

# The Rise of Digital Populism in Romania

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**Abstract:** *Globalization and the use of digital technology are transforming the media landscape, influencing the political behavior of citizens, the way they understand politics. Under the impact of profound changes, we witness the crisis of traditional political culture and the rise of unconventional political movements. All over the world, populism is taking advantage of the political crises. In this study, I focus on the rise of “digital populism” in Romania, with particular attention to the “AUR phenomenon”. The party Alliance for Romanians’ Unity (AUR) had an unexpected success in legislative elections in Romania, last December. I will explain how this new populist party used digital media to rise from obscurity to 9 percent in parliamentary elections in a few weeks and became Romania’s fourth-largest political party.*

**Keywords:** *digital communication, populism, globalization, social networks, election campaigns*

## 1. Globalization and populism

All over the Western World, we witness a new wave of populism, favored by digital media and by the transformation of political culture. Using new technologies and digital media, new political movements successfully speculate old fears and growing dissatisfaction with traditional politics. Recent populist movements are generated by anxieties related to the rapid and profound transformation under the impact of globalization. I propose the concept of “digital populism” for the populist political movements that move in the virtual space.

The complex set of processes oriented to free movements of people, goods, ideas, and technologies determine transcontinental or interregional

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flows and networks of activity, interaction, and power (Held et al., 1999, p. 483). Globalization generates an interconnected and interdependent world in which nation-states' identities are changing and state sovereignties are challenged (Ghender, 2018 b).

For many people all around the world, globalization is a menace to the traditional way of life, security, and fundamental values like cultural identities. The fear of rapid changes associated with globalization leads to the erosion of the establishment's legitimacy. Millions voted against free trade politics and migration, for populist movements that promised social security, protection for national and cultural values. Dani Rodrik (2018, p. 14) described different forms of populism: left-wing populism predominant in Latin America and East Europe and right-wing populism in Western Europe, as a reaction to different perceptions of globalization's threats. Rodrik convincingly shows that even if globalization isn't the only cause of populism, in people's imagination it is easier to blame. Populist movements successfully appeal to ethnic, national, cultural, and social cleavages, especially in times of economic and social crises.

Populism as a political movement has a long history and many facets. As an essential feature, populism considers society to be divided into antagonistic groups, 'the people' versus 'the elite', cultivates the moral oppositions between ordinary people and the privileged elite (Ghender, 2018 a). For that reason, populist movements aim to anti-system rhetoric, economic redistribution, to the "protection" of national or cultural values, "threatened" by corrupt politicians, foreigners, or privileged groups. In a wide range of manifestation, varying in time and space, in the theoretical literature, there is agreement on some characteristics of populism: hostility to pluralism, anti-system rhetoric, and explicit reference to the rejection of an "anti-group", the claim to be the only true representative of the "people" (Deiwikis, 2009; Müller 2017; Cox, 2017).

Because of their radical tone, irresponsible political programs, and the appeal to hate and conflict, populist movements are considered a menace to sane democracy. A few researchers (the safety valve school) focused on the positive effects of populism, like corrective political movements, asking for more representative democracy.

## **2. Politics in the age of digital media**

Politics can be understood as an act of communication. That is why communication technologies are important in shaping and reshaping political competition and political culture. The ubiquity of the Internet in nowadays life had a great impact on political life. But the Internet itself is not static, but a dynamic network that connects people, cultures, institutions and, in this process, mediates the continuous construction of social reality.

The way we use the Internet for the public and private communication quickly changed over the last decades, we can distinguish at least three stages, shortly described in table 1.

**Table 1. Stages of Internet**

<b>Web 1.0</b>	<b>Web 2.0</b>	<b>Web 3.0</b>
Content generated by institutional actors (Mass Media, Government, Companies, Political Parties)	Content generated by institutional actors and ordinary people	Consolidate available content through better-interconnected applications
WebForms	Web Applications	Smart Applications
Directories	Tagging	User Behaviour
Banner Advertising	Interactive Advertising	Behavioural Advertising
Connecting information	Connecting people	Connecting knowledge

Web 1.0 refers to the first stage of the Internet, characterized by a few content creators and many consumers, connected in a top-down classical model of communication based on static pages, organized as a content delivery network.

Web 2.0 developed after the shift in technology from the desktop to smartphones. The new stage is characterized by growing interactivity, user-generated content, and interoperability. Dynamic content, free sorting information, and most important tools and platforms (social media, social networking, tags) where people share information and opinions, thoughts, and experiences.

Web 3.0 is a transformation in progress characterized by the growing role of databases and algorithms in connecting information and knowledge. Semantic web (creating content based on the capability to comprehend the meaning of words), artificial intelligence, and more integrated devices (smartphone, smart TV, car wireless devices) are the main features.

In the last years, digital media and social networks changed political communication and contributed to the change of political culture worldwide. Political actors and more and more important professionals like marketers found new ways and techniques to keep in touch with voters and audiences. The interactive “new media” (which are no longer new) offered opportunities for ordinary people to play a more central role on the political stage. Gaining

voice in virtual space, new leaders and news parties emerged in political life easier and faster than before.

Barandiarán, Unceta, and Peña rightfully observed that

the evolution and expansion of digital technologies and therefore of the media at the service of political communication, are creating a complex and influential scenario for the shaping of political culture. Conventional media from before the expansion of digital technologies that spread information in a unidirectional and vertical way, coexist with and are complementary to new informative alternatives and communication languages. That is, these channels and languages are significantly influencing the political culture, at a time when, in addition, virtual content can have even more credibility than reality itself. (2020, p. 276)

The fragility of traditional politics opened the way to a new political culture, structured on low trust in institutions and political apathy. They appreciate that we witness a crisis of traditional political culture and the emergence of a new political culture characterized by “the absence of social, cultural and ideological categories of political problems traditionally formulated in terms of left and right” (Barandiarán et al., 2020, p. 261). The main features of the new political culture are the decline of party identification feeling and growing electoral volatility, the emergence of new political leaders and new political movements, negative feelings toward politics.

The use of digital technology is transforming the way information is produced, distributed, and received, mass media lost the exclusivity to mediate the public debate. Frank Esser and Barbara Pfetsch said that the functioning of today’s political communication is characterized by two parallel modes of operation: traditional, top-down oriented mass communication, and the decentralized, participative interactive logic of Internet communication. “This concurrence and its dynamics have turned contemporary media systems into ‘hybrid media systems’, which means we can no longer reduce media systems to a single, one-dimensional communication logic and we can no longer define dynamically changing media systems, such as that of the United States, using static classification schemes” (Esser & Pfetsch, 2020, p. 6). In the new hybrid media systems, the relations between media, politics and citizens became more complex. The concept “political communication ecosystem” (Anderson, 2016) best explain the new reality. The concept inspired by biology, refers to the increased degree of complexity and adaptation. News ecosystem represent “entire ensemble of individuals, organizations, and technologies within a particular geographic community or around a particular issue, engaged in journalistic production and, indeed, in journalistic consumption” (Anderson,

2016, p. 412). Cooperation and competition are key words in this model of high interactivity. Anderson (2016, p. 419) wrote that “digitization changes the dynamics through which news moves but digitization and the shape of networks are not the only factors involved in determining the spread of informational content. Journalists, activists, public relations workers, and other actors exercise news judgment and strategic initiative in their attempts to point the news agenda in a particular direction. In big data analysis of news processes, this perspective is often lost.”

Political communication profoundly changed: now politicians and marketers are able to target the public efficiently, fast, and cheaply. They have a wide range of tools to gather information, send personalized messages, interact with voters. People also have new and sophisticated tools to express themselves in the political arena. Strongly connected street and virtual protests in Romania, in January 2017, became a social movement I called “Citizenship 2.0” (Ghender, 2018 a): an online politicized community formed in the Romanian virtual space forced the Government to draw back from law legislation. In that movement, ordinary people who felt unrepresented/misrepresented by the political class changed the Government agenda and stopped the undesired law reform. It’s an excellent example of “digital agora” (Koc-Michalska & Lilleker, 2018), a new form of political engagement and mobilization. People digitally connected can use online social spaces to build networks and to influence political life. Theoretically at least, because there is no strong evidence that digital communication led to the stimulation of political participation at a macro level. Rather, waves of mobilization and demobilization for different public segments and profiles are opposite facets of the new political culture.

The “dark side” of digital space is also prominent: manipulation, fake news, “depoliticization” (shifting focus on personal issues and image building rather than on core political issues).

As I already wrote, Web 2.0 implies the replacement of the top-down communication model with multidirectional flows of communication (bottom-up and horizontal), open to anybody digitally connected. “The architecture of participation” opens the way for the co-production of information and to “informational democracy” (as Manuel Castells predicted).

Surprisingly, traditional political parties failed to fully adapt to Web 2.0, especially they failed to create networks for interactivity. Nigel Jackson and Darren Lilleker’s study (2009) focused on political communication in the UK revealed limited adaptation to Web 2.0. The political parties use digital tools and social networks, are active in sharing information online, but they observed low-level interactivity, they seek to control the communication process and to inform rather than interact. It results in a hybrid model they called Web 1.5, characterized by extensive use of the architecture of participation, but much

less use of the community’s democratic structure (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009, p. 248).

I think that this model, described shortly in Table 2, fits traditional political party communication in Romania.

**Table 2. Models of political communication in Romania**

<b>Political communication 1.5 (traditional parties)</b>	<b>Political communication 2.5 (digital populism)</b>
Partial adapted to Web 2.0 by technology and design	Adapted to Web 2.0 by approach, style, and design
The top-down model of communication	Interactivity with the public
Fabricated interactivity	Creates real communities of supporters
Uses public surveys to target the public	Supposition: uses “big data” and algorithms to target the public

The colonization of digital space, the tools of aggressive political marketing are not oriented to build real communities and to open debates for “digital agora” and “informational democracy”. They use public opinion surveys to efficiently target voters but fail to create real interactivity. The fabricated interactivity – practice to “buy likes” on Facebook, teams for “digital guerrilla” in competition, party networks for sharing information – can’t hide the harsh make-up image of Romanian political parties on digital space. They seem to have difficulty, due to the generation gap and conservatism, acquiring the language of digital communication and hanging on to the language used in audiovisual media even when they use digital channels.

Fresher populist political movements, like AUR, are better adapted to digital communication Web 2.0. In the 2020 campaign for legislative election, AUR was the only party able to build a digital community, gathering the targeted public: frightened, angry, and frustrated people. Anti-system and anti-COVID messages snowball effect on digital space: a small and unknown party gained in a few weeks a strong profile on social networks due to strong and active support from its own community. The sudden success of a small party and the capability to generate content and most of all a huge number of comments in the digital space rise the question of the methods used in the election campaign. The supposition is that AUR used “big data”, algorithms, and machines to target people and to generate content.

### 3. The unexpected success of AUR

The party Alliance for Romanians' Unity (AUR) had an unexpected success in legislative elections last December. AUR rose from obscurity to 9 percent in parliamentary elections in a few weeks and became Romania's fourth-largest political party. AUR took only 0.45% of the votes in the local elections in September. The party had low visibility in the electoral campaign, zero coverage in TV and traditional media but jumped from 36,000 votes in September to 530,000 votes in the elections for the Parliament in December. They were the big surprise of general elections without running costly advertising campaigns, almost invisible for political competitors and mass media.

The party Alliance for Romanians' Unity (AUR) is a populist and ultranationalist party founded in 2019 that proclaims to stand for "family, nation, faith, and freedom." The acronym of the party's name, AUR, means gold in Romanian. AUR combines anti-establishment, populist, anti-European, nationalistic, conservative, and religious values. They exploited pandemic difficulties and criticized the lock-down rules imposed by the authorities. AUR played anti-vaccination and anti-restrictions cards using mainly social media and street protests. The party stands for Greater Romania (demands unification to Moldavia); strong connections to the Orthodox Church (AUR gained visibility protesting for holding religious ceremonies during the pandemic); "the traditional family", opposes same-sex marriages; nationalism and protectionism, combined with Euro-skepticism and Xenophobia (they pretend that Romanians are the victims of international conspiracies, betrayed by corrupt politicians); the pandemic crises – the AUR leaders built their discourse on anti-vaccination and anti-mask messages during the electoral campaign; and anti-establishment, the hard opposition to "traditional parties".

AUR is not the first new populist party that won parliamentary representation. Actually, after 1990 each generation of the media has contributed to the formation of a political party with populist characteristics. Three mass media generations formed three new parliamentary political parties: the print generation formed The Greater Romania Party; the TV cable generation formed The People's Party Dan Diaconescu; the social network generation formed The Save Romania Union. The first is a nationalistic and populist party, the second a pure populist party, the third represents sophisticated a high skilled public, with some populist characteristics (Ghender, 2018 a).

The special context of the 2020 legislative elections is of course important, marked by the long-term disappointment with the old political elite and the short-term pandemic. In this context, the overall turnout represented a historic low at less than 32%.

The pandemic has affected public debate and political communication around the world. The strong statement of Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) – “We’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic” – best resumes the great impact of the pandemic related debate on politicized digital space. An OECD report show that the global spread of Coronavirus (COVID-19) “has been accompanied by a wave of disinformation, affecting countries' responses to the global pandemic by undermining trust, amplifying fears, and sometimes leading to harmful behaviors” (“Transparency, communication”, 2020). The report distinguished different forms of false information disseminated online: misinformation (false information, but no harm is meant), disinformation (false information is deliberately shared to cause harm), malinformation (genuine information is shared to cause harm, by moving what was designed to stay private to the public sphere).

The AUR phenomenon is the simultaneous production of a type of mobilization (against pandemic) and a type of demobilization (fear of the pandemic and disappointment with the political class kept the supporters of the traditional parties at home on Election Day).

The roots of support for AUR are in my opinion fear and disappointment. Fear of rapid changes in the context of globalization, accentuated by pandemic, fear of losing jobs, for example. The disappointment is related to the decline of trust in political parties, and the dissatisfaction towards the last decades of Governance. Various kinds of dissatisfaction led to absenteeism on the one hand and to support for populist movements, on the other hand. Many voters just wanted to show their contempt for the old political class.

Sociologist Marius Pieleanu leads the Avangarde Public Opinion Polling Institute, the only one to conduct an exit poll in the 2020 parliamentary elections. He noted (Voican, 2020) that in areas where there are strong religious communities, people voted en masse for the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR). As a socio-demographic profile, the average age of AUR voters was 41 years, 63% in the age group 31-60 years, 26% of voters were between 18 and 30 years and 11% were over 60 years. As a comparison, the average age of those who voted for PSD is 57 years, PNL – 48 years, and USR-PLUS – 39 years. According to Avangarde data, the majority of GOLD voters are men – 57.8%, the party recorded the most unbalanced male-female ratio among voters in the 2020 parliamentary elections. Data on the level of education show that 55.4% of AUR voters are high school graduates and post-high school graduates, 22% have not graduated high school and 22.6% have higher education. This socio-demographic profile suggests a Christian party, without strong regional bases, of relatively young and socially active people,

but probably very dissatisfied with the social and political situation in Romania.

The pandemic crisis has continued to help AUR grow in the last year. The latest data (Kiss, 2021) confirm the rise of this party, which is considered the main “beneficiary” of Covid 19 grievances and fears. The opinion poll conducted by Avangarde between December 15 and 23, 2021 on a sample of 907 subjects shows a voting intention of 17% for AUR, up from 15% in the previous poll, the third party after PSD (39%), and very close to PNL (18%).

However, AUR is a special case because its success was not predicted by public opinion surveys. The main cause of the lack of predictability was the logic of the functioning of social networks.

Is the importance of the classical questions about who sees political content growing in the digital age? Who has the power to shape content exposure? These are questions that are even harder to answer because nowadays, the news feed is algorithmically curated. As I wrote above, digital media evolution implies an increase in datafication, our digital tracks are transformed into data for use in algorithmic prediction. Stephanie Edgerly and Kjerstin Thorson affirmed that

algorithms designed by platform companies enable high levels of personalization and fragmentation of media audiences; platform-initiated changes to algorithms and news-feed features can open, or close, the floodgates of visitors to news media websites; the social actions of digital media users are increasingly tracked and turned into data for use in shaping future content visibility—and to classify users for sale to political advertisers. (2020, p. 189)

The audience is either a member of a self-chosen network or special public or an individual is especially true for interactive social media (Stier et al., 2018, p. 51).

The psychologist Catarina Katzer wrote that

through an individual selection process (our personal digital selection) we step on various levels of the network, in which we then move mentally and behaviorally [...] Our own selection is inhibited by what the network puts on our tray. Our freedom of choice is replaced by virtual digital heteronomy [...] Two contradictory processes affect our perceptions and behaviors when we use the Internet: our own selection and mathematical programs that filter information [...] Virtual heteronomy robs us of the ability to make our own decisions. (2018, p. 27-28)

It is generally believed that social media represent par excellence an unlimited open space for communication, for sharing information and opinions. But in reality, social media like Facebook connect mainly people sharing the same area of interest and opinions. When a user constantly interacts by “like”, comments, and “share” to a certain type of messages, like COVID conspiracy, anti-vaccination, and anti-mask messages, he or she will be connected mainly with people sharing similar opinions. Using social media, we create our own closed circle, chatting free with people sharing similar areas of interest, taste, and opinions. When a debate is highly polarized, social media offers barriers that cancel free communication: unlike, block, unfriend, etc. Supporters of a party or a topic under debate are locked in a virtual bubble, which shuts down opinions, arguments, information contrary to their own opinion.

That is why hundreds of thousands of angry voters, ready for action and pretty noisy escaped unobserved for mainstream public opinion until the vote. After the vote, mainstream Romania was amazed to find out that AUR had posts on Facebook with tens of thousands of interactions and videos with millions of views. In a few days, 15 000 new members asked to join AUR, the party with eight 8 000 members at that moment.

As we know, social media helped political actors to win votes without traditional organized structures. What is new in AUR’s campaign is that they relied on networks, not on paid publicity on social media: the party leader’s Facebook page has over 700,000 followers. We can say that AUR has managed to build authentic communities in the digital space. While the mainstream parties relied on television and paid publicity on social media, AUR generated incendiary material by live videos and photos from street protests, shared hundreds of times on Facebook. They were active in sharing and commenting on the party's messages.

Shortly, the characteristics for AUR communication were: Combination of street protests and live sharing on social media; Videos, photos, and text that seemed real, using the common language of social media, contrasting with the marketing products of their opponents; They used groups for debates and sharing messages; Simple and violent messages that helped them to form radical and very active supporters.

### **Conclusions**

The decline of traditional political parties, widespread distrust, and new technologies implies new forms of involvement in political life, a new political culture. It creates a space for the emergence of new political movements in general and digital populism in particular.

The AUR phenomenon is the simultaneous production of a type of mobilization (against pandemic) and a type of demobilization (fear of the

pandemic and disappointment with the political class). The roots of support for AUR are in my opinion fear and disappointment.

I think that AUR's success is contextual, the party is dependent on pandemic context and social crises. The main problem with these kinds of parties is that their supporters do believe them, but in reality, they are not able to keep their promises. Even if AUR is a meteoric party, I think digital populism is a long-term phenomenon, a large part of the electorate remains vulnerable, regardless of who will represent it.

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