

Article

Illiberal Discourse in Romania: A “Golden” New Beginning?

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Abstract

While interest in illiberalism has increased in recent years, the study of the connections between anti-gender discourse and transnational dissemination is a more recent scholarly endeavour. Emerging feminist scholarship has helped to move beyond national cases of illiberalism to understand how the gendered nature of illiberalism is revealed through its ability to cross borders and, in recent years, to become a movement with a transnational character. This article examines the evolution of the political discourse on gender in Romania and proposes a three-stage framework leading from gender traditionalism to a more pronounced illiberal discourse. The article examines whether the recent rise of the political party Alliance for the Union of Romanians (Alianța pentru Unirea României, AUR) represents a new step towards an established political illiberal discourse in Romania. The official public addresses of AUR are analysed to show how the terminology and themes identified as cornerstones of illiberalism (e.g., anti-gender, traditional family, opposition to reproductive rights, education, and anti-LGBTQ) are incorporated into its rhetoric.

Keywords

anti-gender; illiberal offer; illiberalism; Romania; transnational illiberalism

Issue

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1. Introduction

Since Viktor Orbán declared in 2014 that liberal democracy is on its deathbed, academic interest in illiberalism has been growing (Juhász, 2014). Although theorised since the 1990s, beginning with Fareed Zakaria and his concept of illiberal democracy (Zakaria, 1997), renewed interest in illiberalism has led to increased scholarly research in the last decade, even as its meaning continues to be the subject of debate. Illiberalism has been theorised as a reaction to the tendencies towards Westernisation and Europeanisation (Havlík & Hloušek, 2021) or as a reaction to the failure of political liberalism and the promises of neoliberal capitalism to bring general prosperity to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE; Zielonka, 2018). As part of a broader process of democratic erosion, illiberalism can be a strategy to win votes (Enyedi, 2016; Mudde, 2021) or a facilitator of a coordinated de-democratisation process (Bogaards, 2018). When scholarship moves to explore its mechanisms in

practice, it exposes illiberalism as a form of governance that mimics the institutional framework of liberal democracy, best described as a polypore state: “a system in which all vital resources, concepts and institutions of the liberal democratic state are appropriated by the party in power and transformed into an illiberal state” (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018, p. 7). The mutating force of illiberalism also extends to civil society, where actors and institutions seek to promote the “true will” of the people in the form of conservative, anti-modern values (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Pető, 2021). As a discourse or type of political communication, illiberalism uses conservative discursive pillars such as nationalism, religion, and traditional values, mixed with a rejection of progressive and liberal values, to unite different actors and evoke a strong emotional response (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Surowiec & Štětka, 2020).

Emerging feminist scholarship has been instrumental in moving beyond the process of defining and categorising illiberalism toward explaining the spread and

electoral success of regressive political actors, not (only) as a cultural backlash or reactionary movement (Laruelle, 2022; Pető, 2021). By placing the gendered character of illiberalism at the centre of analyses, a differentiated picture of its constitutive features and modus operandi emerges (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018; Korolczuk, 2014; Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Pető, 2021; Roggeband & Krizsán, 2020). In CEE, opposition to “gender ideology,” an umbrella term that includes opposition to gender equality, LGBTQ rights, and reproductive rights, sets the political agenda (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Guasti, 2021; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017, see studies on CEE). It also unites various conservative and traditionalist actors under one big theme. By including a gendered analysis of illiberalism, the focus also shifts to understanding its transnational character (Korolczuk, 2014).

This article aims to expand the understanding of the gendered nature of illiberalism in a broader transnational context by extending current research to the case of Romania. The argument is that the gendered nature of illiberalism is evident in its ability to cross borders and become a movement with transnational dissemination. The article proposes a three-stage framework for analysing the political discourse on gender in Romania. The first stage is gender traditionalism, the second is the introduction of an explicit anti-gender rhetoric by the Coalition for the Family (Coalitia pentru Familie, CpF), and the third is the political mainstreaming of illiberal discourse. Finally, the article examines whether the recent rise of the political party Alliance for the Union of Romanians (Alianta pentru Unirea României, AUR) represents a new step toward a politically established illiberal discourse. Through a qualitative analysis of the official public discourse of AUR, the last section of the article examines how issues such as the traditional family, anti-gender, and anti-LGBTQ—pillars of illiberalism—are incorporated into the rhetoric of AUR.

2. Gendering Illiberalism in a Transnational Setting

While opposition to gender equality and LGBTQ rights is an increasingly important feature of populist or right-wing movements in Europe (Dietze & Roth, 2020; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017), the intertwining of anti-gender and illiberalism makes the former an existential feature of the latter. It is relevant that Jarosław Kaczyński and Viktor Orbán declared in 2016 that the rejection of liberal values in favour of restoring the traditional family and Christian values was a truly new “pan-European” project (Sierakowski, 2016). Beyond the flagship cases of Poland and Hungary, emerging scholarship shows the adaptability of illiberal anti-gender discourses and strategies in different national contexts (Bosak & Munivra Vajda, 2019; Guasti, 2021; Hodžić & Štulhofer, 2017; Kuhar, 2015; Soare & Tufis, 2021). What makes illiberalism adaptable in different contexts in CEE?

The concept of illiberal offer (Pető, 2021) provides the theoretical framework for exploring illiberalism in a

transnational context. This concept makes it possible to understand illiberalism beyond its regressive character as a political project centred on a new kind of world order (Pető, 2021, p. 319). First, anti-gender gives ideological coherence to this new project by becoming its symbolic glue (Grzebalska et al., 2017; Pető, 2021). The illiberal offer is characterised by the rejection of the supposed evils of modernisation (gender equality, human rights, especially those of minorities) and the affirmation of neotraditionalism (family, nation, and Christianity). This new illiberal ontology of human rights (Laruelle, 2022; Malksoo, 2019) is complemented by the promise of a return to a more orderly world, free of “disruption” from those who promote topics such as human rights, gender equality, and minority rights. For countries reeling from economic crises and austerity, illiberalism offers a response to neoliberalism’s focus on the individual by seeming to offer “a safe and secure community as a remedy for individualism and social atomisation” (Pető, 2021, p. 319). More than an ideation construct (Buzogány & Varga, 2021), the illiberal offer is completed by the current and salient political issues it seems to address, such as demography, emigration, education, and social issues, which have often been ignored in mainstream political discourse. Finally, the illiberal offer contains the cohesive power of discourse, which plays a very important role in shaping a transnational movement. Similar discursive tactics such as “gender ideology,” the family and the child in danger, and the idea of an education system “ideologised” by “LGBTQ propaganda” have two goals: normalising illiberalism as a political offer (Wodak, 2019) and bringing together different actors across political, religious, or even ideological boundaries (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022).

The gendered nature of an illiberal offer is evident in its focus on three themes. First, there is a focus on the traditional family and values, which became the “ideological battleground” of illiberalism in Poland and Hungary (Kuhar, 2015) and then propagated in CEE. Against the backdrop of numerous economic and social crises affecting CEE, the traditional family was equated with saving the nation from demographic and moral decline and bringing order to the chaos caused by “gender ideology” (Buzogány & Varga, 2021; Grzebalska & Pető, 2018; Mancini & Palazzo, 2021). Explicit anti-LGBTQ discourses were also mixed into this theme to underpin the myth of saving the traditional family and protecting children from the dangers of “gender ideology” and “LGBTQ propaganda” (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017; Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Mancini & Palazzo, 2021). In Hungary, the FIDESZ-led government declared that the protection of the heteronormative family is linked to the preservation of the nation, the national interest is “sacred and absolute,” and that gender mainstreaming should be replaced by “family mainstreaming” (Sata, 2021, pp. 38, 50). In Croatia, the movement led by Catholic organisations resulted in a successful referendum (2013) on defining the family as a union between a man and a woman.

During this referendum, illiberal messages on “gender ideology” and family as a strategy and discourse were localised based on similar campaigns in different countries (Hodžić & Štulhofer, 2017). A similar use of the traditional family as a signifier was found in Slovenia, Slovakia, and Romania (Kuhar, 2015; Soare & Tufis, 2021).

The (re)glorification of the traditional family is accompanied by opposition to reproductive rights, the second focal theme of illiberal actors. Conservative and religious movements initiated this debate as a backlash against the Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe Convention, 2014) which is seen as being imbued with “gender ideology” (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2020). In Croatia, the ratification of the Istanbul Convention was instrumentalised by conservative forces against gender equality, who associated the Convention with the promotion of “gender ideology” and “LGBTQ propaganda” (Bosak & Munivrana Vajda, 2019). Analogous patterns of anti-gender mobilisation have been found in Poland (Grzebalska, 2015), Bulgaria (Cheresheva, 2018), and Romania (Băluță, 2020).

Finally, illiberalism rallies around education and the perceived “ideologisation” of education systems, as movements in Western Europe protesting gender equality or diversity in education (Hennig, 2018; Kuhar & Zobec, 2017) are emulated in CEE. Education here becomes another battleground which pits the forces imposing “gender ideology” in schools against “concerned parents” protesting what they perceive as the “state-imposed sexualisation of children through sex education and gender equality training programs” (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018, p. 799). Both PiS and FIDESZ focused from the beginning on the need to reform education and restore a nationalist view of history (Sierakowski, 2016). Among other things, this meant ridding them of “gender ideology” and “LGBTQ propaganda.” Opposition to sexual education in schools became a focus of anti-gender mobilisation beyond the two countries (Kuhar & Zobec, 2017; Roggeband & Krizsán, 2020). Gender Studies was also targeted, with a de facto ban on Gender Studies as an academic subject in Hungary (Labanino & Dobbins, 2020; Pirro & Stanley, 2021) and the (so far unsuccessful) initiative to ban the term gender from education in Romania (Bucur, 2020; Tidey, 2020).

3. An Act With Three Parts: From Gender Traditionalism to Illiberal Discourse in Romania

3.1. Ignorance Is Bliss: Gender Traditionalism in Romania’s Political Discourse 1990–2013

During the first two decades of the post-socialist transition in Romania (1989–2010), gender was a marginal note in the political discourse, which moved between ignorance and rejection of modernisation strategies (Miroiu, 2006). When the topic of gender entered the public political discourse after 2007 due to EU requirements and academic and civil society pressure, it was

already embedded in the legacy of traditionalism (Chiva, 2009; Miroiu, 2010; Nimu, 2018).

The post-socialist construction of national identity led political parties to a discourse that often included references to the traditionalism and Orthodox religion of the Romanian state and society, which were elevated to the status of national virtues (Norocel, 2011; Norocel & Băluță, 2021; Soare & Tufis, 2021). Political parties’ discourse on gender and equality vacillated between ignoring and adhering to the traditional gender status quo (Băluță, 2006; Chiva, 2018). Official rhetoric claimed that women and men are equal but that a “natural” division of gender roles should be maintained (Chiva, 2005; Oprica, 2008). Political parties held this kind of gender traditionalism because it was believed to correspond to what society wanted after 1989, as the Romanian public continued to adhere to patriarchal gender norms and ultra-conservative views on sexual orientation (Miroiu, 2004; Norocel, 2010). When feminism and discussions on gender equality tentatively entered the public sphere, especially through academia and the emerging feminist civil society, they were ignored or dismissed by political parties as not being a national priority or an ideology alien to the Romanian spirit (Miroiu, 2010). However, several Romanian nationalist, right-wing political parties adopted a more radical gendered discourse. Their agenda focused on the (extreme) glorification of Orthodoxy and orthodox nationalism, xenophobia, and populism (Soare & Tufis, 2021; Sum, 2010). The discourse on women and women’s issues presented the Romanian essence as consisting mainly of traditionalism, the glorification of patriarchal norms, and the rejection of any diversity in terms of family formation or sexual orientation (Norocel, 2011). Triggered by the repeal of legislation criminalising homosexuality, radical right-wing and conservative religious groups began to focus on the “threat” of homosexuality, which was portrayed as a foreign attack on the traditional family and Orthodoxy (Norocel, 2011, 2015).

Romania’s accession to the EU in 2007 provided little incentive for a substantial change in the political discourse on gender and gender issues; it even lagged other CEE countries (Avdeyeva, 2010). The main political parties did include some references to gender issues in their official political discourse after 2007 but most avoided the issue altogether. One notable change was the partial adoption of the more formal language of EU conditionality on gender equality (Băluță, 2020), which was considered preferable to the more disruptive feminist language. A combination of weak EU conditionality and the imprint of earlier gender traditionalism contributed to maintaining a state of arrested development (Cianetti & Hanley, 2020) on gender as a politically relevant concept. Two moments abruptly changed this dynamic of gender traditionalism: the debates surrounding the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and the emergence of a conservative traditionalist mobilisation that triggered a more radical and gendered discourse. This discourse

entered a country where gender and gender issues were almost irrelevant in political discourse, and when they were raised, traditionalism prevailed.

3.2. *Picking Up Steam: Coalition for the Family and the Emergence of “Gender Ideology”*

Similar to other countries in CEE (Bosak & Munivra Vajda, 2019; Roggeband & Krizsán, 2020), the debate around the Istanbul Convention in Romania has been the catalyst of a new kind of gendered discourse focussing on the perceived inclusion of domestic violence and reproductive rights within the framework of “gender ideology,” a term only recently introduced to the public (Băluță, 2020). In line with the coagulability of the illiberal discourse, the emergence of the Coalition for the Family (CpF) in 2013 brought together a variety of organisations ranging from conservative non-governmental organisations to religious figures and organisations with different affiliations (Orthodox, Neo-Protestant, and Catholic) and public intellectuals (Mărgărit, 2020). CpF presented itself as a coalition of the true Romanian civic sphere, denied that it had a political agenda, and used as its public representatives a combination of religious figures and public intellectuals (Mărgărit, 2020). CpF gradually used “gender” and “gender ideology” in public discourses, branding “gender ideology” as “alien,” an “attack on the family, children, the Romanian spirit,” and a “homosexual threat” (Platforma Civică Împreună, 2020). CpF’s public statements stated what is threatened: the (traditional) family, the Romanian nation, Orthodoxy, and children. The idea of ideologising the education system through Gender Studies emerged. Democratisation and modernisation meant the destruction not only of the traditional family but also of “the organisation of the political, educational, medical spheres, etc. of society” (Mărgărit, 2020, p. 7).

CpF became the driving force behind the so-called “Family Referendum” (2018), which like the anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ strategies in CEE (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Norocel & Băluță, 2021), aimed to enshrine in the Constitution the definition of marriage as only possible between a man and a woman. CpF advocated the need for a referendum because the Romanian nation and Orthodoxy are threatened with extinction in the face of “gender ideology” (Norocel & Băluță, 2021; Soare & Tufis, 2021). The interests of children and families were also frequently mentioned in discursive tropes, while demographic decline was associated with the “dangers” to the traditional Romanian family. The socio-economic context—the lack of gender equality measures, especially in terms of reconciling family and work or the high level of poverty in Romania—was almost never mentioned (Norocel & Băluță, 2021). During the campaign for the 2016 general elections, the three major political parties signed electoral protocols with CpF in which they pledged to organise the referendum. In a first direct political act, CpF committed to campaign for

them (Mărgărit, 2020). In 2018, when the then leader of the ruling Social Democratic Party (PSD) suddenly called for a referendum on the definition of family, elements of the anti-gender discourse found their way into the speeches of the established political parties (Mărgărit, 2020; Norocel & Băluță, 2021).

CpF successfully pushed the gender traditionalism of mainstream political discourse in a radical direction and initiated and normalised the discourse on gender and “gender ideology” as an existential threat to Romanian society. CpF was less successful in shaping the public agenda than other initiatives in CEE, such as *Ordo Iuris* in Poland. The association with established parties, perceived as corrupt and self-serving, proved detrimental. Public distrust of political parties characterised the referendum, which failed because it did not meet the legal participation threshold (Voiculescu & Groza, 2021). In 2020, an initiative aimed at banning the use of the term gender in the education system, a legal act aimed at abolishing Gender Studies, also failed (Bucur, 2020).

3.3. *Illiberalism Enters the Parliament*

Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor (The Alliance for the Union of Romanians, AUR) is a new political party founded in 2019. It received 9% of the vote in the Romanian parliamentary elections in December 2020, placing it fourth in the final results. Its voters are younger than the average voter in Romania (41 years on average), have a secondary education, and have the largest gender gap among voters (Pora, 2020). Since the election, the party has made gains in the polls, moving into second place in the poll rankings (Sîrbu, 2022). Party leaders often praise Poland and Hungary and expressed support in the 2021 dispute over EU funds (AUR, 2021b). AUR explicitly advocates a conservative “Reconquista” in Europe (AUR, 2021d) and aims to join the European Conservatives and Reformists Party (ECR).

Although the AUR is a new political party, its meteoric rise can be partly attributed to CpF’s earlier efforts to organise various conservative and religious groups on cultural issues. In addition, some leading members of AUR were involved in the Coalition, most notably AUR co-chair Claudiu Târziu, a prominent member of the CpF who was directly involved in the events leading up to the “Family Referendum” (Clark, 2021). While AUR was the first Romanian political party to enter Parliament after 2004 with a thoroughly right-wing, anti-establishment agenda and (as the analysis in this article shows) an explicitly illiberal discourse, the seeds of illiberalism were already sown in the decade leading up to the 2020 election through the rhetoric of members of the mainstream parties represented in Parliament (Băluță, 2020; Norocel & Băluță, 2021). This rhetoric was prompted by an opportunistic alliance of members of Parliament with representatives of the Orthodox Church, which tended towards a radical anti-LGBTQ and an emerging anti-gender attitude (Soare & Tufis, 2021). However, education, reproductive

rights, and even the imperative to support and protect families (apart from proclaiming the traditional heteronormative family as ubiquitous), as well as the link to the overall socio-economic context, were almost always absent from this proto-illiberal discourse, including in the case of CpF.

The sudden electoral success of AUR and its continuous rise can be explained by a mixture of pandemic context (AUR ran an election campaign explicitly against restrictions) and ethno-nationalist and anti-establishment discourse (Mărgărit, 2020). Through the skilful use of social media, public appearances, and political rallies, it has quickly extended its reach beyond that of an outsider party (Holdiş & Rus, 2021). AUR emphasises its anti-elite position and denounces the corruption, selling-out, and disconnection of the big parties from the “real” Romanian society (Norocel & Băluță, 2021). AUR fits the definition of illiberal populism (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018), a movement that positions itself as “anti-politics,” “anti-elite,” and “anti-establishment” (Mărgărit, 2020) but also seeks to reshape society morally. In this social change project, AUR’s anti-gender discourse is at the forefront.

4. “Take Your Hands Off Our Children”: AUR’s Use of Illiberal Discourse

4.1. Methods

The content analysis of AUR’s official press releases and parliamentary speeches between 2020 and 2021 examines whether the three pillars of the gendered illiberal offer (traditional family, education, reproductive rights) are represented in AUR’s public discourse. The focus of the analysis is thus on the construction of the anti-gender discourse and aims to identify a possible agenda and “frame what is politically possible and legitimate” (Kantola & Lombardo, 2020, p. 4). The focus on political discourse is due to its role in shaping illiberalism (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Wodak, 2019). Here, political discourse is treated as an instrument for creating subjective realities, “where ideational interpretations are more important than empirical facts” (Sata, 2021, p. 39). Discourse analysis focuses on the specific use of discursive tropes and their framing to examine how a particular issue, in this case, anti-gender, is constructed (Hardy et al., 2004). In the case of the Romanian context, this method is particularly appropriate because decades of gender traditionalism have created the conditions for introducing significance into a void (Laclau, 2005).

Two types of documents were analysed: official press releases published on the AUR website (consisting of 272 source texts identified) and parliamentary speeches from 2021 (consisting of 519 source texts identified). The preliminary selection of these texts was based on two findings highlighted in the theoretical part of this article. First, AUR’s official press releases help indicate the focus of its official political discourse (concerning

education and its perceived attacks by “gender ideology,” family, and the rejection of reproductive rights) projected into the public sphere and used to enforce what constitutes a legitimate discourse for illiberal parties (Wodak, 2019). Second, parliamentary speeches were selected because this article proposes an analysis of AUR as a different kind of illiberal actor than previous right-wing extra-parliamentary parties or even individual members of mainstream parties (Norocel & Băluță, 2021). This distinction is evident in the AUR’s tendency to deliberately engage in illiberal discourse, which it shares with similar actors in CEE.

After this initial phase, purposive sampling (Kantola & Lombardo, 2020) was used to identify relevant texts that explicitly refer to family, education, and reproductive rights. Sampling was based on keywords for text selection (family, education, sexual education, and abortion). To identify other relevant texts, LGBTQ (and variants such as homosexuality), traditional or traditionalism, and terms related to demography were added to these keywords. Forty-eight texts were selected, covering the period from January 2020 to January 2022. AUR’s official programme and its self-titled “Mission Statement” of September 2021 were included in the analysis, resulting in a total of 50 texts out of the original 791 texts identified (the selected texts are available upon request). While this is only about 7% of the selected texts in the total sample, the use of purposive sampling, in this case, has produced a number of documents that facilitate the identification of the pillars of AUR’s illiberal discourse. For the purposes of the analysis in this article, religion, Orthodox faith, and nation were not used as keywords for the sample, although they are mentioned in some of the texts analysed, particularly in the Parliamentary speeches. This methodological option was based on the theoretical approach of the article on illiberal dissemination in CEE, which focuses on the concept of “illiberal offer” (Pető, 2021) as a political project to redefine political space. The analysed documents show that AUR’s use of illiberal discourse in approaching the three pillars of transnational illiberalism indicates a clearly defined and adopted political and ideological offer.

4.2. Results

Family is not the most common discursive trope when it comes to pointing out the dangers of “gender ideology” and “LGBTQ propaganda,” the two most used terms in anti-gender discourse; for this aim, education is the main battleground. Of the 50 documents analysed, 16 explicitly mention that education and children are threatened by “gender ideology” or “LGBTQ propaganda.” In terms of policy mentions, the initial sample of documents revealed that education, in general, is an important issue for AUR. Modernisation, curriculum reform, improving access, and “fighting fake news” are important issues in the party’s political discourse and agenda. The use of illiberal terms such as “gender ideology,” “indoctrination,”

and supposed “dangers” to children are used in two main themes of AUR—the rejection of sexual education and the need to protect the interests of children and parents. Sexual education is referred to as the main tool to enforce “gender ideology” and LGBTQ “propaganda” or “indoctrination” (AUR, 2021a). Other discursive tropes include the endangerment of children through sexual education (Albișteanu, 2021), the association of “gender ideology” with child abuse (D. Aelenei, 2021a) and the primacy of parental consent in deciding on the sex education curriculum.

In July 2021, AUR announced on its website that it would present a legislative proposal to ban “gender and LGBTQ propaganda” in schools, specifically mentioning the Hungarian example (AUR, 2021c). An amendment to the Romanian Child Protection Act proposed by the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania to “protect children from homosexual propaganda” in 2022 (Thoreson, 2022) provides AUR with a potential, if uncomfortable, political ally. This type of legislation is an example of the “Hungarian illiberal playbook” (Pirro & Stanley, 2021) and coincides with other issues that have convinced AUR. On the eve of the proposed legislation to ban the term gender, AUR issued a statement opposing the promotion of gender equality in education systems and pointing to “the need to evaluate higher education, especially to stop the gender ideologisation of social sciences studies” (AUR, 2020b). AUR’s choice of education as the preferred policy and discursive domain to pursue an illiberal agenda is in line with similar actors in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Croatia (Kuhar, 2015; Kuhar & Zobec, 2017; Labanino & Dobbins, 2020; Roggeband & Krizsán, 2018). AUR describes education as a battleground of crucial importance for Romania’s future (AUR, 2021a) and offers a conservative reinterpretation to solve the perceived ills of Romania’s education system.

The traditional or natural family, as it is sometimes called, is the second important feature of AUR’s public discourse. In 15 of the 50 documents analysed, the traditional family and demographic and natalist concerns are the main theme, confirming the strong orientation of illiberal political parties towards anti-gender issues (Pető, 2021). The discourse links the dangers of “gender ideology” with the dismissal of the traditional Romanian family. Often the nation and the “demographic crisis” are also included through tropes such as the heteronormative family as a religious and national duty. The rejection of same-sex marriage is mentioned in several documents and linked to the fact that same-sex marriage is alien to Romanian tradition. At the same time, the European Parliament’s September 2021 declaration on rainbow families is described as “an attack on Poland, Hungary, and Romania” (Andrusceac, 2021). The reference to moral, Christian, or Romanian values in the context of the “crisis” of the traditional family is more often found in Parliamentary speeches (see D. Aelenei, 2021b), while a more policy-oriented approach is preferred in AUR’s official statements.

It is striking that the family discourse of AUR stands out from the previously diffuse messages of CpF. While CpF focused on legitimising the traditional family based on religion and nationalism (Mărgărit, 2020; Norocel & Băluță, 2021), AUR takes a policy-oriented approach. AUR often frames the imperative to protect the traditional family with policy proposals aimed at tax deductions for families, negative tax deductions for families without children, and the establishment of childcare facilities (AUR, 2020a). These measures would protect families “raising children in a Christian and traditional environment” (AUR, 2020a). As with other illiberal actors (Orenstein & Bugarič, 2022), AUR frames the issue of traditional families and natalist concerns in specific policy proposals that focus on increasing the birth rate. Family and birth policies in Hungary and Poland appear as an example of a “working policy” to protect the traditional family (E. Aelenei, 2021) and point to AUR’s further anchoring in the illiberal transnational offer. In this context, it is significant that the Collegium Intermarium-led conference that produced the “Geneva Consensus Declaration” (a proclamation signed in 2020 by 34 countries [the US has since withdrawn its support]) that aims to restore “the true meaning of the concept of human rights” (Intermarium Regional Conference, 2020) appears in AUR’s discourse. In a Parliamentary speech by an AUR representative who attended the 2020 conference, the GCD agenda is described as relevant and urgent for Romanian society (Neagu, 2021).

However, AUR’s platform on reproductive rights is restrained, as the texts analysed do not explicitly mention the restriction or prohibition of abortion and contraceptives. While “pro-family” is mentioned in relation to the traditional family and reproductive rights, “pro-life” terminology is rarely used. The analysis revealed that “life begins at conception” is the only mention of such terminology and was used only once (AUR, 2021e). Veiled “pro-life” positions are taken in relation to the proposed solutions to combat the phenomenon of teenage pregnancies (Tanasă, 2021b), with Romania having the second highest incidence in the EU (UNICEF, 2021). The AUR policy programme mentions abortion in the context of the need to improve the economic situation of families and the need for sexual education in schools (a statement that was not repeated). This is a significant departure from the illiberal discourse elsewhere in CEE as well as from the positions of CpF and signals the adaptive nature of the illiberal offer. Even though in Romania access to abortion is threatened from various sides, restricting or banning abortion would be an unpopular proposition in Romania (Centrul FILIA, 2021). An exception to the restrained approach to the issue of reproductive rights were the reactions to the European Parliament’s adoption of the Matic Report (European Parliament, 2021), which was denounced as a “neo-Marxist attack on Romania’s traditional values” and of addressing trivial, unimportant issues (Lilian, 2021).

Returning to the theoretical framework of this article, some conclusions can be drawn regarding AUR's use of illiberal discourse, which support the claim that AUR introduced in Romania a deliberate illiberal offer in conjunction with a transnational context. First, as the above analysis shows, AUR's public rhetoric uses illiberal anti-gender terminology to create a clearly defined enemy—LGBTQ and “gender ideology”—that inspires mobilisation and overcomes the limitation of CpF's “mobilisation without political representation” problem (Băluță, 2020). This mobilisation, which revolves around two important issues in Romania, education and social issues, shows remarkable similarities with illiberal actors in CEE. The rather muted discourse on reproductive issues, especially AUR's apparent reluctance to engage with the global anti-abortion movement, will be tested in the near future as abortion and sexual rights receive international attention (UN, 2022). Second, unlike previous attempts to create an anti-gender platform in Romania, AUR's discourse includes both the “moral” legitimisation of its anti-gender stance and social and economic concerns. The texts analysed show that “ideology-free” education and the “traditional” family are embedded in both a moral discourse and socio-economic concerns (Tanasă, 2021a). This kind of approach is both intentional and strategic, as evidenced by the fact that there is no difference between the terminology used in official press releases and that used by AUR parliamentarians. Thirdly, AUR justifies its opposition to the introduction of sexual education in schools with the appearance of invoking legal rights. As shown earlier, AUR denounces the “ideologisation” of education, often invoking the primacy of the “right to choose” of children and parents (D. Aelenei, 2021a; AUR, 2022). As the anti-gender movement, which includes illiberal actors, seems to be moving from “culture wars” to legal battlegrounds (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022), this has the potential to become an important strategy of illiberalism. AUR has already indicated its intention to pursue this strategy by announcing legislation to monitor “ideologisation and indoctrination” of schools (AUR, 2021c).

5. Conclusion

The illiberal offer is an adaptable body of anti-gender ideology and discourse. It also formulates a political agenda that addresses important policy issues for the countries of CEE. Exploring its transnational dimension reveals the adaptability of discursive tropes (advocacy for the traditional family, rejection of reproductive rights, and turning education into an ideological battleground) to become mainstream features of politics in Hungary, Poland, Croatia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and, as this article has shown, Romania. The emergence of the illiberal discourse in Romania was initiated by the various actors under the banner of the “Coalition for the Families” (CpF) and is becoming a mainstream political discourse with the emergence of AUR. The party introduced an explicitly

anti-gender political message into the election campaign and has maintained it ever since. Qualitative analysis of AUR's political discourse demonstrates its use of anti-gender tropes such as “gender ideology” and “LGBTQ propaganda” that mirror the rhetoric espoused by illiberal actors elsewhere in the CEE countries. It employs various discursive tactics, ranging from portraying “gender ideology” and “LGBTQ propaganda” as dangers to the nation to advocating policies in support of the traditional, Christian family. In its form of illiberal offer, AUR's anti-gender discourse is not only an ideological appeal to the integrity of national and religious values, but also a reinterpretation of social and economic justice themes adopted by similar illiberal parties and movements in the CEE. By contextualising the issues and the political significance of anti-gender framing (social policy, education), AUR's willingness to use illiberal discourse as a political strategy to promote this agenda makes it appear ideologically coherent rather than ideologically opportune. With these messages, AUR has much more in common with the CpF than with the mainstream parties' decades of gender traditionalism. However, its rising popularity and the fact that it is a Parliamentary party make AUR a better equipped actor to disseminate illiberal rhetoric in Romanian society.

The findings of this article not only help to broaden the understanding of illiberalism beyond Hungary or Poland, but also point to some avenues for further theoretical and empirical approaches to the study of illiberalism. First, since illiberalism has been researched as a discourse and counter-ideology (Laruelle, 2022), the next step of research efforts must be to focus on what makes it an adaptive phenomenon in different national contexts. The analysis presented here suggests that the embeddedness of illiberal discourse in key policy concerns (education, social concerns, demography, etc.), a feature implied and theorised by the concept of illiberal offer (Pető, 2021), requires more empirical attention. As such, the emerging literature dealing with illiberalism should examine illiberalism in practice through the analysis of policies and their impact. Second, as AUR clearly sees itself as part of a larger movement, the implications of the analysis presented raise the question of what a potential “illiberal international” (Sierakowski, 2016) can achieve in terms of dismantling progress on gender equality and LGBTQ rights at the European level. The question becomes whether different illiberal actors using similar discourse and focusing on specific issues will be able to act together, especially when shaping the EU's future.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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