

Article

Measuring Receptivity to Eurosceptic Media Discourses in the Vicinity of War: Evidence from Romania

Mihnea S. Stoica * and Andreea Voina

Department of Communication, Public Relations, and Advertising, Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania

* Corresponding author (mihnea.stoica@ubbcluj.ro)

Submitted: 30 April 2023 | Accepted: 21 June 2023 | Published: 19 October 2023

Abstract

Ever since its accession to the EU, Romania was considered an exceptional case among member states, given the unwavering high levels of popular support for the EU. However, the most recent elections held in Romania brought about the unexpected emergence of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), a far-right populist party that strongly opposes the European project, which it accuses of resembling “a harmful hegemony.” The war in Ukraine represented another chance for AUR to bash the EU for its reaction in supporting Ukraine. The current article examines the degree to which anti-EU appeals of AUR influence Eurosceptic attitudes in Romania. In doing so, the present research pursues two distinct, but complementary goals. The first is to perform a content analysis of Eurosceptic narratives disseminated by AUR through its main social media channels since the start of the war. The second goal is then, employing four logistic regression models and using unique data collected through an online interactive survey, to test which of these narratives matter the most in shaping Eurosceptic attitudes. The article allows us to develop a nuanced understanding of what triggered a change of heart in a significant part of the Romanian electorate vis-à-vis the EU and the influence of Eurosceptic media discourse in this sense.

Keywords

Euroscepticism; far-right; political communication; populism; Romania; social media; war

Issue

This article is part of the issue “Media Discourses on European Integration: Information, Disinformation, and Polarization” edited by Ana Pérez-Escoda (Antonio de Nebrija University) and Tetyana Lokot (Dublin City University).

© 2023 by the author(s); licensee Cogitatio Press (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

1. Introduction

Euroscepticism is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that comprises a range of concerns regarding the EU and its policies. Both earlier (Boomgaarden et al., 2011; Hooghe & Marks, 2007; Taggart, 1998; Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2002) and more recent studies (Mariano & Schneider, 2022; Treib, 2021) seek to identify the factors that drive its success. Most explanations rest on perceptions related to economic insecurity, political legitimacy, or cultural anxiety.

For Eastern European countries, Euroscepticism is primarily linked to the fear of being “absorbed” by a larger “progressive” Western European culture. Therefore, it has developed around issues such as national culture,

tradition, and religion. Additionally, Euroscepticism is often explained by disappointment with the outcome of the political transition these countries have experienced, given the very high expectations that accompanied their accession to the EU (Styczyńska, 2017). As such, it was argued that the two main types of Euroscepticism are on the one hand identity-based, and on the other policy-based (Riischøj, 2004). The first type represents opposition to transforming the European project into a cultural melting pot, where people of different cultural (ethnic, national, sexual, etc.) backgrounds fuse. The second one represents resistance to decisions taken in Brussels which then must be implemented at the national level, questioning the legitimacy of EU institutions; this is an expression of the idea that the EU

should limit integration (Styczyńska, 2017) and enlargement (Bélanger & Wunsch, 2022). For our study, we will refer to the first as attitudes towards EU politics and to the latter as attitudes towards EU policies.

Studying public opinion at the European level, De Vries (2018, p. viii) framed a benchmark theory grounded on the idea that “people’s evaluations of and experiences with the European project are fundamentally framed by the national circumstances in which they find themselves.” Moreover, although voters’ attitudes towards the EU may be similar for supporters of parties in the same family, the different experiences of Western Europe and Central and Eastern Europe countries may undergird various cleavages to substantiate support for the far right; for instance, citizens’ dissatisfaction with post-communist democracy is highly compatible with far-right parties’ anti-democratic rhetoric (Allen, 2017). Similarly, countries of new Europe tend to embrace Euroscepticism as a way of committing to strategic autonomy, thus populist parties arguing for national interests to the detriment of adopting EU decisions in cases such as sanctions against Russia or the Ukrainian refugee crisis tend to gain traction among their publics (Song, 2023).

To expand on this idea, there are at least two other explanations for Euroscepticism in Eastern Europe that need to be taken into consideration, especially in light of the ongoing war in Ukraine. Although with different intensities, communist nostalgia is still a driving force behind Euroscepticism in Eastern Europe, as it stems from the belief that the EU has failed to deliver on its promises of prosperity and security and that the communist era was a time of greater economic stability and social cohesion. Recent surveys show that Communist nostalgia is particularly prevalent in countries like Hungary, Poland, and Romania, a sentiment that is not specific only to older generations but is also growing among younger people who were born after the fall of communism (Wike et al., 2019). Many times, communist nostalgia is wrapped in a sentiment of admiration for Vladimir Putin’s Russia. Recent studies have highlighted that higher levels of communist nostalgia determine resentment towards the West and support for authoritarianism (Neundorf et al., 2020). Examining supporters of pro-Russian parties in the EU and those of mainstream parties, Snegovaya (2022) found that the electoral bases of most pro-Russian parties hold significantly more Eurosceptic attitudes, being particularly vulnerable to Kremlin’s anti-EU narratives. Scholars identified a “Russia-friendly” type of Euroscepticism (Tereszkiewicz, 2018), that praises the superiority of Russia over the EU or supports the idea that the EU is responsible for the deterioration of its relations with Russia. Throughout the current article, we will refer to these viewpoints as attitudes towards Russia.

Finally, the war in Ukraine has generated yet another source of Euroscepticism in Eastern Europe, as countries in this region have been confronted with a massive influx

of Ukrainian refugees. According to publicly available statistics, most of the 8.1 million refugees from Ukraine crossed borders with Poland and Romania to reach safety (UNHCR, 2023). The refugee intake put pressure on the two states, which overnight needed to find financial resources to help Ukrainians fleeing their own country. Refugee crises pose risks for European democracies, as they meet popular contestation over issues related to sovereignty and polarise the electorate especially when it comes to quotas; populist actors can capitalise on such opportunities to develop negative anti-establishment narratives, thus undermining citizens’ trust in the EU (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017). The Ukrainian refugee crisis was a window of opportunity for Eurosceptics to exhibit their welfare chauvinism, in line with their view of the “otherness” as a threat to the economic stability of the society (Mudde, 2022). People who accept such ideas consider that the support given to Ukraine is what fuels the war. As such, they consider the war to be the result of Ukraine’s unwillingness to let go or negotiate peace with Russia. Within our study, we refer to this new line of Eurosceptic positioning as attitudes towards Ukraine.

2. The Rise of Euroscepticism in Romania: The Alliance for the Union of Romanians

Both before and after their country’s accession to the EU, Romanian citizens’ level of trust in the EU remained well over that of the average numbers in other EU countries. As a result, in much of the research devoted to the subject, Romania came to be known for its almost non-existent political Euroscepticism (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2002). For quite some time, Romania had been an exception in the region, as Eurosceptics were absent from its political landscape (Popescu & Vesalon, 2022).

However, the situation turned around rather suddenly. Romania held elections in December 2020, and the outcome has taken politicians, analysts, journalists, and even pollsters aback: In the context of a very low turnout (31.91%), the populist ultra-conservative Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) became the country’s fourth largest party in Parliament, with 9.1% of the entire share of votes. What is more surprising is that AUR’s gain came only three months after the local elections, when it capitalised only about 1% of the entire vote share.

The success of AUR also marked an important moment in the political history of post-communist Romania: never has the Eurosceptic discourse proven so appealing for a significant part of those who participate in elections. Capitalising on the citizens’ decreasing trust in the state and the EU during the Covid-19 pandemic, AUR’s innovative campaigning style heavily relied on controversy and spectacle expressed via new technologies; their rhetoric was infused with old ideological devices such as nationalism, religion, and traditional values, as well as new ones, like environmentalism and critique against globalisation (Doiciar & Crețan, 2021).

Moreover, they created a distinctive anti-communist narrative, in which, for instance, they oppose “communist” EU policies, coupled with anti-neo-Marxist rhetoric framing “gender ideology” or multiculturalism as enemies of the people (Popescu & Vesalon, 2022). The anti-gender tropes used by AUR in their political discourse, such as “gender ideology” or “LGBTQ propaganda,” mirror the rhetoric employed by populists in other European countries (Dragolea, 2022). The latter appeal to Christian heritage as a form of resistance against EU-imposed “cultural aggression,” such as political correctness, expression of freedom limitations, or the “madness” of gender ideology (McMahon, 2022). This is particularly important for AUR’s rhetoric due to the fact that mobilising individuals based on religious ties can be a profitable strategy in post-communist countries (Allen, 2017), as supporters of pro-Russian parties from post-Communist European countries are more likely to hold traditionalist views on sexual minorities and generally embrace cultural conservatism (Snegovaya, 2022).

But in general, studying the rise of AUR is relevant for quite a number of reasons: Firstly, it allows us to understand the dynamics of the anti-EU discourse not only in Romania but in the broader European context, after the Covid-19 pandemic and during the war in Ukraine. As such, it brings a solid contribution to a strain of academic literature that is only now developing. Secondly, AUR is a relevant case study because it strengthens the argument that social media is an optimal environment for the amplification and dissemination of narratives that challenge the EU (Fortunato & Pecoraro, 2022). As such, the current article brings a meaningful insight into what narratives disseminated via social media spark discontent with the EU. Thirdly, AUR is a significant case study because it advocates against the process of Europeanisation, eroding trust in the idea of a united Europe and undermining cooperation. Understanding what are the main arguments that trigger Eurosceptic sentiments is especially important in the lead-up to the campaign for the EU elections. Therefore, the relevance of this case study goes beyond Romania, as similar narratives can be used by populist forces in quite a number of EU countries, especially those in which citizens’ anxieties related to ongoing events coincide (Fernández et al., 2023).

The rise of AUR has also elevated the political power of social media to new heights. Not only did social media allow this new party to rise from obscurity (Ghender, 2021), but through the regimented use of Facebook, AUR managed to disseminate its ideas in ways that the mainstream media was not capable of. As such, Facebook has remained the preferred communication channel of AUR, a platform that it uses to distribute and circulate its Eurosceptic narratives. Therefore, the current article seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the main Eurosceptic narratives disseminated by AUR through Facebook?

RQ2: Which of AUR’s narratives matters most in shaping the Eurosceptic attitudes of citizens?

3. Research Design

3.1. Data

The current article uses two sets of data: firstly, textual data representing the media discourse of AUR and its leader George Simion, which consists of Facebook posts published on their official social media pages between 24th February 2022 (the date of the Russian invasion) and 31st December 2022 ($n = 895$). The data was collected manually.

Secondly, to measure receptivity to the Eurosceptic media discourse of AUR, we employed a large- N non-probability data set collected online in the first year of the war waged by the Russian Federation against Ukraine. The data collection fully complied with EU privacy (General Data Protection Regulation) regulations and adhered to the ethical norms of the university under which the research was conducted. The variables included in the analyses were asked as part of a political compass which was launched in 2022, after the start of the war in Ukraine. A sample of 5,709 respondents provided answers to all of the variables included in our study. For all analyses in the current article, we make use of this sample. However, given the fact that, in general, political compasses generate opt-in samples that are non-representative of the general population (van de Pol et al., 2019), we limited sampling error by using targeted recruitment: The sample obtained closely matches the characteristics of the general population of Romania, as presented by the 2021 census (National Institute of Statistics, 2022). As such, in terms of gender, our sample is formed of 51.2% female respondents and 48.8% male respondents. In terms of education, 78.3% of the respondents have a lower and medium level of education, whereas 22.7% have a university diploma. In addition, 57.9% of the total number of respondents reside in urban areas, whereas the rest 42.1% are in rural areas.

Using data from a political compass was especially relevant for the current study given the fact that academic literature underlines how, in general, data collected through online political compasses are superior in studying the sources of radical party support (e.g., Hooghe & Teepe, 2007; Wall et al., 2009), and AUR perfectly fits in the profile of such a political party (Cmeci, 2023).

3.2. Content Analysis of Alliance for the Union of Romanians Media Discourse

To capture a nuanced understanding of AUR’s media discourse, we broke the timeline of the war waged by Russia against Ukraine into four main phases. Figure 1 provides a timeline referring to the year 2022 and indicates the four stages that we analysed, as well as relevant milestones for each of the phases.

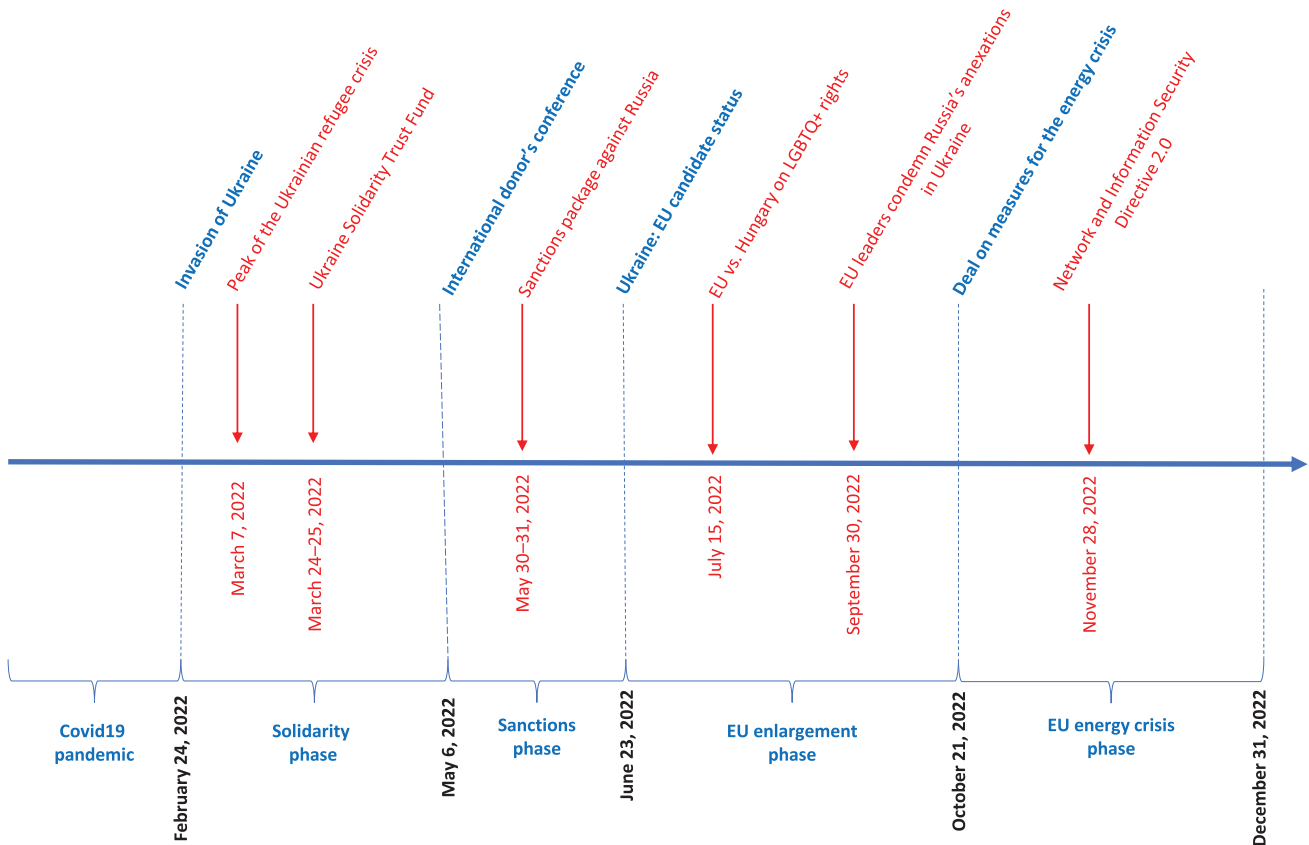


Figure 1. Timeline and phases of the Russian-Ukrainian war (2022).

Due to AUR's masterful use of Facebook to maximise its reach for success among the public, through its content and that of its leader, George Simion (Coțofană, 2023; Doiciar & Crețan, 2021), the media discourse of AUR was analysed based on a corpus formed from both Facebook pages (see Supplementary Material). Their posts consisted of text, photo, and video content that was structured into eight documents (referenced in the analysis as AUR1, GS1, etc., corresponding to each phase in the timeline and each actor analysed), further coded and analysed using ATLAS.ti. Photo and video content was accessed through the links to the posts found in the eight documents and coded accordingly. The code groups and markers relied on literature on Eurosceptic narratives in political parties' discourse (as shown in Table 1) and were compiled to unpack AUR's Eurosceptic narratives in wartime. Intercoder reliability was computed using ATLAS.ti Inter-coder Agreement mode and resulted in a Krippendorff's alpha of 0.93 across code groups. The novelty of our approach comes from combining AUR's media discourse with public opinion data, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of Euroscepticism in the Romanian case.

3.3. Method and Variable Measurements for the Political Compass Data

This study assesses to what extent perceptions of EU policies, perceptions of EU politics, attitudes towards

Russia, and attitudes towards Ukraine have determined Euroscepticism in Romania in the context of the war that is undergoing in its vicinity. For each of these theories, corresponding independent variables are included in separate regression models to assess and compare their explanatory power. A full model comprises all variables simultaneously. The dependent variable, i.e., respondents' degree of Euroscepticism, was measured by adding together all the scores for each self-placement within the political compass. The result labelled each respondent as "Eurosceptic" which was coded as "0" and "Pro-European" which was coded as "1." Because the dependent variable is binary, we estimated logistic regression models (Abts et al., 2023; Table 2). All models include demographic control variables measuring respondents' background characteristics, i.e., age, gender, and education.

In regards to the EU policies model (POL model), to test the hypothesis that negative attitudes towards the EU as a bureaucratic apparatus will lead to Euroscepticism, the first submodel (COVID) included attitudes towards the Covid-19 vaccination mandate. The second submodel (CYSE) referred to the attitude towards EU policies on cybersecurity.

The EU politics model (POS model) tests how adversity towards the EU's identity politics leads to Euroscepticism. For the first submodel, we included opposition to EU enlargement (NEXT), and for the second one, opposition to Hungary being sanctioned for violating LGBTQ+ rights (LGBTQ+).

Table 1. Data structure.

Codes	Markers
Attitudes towards Russia	<p>Dissatisfaction with democracy, as opposed to Russian-style authoritarianism (Zilinsky, 2019);</p> <p>Outright admiration for Russia (Polyakova, 2014);</p> <p>Communist nostalgia (Boym, 1995);</p> <p>Desire not to harm relations with Russia (Abts et al., 2023);</p> <p>References to infringement on Russia's sphere of influence (MacFarlane & Menon, 2014);</p> <p>Framing energy independence from Russia as impossible/extremely costly/harmful (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014).</p>
EU policies	<p>Covid-19 conspiracies (Eberl et al., 2021);</p> <p>Negative effects of anti-Covid-19 vaccination (Žuk & Žuk, 2020);</p> <p>Fostering distrust in EU cybersecurity policies (Carrapico & Farrand, 2021);</p> <p>Lack of trust in online privacy (Kerry & Brotman, 2017).</p>
EU politics	<p>Opposition towards EU enlargement (Bélanger & Wunsch, 2022);</p> <p>Framing the EU as the "main" cause of the war (Ádám, 2023);</p> <p>Rejecting deeper EU integration (Gómez-Reino & Llamazares, 2013);</p> <p>Outlining incompatibility with EU values, practices, and norms (Meret & Siim, 2013);</p> <p>Stressing identity politics (Noury & Roland, 2020);</p> <p>"Gender ideology" as a threat (Kováts, 2018);</p> <p>"Othering" LGBTQ+ movements, people (Yermakova, 2021).</p>
Attitudes towards Ukraine	<p>Cultural incompatibility with Ukrainian refugees (Styczyńska, 2018);</p> <p>Welfare chauvinism (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2023);</p> <p>Condemning Ukraine's refusal to communicate/negotiate with Russia (Soare, 2023);</p> <p>Historical anguish between Romania and Ukraine/Troublesome neighbourhood (Kruglashov, 2011);</p> <p>Framing Ukraine as the "real" cause of the war (Ádám, 2023).</p>

The attitudes towards Russia model (RUS model) is divided into two submodels. The first submodel (SRU) refers to the support of respondents for EU sanctions against Russia. We hypothesised that those who are not supportive of sanctions imposed by the EU against Russia are more likely to be Eurosceptic. In the second submodel (EIRU) we look at how less support for energy independence from Russia generates Euroscepticism.

Finally, the attitudes towards Ukraine model (UKR model) tested whether a lack of support for Ukraine generates more Euroscepticism. The first submodel (UKRR) refers to the idea of integrating Ukrainian refugees into Romanian society, and the second submodel (REUKR) looks at how opposing the idea of supporting the reconstruction of Ukraine leads to more Euroscepticism. All independent variables are measured on a five-point scale ranging from $-2 = \textit{totally disagree}$ to $2 = \textit{totally agree}$ (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$).

4. Results

4.1. Content Analysis

Results indicate that the Eurosceptic media discourse of AUR and its leader, George Simion, displayed a subtle, yet corrosive rhetoric throughout the phases under analysis, by skilfully framing anti-EU narratives and fuelling anti-EU sentiment via domestic issues and blaming assigned actors of the establishment. Table 3 provides an overview of the results, mapping the most salient topics AUR tackled in each phase of the Russian-Ukrainian war, as well as the distribution of Eurosceptic narratives across AUR's discourse.

Overall, the most recurrent topics in AUR and George Simion's Facebook posts across the four phases under analysis consist of EU politics (42.49%). Narratives related to attitudes towards Ukraine (26.61%) and

Table 2. Overview of hypotheses by model and submodel.

Model	Submodel	Number	Hypotheses
RUS	SRU	1	Citizens who are not supportive of EU sanctions against Russia are more likely to be Eurosceptic.
	EIRU	2	Citizens who are less supportive of energy independence from Russia are more likely to be Eurosceptic.
POL	COVID	3	Those who opposed the anti-Covid-19 vaccination mandate imposed by the EU are more likely to be Eurosceptic.
	CYSE	4	Those who feel unsafe with the EU cybersecurity policies that are currently in place are more likely to be Eurosceptic.
POS	NEXT	5	Opponents of EU enlargement are more likely to be Eurosceptic.
	LGBTQ+	6	Opponents of sanctions against Hungary for violating LGBTQ+ rights are more likely to be Eurosceptic.
UKR	UKRR	7	Those who oppose the idea of supporting the integration of Ukrainian refugees into society are more likely to be Eurosceptic.
	REUKR	8	Those who oppose the idea that the EU should support the reconstruction of Ukraine are more likely to be Eurosceptic.

attitudes towards Russia (20.17%) were also consistently present in their Facebook communication, but the latter dropped significantly within the EU energy crisis phase (6.38%), once the deal on measures for the energy crisis was adopted by the EU. Up until that point, AUR and George Simion communicated about how the debate surrounding energy regulation was against the national interest and live-streamed their disruptive interventions in the parliament. They also framed the government as actually representing the personal interests of public officials in the energy industry. Attitudes towards Ukraine were most intense in the Solidarity phase (31.33%) when the party and its leader focused on supporting the Romanian ethnicities in Ukraine. The least tackled topics were those related to EU policies (10.73%), and they solely emerged in the Facebook posts when referencing the economic effects of Covid-19 vaccine acquisition and the Covid-19 measures as abusive on behalf of the government. Next, the markers corresponding to the four code groups will be presented in detail, as shown in the Facebook posts of AUR and George Simion.

Throughout the phases included in our analysis, references to Russia were rather subtle and implicit, as AUR and Simion only mentioned it when referencing polarizing perspectives shown in the media or expressed by other politicians, but without a clear positioning on the Russian-Ukrainian war or Russian sanctions. For instance, Simion criticized the media for giving their manifestation pro-Ukrainian claims, emphasizing that “some call [AUR] pro-Russian, other call [them] pro-Ukrainian. [They are] merely Romanian patriots” (GS1). There were two posts in which they favoured an isolationist approach, arguing that it was “not our war” (GS4) and we should not get involved in “others’ war” (AUR1); moreover, a post about protecting the Romanian minority in Ukraine ended with a vague recognition of Russia’s “military aggression” and pleaded for peaceful dialogue and negotiations, yet hinting at Ukraine’s refusal to engage in such an endeavour (GS1). One association of AUR with Russia was made in Simion’s post on 30 October, 2022, where he cited Save Romania Union’s President Dan Barna saying he hoped AUR would never become an option for governing Romania, adding that he also labelled AUR as a

Table 3. Media discourse topics of AUR and George Simion across the timeframe.

	1: Solidarity phase	2: Sanctions phase	3: EU enlargement phase	4: EU energy crisis phase	Narrative distribution
RUS	24.10%	17.65%	28.85%	6.38%	20.17%
UKR	31.33%	23.53%	23.08%	25.53%	26.61%
POL	13.25%	5.88%	9.62%	12.77%	10.73%
POS	31.33%	52.94%	38.46%	55.32%	42.49%
Totals	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

pro-Russian party and ending the post with a playful emoji, implying a joke (GS4).

Attitudes towards Russia emerging from AUR's media discourse across the first three phases were mainly focused on dissatisfaction with democracy, framing energy independence as costly, and communist nostalgia. Under the pretence of fostering national interest, AUR and Simion took positions that favoured Russia's interests. Although not employing communist nostalgia per se, they weaponized post-communist politicians' government performance to emphasize acting against citizens' interests. This feature coupled with dissatisfaction with democracy, is framed as both too authoritarian in relation to the citizens (the Covid-19 "sanitary dictatorship"; see AUR1, AUR2, GS1) and too weak in relation to the EU. In all phases of our analysis, the focus in AUR and Simion's posts was EU politics; thus, their media discourse consistently featured incompatibility with EU values, practices, and norms, from criticizing gender quotas (AUR2) or opposing sending weapon supplies to Ukraine (GS1) to inviting to boycotts due to Austria's decision to block Romania's Schengen accession (AUR4, GS4). But rather than blaming the EU directly, their positioning was mainly against the establishment in terms of "servants" of the EU (GS1, GS4), also defined as "the government of national betrayal" (GS2). However, amidst a recruitment campaign for party members in November, Simion posted a picture of AUR MPs and stated "not want[ing] to be led by Ursula von der Leyen and faceless bureaucrats" (GS4).

The topic of energy independence was incrementally introduced from the Solidarity phase, escalated in the Sanctions phase, and ramped up in the EU enlargement phase in a "patriotic violence" approach (Grapă & Mogoș, 2023); Simion's media discourse showed disruptive communication, live feeds in which he burst into media outlet headquarters or committee hearings to provoke reactions. Instead of opposing Russian sanctions, Simion boycotted Parliament's debates and voting process for Offshore Law no. 157/2022, aimed at enhancing Romania's independence from Russia, and kept the energy-related discourse in the public's attention by relating it to a salient topic for Romanian citizens, which is corruption among public officials. He attacked the Minister of Energy for theft, claiming personal ties of the minister with the oil industry (GS3), and labelled the law "a new national heist" (GS2); moreover, he mocked the government's fuel subsidy scheme for citizens (GS2, GS3).

Although gender references were missing in the Solidarity phase, "gender ideology" was framed as a threat in the following phases, as well as "othering" the LGBTQ+ movement. AUR's culturally conservative discourse included celebrating traditional family as an artefact of healthy education (AUR2, AUR3), and clearly argued against gender equality and sex education in schools (AUR2, AUR4). Moreover, they implicitly referenced EU politics when mocking the LGBTQ+ march and

the separation of "parent 1" and "parent 2" with reference to Save Romania Union's internal rupture (AUR2), and trivialized Romanian MPs debate on gender equality by denouncing wrong country priorities, detrimental to debating the treatment of Romanian citizens in the EU (AUR4). To a significantly greater extent than gender issues, AUR and Simion heavily relied on stressing identity politics in the Facebook discourse across all phases. In the construction of identity politics discourse, they invoked historic moments and romanticized the potentially unified homeland together with the Republic of Moldova, all the while framing Hungarian minority members and politicians as scapegoats for all evils.

In terms of attitudes towards Ukraine, identity politics intersected with historical anguish between Romania and Ukraine in AUR and Simion's discourse of concern for the Romanian minority in Ukraine, most prominently in the Solidarity phase (AUR1, GS1). The main claims identified in their discourse are calls for hosting Romanian families: "rather than criticising...host a Romanian family from Chernivtsi, as I will do, and the Bessarabian brothers...had rather request unification with the Country" (GS1), as well as protecting the cultural identity of Romanian minorities in Ukraine, such as through an agreement to protect the Romanian language in the region (GS1, AUR1). In a similar fashion to Vladimir Putin's gift to Igor Dodon consisting of a map of the Greater Republic of Moldova from 1790 (Soare, 2020), Simion posted a map of Greater Romania (see Figure 2), asking the followers where they were born, thus hinting at Romanian minorities from Ukraine and Moldova.

George Simion  June 15, 2022 · 

Tu unde ești născut?



Figure 2. Example of historical anguish between Romania and Ukraine, featured in Simion's Facebook post.

Coupled with the historical anguish displayed, welfare chauvinism also emerged in AUR and Simion's discourse in various instances, when referring to the Romanian minority in Ukraine or the support offered to Ukrainian refugees, illegal migrants, or foreign economic agents rather than Romanian citizens in need (AUR1, AUR2,

AUR3, AUR4, GS1, GS4). Figure 3 features a diagram that unpacks the complex dynamics of AUR’s media discourse throughout the phases of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2022.

4.2. Regression Analysis

In Table 4 we show the logistic regression results from the four theoretical approaches, as well as a full model that combines all four. By far, the full model has the largest explanatory power (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.72$), but when comparing the four models, we see that the POL model has a superior explanatory power (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.45$), followed by the POS model (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.41$). The UKR model (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.38$) and the RUS model (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.37$) have the smallest explanatory powers.

A closer look at the POL model indicates that the vaccination mandate submodel (COVID) is the strongest driver of Euroscepticism in Romania. The result is rather surprising: in spite of the fact that Europe has been shook by the war in Ukraine and Romania has been in the proximity of the war for several months already, the issue of the pandemic has exerted such a powerful impression on citizens that their attitudes vis-à-vis the EU are much more associated with issues related to

the pandemic, which are currently quite marginal in the media. The same model offers another pertinent finding: Euroscepticism is strongly associated with dissatisfaction vis-à-vis the EU cybersecurity policies, another topic that is less present in the public debate.

The POL model is closely followed by the POS model, which reveals that the issue of LGBTQ+ rights is still sensitive. This is in line with previous findings which show that gender issues are at the heart of populist discourse in Romania (Stoica, 2021). Within the UKR model, the submodel which refers to integrating Ukrainian refugees (UKRR) shows that identity politics is a strong predictor of Euroscepticism in Romania. Lastly, within the RUS model, the submodel referring to sanctions against Russia (SRU) shows that EU’s intention to punish the Russian Federation is associated with Euroscepticism much more than the EU’s strife for energy independence (EIRU).

Moreover, our likelihood ratio tests (Table 5) show that all models significantly predict Eurosceptic attitudes better than the null model ($\chi^2_{RUS} = 675.12$, $\chi^2_{POS} = 888.92$, $\chi^2_{POL} = 1,002.81$, and $\chi^2_{UKR} = 708.09$; $p < 0.01$ in all cases).

We also assessed the goodness of fit for all of the models. Table 6 presents the pseudo- R^2 , the area under the curve, and the proportional reduction in error values for each of the models (Abts et al., 2023; King & Zeng, 2001).

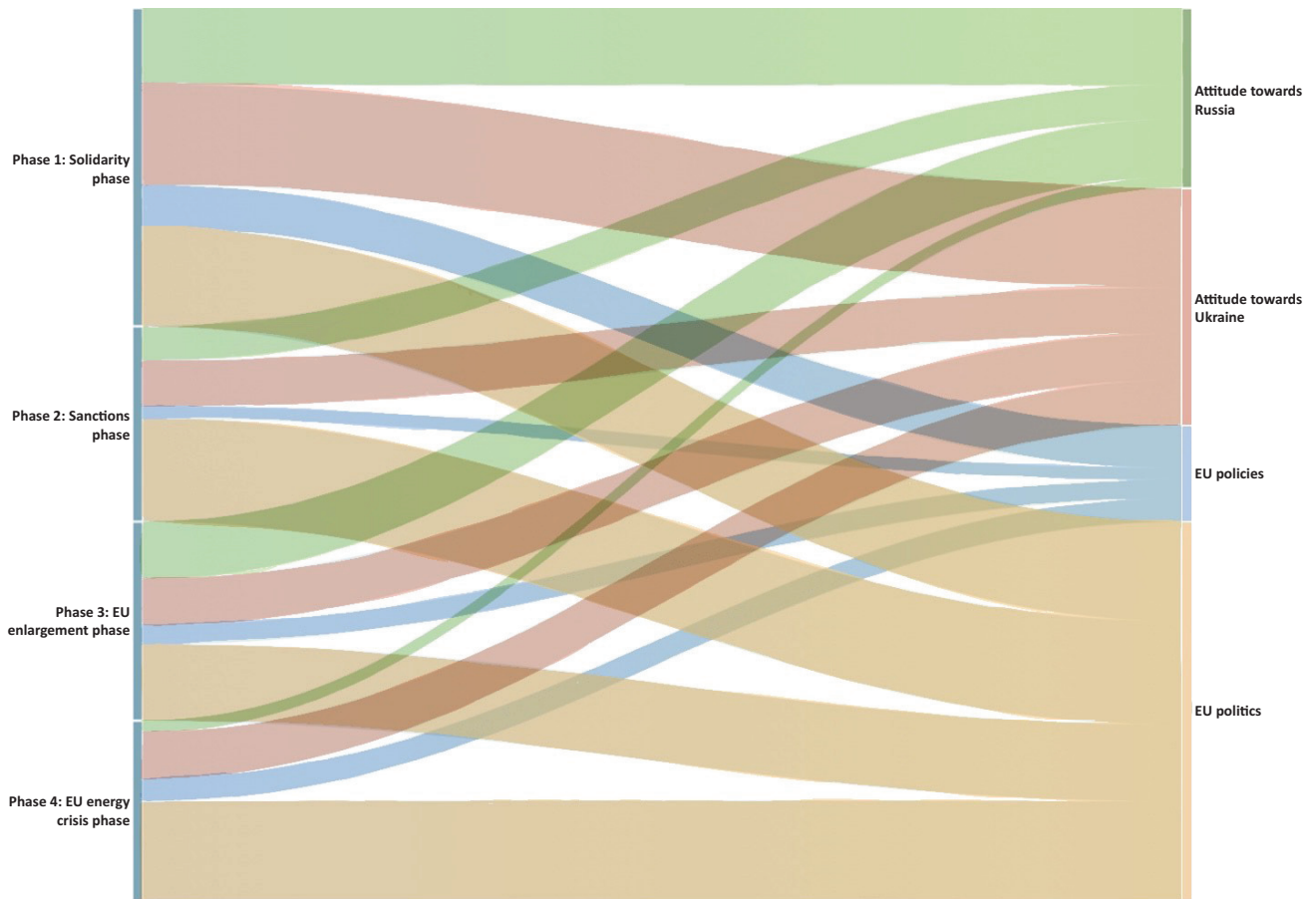


Figure 3. Diagram of Eurosceptic narratives in AUR and George Simion’s media discourse.

Table 4. Regression coefficients for the four models and the combined full model.

	RUS	POL	POS	UKR	Full model
Female (male = 0)	0.42* (0.15)	0.30 (0.16)	0.19 (0.15)	0.27 (0.15)	-0.10 (0.20)
Age (18–65)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Higher education	-0.26 (0.15)	-0.17 (0.16)	-0.28 (0.16)	0.01 (0.15)	-0.28 (0.21)
Sanctions against Russia	1.20*** (0.06)				0.53*** (0.09)
Energy independence from Russia	0.55*** (0.06)				0.58*** (0.09)
Vaccination mandate		1.21*** (0.07)			0.89*** (0.09)
EU cybersecurity		1.04*** (0.07)			1.04*** (0.10)
EU enlargement			0.94*** (0.07)		0.57*** (0.09)
Sanctions against Hungary for violating LGBTQ+ rights			1.04*** (0.64)		0.60*** (0.09)
Integration of Ukrainian refugees				1.16*** (0.08)	0.72*** (0.12)
Reconstructing Ukraine after the war				0.84*** (0.07)	0.71*** (0.09)
Constant	1.75*** (0.15)	2.34*** (0.16)	2.51*** (0.16)	1.84*** (0.16)	1.10*** (0.23)
Observations	5,709	5,709	5,709	5,709	5,709

Notes: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$; standard errors in parentheses.

Table 5. Likelihood ratio tests.

Model	Compared with	Chisq	p	sig
RUS	Null	675.12	0	***
POL	Null	1,002.81	0	***
POS	Null	888.92	0	***
UKR	Null	708.09	0	***
Full	Null	1,402.57	0	***

Table 6. Goodness of fit statistics for all models and full model.

	Models				
	RUS	POL	POS	Attitudes towards Ukrainian	Full
Nagelkerke R^2	0.37	0.45	0.41	0.38	0.72
Area under the curve value	0.81	0.94	0.88	0.84	0.95
Proportional reduction in error	38.11	46.22	41.63	39.74	71.25

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The current article sought to bring a substantial contribution to the relatively scarce academic literature on Euroscepticism in Romania, especially since the start of the war in neighbouring Ukraine. In doing this, we referred to the main narratives that drive negative attitudes towards the EU.

To determine which narratives matter the most in the case of Romania, we pursued two distinct, but complementary goals: On the one hand, we highlighted these narratives within the political discourse of AUR, a new anti-EU populist party that won a significant number of votes in the most recent Romanian parliamentary elections. On the other hand, we tested which of these narratives pursued by AUR matter the most in shaping Eurosceptic attitudes in Romania. We did this by analysing original data collected through an online political compass.

The results of the content analysis indicate that AUR's media discourse strongly concentrates on issues that have to do with EU politics, which is in line with the party's ultra-conservative stances highlighted by previous studies (Gheorghiu & Praisler, 2022). Given the ongoing nature of the war in the neighbouring country, the second main topic in AUR's media discourse is Ukraine. Furthermore, AUR's discourse focuses on Russia using subtle techniques, through expressing dissatisfaction with the democracy—portraying the establishment as either weak in relation to the EU or abusive towards citizens, i.e., via the sanitary dictatorship, or by disrupting the establishment's efforts to secure energy independence from Russia by claiming to act on behalf of the people who would pay the costs. Only lastly does the party refer to EU policies. AUR and its leader's Eurosceptic media discourse employed narratives such as the establishment's servant status to the EU, the EU-mainstreamed "gender ideology," and the forthright commitment to protecting the status of the Romanian minority in Ukraine, all embedded in an incendiary rhetoric (Morini, 2020) of populism with its local flavour, that of performed "patriotic violence" (Grapă & Mogoș, 2023).

The regression analysis illustrates a slightly different image. Negative attitudes towards the EU are mainly driven by public perceptions related to EU policies, most prominently by the vaccination mandate. It might be the case that the effects of the previous crisis (the pandemic) still override public perceptions related to the current crisis (the war), which confirms predictions found in the literature (Robinson et al., 2021). The second driver of Euroscepticism is EU politics, leaving attitudes towards Ukraine and attitudes towards Russia to be less relevant in shaping Euroscepticism, at least in the first year of the war.

However, the overall results suggest that in Romania, Euroscepticism is fed by identity politics, as it ranked first in the political discourse of AUR and second in public

perceptions that determined Euroscepticism. And rather than seeing it isolated from other factors, identity politics should be understood as a catalyst that increases hostility towards the EU in the presence of other factors (Braghiroli & Petsinis, 2019). Future studies should examine closer the role of identity politics in determining Euroscepticism in Romania, as well as look at how changing attitudes toward Ukraine and Russia influence attitudes towards the EU, especially in the context of the evolution of the war.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by a grant from the Ministry of Research, Innovation, and Digitalization (Romania), CNCS-UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P1-1.1-PD-2021-0267, within PNCDI III. The authors would also like to thank their collaborators and coders: Tania Borisov and Laurențiu Burduja.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

References

- Abts, K., Etienne, T., Kutiyski, Y., & Krouwel, A. (2023). EU-sentiment predicts the 2016 Dutch referendum vote on the EU's association with Ukraine better than concerns about Russia or national discontent. *European Union Politics*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14651165231157612>
- Ádám, Z. (2023). *Politicizing war: Viktor Orbán's right-wing authoritarian populist regime and the Russian invasion of Ukraine*. European Center for Populism Studies. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0021>
- Allen, T. J. (2017). All in the party family? Comparing far right voters in Western and post-communist Europe. *Party Politics*, 23(3), 274–285. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068815593457>
- Bélanger, M. È., & Wunsch, N. (2022). From cohesion to contagion? Populist radical right contestation of EU enlargement. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 60(3), 653–672. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13280>
- Boomgaarden, H. G., Schuck, A. R., Elenbaas, M., & de Vreese, C. H. (2011). Mapping EU attitudes: Conceptual and empirical dimensions of Euroscepticism and EU support. *European Union Politics*, 12(2), 241–266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116510395411>
- Boym, S. (1995). From the Russian soul to post-communist nostalgia. *Representations*, 49, 133–166. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928753>

- Braghiroli, S., & Petsinis, V. (2019). Between party-systems and identity-politics: The populist and radical right in Estonia and Latvia. *European Politics and Society*, 20(4), 431–449. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2019.1569340>
- Bustikova, L., & Guasti, P. (2017). The illiberal turn or swerve in Central Europe? *Politics and Governance*, 5(4), 166–176. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v5i4.1156>
- Carrapico, H., & Farrand, B. (2021). When trust fades, Facebook is no longer a friend: Shifting privatisation dynamics in the context of cybersecurity as a result of disinformation, populism and political uncertainty. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 59(5), 1160–1176. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13175>
- Cmeci, C. (2023). (De)legitimation of Covid-19 vaccination narratives on Facebook comments in Romania: Beyond the co-occurrence patterns of discursive strategies. *Discourse & Society*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09579265231174793>
- Coțofană, A. (2023). Weaponising the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR). In E. Orofino & W. Allchorn (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of non-violent extremism: Groups, perspectives and new debates* (pp. 258–272). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003032793-21>
- De Vries, C. E. (2018). *Euroscepticism and the future of European integration*. Oxford University Press.
- Doiciar, C., & Crețan, R. (2021). Pandemic populism: Covid-19 and the rise of the nationalist AUR party in Romania. *Geographica Pannonica*, 25(4), 243–259. <https://doi.org/10.5937/gp25-33782>
- Dragolea, A. (2022). Illiberal discourse in Romania: A “golden” new beginning? *Politics and Governance*, 10(4), 84–94. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v10i4.5515>
- Eberl, J. M., Huber, R. A., & Greussing, E. (2021). From populism to the “plandemic”: Why populists believe in Covid-19 conspiracies. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 31(1), 272–284. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2021.1924730>
- Fernández, Ó., Vandendriessche, M., Saz-Carranza, A., Agell, N., & Franco, J. (2023). The impact of Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine on public perceptions of EU security and defence integration: A big data analysis. *Journal of European Integration*, 45(3), 463–485. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2023.2183392>
- Fortunato, P., & Pecoraro, M. (2022). Social media, education, and the rise of populist Euroscepticism. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 9(1), Article 301. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01317-y>
- Ghender, F. (2021). The rise of digital populism in Romania. *Revista de Studii Media*, 10, 44–55.
- Gheorghiu, O. C., & Praisler, A. (2022). Hate speech revisited in Romanian political discourse: From the Legion of the Archangel Michael (1927–1941) to AUR (2020–present day). *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 9(1), Article 235. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01228-y>
- Gómez-Reino, M., & Llamazares, I. (2013). The populist radical right and European integration: A comparative analysis of party–voter links. *West European Politics*, 36(4), 789–816. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2013.783354>
- Grapă, T. E., & Mogoș, A. A. (2023). The spectacle of “patriotic violence” in Romania: Populist leader George Simion’s mediated performance. *Media and Communication*, 11(2), 148–162. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i2.6367>
- Havlík, V., & Kluknavská, A. (2023). *Our people first (again)! The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on the populist radical right in the Czech Republic*. European Center for Populism Studies. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0015>
- Hooghe, L., & Marks, G. (2007). Sources of Euroscepticism. *Acta Politica*, 42, 119–127. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.ap.5500192>
- Hooghe, M., & Teepe, W. (2007). Party profiles on the web: An analysis of the logfiles of non-partisan interactive political internet sites in the 2003 and 2004 election campaigns in Belgium. *New Media & Society*, 9(6), 965–985. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444807082726>
- Kerry, C., & Brotman, S. (2017, July 17). Could consumer internet privacy legislation show potent populist appeal? *Brookings*. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2017/07/13/could-consumer-internet-privacy-legislation-show-potent-populist-appeal>
- King, G., & Zeng, L. (2001). Improving forecasts of state failure. *World Politics*, 53(4), 623–658. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.2001.0018>
- Kováts, E. (2018). Questioning consensuses: Right-wing populism, anti-populism, and the threat of “gender ideology.” *Sociological Research Online*, 23(2), 528–538. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780418764735>
- Kruglavshov, A. (2011). Troublesome neighborhood: Romania and Ukraine relationship. *New Ukraine, A Journal of History and Politics*, 11, 114–125.
- MacFarlane, N., & Menon, A. (2014). The EU and Ukraine. *Survival*, 56(3), 95–101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2014.920139>
- Mariano, N., & Schneider, C. J. (2022). Euroscepticism and bargaining success in the European Union. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 29(1), 61–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1991985>
- McMahon, R. (2022). Is alt-Europe possible? Populist radical right counternarratives of European integration. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 30(1), 10–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2021.1919865>
- Meret, S., & Siim, B. (2013). Gender, populism and politics of belonging: Discourses of right-wing populist

- parties in Denmark, Norway and Austria. In B. Siim & M. Mokre (Eds.), *Negotiating gender and diversity in an emergent European public sphere* (pp. 78–96). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137291295_5
- Morini, M. (2020). *Lessons from Trump's political communication: How to dominate the media environment*. Springer.
- Mudde, C. (2022). The far-right threat in the United States: A European perspective. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 699(1), 101–115. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162211070060>
- National Institute of Statistics. (2022). *Recensământul populației și locuințelor runda 2021—rezultate provizorii* [Population and housing census round 2021—Provisional results]. <https://insse.ro/cms/ro/content/recens%C4%83m%C3%A2ntul-popula%C8%9Biei-%C8%99i-locuin%C8%9Belor-runda-2021-rezultate-provizorii>
- Neundorf, A., Gerschewski, J., & Olar, R. G. (2020). How do inclusionary and exclusionary autocracies affect ordinary people? *Comparative Political Studies*, 53(12), 1890–1925. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414019858958>
- Noury, A., & Roland, G. (2020). Identity politics and populism in Europe. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 23, 421–439. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050718-033542>
- Polyakova, A. (2014). Strange bedfellows: Putin and Europe's far right. *World Affairs*, 177(3), 36–40.
- Pomerantsev, P., & Weiss, M. (2014). *The menace of unreality: How the Kremlin weaponizes information, culture and money*. Institute of Modern Russia.
- Popescu, L., & Vesalon, L. (2022). “They all are the red plague”: Anti-communism and the Romanian radical right populists. *East European Politics*, 39(1), 150–169. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2086862>
- Riischøj, S. (2004). Europeanisation and Euro-scepticism: Experiences from Poland and the Czech Republic. *Central European Political Studies Review*, 4(6), 1–44.
- Robinson, L., Schulz, J., Ball, C., Chiaraluce, C., Dodel, M., Francis, J., Huang, K., Johnston, E., Khilnani, A., Kleinmann, O., Kwon, K. H., McClain, N., Ng, Y., Pait, H., Ragnedda, M., Reisdorf, B. C., Ruiu, M. L., Silva, C. X., Tramm, J. M., . . . Williams, A. A. (2021). Cascading crises: Society in the age of Covid-19. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 65(12), 1608–1622. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642211003156>
- Snegovaya, M. (2022). Fellow travelers or Trojan horses? Similarities across pro-Russian parties' electorates in Europe. *Party Politics*, 28(3), 409–418. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068821995813>
- Soare, S. (2020). Romania: The challenges of contested identities. In S. Bayó Belenguer & N. Brady (Eds.), *Pulling together or pulling apart? Perspectives on nationhood, identity, and belonging in Europe* (pp. 339–378). Peter Lang.
- Soare, S. (2023). *Romanian populism and transnational political mobilization*. European Center for Populism Studies. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0027>
- Song, W. (2023). Between Europe and Asia: Narrow spaces for strategic hedging in New Europe. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 25(1), 22–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2022.2129324>
- Stoica, M. S. (2021). Populist political advertising in times of pandemic: Framing elites as anti-religious. *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 20(60), 115–127.
- Styczyńska, N. (2017). Eurosceptic parties in the Central and Eastern European countries: A comparative case study of Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria. In B. Leruth, N. Startin, & S. Usherwood (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of Euroscepticism* (pp. 139–154). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315464015-14>
- Styczyńska, N. (2018). Refugees not welcome: The populist radical right in Poland and the migration crisis. In K. Czerska-Shaw, M. Galent, & B. Gierat-Bieroń (Eds.), *Visions and revisions of Europe* (pp. 75–90). University of Göttingen.
- Taggart, P. (1998). A touchstone of dissent: Euroscepticism in contemporary Western European party systems. *European Journal of Political Research*, 33(3), 363–388. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.00387>
- Taggart, P., & Szczerbiak, A. (2002). *The party politics of Euroscepticism in EU member and candidate states*. Sussex European Institute.
- Tereszkiewicz, F. (2018). Visegrad Euroscepticism: Discursive nodal points in Eurosceptic discourses surrounding external actions of the European Union. *Online Journal Modelling the New Europe*, 26, 144–168.
- Treib, O. (2021). Euroscepticism is here to stay: What cleavage theory can teach us about the 2019 European Parliament elections. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 28(2), 174–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2020.1737881>
- UNHCR. (2023). *Ukraine refugee situation*. Operational Data Support. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>
- van de Pol, J., Kamoen, N., Krouwel, A., de Vreese, C., & Holleman, B. (2019). Same but different: A typology of voting advice application users in first-and second-order elections. *Acta Politica*, 54, 225–244. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41269-018-0083-3>
- Wall, M., Sudulich, M. L., Costello, R., & Leon, E. (2009). Picking your party online—An investigation of Ireland's first online voting advice application. *Information Polity*, 14(3), 203–218. <https://doi.org/10.3233/IP-2009-0179>
- Wike, R., Poushter, J., Bishop, C., Silver, L., & Devlin, K. (2019, October 15). European public opinion three decades after the fall of communism. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/>

[10/15/european-public-opinion-three-decades-after-the-fall-of-communism](#)

Yermakova, O. (2021). PiS vs LGBT: The “othering” of the LGBT movement as an element of populist radical right party discourse in Poland. *Sprawy Narodowościowe*, 53, Article 2568. <https://doi.org/10.11649/sn.2568>

Zilinsky, J. (2019). Democratic deconsolidation revisited:

Young Europeans are not dissatisfied with democracy. *Research & Politics*, 6(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168018814332>

Žuk, P., & Žuk, P. (2020). Right-wing populism in Poland and anti-vaccine myths on YouTube: Political and cultural threats to public health. *Global Public Health*, 15(6), 790–804. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2020.1718733>

About the Authors



Mihnea S. Stoica (PhD) is a lecturer at the Department of Communication, Public Relations, and Advertising of the Faculty of Political, Administrative, and Communication Sciences of Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania. He teaches political ideologies and political advertising. Stoica is a member of the Communication and Social Innovation Research Center, and his main research interests revolve around populism, Euroscepticism, and public opinion.



Andreea Voina (PhD) is a lecturer at the Department of Communication, Public Relations, and Advertising of the Faculty of Political, Administrative, and Communication Sciences of Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania. She is a Fulbright alumna at the University of Georgia, USA, and a member of the Communication and Social Innovation Research Center. Her research focuses on gender issues, women’s representation in politics and the media, and political communication.