt-un-misigin-am-spus-niste-adevaruri-pe-care-le-stim-cu-totii-numai-ca-putini-indraznesc-sa-le-spuna-1416446> DIGI24 (2020).
- 10 Notion frequently invoked to excuse inaction or poor results and lay the blame on previous politicians/policies.
- 11 In March 2021, when Romanian senators were analysing two legislative projects intended to rehabilitate and reintroduce state indemnities for ex-legionaries, war criminals or Nazi organisation members, and for their descendants, Sorin Lavric mentioned Mircea Vulcănescu (a far-right politician during Antonescu's wartime dictatorships) and Valeriu Gafencu (a legionary, active in the fascist rebellion of 1941), reiterating his veneration of "martyrs, heroes and political detainees, whose only crime is that of opposing communism." (available at <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/senatorul-aur-sorin-lavric-elogii-pentru-fostii-legionari-vexler-minoritatii-este-o-umilinta-ingrozitoare-la-adresa-victimelor-1464522>) DIGI24 (2021).
- 12 Made in the book *Decocăt de femeie [Decoction of a Woman]* (2019).

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