

“KEEPING IT BEHIND CLOSED DOORS”: DISCURSIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE
(UN)TRADITIONAL FAMILY IN ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT

As a result of a citizens' initiative led by the fundamentalist religious organization Coalition for Family, on October 6 and 7, 2018, a Referendum was held in Romania on the constitutional redefinition of the family as the *union between a woman and a man* instead of the previous *union between spouses* formulation. The thesis relies on the theoretical framework of right-wing populism (Wodak 2015) defined as a political ideology with its own form *and* content “that rejects existing political consensus and usually combines laissez-faire liberalism and anti-elitism” (Wodak 2015: 32) making an appeal to the common people considered to be quasi-homogenous. The thesis provides a critical discourse analysis of the pro- and anti-Referendum discourses that were constructed on social media by analyzing the contents shared by 7 Facebook pages in total in the month leading up to the Referendum.

The main argument of thesis is that the mechanisms of right-wing populism (including a rhetoric of fear) can be identified in the pro-, and even the anti-Referendum discourse, although the Referendum itself was not initiated by a political party, but by the Coalition for Family organization, on the basis of fundamentalist religious values, who had the continuous support of the Orthodox Church. There was also a prevailing discourse on the visible support offered by the ruling Social Democratic Party (PSD), that resulted for some in a direct association of the Referendum with the less and less popular PSD said to distract attention from allegations of corruption by advocating for the Referendum. The low voter turnout (20.4%), however, cannot be justified solely on this basis in a country where 86.5% of the population is Orthodox, and the Referendum is allegedly intended to protect Christian values. In the analysis of my thesis I examine both the pro- and anti-Referendum discourses to map out both the discursive strategies applied and the themes addressed that could engender a particular meaning in the Romanian context.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis are accurate:

Body of thesis (all chapters excluding notes, references, appendices, etc.): 24,261 words

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Signed

BLANKA BARABÁS

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1. Introduction

In Romania, a constitutional amendment referendum can be held based on a citizens' initiative if 500,000 signatures are gathered. In the first half of 2016, the fundamentalist religious organization Coalition for Family gathered 3,000,000 signatures for a referendum that would decide upon the redefinition of the family in the Constitution as the *union between a woman and a man* instead of the previous *union between spouses* formulation. The voices supporting the Referendum simultaneously argued that the modification of the Constitution is *not against* any minority group, and that the values of the *traditional family must be protected* from the threats imposed by the rights granted to LGBTQ people (as demonstrated by the example of the West where common-sense values are being overwritten). At the same time, a strong criticism of the planned Referendum emerged as the anti-Referendum discourses focused, on the first hand, on a call for tolerance toward minority groups, on the other hand, the *real* problems of Romania became central as it was argued that the Referendum would not solve any of these but spend taxpayers' money.

In my thesis, I chose to analyze data from social media, on the one hand, because retrospectively I did not have access to the TV spots aired in television during the campaign time. On the other hand, the analysis of the online pro- and anti-Referendum discourses provides a more complex picture on the arguments presented by both sides as these are not subject to financial resources or political connections that would allow for the distribution of campaign materials in television.

My research question focuses on the ways in which a right-wing populist rhetoric can be applied to a context that is (generally) missing a political party. I aim to explore how the strategies and mechanisms of right-wing populist politics can be identified in the discourses aiming to convince the public opinion. I also aim to address the low voter turnout of the Referendum by connecting the findings of the critical analysis of the discourses around the Referendum and the dominant understanding of sexuality in the Romanian context.

Chapter 2 aims to present in detail the political and social context of the Referendum as these become particularly important in applying critical discourse analysis. The social events preceding the Coalition for Family's initiative, as well as the political and economic situation of

Romania are central in establishing this context. The section on the fundamental understanding of sexuality has the role of showcasing the particular legacy of communism in this regard, while it will also serve as a central point of reference in the concluding chapter. The section on the legal situation of sexual minorities shows that the low visibility and representation of homosexuality makes it into an adequate target for the scapegoating narrative of the pro-Referendum discourse.

The theoretical framework is outlined in Chapter 3 based on Ruth Wodak's *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*. The central concepts of right-wing populism, such as *scapegoating*, *renationalization*, *exclusion*, *charismatic leader*, and the *rhetoric of fear* are introduced. In the third section of the theoretical framework, I revisit the main concepts of right-wing populism in order to apply them to the specific Romanian context.

In Chapter 4, I provide a brief description of critical discourse analysis (CDA), and its main tenets that argue for the use of this method. I also present in detail the sources of the data examined in the analytical chapters.

Chapter 5 aims to outline the strategies through which a common sense of belonging is evoked by building on the narrative of a shared national past. The *renationalization* process operates based on a clearly constructed 'Us' (good people with fundamental Christian values) versus 'Them' (immoral homosexuals that pose a threat to the integrity of the nation) divide, while it also makes use of national symbols, and incorporates the topoi of *children*, *family*, *future* characteristic of nationalistic narratives.

In Chapter 6, I analyze how a rhetoric of fear is created by scapegoating sexual minorities. The analysis will make use of theoretical notions such as *othering*, and the analytical categories of distancing and authorization, while it will point to the heterosexist gender dichotomy that stands at the base of the pro-Referendum discourse, and leaves no space for gender fluidity or gender nonconformity.

Chapter 7 will present the anti-Referendum discourse by addressing the dominant values (tolerance) assumed by these voices, the more efficient and complex use of social media, while it will also draw a parallel between the strategies used in the pro-Referendum discourse since topoi that can be associated with the nation, and even a rhetoric of fear can be identified in the discourses advocating against the Referendum.

In the concluding chapter of the thesis (Chapter 8), I will try to point out, based on the analyzed pro- and anti-Referendum discourses, the ways in which right-wing populist strategies can be applied even to a context where the initiator is not a political party. On a more conceptual, and Romanian context-specific note, I will try to find connections between the low voter turnout and the dominant understanding of sexuality.

2. The political and social context of the Referendum

2.1 Social events leading up to the Referendum

On the evening of October 30, 2015, the Romanian metalcore band Goodbye to Gravity performed an album release concert at the Colectiv nightclub in Bucharest. As the end of the show was approaching, during one of the songs, pyrotechnic effects were displayed. The sparks of the fireworks shortly caught fire and reached the ceiling covered with acoustic foam, parts of which started to fall on the people in the club, while flammable toxic gas started coming down the ceiling. There were no emergency exits in the nightclub. 26 people lost their lives that night, and 38 others died at the hospital in the following months;¹ the fire killed a total of 64 people and injured another 147².

Although the incident took place in the largest city of Romania, Bucharest, the hospitals from the capital were not prepared, nor equipped to adequately treat such a large number of burn victims. The official authorities told the press that the Romanian hospitals “have everything they need³”, and in relation to the option of transporting those injured to other countries, the Romanian Minister of Health Nicolae Băncicioiu declared:

Experts from several countries came up with this idea. After they saw that these were cases they had not encountered before, they gave up. Moreover, I have already said, and I will say it again, we did not oppose any help. And we are thankful for those who offered their help.⁴

One week after the Colectiv tragedy, as the number of the deceased was increasing, and with a lot of people still in critical condition, “a group of the civil society: Romanians from European institutions, from the communities of the diaspora, non-governmental associations and

¹ <https://www.romania-insider.com/the-colectiv-tragedy-in-romania-people-had-153-seconds-to-get-out-of-the-deadly-club> (last accessed on: April 22, 2018)

² https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/zn8zmy/colectiv-club-survivors-876 (last accessed on: April 22, 2018)

³ <https://www.liberties.eu/ro/news/ajutor-raniti-romania-spitale-strainatate/5889> (last accessed on: April 22, 2018)

⁴ <https://www.gandul.info/tragedia-din-clubul-colectiv/de-ce-nu-a-cerut-romania-ajutor-international-cat-nu-era-prea-tarziu-cine-raspunde-14877348> (last accessed on: April 22, 2018)

organizations⁵” urged in an open letter the officials of the Ministry of Health, Nicolae Băncicioiu, Romanian Minister of Health and Raed Arafat, Secretary of State, Head of Emergency Situations of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Romania, to request and accept the help of other countries. After that, 21 of the victims were transported to hospitals from Belgium, Germany, Netherlands and Israel, however, three of these victims died on their way to the hospitals.⁶

A medic of the Emergency Hospital for Plastic Surgery and Burns in Bucharest (Spitalul Clinic de Urgență de Chirurgie Plastică Reparatrice și Arsuri) came forward in an interview, and told to the press that some deaths could have been avoided as at least three burn victims died only at their hospital due to bad sanitary conditions:

At our Hospital for Burns, most of them died from infections with various bacteria, the most aggressive being *P. aeruginosa*. I speak with certainty about the Hospital for Burns, but I know from my colleagues from other hospitals that the situation is similar (...) In the civilized world, patients do not die from these infections. I do not want to invoke now studies from US or to discuss figures, but the survival rate is much higher there (...) Here, those who escaped from the fire were killed by the bacteria that infect the hospitals, and none of the bosses of the sanitary system had the courage to say that.⁷

Other doctors from the hospital talked to the press following the above interview saying that they had informed the competent authorities before the Colectiv tragedy about the sanitary conditions, and that they needed a new hospital. The doctors also said that they suggested to the families to transport the burn victims to hospitals from other countries if they can afford it, before the Minister of Health agreed to accept the help that was offered⁸. A few months later, the Hospital for Burns had to close a burns ward after one of the medics posted online a footage of patient being “eaten alive” by maggots⁹.

⁵ <http://www.apador.org/apel-catre-banicioiu-si-arafat-sa-trimita-raniti-din-colectiv-in-strainatate/> (last accessed on: April 22, 2018)

⁶ <https://www.mediafax.ro/social/tobosarul-goodbye-to-gravity-a-intrat-in-stop-cardiorespirator-in-aerona-va-care-trebuia-sa-l-trasporte-in-elvetia-avionul-intors-din-drum-14878274> (last accessed on: April 22, 2018)

⁷ <https://www.tolo.ro/2015/12/03/colectiv-medic-de-la-spitalul-de-arsi-i-am-salvat-dintr-o-bomba-de-foc-si-au-murit-intr-o-bomba-cu-microbi/> (last accessed on: April 22, 2018)

⁸ <https://www.gandul.info/tragedia-din-clubul-colectiv/unii-raniti-din-colectiv-au-murit-din-cauza-infectiilor-din-spitale-medic-i-am-spus-ministrului-banicioiu-ca-ar-trebuie-transferati-in-strainatate-14907225> (last accessed on: April 22, 2018)

⁹ <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/weird-news/hospital-closes-ward-after-horri-fying-8455238> (last accessed on: April 22, 2018)

Prior to the process in which the weaknesses of the healthcare system were gradually exposed, thousands of people went to the streets for peaceful protests in Bucharest, and called for the resignation of Prime Minister at the time, Victor Ponta and District 4 mayor, Cristian Popescu Piedone for letting corruption take over.¹⁰ Piedone allegedly granted the operating license for the Colectiv club without the fulfilment of the legal and safety requirements.¹¹ As a result of the protests, on November 4th both Prime Minister Victor Ponta, who had already been under pressure to resign from the President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis, and District 4, mayor Cristian Popescu Piedone resigned from their positions, the latter saying that he assumes the moral blame for the tragedy.¹²

The protests, however, continued even after their resignation, and the demands were very simple: “they should all leave” and “corruption must end”. Having no political platform other than social media, the protestors were called “the silent minority, which represents the people who don’t have political sympathies and are generally fed up with all the political class and the ineptitude of the public administration as a whole.”¹³

The masses also criticized the Orthodox Church for being absent from the public space in the aftermath of the tragedy, and following statements such as “people should go to church instead of clubs” made by the Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, the tension increased. In the light of the news that Colectiv victims were dying due to the conditions of the Romanian healthcare system, a leading message of the protests became: “We want hospitals, not cathedrals”.¹⁴ The cathedral referred to by the protestors was the People’s Salvation Cathedral (inaugurated in December 2018) that was under construction at the time of the tragedy, intended to become the Romanian “national cathedral” and the largest Orthodox church in the world when finished in 2024. The protestors voiced their discontent and criticism about how the Cathedral was being built with the money of the state, while people were dying as the healthcare system failed to provide the

¹⁰ <https://www.romania-insider.com/the-silent-minority-awakens-colectiv-club-tragedy-brings-thousands-to-the-streets-for-peaceful-protests-in-bucharest> (last accessed on: April 22, 2018)

¹¹ <https://www.maszol.ro/index.php/tarsadalom/55625-b-nvadi-eljaras-indult-cristian-popescu-piedone-ellen-is> (last accessed on: April 22, 2018)

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/04/romanian-government-resigns-nightclub-fire-victor-ponta> (last accessed on: April 22, 2018)

¹³ <https://www.romania-insider.com/the-silent-minority-awakens-colectiv-club-tragedy-brings-thousands-to-the-streets-for-peaceful-protests-in-bucharest> (last accessed on: April 22, 2018)

¹⁴ <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/social/colectiv-momentul-vrem-spitale-nu-catedrale-466372> (last accessed on: April 22, 2018)

necessary conditions: “[o]f the \$125 million spent so far, three quarters has come from taxpayers, in a country where hospitals, roads and education are desperately underfunded.”¹⁵ The aftermath of the Colectiv club tragedy was among the first times when the public discourse explicitly turned against the Romanian Orthodox Church associating it with the corrupt political system (Sutu 2018: 111).

2.2 The political stage and the Referendum

After the tragic event of the Colectiv club fire and the mass protests that took place in November 2015, as a result of which the Romanian Prime Minister resigned, and the Orthodox Church received strong criticism for being part of the corrupt state machinery, the Orthodox priests encouraged parishioners during the Christmas mass to back a campaign for changing the constitution and clarify the definition of marriage.¹⁶ According to INS (National Institute of Statistics), based on the data of the 2011 census, 86.5% of those who declared their religious beliefs said that they were Orthodox.¹⁷ Therefore, it is safe to assume that the clergy was able to address a large audience, even outside the church: “[p]riests in the Iasi region in the east of the country, while blessing people’s houses for the Epiphany Day – a common tradition in Romania – used the occasion to ask them to back amendments to the fundamental law, according to media reports.”¹⁸

At the same time, an NGO uniting religious and conservative groups called *Coaliția pentru Familie* (Coalition for Family) appeared in the public space with the aim to modify the definition of marriage and of the family in the Constitution through a citizen’s initiative. By February 2016, the 80,000 volunteers working for the Coalition for Family gathered more than 2.16 million signatures¹⁹, and this number reached a total of 3,000,000 signatures by the summer of the same year. In accordance with the Romanian legal requirements, a referendum can only be held if the

¹⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/03/world/europe/romania-bucharest-cathedral.html> (last accessed on: April 22, 2018)

¹⁶ <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/01/08/romanian-conservatives-try-not-to-allow-same-sex-marriage-01-07-2016/> (last accessed on: April 22, 2018)

¹⁷ <https://actmedia.eu/daily/final-results-of-the-population-and-housing-census-romania-had-over-20-121-million-inhabitants-in-october-2011/46970> (last accessed on: April 22, 2018)

¹⁸ <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/01/08/romanian-conservatives-try-not-to-allow-same-sex-marriage-01-07-2016/> (last accessed on: April 22, 2018)

¹⁹ <https://www.romania-insider.com/romanias-coalition-for-family-gathers-more-signatures-for-constitution-amendment-against-same-sex-marriage> (last accessed on: April 24, 2018)

initiative is “supported by at least 500,000 citizens who have the right to vote.”²⁰ The president of the initiative committee Mihai Gheorghiu summed up the goal of the Referendum:

We have a definition of marriage in the Civil Code, which is made in these terms – the union between a man and a woman – and we have the current constitutional definition which speaks about spouses in generic terms. We basically want to harmonize the two definitions by including the definition of the Civil Code, article 258, in the Romanian Constitution.²¹

As the Coalition for Family defined itself as a coalition of several groups, its transnational connections were also revealed, and it became associated with four American anti-LGBT groups active in Romania (ADF International, Liberty Counsel, the World Congress of Families and the European Center for Law and Justice).²² The Romanian *vice.com* made a connection between the Romanian Pro Vita Association (important part of the Coalition for Family) and the dynamics applied in Russia in terms of how ideological messages are transmitted through the Orthodox Church.²³ In another article published by *vice.com*, the foundational arguments of the Pro Vita Association are discussed based on a 160 pages material entitled *Restoring the Natural Order. An agenda for Romania*.²⁴ The Association has a clear anti-abortion agenda as it wants to protect the value of the lives of born and unborn children. In the material analyzed by *vice.com*, they claim that the use of contraceptives is detrimental for the concept of human dignity as it transforms people into objects; it leads to a misconception of human sexuality as sexual education would be included in the curricula and even those opposing it would have to learn it; it opens the door for accepting homosexuality and pedophilia; it increases the number of abortions and encourages conjugal infidelity. The manifesto also argues that feminism encourages women to dress and behave like men, and pursue their own professional careers, while raising children requires time

²⁰ <https://www.romania-insider.com/romanias-coalition-for-family-gathers-more-signatures-for-constitution-amendment-against-same-sex-marriage> (last accessed on: April 24, 2018)

²¹ <https://www.romania-insider.com/romanias-coalition-for-family-supports-constitution-amendment-against-same-sex-marriage> (last accessed on: April 24, 2018)

²² <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/09/27/american-anti-lgbt-groups-battling-same-sex-marriage-romania> (last accessed on: April 24, 2018)

²³ <https://www.vice.com/ro/article/53bkmz/cine-sunt-oamenii-din-spatele-coalitiei-pentru-familie> (last accessed on: April 24, 2018)

²⁴ <https://www.vice.com/ro/article/9k5gjp/documentul-sters-de-pro-vita-impotriva-femeilor> (last accessed on: April 24, 2018)

and personal implication, therefore, a full-time job is not an option for both parents when someone needs to take care of the children and the household.²⁵

In October 2016, when the 3,000,000 signatures were collected, during a press conference, the President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis expressed his views on the issue of the Constitutional Referendum not by discussing the traditional family, but by highlighting the importance of tolerance towards minority groups. By doing so, he became the first Romanian president to openly address the question of LGBT rights:

In this context, I think it is important to reiterate one thing I believe in. I belong to, I come from a minority, from an ethnic minority and from a religious minority. I think we have to come back to what is called tolerance and acceptance of the other. Accepting the other with their good and bad. We are not all alike. Not all ethnic groups and all religious groups are alike. It is wrong to obey or go on the path of religious fanaticism and ultimate demands. I do not believe in them and I do not support them. I am an advocate of tolerance, trust and openness towards the other.²⁶

The Parliament delayed the ratification of the proposal several times during the following year, but in the spring of 2018, news about a Referendum potentially held in May were leaked to the press. President Iohannis was asked to comment on the news, in response to which he explained that his jurisdiction does not include making any legal steps in this regard:

The Referendum was demanded by an important number of citizens, and, when the Parliament will decide that there is a need for it, this referendum will certainly take place. Here the role of the president apparently is being diminished by the steps taken by the Parliament, the legislation is still in circuit, and we will see how it will be finalized.²⁷

On a personal note, he added: “As it was presented to me, it will not be promulgated. I have some dissatisfaction with it, and I will ask for the Constitutional Court’s opinion.”

²⁵ <https://www.vice.com/ro/article/9k5gjp/documentul-sters-de-pro-vita-impotriva-femeilor> (last accessed on: April 24, 2018)

²⁶ <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/social/k-iohannis-eu-sunt-adeptul-tolerantei-591905> (last accessed on: April 24, 2018)

²⁷ <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-politic-22400318-iohannis-despre-mitingul-psd-privind-familia-traditionala-vedem-presedintele-ataca-ccr-legea-referendumului.htm> (last accessed on: April 27, 2018)

In 2016, the Social Democratic Party (PSD) won the parliamentary elections with 45 percent of the total number of votes. The ongoing corruption cases of its member and its leader, Liviu Dragnea were overlooked as they promised to the voters of the second-poorest country in the EU to increase wages and pensions without considering the consequences of these actions in terms of the broader economy of Romania. As political analyst, Radu Magdin points out: “the PSD is a catch-all party: its values are conservative, its economic policy is liberal and it has a social, left-leaning rhetoric when it comes to public policies.”²⁸ Throughout the years, PSD as well as the country were forced to face the social and economic consequences of these *catch-all* politics as PSD was unable to align its action with the values of the EU, while corruption took over within the party. The increasing demographic crisis of Romania was also often associated with the bad governing by PSD as between 2007 and 2017, more than 3.4 million Romanians (17% of the population) left the country in search of a better life, this becoming “the second greatest number of emigrants after Syria, and this from a country not torn by war.”²⁹ On August 10, 2018 a mass demonstration against corruption, low wages and PSD itself, entitled *Diaspora at Home* was organized in the capital of Romania where 100,000 protesters gathered.

At the end of August 2018, the ruling Social Democratic Party (PSD) offered its support for the Referendum, and they pushed it through the senate where PSD has a majority. There was only one political party, the Save Romania Union (USR), who voted against the amendment; the leader of the party Dan Barna accused PSD of opportunism:

This divisive referendum will solve none of Romania’s real problems. The only reason the PSD wants this referendum to be held is to distract attention from its ongoing attack on the independence of the justice system.³⁰

The Government issued an Emergency Ordinance on September 18, 2018 that allowed the Referendum to take place on two days, October 6 and 7, 2018, and allotted EUR 35.2 million its organization³¹. The Government meeting also determined the question Romanian voters were

²⁸ <https://www.politico.eu/article/pragmatism-is-a-winner-for-romanian-left-social-democrats-psd-corruption-scandal-liviu-dragnea-victor-ponta-elections/> (last accessed on: April 27, 2018)

²⁹ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2018/08/31/romania-protests-and-the-psd-understanding-the-deep-malaise-that-now-exists-in-romanian-society/> (last accessed on: April 27, 2018)

³⁰ <https://emerging-europe.com/news/romania-set-for-divisive-referendum/> (last accessed on: April 27, 2018)

³¹ <https://www.romania-insider.com/romania-referendum-family-cost> (last accessed on: April 27, 2018)

required to answer: “Do you agree with the Law on the revision of the Romanian Constitution in the form adopted by the Parliament?”³²”

Those opposing the Referendum urged people to boycott the ballot by staying home and not voting as “restricting the definition of family to one based on a marriage between a man and a woman would also hurt single parents, non-married couples and other non-traditional parenting units, as well as same-sex couples.”³³”

The Referendum on the redefinition of the family, held on October 6 and 7, 2018 failed as only 20.41 percent of the Romanians cast a ballot, while a participation of at least 30 percent was required for the Referendum to be valid. After the results of the Referendum were made public, the leader of the National Liberal Party (PNL), Ludovic Orban said many Romanians who would have supported the goal of the Referendum did not vote in order to get back at the governing party: “people sanctioned the PSD as it was obvious that the PSD promoted the referendum and tried to use it to their political advantage.”³⁴”

At the end of 2018, the Coalition for Family changed its name, and became the ÎMPREUNĂ (‘TOGETHER) Civic Platform; while they run their Facebook page under the old name, all of the content published is signed with their new name, and they closed the Coalition for Family website as it was replaced by the ÎMPREUNĂ (TOGETHER) Civic Platform website. In their mission statement, they write that they support the fundamental values of the Romanian civilization, such as those related to family or marriage³⁵. According to their Facebook page, lately they have been defending “the children of Romania and their identity”, as they have refused “any interference of the gender ideology into the educational process in Romania”.

³² <http://gov.ro/ro/media/comunicate/comunicat-de-presa-edinta-de-guvern-guvernul-a-adoptat-actele-normative-necesare-bunei-organizari-a-referendumului-pentru-revizuirea-constitutiei&page=1> (last accessed on: April 27, 2018)

³³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-romania-gaymarriage/romania-sets-date-for-referendum-to-block-gay-marriage-idUSKCN1LY2KB> (last accessed on: April 27, 2018)

³⁴ <https://www.politico.eu/article/romania-same-sex-marriage-referendum-fails-due-to-low-turnout/> (last accessed on: April 27, 2018)

³⁵ <http://platforma-impreuna.ro/misiune/> (last accessed on: April 27, 2018)

2.3 The fundamental understandings of sexuality in Romania

In order to outline the wider context for the events leading up to the Referendum as well as for its failure, there is need for a historical overview of the societal and religious forces underlying the question of reproduction and sexuality in Romania. Some of the answers can be found in the Communist period and the infamous 1966 decree to ban abortions, “an extreme instance of state intrusion into the bodies and lives of its citizens” (Kligman 1998: 6).

Prior to 1966, abortion was legal in Romania, the country having “one of the most liberal abortion policies in Europe” (Pop-Eleches 2006: 748), that resulted in the abortion of about 80% of all conceptions by 1965 (Berelson 1979) and one of the lowest fertility rates in the world (Kligman 1998). Ceaușescu’s Decree 770 of 1966 declared abortion and any type of family planning illegal, while the immediate stop of all abortions was ordered, the state demanding “each family produce four or five children as a way of forcing population growth” (Kligman 1998: 1). “Legal abortions were allowed only for women over 45, women with more than four children, women with health problems, and women with pregnancies resulting from rape and incest” (Pop-Eleches 2006: 748). Illegal abortions became widespread and the resulting social stigma was also increasing, leading to significant physical and psychological risks for the women in question (Kligman 1998).

I argue that an important effect of the Decree was the societal tabooization of sexuality. Publications on sex were mostly banned (censorship was especially focused on eradicating any type of obscenity and pornography, cf. Corobca 2014), and although there were several sex manuals published after 1966, they focused on the anatomic and reproductive aspects, transmitting what Biebuyck calls a *communist sexuality*, “the ideological construct of normal sexuality disseminated by communist states” (Biebuyck 2010: 51). The language of the bill and its implementation, as well as the discourses supporting it are characterized by an expression of “a civic form of nationalism” (Iordache 2014: 5). Recollections of the period include the description of a culture of silence within families on the subject: parents did not discuss the issue with the

children, and even if they did, they talked about sexual life as something shameful, dirty and risky.³⁶

As Baumeister and Twenge argue, each instance of legal restrictions of birth control and abortion “can also be interpreted as contributing to the suppression of female sexuality” (Baumeister and Twenge 2002: 192). They also stress that such laws did have the indirect effect of restraining female sexuality as the burden of an unwanted pregnancy had to be carried by women: “the costs of sexual mistakes have always been greater for women than men” (Baumeister and Twenge 2002: 196), and as such, Romania after 1966 “constitutes an extreme example of a communist state’s attempts to reconcile a pro-natalist drive with a professional commitment to gender equality” (Biebuyck 2010: 50).

In a 2015 article, Massino and Popa argue that, although the transition from communism ended in a number of respects when Romania joined the EU in 2007, “the process of reconfiguring gender roles and relations continues to unfold” (Massino–Popa 2015: 172) since the legislations promoting gender equality introduced as a measure to gain EU membership have not been reinforced. Massino and Popa identify three types of gaps resulted from this dissonance between the legislative and social life of women: *compliance gap* (due to budget cuts, the agencies designed to enforce gender legislation are unable to fulfill their mandates), *awareness gap* (women are unfamiliar with the existing legislation) and *confidence gap* (lack of faith in the political process). Even if the transition to pluralism has its wide range of guaranteed rights and opportunities for women (e.g. reproductive rights, different freedoms), new uncertainties and insecurities have emerged that often lead to a turning back to well-established, familiar practices and patterns, while the traditional discourses on gender, “alongside the media’s valorization of youth, sexuality, and beauty offer women and girls limiting ideals of womanhood” (Massino–Popa 2015: 172).

Another important aspect of the tabooization of sexuality within the Romanian society is the issue of sexual education. As stated above, in the Communist period, sexual education focused on the anatomic and reproductive aspects according to the ideal of *communist sexuality*. Nevertheless, since the fall of Communism, the issue of sexual education has become even more controversial, as several Christian organizations oppose the introduction of subjects particularly

³⁶ <https://atelier.liternet.ro/articol/6585/Mihaela-Miroiu-Robert-Serban-Alexandru-Ofrim/Sexul-in-comunism.html> (last accessed on: May 18, 2019).

aiming sexual education in schools. The representative of the Romanian Orthodox Church has declared that such classes can become the tool of a “homosexual, transsexual, transgender type of education” and that the Church must stand for what is “natural”.³⁷ The subject stirred up a heated public debate recently due to a draft legislation called “A bill for the innocence of children” initiated by a PSD politician in 2016 which would have banned any type of sexual education in schools without the written consent of the parents and would have had serious consequences (up to 2 years of imprisonment) for the teachers who didn’t abide by it. In this debate, the Christian organizations opposing the introduction of sexual education classes into public schools pointed out the need for the preservation of the innocence of the children (as the name of the bill itself states) and the authority of parents over educators in the matter, but an equally significant aspect they stressed was the imminent danger of homosexual propaganda that – in their opinion – would surely be part of such education. The fear of homosexual propaganda and of homosexuality itself is further analyzed in the following section focusing on sexual minorities in Romania and their social status.

2.4 Sexual minorities in Romania

It is not my aim to give a thorough presentation of the history of social attitudes towards sexual minorities in Romania, nevertheless I point out some important historical instances that led to the current situation of such communities. The first instance of criminalization of homosexuality occurred in 1937 with the introduction of the Romanian Civil Code, however, it only punished homosexual acts in the public space (c.f. Andreescu 2011: 211). Based on the 1948 Penal Code, the 1957 changes in legislation, as well as under article 220 of the 1969 revised Penal Code, homosexuality was criminalized and severe legal sanctions were applied (Vlăduț 2004), homosexual relations being punishable by imprisonment from one to five years (Andreescu 2011: 212). This aspect must also be considered in the above presented pro-natalist framework of the Ceaușescu regime focusing on reproductive sexuality and policies aiming to increase the national birth rate.

³⁷ <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/educatie/de-ce-este-atat-de-controversata-educatia-sexuala-in-romania-897395> (last accessed on: May 19, 2019)

After the regime change, starting with the mid 1990s, progressive legislative changes were made, however, as Andreescu points out, this was mainly “due to international pressure and not because the political elites were convinced that the civil rights of all citizens should be recognized” (Andreescu 2011: 212). As Romania applied for EU membership in 1995, having to prove that sexual minority rights are not violated by the country’s legislation, the government adopted Emergency Ordinance 89/2001 in January, 2001 (coming into force in January 2002), which repealed article 200 of the Penal Code and regulated other aspects of sex offense (Andreescu 2011). With this, Romania became one of the last countries in Europe to decriminalize same-sex relationships³⁸.

According to Moraru, there is no significant study concerning the number of homosexuals in Romania, only estimates of international studies (Moraru 2010). Social attitudes towards homosexuality have been analyzed mainly based on the European Social Survey and the European Values Survey. The results of such analyses show that Romania is one of the less liberal European countries regarding the issue of “justification” of homosexuality, (non-)preference for homosexual neighbors, attitudes towards adoption by same-sex couples and social acceptance of gay men and lesbian women (Takács–Szalma 2019). The Eurobarometer survey carried out in 2015 shows that in Romania, only 36% of the respondents feel that gay, lesbian and bisexual people should have the same rights as heterosexual people (as opposed to the European mean of 71%), and only 27% would be comfortable with having a gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or transsexual colleague at work.³⁹

Religiosity has a role in shaping social attitudes towards homosexuality. Takács and Szalma state that “belonging to the Orthodox Church was shown to have a more negative effect on homosexuality related attitudes in Romania than belonging to the Roman Catholic Church in Hungary” (Takács–Szalma 2019: 96). As we have seen above, the Romanian Orthodox Church, one of the most trusted institutions in the country,⁴⁰ has been very actively advocating against the

³⁸ <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/08/655528971/romanian-referendum-that-would-define-marriage-fails?t=1559803089553> (last accessed on: May 21, 2019).

³⁹ <http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/SPECIAL/surveyKy/2077> (last accessed on: May 21, 2019)

⁴⁰ <https://www.g4media.ro/sondaj-de-opinie-inscop-topul-incraderii-in-institutii-interne-si-internationale-armata-biserica-si-jandarmeria-pe-primele-locuri-nato-si-parlamentul-european.html> (last accessed on: May 21, 2019).

rights of LGBTQ people, especially in rural areas⁴¹. Same-sex marriage and civil unions are not accepted, and the visibility of sexual minorities is feeble as very few Romanians are willing to come out in this particular social climate. Nevertheless, the past years have seen an increase in LGBTQ visibility, as Bucharest has been organizing an annual Pride since 2005, with Cluj-Napoca joining in 2017.⁴²

In this chapter I aimed to outline the historical and social events preceding the Coalition for Family's initiative, as well as the political and economic situation of Romania. The section on the fundamental understanding of sexuality in the country has the role of showcasing the particular legacy of communism in this regard, while it also serves as a central point of reference in the concluding chapter. The section on the legal and societal situation of sexual minorities shows that the low visibility and representation of homosexuality makes it into an adequate target for the scapegoating narrative of the pro-Referendum discourse.

⁴¹ <https://slate.com/human-interest/2014/12/gay-in-romania-legal-status-and-lived-experience.html> (last accessed on: May 21, 2019).

⁴² <http://clujpride.ro/ce-este-cluj-pride/> (last accessed on: May 21, 2019).

3. Theoretical framework

The literature on populism often makes use of a *formalistic* approach when it defines populism as the “politics of dichotomizing the political space into an ‘us’ (the pure people) versus ‘them’ (the corrupt elite or the foreigner)” (Farris 2017: 57); in this framework populism is understood as the form, while nationalism operates as the content. According to Laclau, populism is not a “type of movement”, but a “political logic” (Laclau 2005: 117). Farris argues that for Laclau the formal articulation of populist demands is more important than the specific political program and agenda (Farris 2017: 61-62), however, in Laclau’s understanding, “populism’s ideological content and stylistic form are interdependent” (Ballacci 2017: 53).

In her 2015 book *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*, Ruth Wodak defines right-wing populism as a political ideology with its own form *and* content “that rejects existing political consensus and usually combines laissez-faire liberalism and anti-elitism” (Wodak 2015: 32) making an appeal to the common people considered to be quasi-homogenous. In the following two sections I will outline the constituent elements and the dominant rhetoric of right-wing populism as these are discussed by Wodak in the above-mentioned work; in the third section of this chapter I will apply these theoretical groundings to the specific Romanian context of the Referendum.

3.1 The mechanisms of right-wing populism

As briefly shown above, there is an inclination in the literature on populism to define populist politics rather by their form than their content, according to Wodak, in the case of right-wing populist politics the specific content constitutes a common ground. The fundamental similarity of right-wing parties is that they construct fear based on real or imagined dangers, and “propose scapegoats that are blamed for threatening or actually damaging” the society (Wodak 2015: 24). Furthermore, she even lists the specific phenomena characteristic of right-wing populist rhetoric in terms of its content: (1) the existence of a homogenous *populum* (*Volk*) defined along nativist criteria; (2) *threat scenarios* constructed based on a ‘We’ that represents the homeland threatened by a ‘Them’, dangerous outsiders; (3) *revisionist histories* that imply a belief in the common

narrative of the past; (4) *conspiracies* that have a particular importance in creating fear; (5) *traditional, conservative values and morals*; and (6) *common sense simplistic explanations and solutions*, as well as the need for a *charismatic leader* (Wodak 2015: 104–105).

A tendency of what Wodak terms as *renationalization* can be observed across the EU in the context of which the conceptual borders of the nation are reiterated, allowing thus for the establishment of an ‘*Us*’ and the ‘*Others*’ who represent the perceived danger constructed on xenophobic bases, or by endorsing a traditional Christian (fundamentalist) agenda. In cases when the ‘*Other*’ is another nation, the imagining of the national homogeneity relies on exaggerating the distinctions between the nation representing ‘*Us*’ and the nation representing the ‘*Other*’, while this homogeneity is further established through a “hegemonic identity narrative, encompassing a collective past, a collective present and future, a common culture, a common territory” (Wodak 2015: 118).

According to Wodak, nationalism is reinvented with the increasing role of political unions such as the European Union, while there is also a global tendency of emerging nationalist movements in the context of which identities are defined on the basis of nationalistic, religious and ethnic categories (Wodak 2015: 109). Wodak points out that although feelings of *Europeanness* create a strong *imagined community* through “discursive strategies of positive-Self and negative-Other representations” (Wodak 2015: 119), national identities are “dynamic, fluid and fragmented” (Wodak 2015: 109), and the boundaries between ‘*Us*’ and ‘*Them*’ are similarly always renegotiated as they are constructed in the everyday discourse depending on the “cultural resources they have access to and the structural conditions they are placed” (Lamont–Molnar 2002: 167, quoted by Wodak 2015: 119). Although the European Union has its own flag and anthem (establishing this way a *banal nationalism*), the sense of unity cannot be achieved, and the Euroscepticism prevails as the EU was the concept of hegemonic European identity was based on an “elite-centred vision” (Smith 1995: 126–128, quoted by Wodak 2015: 75).

Since contemporary capitalist societies promote and appreciate the ideological value of tolerance, new discursive strategies need to be applied for conveying exclusionary messages. Since being directly associated with discriminatory belief systems conflicts with the values of liberalism, “discriminatory utterances tend to be ‘coded’ in official rhetoric so as to avoid sanctions” (Wodak 2015: 85) by making use of pragmatic devices comprehensible only to those who are part of the

‘We’. Wodak argues for the use of *discourse-historical approach (DHA)* for the in-depth analysis right-wing contents as it focuses on the use of power-dependent semiotic means to construct presentation of ‘Us’ (the good people) and ‘Them’ (scapegoats) (Wodak 2015: 88).

When right-wing populism is performed, the presence of a charismatic figure is indispensable, as this leader is someone who understands the needs of people and can be seen as ‘one of us’, and who are “not elitist or intellectual, but firmly rooted in common-sense opinions and beliefs”. The leadership traits of these charismatic figures through which the actual performance of the actors can be overlooked are:

1. Charismatic leaders have a mission, as savior of people.
2. Charismatic leaders portray themselves as ordinary men, as merely obeying the wishes of the people, and thus also as having symbiotic relationship with the people they represent.
3. Enemies are targeted, indeed demonized.
4. Charismatic personalities have great personal presence, which is frequently described as ‘magnetism’.

(Eatwell 2007: 6–11, quoted by Wodak 2015: 191–192)

Wodak argues that the media transformed the way politics work by creating a “media-democracy” that instead of the political process focuses on the individual performance of politics (Wodak 2015: 36).

3.2 The rhetoric of fear and right-wing populism

Indifferent of the chosen strategies in terms of their nature, a common characteristic of right-wing populist parties is that, in order to gain as many votes as possible, they (1) create of politics of fear based by *scapegoating* some kind of ethnic/religious/linguistic/political minority; and (2) endorse an *arrogance of ignorance* (Wodak 2015: 25) appealing to common-sense and anti-intellectualism.

Fear does not emerge from nowhere, and is not solely based on the scapegoating strategies applied as discussed above, as right-wing populist politics build on already existing socio-political concerns resulted from disaffection and pessimism, such as: “fear of losing one’s job; fear of

‘stranger’ (i.e. migrants); fear of losing national autonomy; fear of losing old traditions and values; fear of climate change; disappointment and even disgust with mainstream politics and corruption; anger about the growing gap between rich and poor; disaffection due to the lack of transparency of political decision making and so forth” (Rydrøgen 2007, quoted by Wodak 2015: 26–27). In the populist rhetoric the foreigner (who for some reasons does not conform to the values of the people, ‘Us’) already threatened the integrity of the nation, and the élites are responsible for this, so they become *secondary others* for accepting cultural diversity, as they are being blamed for Europeanization and globalization as well.

Right-wing populist parties are more and more successful due to their ability to create fear by addressing the collective common ground. Altheide argues that citizens share the perspective of fear, “while liberals and conservatives may differ in their object of fear, all sides express many fears” (Altheide 2002: 3, quoted by Wodak 2015: 28).

3.3 Religious fundamentalism and right-wing populism

In this section I will discuss how the different content-specific elements and mechanisms of right-wing populism can be applied to the Romanian context of the Referendum. I argue that, although, the Referendum was not initiated by a political party, but by the fundamentalist religious organization Coalition for Family who had the constant support of the Orthodox Church, the very same characteristics and rhetoric can be identified as in the case of right-wing populist parties.

As the following chapters will show, in the discourses emerging around the Referendum, there was a *renationalizing* process at play attested by the frequent use of nationalistic symbols, a constant argumentation constructed on the ‘Us’ (Romanians with Christian values) versus ‘Them’ (those who threaten the integrity of the nation, as well as the fundamental beliefs), and a reinforced narrative of the common past.

The high relevance of a *populum* – that is basing its existence on common-sense and traditional values, while it can be characterized by both anti-elitism and anti-intellectualism – in the Romanian context is backed up by the simple demographic data on the class division of the country:

Seven million peasants, who barely reach subsistence levels, have no idea of the difference between the political right and left, and buy on average a single toothbrush in a lifetime pose a development problem not just for Romania, but for the European Union in general. It is hard to believe that by the twenty-first century the peasant problem in Romania had not only remained unsolved, it had actually been recreated close to its historical original, in spite of efforts to eliminate rural underdevelopment (Mungiu-Pippidi 2010: 189).

As a result of this, the conflict that arises between the people of Romania and the values of the European Union is very much justified. This division is visible even on the Romanian political stage as the leader of the ruling Social Democratic Party (PSD) Liviu Dragnea has criticized the European Union⁴³, while President Klaus Iohannis's politics are pro-European; his figure might even be interpreted as an elite.

The constant socio-economic instability of the country creates a substantial fear, making the Romanian people a fitting target for the implementation of the rhetoric of fear. The image of the sexual minority of LGBTQ people is constructed through scapegoating since they are represented as a threat to the integrity of the nation and the conservative values said to be represented by the heteronormative traditional family.

Wodak also points out the need for a *charismatic leader* in right-wing populist narratives. Both scholars (Massino–Popa 2015) and the mass protests point to the fact that the trust in the Romanian political and judicial system is continuously undermined by the visible corruption in the country. In addition to this, the Referendum had the full support of the Orthodox Church from the very beginning of the initiative. Based on these, it can be argued that the role of the charismatic leader was probably assumed by the Orthodox priests the *charisma* of whom is already established by their authority in the community, while at the same time, they represent the fundamentalist religious values the Referendum is intended to protect, and they are in direct contact with the members of smaller communities being aware of their everyday problems.

In this chapter I presented the theoretical framework of right-wing populism as outlined by Wodak (2015), placing a special emphasis on the rhetoric of fear and other constituents of right-

⁴³ <https://www.france24.com/en/20190101-romania-takes-over-eu-presidency-tensions-brussels-junker> (last accessed on: May 13, 2019)

wing politics such as *renationalization*, *scapegoating*, and the *need for a charismatic leader*. I argue that the Referendum can be analyzed along these theoretical concepts as the mechanisms of right-wing populism can be identified even if this social moment was not created by a political party, but a fundamentalist religious organization.

4. Research Design and Method

The following analytical chapters (Chapters 5, 6, and 7) are intended to explore the strategies and themes most often used in the anti- and pro-Referendum discourses as seen through the lens of the conceptual framework presented in the previous chapter. I argue that although the Referendum was not initiated by a political party, the arguments that support the need for a constitutional redefinition of the family follow the right-wing populist mechanisms outlined by Wodak (2015).

In the analysis, I apply the method of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to map out how “social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted” (van Dijk 2015: 352) by text in the given social and political context. Following Fairclough critical discourse analysis is considered a framework that aims “to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by reactions of power and struggles over power” (Fairclough 1993: 135).

CDA becomes particularly relevant for the analysis of the data selected on the Referendum especially in the light of the emerging power relations in the context of this social event. Those initiating the Referendum united in a coalition of different organizations sharing the same fundamentalist religious and conservative values (including organizations from the US) and they had the support of the Orthodox Church that can personally address, as well as the moral (and according to some news sources⁴⁴, even the financial) support of the ruling Social Democratic Party (PSD). Those against the Referendum, however, did not have an institutionalized or even organized union like the Coalition for Family, therefore, the anti-Referendum discourse emerged from different sources who were not publicly coordinating between each other, yet formulated similar arguments against the constitutional redefinition of the family.

⁴⁴ <https://www.paginademedia.ro/2018/10/psd-plateste-difuzarea-unor-spoturi-spune-da-la-referendum> (last accessed on: May 5, 2019)

The analysis is carried out based on an understanding of the main principles of CDA as these are summarized by Fairclough and Wodak (1997: 271–80, quoted by van Dijk 2015: 353):

1. CDA addresses social problems
2. Power relations are discursive
3. Discourse constitutes society and culture
4. Discourse does ideological work
5. Discourse is historical
6. The link between text and society is mediated
7. Discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory
8. Discourse is a form of social action.

Based on the above tenets, the analysis will aim to address the emerging pro- and anti-Referendum discourses considering the specific Romanian social and political context, as well as the discursive representations of the Romanian reality constructed differently by the voices *for* and *against* the Referendum. Since the subject of the Referendum was the redefinition of family as the union *between a woman and a man*, the analysis will place particular emphasis on how the different notions on the institution of family are represented in these discourses.

Given the fact that the Coalition for Family was the union of several organizations, with the same fundamentalist religious values, created at first with the sole purpose to initiate the Referendum, having the full support of the Orthodox Church from the very beginning, it can be argued that they were in a dominant and central position when the discourses on the Referendum started to emerge. Although, the voices of those against the Referendum were far from being as organized as the Coalition for Family (no organizations or interest groups united for this purpose), their messages soon gained broad attention, especially when the two conflicting discourses met on social media where both sides had to make use of similar assets.

The analysis looks at the data provided by different Facebook pages that construct the pro- and anti-Referendum discourses: Coalition for Family (Coaliția pentru Familie) with 88K followers, Referendum for Romania (Referendum pentru România) with 23K followers, Alba Iulia Center of Family Pastoral Care (Gyulafehérvári Családpasztorációs Központ) with 12K followers, Boicot (Boycott) with 5.8K followers, MozaiQ with 20K followers, RiseOUT 7.9K followers, Accept Association (Asociația Accept) with 20K followers. The data consists of materials of

different genres shared by these Facebook pages between September 1, 2018 and October 7, 2018 (the last day of the Referendum) in order to map out the argumentations based on which a mobilization to act (or to act by not acting) took place. As the thesis does not intend to address the reactions in the comment section, but aims to later view the results of the Referendum as an overall *reaction* to the discourses that emerged, the comments made under the different contents will not be analyzed, although, this perspective could offer a particular layer of interpretation in a future work.

The main argument of the thesis is that the mechanisms of right-wing populism (including a rhetoric of fear) can be identified in the pro-Referendum discourse, although the Referendum itself was not initiated by a political party, but by the Coalition for Family organization, on the basis of fundamentalist religious values, who had the continuous support of the Orthodox Church. There was also a prevailing discourse on the visible support offered by the ruling Social Democratic Party (PSD), that resulted for some in a direct association of the Referendum with the less and less popular PSD said to distract attention from allegations of corruption by advocating for the Referendum. The low voter turnout (20.4%), however, cannot be justified solely on this basis in a country where 86.5% of the population is Orthodox, and the Referendum is allegedly intended to protect Christian values. In the following chapters I will analyze both the pro- and anti-Referendum discourses to map out both the discursive strategies applied and the themes addressed that could have a particular meaning in the Romanian context.

5. Renationalization in the pro-Referendum propaganda

As pointed out in the theoretical framework, one of the main components of right-wing populist politics is the tendency of renationalization in which the nation state and the sense of belonging of its members are reinforced, in this case, by fundamentalist religious narratives. The Romanian Referendum was allegedly aimed at the constitutional redefinition of the traditional family, however, the narrative of the Coalition for Family was clearly constructed as a campaign against homosexuality, thus being only indirectly linked to the subject of the Referendum: the family. The creation of scapegoats, othering narratives and the construction of an enemy that threatens the integrity of the nation are all part of the exclusionary politics implied by populist discourses; the particular instances of these mechanisms will be addressed in the upcoming sections. The aim of this chapter is to explore the nationalistic tropes identified in the social media campaigns for the Referendum in order to track the renationalizing process in the pro-Referendum campaign, as well as to discuss the different understandings of the nation.

5.1 Showcasing the Referendum as a moment to fight for the nation

During the campaign leading up to the two days of the Referendum (October 6–7), in the audiovisual content shared on their Facebook page, the Coalition for Family provided a series of informational videos on homosexuality, adoption by same-sex couples and gender ideology, while the Referendum for Romania Facebook page mostly shared videos focusing on the idea of “defending our children” and “protecting the future of Romania”. On the morning of the Referendum, October 6, 2018 both the Coalition for Family and the Referendum for Romania Facebook pages shared the same video⁴⁵ (with a total of more than 55,000 views in March 2019) that, based on its content and timing, can be interpreted not only as a battle march, but as the concise message communicated by those campaigning for the constitutional redefinition of the family. In the following, I will examine the elements chosen to represent the nation as something its members should fight for both on a linguistic (conceptual) level and in terms of the imagery and sounds used.

⁴⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/coalitiapentrufamilie/videos/343497556396390/> (last accessed on: May 2, 2019)

Wodak (2015: 3) argues that in analyzing populist movements and their rhetoric, the specific target audience can be identified only by looking at the form and content of propaganda material. In the opening frame of the 2-minute video on a black background the text “#VOTEZDALAREFERENDUM” (‘I vote yes at the referendum’) appears; the word *yes* is written in the colors of the Romanian flag, while *referendum* is red against a white background. Besides introducing the national symbol of the flag in the opening frame, the video also addresses the audience of the social media campaign: members of the nation who are familiar with the hashtag. Moreover, the audience is potentially everyone with a sense of belonging.

The power of the video is guaranteed by a combination of visual and audio effects that are similar to trailers of action movies. The sound sets the general mood of the video characterized by an inspirational, pulsing tone that calls for urgent action – a generic feature mostly used in battle scenes. The analysis below focuses firstly on the textual level, secondly on the visual information, and some aspects of the soundtrack will also be discussed. Throughout the video the main message (which also constitutes the textual part of the Facebook post) is shown in the form of intertitles, while it is interrupted by images. In the following, I will provide a short analysis of the translation of the original text not voiced, but literally typed on the screen in the video:

Our ancestors fought in their time, for us to become a nation and a popor [people].

Now it's your time to fight for your country, Romania.

Protect and support the family based on marriage between a man and a woman.

Be a responsible citizen! It's time to act! We care about the family, and we want to protect it. We care about the future of our children!

Get your family and friends! Come and vote at the Referendum! Your vote counts!⁴⁶

The text reinforces the central motif of the battle set in motion by the sound. A sense of continuity is being evoked by linking the different temporal dimensions (see below) in which the aim remains to be the same: preserve the nation. The key components of nationalistic discourse

⁴⁶ The original text in Romanian (all texts were translated by the author): “Înaintașii noștri au luptat în vremea lor, pentru ca noi să fim o țară și un popor. Acum e timpul tău să lupți pentru țara, România. Protejează și sprijină familia întemeiată pe căsătoria dintre un bărbat și o femeie. Fii un cetățean responsabil, e timpul să acționezi! Ne pasă de familie și vrem să o apărăm. Ne pasă de viitorul copiilor noștri! Ia-ți familia și prietenii și vino și votează la referendum!”

are outlined here as understood in terms of political organization (*nation, people, country*), family and children, a national past, present and future that needs to be protected now. The illusion of an unspecified enemy is created through the reiteration of a need to protect the family, and more importantly the children who are exposed to this enemy without a name.

The language use of the text is also aiming to produce a sense of exceptionalism and the importance of the individual – something that has not been characteristic of the political narratives of the past years in Romania. There is a direct outreach to the individual as it is attested by the extensive use of the different forms of the personal pronoun *you* singular (in Romanian). The last message displayed is *Votul tău contează!* ‘Your vote counts!’, creating the illusion of regaining a long lost control of the individual over what is happening on the level of the country. However, the presence at the Referendum is not a matter of personal free choice, because those who fail to vote are not “responsible citizens”.

While the closer personal relations are all captured using the motifs of family and friends (this latter being an interpersonal relation more characteristic of the youth, with the help of which the video seems to try to reach out to the younger generation as well, usually more passive when it comes to voting⁴⁷), the sense of unity is guaranteed by showcasing the concepts of *nation, people, country*, and even *Romania* in the same segment from the beginning. In the translation of the text I kept the original Romanian term *popor* the closest equivalent of which in English is *people*, however, *popor* is a collective noun reflecting a sense of singularity as there is one *popor* that belongs to a nation, while it also carries a rather archaic tone. The Romanian Explanatory Dictionary (DEX) specifies the following primary meaning for *popor*:

1. A historical form of human community, superior to the tribe and prior to the nation, whose members live on the same territory, speak the same language and share the same cultural tradition.⁴⁸

Popor does not denote a group of individual people, but a collective entity that probably remains as imagined as the nation (see Anderson 1983). At the same time, the use of *popor* can be

⁴⁷ <https://pressone.ro/parlamentare-2016-tinerii-chiulesc-rezultatul-e-decis-de-segmentul-45-64-de-ani/> (last accessed on: March 9, 2019)

⁴⁸ <https://dexonline.ro/definitie/popor> (last accessed on: March 9, 2019)

integrated in what Wodak calls the “revival of the ‘Volk’” in which the nation state and citizenship may be linked to fundamentalist religious politics (Wodak 2015: 24).

The use of imperatives, the choice of verbs (*fight, get, come, act*) all call for urgent action and refer to the moment when this video was shared: on the morning when the polls opened. While short segments of the text discussed above are shown, powerful visual representations of the nation appear in the video that are aimed to support the message formulated on the linguistic level.

In the renationalization tendencies, different nationalist pasts are evoked (and constructed) (Wodak 2015: 25). Before any of the intertitles are shown on screen, a series of pictures aiming to evoke various historical moments of the Romanian nation are featured in order to illustrate the times when “our ancestors fought”. The frames depicting moments of the collective past are aimed to evoke the feelings of belonging as a result of which, according to Anderson, people are willing to die for the nation (Anderson 1983: 7). The choice of these images is, however, nothing more than a dramatic tactic as their sources vary both in terms of style and authenticity. The images showcasing the Medieval times of the Romanian nation are borrowed from old historical movies, therefore, instead of showing the portrait of one of the greatest Romanian historical figures, Michael the Brave (1558–1601)⁴⁹, we see the actor who played him in a movie⁵⁰. A possible reason for this might be that a real, moving human figure is more relatable than an old, Medieval portrait, and can be more easily inserted in the dynamics of the video that still urges for reflection on and action in the present moment.

Since no historical movie was made on the ruler Alexandru Ioan Cuza (1820–1873)⁵¹, the creators of the video were forced to insert his portrait; Cuza became the ruler of the Romanian Principalities after being the key figure in uniting the two, while his reforms aimed to modernize the Romanian social and political life⁵². In the chronological screening of Romanian history, we see actual photos (though colorized to emphasize the red-yellow-blue of the national flag) taken at the Great National Assembly of Alba Iulia, where on December 1, 1918, the representatives of the Romanians from Transylvania formulated a decree to unify Romania of the territories where they

⁴⁹ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Michael-prince-of-Walachia> (last accessed on: April 10, 2019)

⁵⁰ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0066078/> (last accessed on: April 10, 2019)

⁵¹ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alexandru-Ioan-Cuza> (last accessed on: April 10, 2019)

⁵² https://www.academia.edu/21419242/The_Question_of_Romanian_Union_and_Alexandru_Ioan_Cuza_s_Visit_to_Istanbul (last accessed on: April 10, 2019)

lived⁵³. This event marks the moment in which the country of Romania known today was formed; the Romanian National Day, also known as Great Union Day commemorates this⁵⁴. The source of the last images from this series of historical moments is real footage shot at the events they depict: the first is the revolution marking the end of communism in Romania⁵⁵ (see the timestamp, December 22, 1989 on the images, as well as the editorial decision to include the original audio with the crowd chanting *Suntem cu poporul!* ‘we are with the people/Volk’), as well as other non-distinctive frames featuring big crowds, most probably at events organized by the Coalition for Family. The choice of historical figures and events outlines a particular “history” of the nation in the making, a history of brave warriors fighting off enemies, whose strength arises from their unity and that is what is needed in the present: united people willing to fight for a just cause and for the future of the nation.

The message about the current need to act is supported by further pictures. First, frames of the Coalition for Family are inserted as the volunteers carry the boxes with the 3,000,000 signatures that were collected in order to initiate the process for a constitutional amendment referendum. According to Art. 150 of the Constitution of Romania, only 500,000 are required in such cases, and the high number of signatures was a particular pride and constant reference of the NGOs pushing for the organization of the referendum⁵⁶. The intertitle “Be a responsible citizen!” is followed by a picture of a carved wooden Orthodox crucifix, suggesting that being responsible is also being (Orthodox) Christian. There are close-up shots taken of people wearing traditional national folk costumes, while there are also bird’s-eye view pictures of the crowd that give a sense of universalness, because any Romanian person could be a part of that crowd. In the following frames, the only people of whom close-ups are taken are children in at least three different environments, playing joyfully, demonstrating the very thing that needs protection: their innocence. All the pictures shown in the video are blurry and covered with a dark filter, underlining the seriousness of the issue discussed.

⁵³ <http://romaniancentenary.org/1918-annus-mirabilis/> (last accessed on: April 10, 2019)

⁵⁴ <https://www.romania-insider.com/what-do-romanians-celebrate-on-their-december-1st-national-day> (last accessed on: April 11, 2019)

⁵⁵ <https://www.rferl.org/a/romania-revolution-then-and-now/29660285.html> (last accessed on: April 11, 2019)

⁵⁶ <https://www.activenews.ro/stiri-social/Coalitia-pentru-Familie-a-strans-3-MILIOANE-de-semnaturi-in-vederea-modificarii-Constitutiei-in-sprajinul-FAMILIEI-132618> (last accessed on: April 11, 2019)

The closing frame of the video consists of a picture of Michael I of Romania (1921–2017), the last King of Romania⁵⁷, and a few lines by him written next to his picture that translates: “I do not see today’s Romania as an heritage from our parents, but as a country we borrowed from our children”. Although the video starts with an overview of victorious historical events from the Romanian national past, there is a constant urge to act in the present in order to achieve similar moments of triumph. This quote by Michael I opens up a further temporal dimension by pointing to the future where the children have to live in a country shaped by the current people of Romania. The importance of this message is further underlined by the fact that the music suddenly reaches a climax and stops for a few seconds as the words appear on screen. The authority of the King is emphasized by the picture chosen by the editors: he is smiling, looking downward and reaching out his left hand, as if he were greeting his subjects, thus he is represented as a sovereign addressing his people.

Nevertheless, once the source of this quotation is examined, it becomes evident that the words were taken out of context. In 2011, Michael I gave a speech in the Romanian Parliament, where he reflected on the past, discussed the importance of development, movement, education and Romania’s membership in the European Union at length, and he stressed: “United among ourselves and with our neighbors and brothers, let us continue the effort to regain dignity and respect. [...] the most important things to acquire, after freedom and democracy, are identity and dignity.”⁵⁸ Introducing a national and historical authority in the person of Michael I, who is still very much present in the minds of those with the right to vote, can have a validating result, however, the actual context of the last Romanian King’s words outline a standpoint that is much more focused on Romania’s fight for freedom and democracy, its emerging place in Europe and the need to form strong relations with other nations. In this interpretation the focus is not on the past or the future, it is on the present: past mistakes need to be corrected in order to ensure a worthy future.

The video ends with the opening frame (see Figure 1 below):

⁵⁷ <https://emerging-europe.com/after-hours/michael-the-last-king-of-romania/> (last accessed on: April 11, 2019)

⁵⁸ <http://www.opiniastudenteasca.ro/reportaj/povesti-fara-timbru/nu-vad-romania-de-astazi-ca-pe-o-mostenire-de-la-parintii-nostri-ci-ca-pe-o-tara-pe-care-am-luat-o-cu-imprumut-de-la-copiii-nostri.html> (last accessed on: April 15, 2019)



Figure 1 The opening and ending frame of the pro-Referendum propaganda video ('I vote yes and the referendum')

The creators of this propaganda video wish to produce content that has a dramatic, yet catchy effect emphasized by the use of music and sound as well: dynamic, inspirational soundtrack reminding of grandiose historical war movies such as *Gladiator* or *Pearl Harbor*, mixing in sounds of hoofs evoking horses marching into battle, as well as the use of the original audio from the footage shot during the Romanian revolution encourage those who watch it to go and vote.

The multimedia choices made in the creative process of the video are characteristic of movie trailers. The creators of the video (who remain anonymous, and do not reference any of the materials used) based this product on some commonsense pillars of movie-making, more precisely the editing of promotional materials.

5.2 Children as symbols of the nation and the use of the national the flag

Several authors suggested that children and childhood are central to the discourses around the nation. Following Anderson, Stephens (1997) argues that one should not only have a *nationality* as they have a *gender*, but they also should have a *childhood* as this is a crucial component of national identities (Stephens 1997: 5). Pointing to the small number of works on children and nationalism in the relevant literature, Scourfield et al. suggest that “a consideration of children should be central to the study of national feeling, place-belonging, and, indeed, collective identifications of all kinds” (Scourfield et al. 2006: 1). On the other hand, children always imply

human reproduction, thus determining the role of women (see Anthias–Yuval-Davis 1989) within the collective in which “[w]omen are typically construed as the symbolic bearers of the nation but are denied any direct relation to national agency” (McClintock 1993: 62). The nation and its future existence depend on the compliance with strict gender roles as heterosexism “presupposes a binary coding of polarized and hierarchical male/masculine and female/feminine identities (...) and denies all but heterosexual coupling as the basis of sexual intimacy, family life, and group reproduction” (Peterson 1999: 39).

As seen already and as it will be outlined in the following, the children became the protagonists of the pro-Referendum narratives in multiple instances: they represent the future of the nation, the reason for a traditional family, and are also conceived only in traditional families, while they are also primarily exposed to the threats brought along by the concepts associated with the ‘Other’. Figure 2 is a central propaganda material of the Referendum as it was not only distributed on the online platforms, but similar leaflets were found in mail boxes across the whole country, and a bakery from Bihor county even included these leaflets in the packaging of bread,⁵⁹ a powerful symbol of physical sustenance and life itself.

⁵⁹ <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-22733698-foto-firm-panifica-pus-pliante-pro-referendum-pungile-ine.html> (last accessed on: March 5, 2019)



*Figure 2 Pro-Referendum leaflet with the text:
[Come to the Referendum!
VOTE 'YES'
for MARRIAGE between a MAN and a WOMAN!*

PROTECT THE CHILDREN OF ROMANIA

October 6 and 7, 2018

Let 6,000,000 of us be at the POLLS!

This is the only way to protect our children.

YES This is how those who protect their children will vote!]

The direct association between the nation and the children can be found both on a semiotic and textual level. The leaflet uses the color of the national flag, a stock photo of a little boy and

girl who are dressed according to the color stereotypes of gender (blue for boys and pink for girls), while they choose to read when they are somewhere in the open air. The idealistic character of the image is a powerful visual effect. Out of the 38 words (that includes articles and conjunctions) of the original Romanian text, 16 words are used to call for the protection of “our children/the children of Romania”. Therefore, the text is extremely redundant, but no rhetorical principles are considered here, because those behind the Referendum chose to convey a message by its endless reiteration instead of offering valid arguments.

In addition to the images where the children are shown alone or in the company of other children, there are some photos used in the propaganda material that depict both a child and a mother. Although, the Referendum is for the marriage *between a man and a woman*, these pictures do not include a father. In the anti-homosexual propaganda in the context of the Referendum predominantly presenting gay couples as two men (see detailed discussion in chapter 6 below), it is often repeated that “every child needs a mother” besides a father. In these narratives some fundamental nationalistic tropes are reaffirmed, such as the nurturing role of the mother, and the gendered division of public and private life where the main responsibility of women is still the (spiritual) well-being of the family.

In order to evoke these emotional associations towards the women of the nation and/or motherhood, an exceptionalizing discourse of women is set in motion in which they become the protectors of sacral (and at the same time national) values. On the night prior to the Referendum, the Coalition for Family’s Facebook page shared a statement signed by their president, Mihai Gheorghiu:

“These people will be saved by their women. The most beautiful people met in these three years [i.e., since the Coalition for Family was founded], the most gifted, the brightest, the most deprived of the selfishness of sufficiency and self-sufficiency, the most courageous ones were women. Moms, wives, grandmothers, daughters, sisters. Courage, this old male virtue, was passed on to the fragile beings next to us. Their voices are more audible than ours, clearer than ours, poor people who even lack the courage to confess our Orthodox faith.

They will take our families out to vote for the defense of the minds and souls of our children. They will have the power and courage to confess and remove the ultimate wile that stands in front of us. Let's follow them! May God protect them!

Let us go vote under the flame of their courage and the call of truth and beauty. Let Christ be in our midst!"

The metaphorical connection of women to the nation is also supported by the use of abstract attributes such as *beautiful*, *gifted*, *bright* mediated by statements that evoke a religious sermon. The concept of *woman*, however, does not seem to be strong enough on its own, because it is immediately complemented by its familial connotations. The "old male virtue" of courage is generously passed on by the male president of the Coalition for Family to women, who can now stop being fragile beings, and with the courage that was granted to them, they can make a change in the two days of the Referendum. Handing over the control and responsibility for the outcome of the vote to the quintessential caretakers, women, fits perfectly into the populist renationalizing narrative.

On the evening of October 5, 2018, in a Facebook post, Coalition for Family reflected on their campaign preceding the Referendum on October 6-7. More precisely they presented "a balance sheet of the humiliations" to which the volunteers of the campaign were subject to, only because they "tried to defend a definition older than any law, namely the definition of marriage between a man and woman". This "balance sheet" provided by the Coalition enumerates two particular cases of humiliation: the first one refers to the limitations imposed by several election offices regarding the use of the colors of the national flag during the campaign, which, in the Coalition's interpretation, is a legal limitation⁶⁰ only applicable for political parties and understood as discriminatory in this case. The second one is related to the different kinds of attacks the

⁶⁰ See Art. 41 of Act 370 of 2004 on the electoral campaign which states that the use of electoral materials that use colors in a succession that resembles the national flag of Romania or that of any other country is forbidden. In this respect, the law does not forbid the use of the colors of the national flag *together* with the face of children, but the succession of colors resembling any national flag.

volunteers of the campaign experienced for the sole reason of being “the bearers of the prayer to defend the children of Romania by defending the marriage between a man and a woman”⁶¹.

The exaggerated use of the national flag and its colors shows that the unity of the nation, the nation itself is most conventionally represented by its tricolor. This strong emotional attachment to the blue, yellow and red stripes has formed for centuries in the Romanian collective consciousness as these three colors were already used on the royal grants of Michael the Brave in the 16th century⁶², while it was officially recognized as the National Flag in 1848⁶³. In addition, the national anthem of the Socialist Republic of Romania between 1977 and 1990 was a patriotic song the first line of which translates as: “Three colors I know in the world.”⁶⁴ The use of the tricolor as often as possible could be interpreted to contribute to the construction of a *banal nationalism* (Billig 1995) that refers to the presence of national symbols in everyday settings. However, the use of national symbols (including flags) in specific contexts bear much more significance than what the concept of banal nationalism leaves space for. In relation to Pride Marches in Hungary, where LGBTQ people not only waved the Hungarian flag, but they were present in public spaces with national significance, Renkin argues that national symbols in this specific context “possess profound implications for all belonging” (Renkin 2009: 30).

The Coalition for Family criticized the legislation interpreted as the “first humiliation which was also the hardest to bear” that banned the use of the national flag next to “faces of *our* children”, which, as we have seen above, is a gross misinterpretation of the text of the law. In relation to this, the Coalition for Family Facebook page writes:

“As a result of these abusive decisions, Romanian citizens chose to cover in black or red the colors of the national flag from under the faces of the children in the messages about the Referendum for marriage. In a troubled way, these colors have been chosen to signify the unprecedented situation in a sovereign state where its citizens are not entitled to use national symbols: black symbolizes the mourning in the Centenary Year for the ban on using the colors of the flag, and red symbolizes

⁶¹ https://www.facebook.com/coalitiapentrufamilie/posts/2096789400341023?_tn_ =K-R (last accessed on: March 5, 2019)

⁶² <https://www.dacoromania-alba.ro/nr76/tricolorul.htm> (last accessed on: April 13, 2019)

⁶³ <https://www.presidency.ro/ro/presedinte/romania/drapelul> (last accessed on: April 13, 2019)

⁶⁴ <http://revistamuzicala.radioromaniacultural.ro/?p=28762> (last accessed on: April 13, 2019)

the blood of the heroes that seem to have died for nothing [when they gave their lives] for the colors of the national flag.”

This criticism seems to be ungrounded because, based on the discussed examples, the national colors were indeed used in the propaganda material that included pictures of children, even if these were stock photos. Therefore, the intended message had probably come through regardless of the ban of using the colors of the flag during electoral campaigns. The attachment to the national symbols identified in this short fragment is even aggressive at some point; both the flag and the children are central to conveying the message of the Referendum, and any restriction in using these as propaganda tools is equivalent to a crime committed against the nation. The loss resulted from this crime even has to be mourned in the Centenary Year (i.e., 2018 which marks 100 years from the Great Union mentioned above) of great national significance. Moreover, in this narrative, even the late heroes of the nation are disgraced, and their heroic actions are of no value when the legislation does not allow for the use of the sacred national symbols be used in electoral campaigns.

The exclusionary politics central to populism make necessary the existence of a border politics that functions both in terms of belonging and territorial boundaries (Wodak 2015: 35). The integrity of the Romanian nation that exists within its territorial borders is particularly reproduced in the year of the Referendum; 2018 marks one hundred years since the union of Transylvania with Romania. The symbolic importance of the Year of the Centenary, particularly significant from the point of view of national unity, served as an effective tool in the nationalistic narratives that aimed to consolidate the continuity of the nation by guaranteeing the integrity of the traditional family by the constitution. Thus, the theme of 2018 as the Year of the Centenary was not only used as a reason to look back on the national past and reclaim the values seen to be fundamental, but also to bequeath these values to future generations by safeguarding the most sacred one, family.

Two days after the failed Referendum, on March 9th, Klaus Iohannis, the President of Romania gave a speech at a ceremony organized for Holocaust survivors, in which he shared his own interpretation of the Centenary of the United Modern Romania, namely, that it does not only refer to the past, but rather to the future. He also added that Romania belongs to all Romanians:

“although we are different, we are all Romanians and we want to move forward together in a country that has embraced and respects common European principles

and values. [...] I reiterate here our firm commitment to take all necessary steps to avoid in the future any actions that are based on the violation of human dignity.⁶⁵”

5.3 Extending the nation among ethnographic groups and beyond its geographical borders

According to the 2011 census, Hungarians are the largest national historical minority in Romania with a Hungarian ethnic population of 1.2 million people (6.5% of the total population)⁶⁶. The dominant narrative of the Hungarian minority from Romania is characterized by a constant longing for the lost “Greater Hungary”, a political organizational form created by the post-Trianon⁶⁷ Hungarian narratives as the Greater Hungary has never existed historically, it was the Kingdom of Hungary the territories of which were annexed to different neighboring countries after World War I when the new borders were set by the Treaty of Trianon. As a result, the national identity of the Hungarians from Romania has been constructed based on the belonging to a *cultural nation*⁶⁸ defined by the shared mother-tongue, traditions, cultural heritage, thus continuously being strongly connected to Hungary.

During the period leading up to the Referendum, however, the pro-Referendum Transylvanian Hungarian voices came forward both in Transylvanian Hungarian media and in social media that now claimed a belonging to the *political nation*, Romania, in the very year that is a reminder of the Hungarian national trauma of World War I. This case shows a dissonance in the national identity construction of the Transylvanian Hungarians, and it seems that their ideological beliefs contradict their claimed cultural nation. At the same time, based on the ongoing discourses in the context of the Referendum, the sense of belonging to one nation does not

⁶⁵ https://adevarul.ro/news/politica/iohannis-apatitie-referendum-pas-e-abandonarea-discursului-urii-1_5bbcb5a6df52022f755595b7/index.html (last accessed on: March 5, 2019)

⁶⁶ <https://actmedia.eu/daily/final-results-of-the-population-and-housing-census-romania-had-over-20-121-million-inhabitants-in-october-2011/46970> (last accessed on: March 28, 2019)

⁶⁷ In 1920, the Treaty of Trianon formally ended World War I for several territories, one of which was the Kingdom of Hungary. The treaty also defined the new borders of the Kingdom of Hungary, as a result, its easternmost territory, Transylvania came under the control of Romania. (see e.g. https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/trianon_treaty_of, last accessed on: March 28, 2019)

⁶⁸ <https://www.scribd.com/document/346743033/Distinguish-Between-Political-and-Cultural-Nationalism-15> (last accessed on: March 28, 2019)

operate on an either/or basis, but the beliefs towards the cultural and political nation seem to complement each other.

In their pro-Referendum campaign, the Transylvanian Hungarians did not turn their back on Hungary while “fighting for Romania”. As a result of his foreign policy that offers a wide range of opportunities to the ethnic Hungarian minorities, the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán is very popular among Hungarians in Transylvania, whom they often view as their political leader⁶⁹. Previously, I have discussed that the Romanian Referendum for the traditional family had no official face, and that the populist propaganda here is achieved without a political party. This absence that characterizes the Romanian narrative, is resolved in the Transylvanian Hungarian pro-Referendum discourses since they point out the measures taken by Orbán as an example to follow, because he has already managed to protect the traditional family (based on the marriage of a man and a woman) by including its definition in the Hungarian Constitution.

On a political level, the party representing the Hungarian minority in Romania, the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (hereinafter: RMDSZ) made a statement in regard to the Referendum that lacks any attempt to take a side in this issue. RMDSZ is often criticized both in the Romanian-language and Hungarian-language media in Romania for not having a clear agenda in broader social and ideological questions. Although the members of the Alliance shared different opinions on online platforms, in relation to the Referendum, the official standpoint of RMDSZ was: “Let us live with our democratic rights, take part in the referendum, but do not give in to the instigation!⁷⁰”, i.e. hate speech of any kind.

This statement tries to speak to everyone who wants to make a decision in the question of the Referendum, while it also notices the on-going “instigation” against various minority groups. Nevertheless, their call to vote fits into the narrative of the pro-Referendum voices, including that of the ruling political party (PSD). The parties (the Save Romania Union – USR party) and NGOs advocating boycott stated that staying home is the best way to vote NO, as then the Referendum would not be validated.

⁶⁹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-courts-voters-in-transylvania-romania-hungarian-election-2018/> (last accessed on: March 29, 2019)

⁷⁰ <http://www.rmksz.ro/sajtoszoba/hir/rmksz-eljunk-demokratikus-jogunkkal-vegyunk-resz-a-nepszavazason-de-nengedjunk-az-uszitasnak> (last accessed on: March 29, 2019)

With the exception of the Unitarian Church, all Hungarian Churches and denominations from Transylvania agreed and urged the members of their religious congregation to vote for the constitutional redefinition of the traditional family as this is considered to be a fundamental Christian value.

In the social media, one of the most active and vocal Hungarian pro-Referendum platform was the Facebook page of the Alba Iulia Center of Family Pastoral Care (Gyulafehérvári Családpasztorációs Központ, hereinafter: GyCsK), which mostly used pictures to convey their message.



Figure 3 Hungarian pro-Referendum propaganda material

Figure 3 is a randomly chosen photo that was shared on the GyCsK Facebook page among several others that are realized similarly. One striking aspect of this image is its shape: the text and

all other components are designed to fit into the circular form – an attribute that becomes particularly handy when someone considers changing their Facebook profile picture into a pro-Referendum message. Just as in the case of the Referendum for Romania Facebook page, the GyCsK also uses stock photos with quite similar content: a happy and young couple in the sunset/at their wedding, who show physical contact as well, joyful children playing/singing/discovering their environment, while there is also an intensive use of warm colors. It is important to note here that the young couple has the role of portraying the heteronormative *traditional family* that is capable of reproducing the nation, and the definition of which is aimed to be included in the Constitution of Romania in the case of a valid Referendum.

All images include a full sentence that explicitly says that “we take part in/vote YES for the constitutional redefinition of the marriage between a man and a woman”. The Hungarian community also designed their own pro-Referendum hashtags: #résztveszekIGEN ‘I will participate yes’, #egynőegyférfi ‘one man one woman’. A varying component on these pictures is a short inspirational message; in the case of the above picture: NOW WE CAN STILL DO IT! The frequent use of conditional linguistic formulas can be seen in the Romanian materials as well: there is a temporal condition to acting the unidentified threat becoming a real danger soon.

The pro-Referendum GyCsK pictures all include the logo of the Alba Iulia Center of Family Pastoral Care, as well as their motto at the bottom of the image: “Faith is grace. Family is blessing. The child is future.” This motto alone could be enough message on these pictures, capable of serving the purpose of the Referendum on its own. These highly packed images include one last mandatory component: the “Referendum for Romania” (in this case, in Hungarian) bullet with the colors of the national flag in the background: the visual expression of this unprecedented sense of belonging to the Romanian (political) nation. Any campaign initiated by the Hungarians from Romania were usually either “for the Hungarians/for Transylvania/for Hungary”, but never “for Romania” Transylvanian Hungarian identity is constructed in opposition to the Romanian nation, since there is a strong identification with a lost nation and a continuous thriving for territorial autonomy⁷¹. Moreover, the colors of the Romanian national flag do not evoke a *banal nationalism* in the Transylvanian Hungarian remembrance: the Romanian flag is a symbol of loss for those

⁷¹ <https://eng.polgariszemle.hu/archive/141-vol-13-special-issue-2017/hungarian-history/896-about-the-hungarian-autonomous-territoriality-of-szeklerland-the-autonomous-enclave-within-romania-a-second-territorial-entity-where-the-hungarian-ethnic-group-is-concentrated> (last accessed on: April 2, 2019)

who still carry negative feelings about the Treaty of Trianon. Therefore, it seems that the renationalizing project of this particular populist propaganda is ambiguous and inefficient in some instances, especially when the same national symbols are used by minorities with a different culture. This might be shown in the lowest turnout in the Hungarian majority counties, with an average of 8.5% (Covasna county) and 11.12% (Hargita county) respectively⁷².

In addition to renationalization, a main rhetoric of exclusionary politics is EU skepticism as argued by Wodak (2015); the ways in which the EU and the West was portrayed as opposed to the unity of the nation in the pro-Referendum propaganda will be discussed in the following chapter. At this point, however, it is of a particular significance to address how the territorial borders of the Romanian nation were ignored at a certain point of the discourse as the sense of national belonging was expanded across different European countries.

In the past years, a considerable number of Romanians have become economic migrants as they moved to Western countries in the hope of finding better job opportunities, leaving behind their families. 2013 was the first year in more than four decades, when the population of Romania did not reach 20 million people. In the same year, the Ministry for Romanians Abroad, made public new data on the situation of the Romanian diaspora⁷³, and he estimated that while Romania had a population of circa 20 million, around 2.7–3.5 million Romanian citizens lived and worked in different European countries (Italy, Spain, Germany, United Kingdom) at that time; this number has been increasing ever since. As a result, the influence of the Romanians living in the diaspora on voting outcome in general has been gaining more and more attention during the past years. The political involvement of the Romanian diaspora has also become visible in August 2018, when an anti-government protest entitled “Diaspora at Home” took place. Large numbers of Romanians returned home to take part in the protest organized by the Romanian diaspora against the governing party, PSD; around 100,000 protesters gathered in the center of Bucharest on August 10, 2018, and other 40,000 protesters flooded the streets of other major cities across country.

As the pro-Referendum propaganda focused on nationalistic themes that were by definition strongly connected to the territorial nation-state, those living in diaspora were not mentioned or

⁷² https://adevarul.ro/news/politica/referendum-familia-traditionala-097--prezenta-vot-ora-1000-judetete-fruntase-1_5bb83fecdf52022f75382ad1/index.html (last accessed on: April 2, 2019)

⁷³ <http://www.ziua-veche.ro/actualitate-interna/social/david-in-afara-grani%C8%99Belor-traiesc-intre-%C8%99ase-%C8%99i-opt-milioane-de-romani-201479.html/> (last accessed on: April 2, 2019)

addressed in particular during their campaign. However, on the two days of the Referendum, following the video analyzed at the beginning of the chapter, the Coalition for Family and Referendum for Romania Facebook pages only shared materials depicting the long queues of Romanians at the polls in London. The central narrative constructed around these pictures was that those “fellow” Romanians have already experienced in the Western countries the detrimental effects of gender ideology and same-sex marriage, which explains the large number present at the voting polls. This way, the pro-Referendum propaganda called for a renationalization beyond the territorial borders and urged a united fight for the fundamental values guaranteed by the protection of the traditional family. The images of the voting diaspora shared on pro-Referendum platforms only captured voting sites from London, Dublin, and Nurnberg, while the largest number of the Romanian diaspora is currently living in Italy and Spain. The participation of the Romanian diaspora at the two-day Referendum remains relatively low, contradicting the photos meant to be inspirational: 126,239 votes from the diaspora were added to the 3.73 million votes of the citizens living in Romania.

In this chapter, I addressed some of the ways in which the renationalization discourse became a governing directive in the pro-Referendum campaign that aimed to evoke a sense of belonging in the voters by constructing an image of *we*, the nation in the first place. Some of the analyzed material relied on the collective history of the nation, and urged its audience to act by taking part in the Referendum and respecting the legacy that their ancestors fought for. In the focus of the pro-Referendum discourse are children portrayed as those who need to be protected from a yet-unspecified threat, as they represent the future of the nation. Besides reiterating the importance of *marriage between a man and a woman* as the only way to *save the children*, and thus the future of the nation, there are rare descriptions of the *traditional family* or the values associated with it. Billig (1995) terms the use of flags in everyday life as *banal nationalism*; in the pro-Referendum discourse it can be witnessed how the banality of the Romanian national flag is used excessively in campaign materials in order to maximize national sentiments, and thus this banality is transformed in an active agent capable of evoking feelings of belonging. Although there is an at least century-old conflict between the Romanian majority and the Hungarian historical minority, the latter ethnic group emphasized a sense of belonging to the Romanian nation – something that has been unprecedented – in order to encourage the Hungarian community to support the goals of the Referendum. The need to reinforce the integrity of the nation was also fueled by a strong

Euroscepticism, that manifested in the pro-Referendum campaign by extending the borders of the nation, and pointing to the example of the Romanians living in the diaspora who voted in order to protect the *traditional family* as they have already witnessed the manifestations of the ideological (i.e. liberal) threats coming from the West.

6. Scapegoating and the emerging homophobic discourse

As discussed in the previous chapter, children have been presented as pivotal constituents of the nation exposed to an unspecified danger that threatens, this way, not only the innocence of the youth but the integrity and future of the nation. In this chapter I will address the ways in which the actual scapegoats, LGBTQ people (without explicit use of the term) are constructed in the pro-Referendum discourse with a focus on the analysis of the “distancing dynamics” (Reisigl 2013, quoted by Wodak 2015: 57) at play. The data consists of a video series of four entitled *How Does Marriage between Two Men Affect Me?* published by the very organization initiating the Referendum on their Facebook page, *Coalition for Family* during the month leading up to the Referendum. While the majority of the voices supporting the Referendum (among them was the leader of the ruling Social Democrat Party Liviu Dragnea,⁷⁴ the Romanian Prime Minister Viorica Dăncilă,⁷⁵ claimed that this was not designed *against* something⁷⁶ (such as a minority group like LGBTQ people) but *for* the preservation and reinforcement of traditional values, the videos point to the LGBTQ community as the ‘Other’ representing the danger. This way, the “arrogance of ignorance” (Wodak 2015: 51) becomes central to the emerging homophobic discourse where traditional (conservative) values are linked to an aggressive exclusionary rhetoric (Wodak 2015: 51).

6.1 Othering practices and gender dichotomy

Since LGBTQ people are underrepresented in the Romanian public discourse (Andreescu 2018; Takács–Szalma 2019), the pro-Referendum videos were among the first sources within an institutional framework aiming to inform the general public about “marriage between two men” (a phrase included in the title of all of the videos), producing a collective and essentializing identity of LGBTQ people. The meaning that gest circulated in the public discourse this way comes to be

⁷⁴ <https://www.rferl.org/a/romania-same-sex-marriage-referendum-low-turnout-dragnea/29529342.html> (last accessed on: June 3, 2019)

⁷⁵ <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/english/romaniars-referendum-same-sex-marriage-goes-against-european-liberal-current> (last accessed on: June 3, 2019)

⁷⁶ <https://www.politico.eu/article/romania-same-sex-marriage-referendum-fails-due-to-low-turnout/> (last accessed on: June 3, 2019)

constructed by the “centre that has the power” (Jensen 2011: 65). In order to maintain the status quo in the face of naming of LGBTQI people in the public discourse, it is necessary for the Coalition for Family to reinforce their authority and secure the legitimacy of the Referendum’s goal. This discursive strategy is met by constructing sexual minorities through practices of *othering* summed up by Jensen as “discursive processes by which powerful groups, who may or may not make up a numerical majority, define subordinate groups into existence in a reductionist way which ascribe problematic and/or inferior characteristics to these subordinate groups” (Jensen 2011: 65) with the aim of establishing and maintaining social distance (Lister 2004, quoted by Jensen 2011).

The *How Does Marriage between Two Men Affect Me?* videos were published by the Facebook page of Coalition for Family on four consecutive days of the month leading up to the Referendum (September 13–16) with one new video published every day. These four videos are among the most viewed materials (55,000–228,000 views) on the Coalition for Family Facebook page, with a duration between 2–4 minutes, each. There are no speaking actors, nor are the videos narrated through voice-over, only an intense and dramatic music is playing in the background, and the message of the videos is displayed through showing written textual materials and images. The videos are to underscore the imaginary values of the ‘Christian majority’ in the citizenry wanting to protect the family against a morally ‘inferior’ essentialized homosexuality. To demonstrate this inferiority, the videos make use of different distancing techniques, some of which can be observed even on the typographical level, by the use of quotation marks around the key concepts:

*In Europe, two men can “marry”.*⁷⁷

*A “love” story in which two kings fall in love and get married.*⁷⁸

*In some European countries, TWO MEN CAN ADOPT A CHILD due to the legalization of “marriage” between same-sex couples (sic).*⁷⁹

⁷⁷ The original text in Romanian: În Europa doi bărbați se pot „căsători”

⁷⁸ The original text in Romanian: O poveste de „dragoste” în care doi regi se îndrăgostesc și se căsătoresc.

⁷⁹ The original text in Romanian: În unele țări din Europa DOI BĂRBAȚI POT ADOPTA UN COPIL, datorită legalizării „căsătoriei” între cuplurile de același sex.

*Sued and forced, in February 2017 to make a flower bouquet for the “wedding” of two men, against her will.*⁸⁰

*Sentenced to prison after the refusal to sign a “marriage” certificate for a homosexual couple.*⁸¹

*Sued for refusing to make a cake for a homosexual “wedding”.*⁸²

*A cartoon in which two boys “fall in love”.*⁸³

The concepts denoting or referring to same-sex marriages or even romantic relationships between people of the same sex are put in quotation marks implying that they are only considered a (failed) mimicry of the ‘real’ institution of marriage, trying to discredit the authenticity and validity of the normative institutions when applied to same-sex couples. The quotation marks do mark the deviancy of these activities in an LGBTQ context, and, at the same time, reinforce and legitimize the heterosexual version of marriage as the norm, the union between a man and a woman.

The arguments of the pro-Referendum discourse are in general governed by a strong gender dichotomy that is particularly prevailing in the materials on LGBTQ people. At the same time, this simplistic view of sexualities also reflects the mechanisms of anti-intellectualism characteristic of right-wing populist discourses (Wodak 2015). One of the videos argue that there are 100 schools in the UK that have entered a program as a result of which separate uniforms for boys and girls will be abolished and calls is an act of *reeducating* the children. The use of the term *reeducate* implies through a distancing mechanism that there is a binary of *education* as this exists in its current, static form, while there is a potential that the foundations of the education will be challenged by a *reeducation* process. At the same time, an alleged claim to possess the knowledge to *reeducate* reflects the kind of intellectualism right-wing populist parties want to step up against.

In addition to constantly reiterating the ideal and authority of *the traditional family based on the marriage between a man and a woman*, the videos analyzed in this chapter present *the homosexual lifestyle* according to the ‘mimetic logic resulting in a lack of considering the

⁸⁰ The original text in Romanian: Dată în judecată și obligată, în februarie 2017, să facă un buchet de flori la o „nuntă” a doi bărbați, împotriva deciziei sale.

⁸¹ The original text in Romanian: Condamnată la închisoare pentru refuzul de a semna un certificat de „căsătorie” pentru un cuplu homosexual.

⁸² The original text in Romanian: Dat în judecată pentru refuzul de a face un tort pentru o „nuntă” de homosexuali.

⁸³ The original text in Romanian: Desen animat în care se prezintă doi băieți care se „îndrăgostesc”.

possibility of gender fluidity or non-cisgender identities. Transgender people or even transitioning are introduced in a heteronormative way:

*They will be told that they can change their gender, and how a man can become a woman.*⁸⁴

*How can a man become a woman?*⁸⁵

In both statements above, the dominant narrative is that one can either be a man or a woman, and the transitions is to end up in a reversal but described as a move from male to female in both examples. This fits into the larger heteronormative narrative according to which men's gender nonconformity and noncompliance with masculine roles are perceived as more threatening to the hierarchical relations of gender as masculinity "inevitably conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege" (Halberstam 1998: 2). The videos rely on this normative social logic when they construct LGBTQ people as the threat with reference only to *marriage between two men, adoption by two men* – instead of referring to the events as 'same sex' marriage or adoption. There are only two cases in the four videos when the legislative practices of other countries regarding LGBTQ rights are described by naming female same-sex couples as well: *In the end, parliamentarians approved the marriage between two men or two women and child adoption.*⁸⁶ Following this statement, however, same-sex marriage is referred to as *the marriage between two men* five times during the video in question. The second instance in which lesbians are mentioned is: *Children are taught that two girls can marry each other.*⁸⁷ Here, using the term *girls* instead of the adult form *women* suggests that the institution of marriage between two *girls* is not serious enough, thus conforming to phallogentric understandings of lesbianism. According to Butler: "[c]ompulsory heterosexuality sets itself up as the original, the true, the authentic; the norm that determines the real implies that "being" lesbian is always a kind of miming" (Butler 2004: 127) – with no phallic power involved.

⁸⁴ The original text in Romanian: Li se va spune că pot să-și schimbe genul, din bărbat să devină femeie!

⁸⁵ The original text in Romanian: Cum să devii din bărbat, femeie?

⁸⁶ The original text in Romanian: În final, parlamentarii au aprobat căsătoria dintre doi bărbați sau două femei și adopția de copii.

⁸⁷ The original text in Romanian: Copiii sunt învățați că două fete se pot căsători între ele.

The pro-Referendum discourse does not directly characterize LGBTQ people, it implicates them indirectly by positioning them against the explicitly articulated traditional and conservative values by showing how the rights granted to them could presumably affect the lives of children and that of “ordinary” people who are all assumed to assume Christian moral values. However, an implied homophobia can be detected in the video entitled *How Does Marriage between Two Men Affect Me? The Effects of Adoption by Two Men* that relies on a sociology professor, Mark Regnerus’s study according to which apparently the adults raised in same-sex families are ten times more likely to be sexually molested. A strategy of distancing is at play here to confer objectivity to the presented information as these are not attested by the subjective realm of those who created the video, but by an academic authority who shares his expert knowledge. This is followed by the *confessions* of people raised in a couple of two homosexual men:

Dawn Stefanowicz:

*I was just a child, but he exposed me to explicit sexual activity.*⁸⁸

Lewis Freeman Harrison:

*Sexual allusions happened on a daily basis. It left me traumatized in emotional terms.*⁸⁹

These examples show that the sexuality of gay men is depicted as central to their identities, of which children need to be protected from – something that only a mother can do. The emphasized sexuality can be observed even in the images of gay men used in these videos as they appear half-naked with a baby on their arms:

⁸⁸ The original text in Romanian: Dawn Stefanowicz „Eram doar un copil, dar mă expunea la activitate sexuală explicită.”

⁸⁹ The original text in Romanian: Lewis Freeman Harrison „Aluziile sexuale erau la ordinea zilei. M-a lăsat traumatizat din punct de vedere emoțional.”



Figure 4 Child adoption by two men as presented in pro-Referendum videos

Another moment of *confession* comes from a woman who is said to be *raised in a couple of two lesbian women* who does not support gay marriage as the absence of her father left a “great void” in her life. The conclusion of the video is that: *Every child has the right to a mother and a father*. Gender binary and the patriarchal model are presented as the only just and morally right option to care for the wellbeing of children and the future of non-traumatized adults making up a healthy society, while LGBTQ people are constantly portrayed as deviant and morally wrong and as such a threat for the safety of society.

6.2 Legitimizing fear

The *reeducation of children* is a central topic in the pro-Referendum discourse, and it is reiterated at the end of each video: “Protect the children of Romania! Protect the marriage between a man and a woman! Protect tomorrow’s Romania!⁹⁰” and/or “Only if 6 million of us votes, will we prove that we care about our children and tomorrow’s Romania!⁹¹” The frequent use of the trope of

⁹⁰ The original text in Romanian: „Apără copiii României! Apără căsătoria dintre un bărbat și o femeie! Apără România de mâine!”

⁹¹ The original text in Romanian: „Doar dacă votăm 6 milioane dovedim că ne pasă de copiii noștri și de România de mâine!”

children in formulating moralizing messages about the nation and, in turn, the importance of participating in the Referendum, is aimed at exposing the process of the threat of the so-called “reeducation” of children.

The video *How Does Marriage between Two Men Affect Me? The Reeducation of Children* confers legitimation to the homophobic fear that is being constructed through the act of authorization. According to Wodak, legitimation can take place in the form of authorization “by referring to authority, be that a person, tradition, custom or law” (Wodak 2015: 30). In the case of this video, the reference is to custom. The video addresses some dominant childhood practices and claims that by changing their nature and content, the danger of reeducating ‘our children’ will be imposed on ‘us’ by the rights given to LGBTQ-people. The first practice discussed in the process of reeducation is reading non-heterosexual stories - expressed by the future tense, which suggests that there is no conditionality to its occurrence, the change will take place if the referendum should fail, as shown in the excerpt below:

1. They will read books

King & King – a “love” story in which two kings fall in love and get married.

Karlis became Karlina – a tale in which a boy thinks that he is a girl, and he changes his sex, becoming from boy a girl.

Jean has two moms – the tale of a little fox who has two mothers, lesbians.⁹²

The second childhood custom addressed is watching cartoons, and the example of Disney’s *Doc McStuffins* is put forward as a children’s television series where “a family with two moms” is presented as the ‘threat’, followed by the Academy Award-shortlisted animated short film *In a Heartbeat* introduced as “a cartoon in which two boys who “fall in love⁹³” are presented.

In the context of the custom of education, drag queen Xochi Mochi (Figure 5) is depicted accompanied by the text: “The homosexual and transgender lifestyle is promoted. How can a man

⁹² The original text in Romanian: „1. Vor citi cărți

„Rege și rege” – O poveste de „dragoste” în care doi regi se îndrăgostesc și se căsătoresc.

„Karlis a devenit Karlina” – O poveste în care un băiețel se crede fată și își schimbă genul, devenind din băiat fată.

„Jean are două mame” – Povestea unei vulpițe care are două mame, lesbiene.”

⁹³ The original text in Romanian: „Desen animat în care se prezintă doi băieți care se „îndrăgostesc”.”

become a woman? Transvestite “Xochi Mochi” invited to read tales to children at a public library from the USA.⁹⁴ While the imagery and the text aim to encapsulate the fear fueled by the concept of gender fluidity and its potential effects in the lives of children, the video does not provide the necessary context. Drag queen Xochi Mochi did read to children at a library, however, it was not a random occasion as the *Drag Queen Story Hour* was part of the LGBTQ History Month event series at the library in question, and Xochi Mochi said that her outfit was meant to celebrate both LGBTQ History Month and Halloween⁹⁵.



Figure 5 Drag queen Xochi Mochi reading to children at a public library⁹⁶

⁹⁴ The original text in Romanian: „Este promovat stilul de viață homosexual și transgender. Cum să devii din bărbat, femeie? Travestitul „Xochi Mochi”, invitat să le citească povești copiilor la o librărie publică din SUA.”

⁹⁵ Source: <https://www.pride.com/dragqueens/2017/10/18/drag-queen-dressed-satanic-goddess-read-kids> (last accessed on: May 22, 2019)

⁹⁶ Source: <https://www.pride.com/dragqueens/2017/10/18/drag-queen-dressed-satanic-goddess-read-kids> (last accessed on: May 22, 2019)

In general, authorization operates in these examples through referencing the childhood practices of reading tales, watching cartoons and being educated in an institutional context under threat by showing that the stable nature and fixed contents of these may be subject to change brought about by the mainstreaming of LGBTQ rights – unless ‘we’ stop this by the referendum. The argument that children are possible to be reeducated gains legitimation by demonstrating that even the authority of practices may be undermined as the rigid notions of gender dichotomy are questioned. Authorization has a double role here: it is used as a tool to describe the value represented by childhood practices, and to show the magnitude of the danger that is threatening the child exposed to them.

6.3 Distancing and transnational dynamics

The introduction of all four videos is similar (two types of formulations are used), it is always by referring ‘Europe’ as the source of the potential threat: “In Europe, two men can get “married” /In some European countries, two men can adopt a child.⁹⁷” Following the opening premise, there comes the warranting claim demonstrating the negative consequences of the ‘European’ legislation they are events that attracted great media attention but, surprisingly, they took place outside Europe. Here, there is a double-distancing as first, Romania is differentiated from Europe, while the factual data results in a second type of distancing in which even the European space is left in the search for examples that would prove to be *extreme* enough in backing up the argument of the Referendum, and especially of this video. The video that presents the *shocking confessions* of children raised in same-sex marriages, for instance, only points to the confessions of two people from the US and one from Australia, including the study by US sociology professor Mark Regnerus. There are no European examples in this particular video, yet it starts with stating that some European countries allow same-sex marriage. Therefore, it can be concluded that even if the content of the video does not address cases that are geographically close to Romania, in the argument, Europe operates as a point of reference – where the threats have already turned into

⁹⁷ The original text in Romanian: „În Europa doi bărbați se pot „căsători”/ În unele țări din Europa doi bărbați pot adopta un copil”

reality – that offers topicality and timeliness to the danger constructed in the pro-Referendum discourse.

The video that was first shared on the Facebook page from the series is entitled *Come to the Referendum! Child Adoption by Two Men. How Did It Become Possible?*, and it mostly consists of the enumeration of European countries as examples through which it can be proven that the legislation allowing civil partnership for same-sex couples is *always* followed by legislation that makes same-sex marriages and child adoption by same-sex couples possible. Although the subject of the Referendum was not civil partnership but the redefinition of family in the Constitution as the *marriage between a man and a woman* instead of the previous *marriage between spouses*, the narrative of this video considers the introduction of civil partnership self-evident as the next logical move threatening the heteronormative Romanian social order if imposed in the wake of a negative outcome of the vote. The examples of France, Spain, Germany, Belgium and Norway are intended to depict a legislative process that is characteristic of Europe – something that is geographically more relatable for Romania.

In two of the videos, there are Romanian examples presented as well in order to demonstrate the timeliness of the Referendum against the “reality” of the threats imposed by the scapegoats named. There is an authorization and an implied othering at play in the video *How Does Marriage Between Two Men Affect Me? Freedom of Speech* as it concentrates on examples of *limitation of freedom of speech and belief* arguing that any form of disagreement (its object is not specified) entails punishment, being fired and arrested. The video presents cases in which people were punished for their words or deeds that come to be interpreted as instances of freedom of speech and belief within the reasoning of the video, including the stories of two Romanian citizens:

Leon Dănăilă

Romanian neurosurgeon

Received a fine of 2,000 RON [cca. USD 500] for “discriminatory” declarations against the LGBTQ community.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ The original text in Romanian: „Leon Dănăilă. Medic neurochirurg roman. Amendat cu suma de 2.000 de lei pentru declarații „discriminatorii” la adresa comunității LGBT.”

Ana Corina Săcrieru

Romanian parent

*Reported at the National Council for Combating Discrimination because she was opposing the organization of a conference that promoted the theory of gender ideology in front of the children.*⁹⁹

The 'foreign' examples in this video are presented as a concise and factual description of the cases from abroad – the majority of them linked to officials or service providers at a wedding (photographer, decorator, confectioner). However, the presentation of the 'Romanian' cases is lacking in specific details and contains partial information on the actual people in question. Leon Dănăilă is a Romanian neurosurgeon. He is also a politician who claimed in an interview that legislating the rights of sexual minorities would be a sign of regression of the society as “[h]eterosexuals are those who give birth to children, who can make children. A homosexual can buy children, steal them, or purchase them in some other way¹⁰⁰”. While in the video the discriminatory nature of his claims is questioned and discredited by the use of quotation marks, the governing college of the National Council for Combating Discrimination ruled that “the statements are likely to create a hostile, degrading, humiliating atmosphere based on sexual orientation against the complainants¹⁰¹”

Ana Corina Săcrieru is a mother of three children “whom she considers her gift from God¹⁰²”, however, she is also a lawyer, vice president of the Association of Parents for Religion Class (APOR) and spokesperson of the same Coalition for Family that initiated the Referendum. According to the video, she was reported for opposing the organization of an event that would promote *the theory of gender ideology*. At this point, an example from the video on the reeducation

⁹⁹ The original text in Romanian: „Ana Corina Săcrieru. Părinte român. Reclamată la Consiliul Național pentru Combaterea Discriminării întrucât s-a opus unei conferințe care promova teoria ideologiei de gen în fața copiilor.”

¹⁰⁰ The original text in Romanian: “Heterosexualii, ei dau naștere la copii, pot să facă copii. Un homosexual poate să cumpere copii, poate să-i fure, poate să-i achiziționeze pe alte căi.” Source: <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/leon-danaila-un-homosexual-nu-face-copii-ii-cumpara-sau-ii-fura-689491> (last accessed on: May 20, 2019)

¹⁰¹ The original text in Romanian: “afirmațiile sunt de natură să creeze o atmosferă ostilă, degradantă, umilitoare la adresa petenților pe criteriul orientării sexuale.” Source: <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/leon-danaila-un-homosexual-nu-face-copii-ii-cumpara-sau-ii-fura-689491> (last accessed on: May 20, 2019)

¹⁰² <https://avocatsacrieruana.ro/2016/07/05/ana-corina-sacrieru-avocatura-este-un-prilej-continuu-de-a-fi-sincer-cu-tine-insuti/> (last accessed on: May 20, 2019)

of children should also be mentioned as it reflects on the same case in the context of which Săcrieru was reported:

In Romania, students from Vrancea are invited to a conference of “re”-education

“No one can tell you what you should do with your bodies, be it transitioning as a transsexual person, or abortion” – transsexual activist¹⁰³

In February 2018, a conference called *Women Talk* was organized by Romanian high-school students, which was the first event in the Eastern part of the country that addressed the issues of women’s rights and discrimination against women. The event was boycotted by the association where Săcrieru is vice-president together with other religious actors in educational institutions as they argued that it would be “a propaganda of homosexuality, lesbianism and transgenders¹⁰⁴”. Some online news portals reported on this case focusing on the quoted activist, and presenting Săcrieru as a victim accused of misgendering the activist, Patrick Brăila, who is constantly referred to with his name before his transition and as someone “who lately thinks of himself as a man¹⁰⁵”.

Although freedom of speech is guaranteed by the Romanian Constitution, hate speech is banned by the same Act:

“Article 30 – Freedom of Speech

(1) The freedom to express thoughts, opinions or beliefs and freedom of creation of any kind, by word of mouth, by writing, by images, by sound or by other means of communication in public, is inviolable.

(...)

¹⁰³ The original text in Romanian: În România elevi din Vrancea invitați la o conferință de „re”-educare. „Nimeni nu poate spune și nici vouă, ce să faceți cu corpul vostru, fie că e vorba de a tranzitiona ca persoană transexuală fie că e vorba de avort” – activist transexual

¹⁰⁴ <https://newsweek.ro/actualitate/presedintele-cncc-acuza-cpf-ca-face-presiuni-asupra-institutiei-si-distribuie-stiri-false> (last accessed on: May 20, 2019)

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.activenews.ro/stiri-social/%E2%80%9ENimeni-nu-va-poate-spune-ce-sa-faceti-cu-corpul-vostru-fie-ca-e-vorba-de-a-tranzitiona-catre-o-persoana-trans-fie-ca-e-vorba-de-avort-i-a-invatat-pe-copiii-din-Focsani-%E2%80%9Etransgenderul-Patricia-Braila-cu-spriinul-Ambasadei-SUA-149557> (last accessed on: May 20, 2019)

- (6) Freedom of expression can not prejudice the dignity, honor, private life of the person, or the right to one's own image.
- (7) It is forbidden by the law to defame the country and the nation, the exhortation to war of aggression, to national, racial, class-based or religious hatred, incitement to discrimination, territorial separatism or public violence, as well as obscene manifestations contrary to good morals.¹⁰⁶

These Romanian examples show that there is an effort to showcase situations that may be interpreted as violations of the freedom of speech (and reeducation of children) even in the Romanian context, however, the above informative additions prove that there was no exaggeration in taking legislative measures against Dănilă and Săcrieru. The gender dichotomy characteristic of the pro-Referendum narrative can be detected even in the way the two of them are introduced: while the male person, Leon Dănilă is defined by his profession (a neurosurgeon whose activity has an impact on the level of the society), Ana Corina Săcrieru is only described as a *parent* despite of her career as a lawyer and an official actor of the organization initiating the Referendum; thus dominant stereotypes on gender roles are reiterated.

The pro-Referendum discourse joins the current right-wing populist anti-gender practices that similarly build on an 'Us' vs. 'Them' rhetoric, and, without providing any explanation, the term *theory of gender ideology* is introduced in the Romanian context. *Gender ideology* itself operates as "an empty signifier" (Mayer-Sauer 2017, quoted by Kuhar-Zobec 2017: 31), and in the European mass protests against marriage equality, *gender theory* came to be explained "as a new threat to the 'traditional family' and 'natural masculinity and femininity', as it allegedly aims at cultural revolution: a post-binary gender world" (Kuhar-Zobec 2017: 29). The notion of gender itself operates as an umbrella term applied by the right to unite "separate contested issues attributed to the progressive agenda¹⁰⁷". Therefore, using the term *gender ideology* in the homophobic rhetoric of the pro-Referendum discourse serves the aim of constructing an unspecified danger and emphasizing the importance of saving "the traditional family", while being in dialogue with the right-wing populist practices governed by similar dynamics.

¹⁰⁶ <https://www.constitutiaromaniei.ro/art-30-libertatea-de-exprimare/> (last accessed on: June 3, 2019)

¹⁰⁷ <http://politicalcritique.org/long-read/2017/gender-as-symbolic-glue-how-gender-became-an-umbrella-term-for-the-rejection-of-the-neoliberal-order/> (last accessed on: May 25, 2019)

In this chapter, I analyzed the ways in which the scapegoats of the pro-Referendum discourse were constructed with a special regard to the othering and distancing practices. The *How Does Marriage between Two Men Affect Me?* videos were based on a heteronormative understanding of gender, and portrayed children as the main target of the danger that wants to impose a non-binary view on life questioning current belief systems and dominant understanding of gender roles. In the exclusionary rhetoric applied there was an ideological distancing reinforced by the geographical borders of the nation that represent for now protection from the on-going changes in Europe that threaten traditional values. The pro-Referendum discourse fits into the broader anti-gender discourse as it is not only governed by similar mechanisms, but it also makes use the buzzword *gender ideology* that operates as an empty signifier.

7. The anti-Referendum discourses calling for boycott

The plan of the Referendum as well as the campaign engendered voices of strong disagreement and criticism based in part on the immediate association of the Referendum with LGBTQ rights. Although a positive outcome of the Referendum would not have affected the current legal situation of LGBTQ people (as no form of civil union is recognized in Romania between people of the same sex), the anti-Referendum stance was fueled by a minoritizing discourse, and called for the protection of sexual (and all other) “minorities”. Since the required turnout threshold was 30%, which is relatively low, however, with the government deciding to keep the ballot open for two days, the core message of the campaign against the Referendum was to boycott it by staying home and thus not validating it.

It is important to note that the anti-Referendum discourse did not shift into a pro-LGBTQ discourse, although the social media sites initiating it were mostly platforms promoting LGBTQ rights. The major themes addressed were the economic and social problems in Romania, criticism towards the governing political party and religious authorities as well as the official values associated with the “traditional family”. In the following sections I will analyze some of the most widely shared (audio)visual content constructing the anti-Referendum discourse to explore the common elements used by both sides, aiming to outline discursive representations of aspects of the family and its realities in Romania, focusing mostly on the issue of marriage and children.

7.1 *#istayathome* – a campaign designed for social media

Unlike the Referendum, which was initiated by one organization, the anti-Referendum campaign was spread out across various platforms with the leading contents being shared by several organizations. Most of the Facebook pages launching or joining the anti-Referendum campaign, namely the RiseOUT, ACCEPT, and MozaiQ pages advocating LGBTQ rights, had been active on social media long before the plans for the Referendum. The use of fonts, colors, and text positioning of the anti-Referendum materials shared on these pages results in more visually coherent products than those presented in the earlier chapters, indexing more experience in content creation for digital platforms. Besides the above-mentioned Facebook pages, I also analyze

materials from the Boicot page, which was launched for the purpose of the anti-Referendum campaign, also creating and sharing original visual and multimedia content. The materials on all of these pages were organized around two hashtags, #boicot (#boycott) and #stauacasă (#istayhome)¹⁰⁸.

The use of only two uniform hashtags within the anti-Referendum campaign also implies that the supporters of the movement are aware of the fact that the reiteration of a reduced number of messages would prove to be more efficient in social media. The second hashtag, #stauacasă (#istayathome) was even made into a Facebook profile picture frame accessible to anyone (Figure 6).



Figure 6 #stauacasă 'I stay at home' - Anti-Referendum Facebook profile picture frame¹⁰⁹

Contrary to the elements used in the pro-Referendum imagery, the visuality of the anti-Referendum is remarkable for the lack of the use of the red and blue of the national flag. Instead, the neutral color, yellow is used as the base of the black script that functions as a caption for the image. Figure 6 reinforces the message of the hashtag: the picture features two young people, presumably a couple (a man and a woman, but not necessarily) sitting in a room, a protected environment, a home, looking out the closed window and watching the events outside. This image

¹⁰⁸ In the analysis below I distinguish the Boicot Facebook page and #boicot, the former being a Facebook page created with the sole purpose to promote the boycott of the Referendum, while the latter is a hashtag used by all anti-Referendum organizations on their social media platforms.

¹⁰⁹ Source: <http://www.stauacasa.ro/> (last accessed on: May 2, 2019)

encapsulates the entire meaning and aim of the boycott movement: people (especially young people) should stay at home and away from the vote but this does not mean seclusion and passivity, as they should keep their eyes on the events. From the point of view of my analysis, it is also important to point out another layer of meaning: the image is a visual representation of the home, the space naturally inhabited by the family, the “four walls” of private life, however, the placement of the presumed couple next to the window also implies communication with the outer world, the glass denoting a space of transition between the private and the public. In this interpretation, the image gives account of the ways in which family life, though private, is indeed influenced and affected by decisions made outside the family, staying inside and watching the events fold out may represent many traditional and untraditional families awaiting a decision that would significantly alter the way they can live within those four walls.

In terms of language use, the hashtag is representative of a tendency that is in contrast with the messages conveyed by voices favoring the Referendum. The pro-Referendum materials feature excessively first-person plural pronouns, emphasizing a sense of belonging to the same group, and second-person plural pronouns when the audience is addressed directly and called on to act, still as member of the community. The use of personal pronouns is always a marked case since the inflection at the end of the verbal form marks the person in action for all six cases. In the hashtag, however, no explicit personal pronoun is used, and it is marked for the first-person singular included in the *stau*¹¹⁰ form of the verb. The first person singular form of the verb, “I stay (home)” underscores that abstaining from voting is an individual choice against the ‘collective’ force of mobilization by the Referendum. It is similar to many campaigns on social media (e.g., the *Je suis* slogan also using the first person singular French pronoun *je*): it represents an individual stance, nevertheless it sends a message to friends on what the user is to do, and it definitely exerts an indirect mobilizing force in this instance of public self-identification. *Home* is often used in nationalistic discourses as a synonym of the country, nation and community (c.f. Easthope 2004). However, in this case the word *acasă* (‘home’) has an oppositional effect: following a first-person singular verb, it is evident that it refers to the actual, physical homes of the individuals, evoking an actual space of resistance instead of the unspecified, imagined abstract space as done in nationalistic texts.

¹¹⁰ Rom. *a sta* ‘to stay’ (inf.); *stau* ‘I stay’ (first-person singular)

The yellow-black frame was used in the Hungarian version of the anti-Referendum context as well, with the text replaced by a quote from a popular Hungarian song: #maradjotthonnézzéltévétöksötét ('stay at home, watch TV, pitch dark...')¹¹¹. The song entitled *Csillag vagy fecske* ('Star or Swallow') released in 2003, was written and performed by the Hungarian alternative rock band Kispál és a borz ('Kispál and the Badger'), founded in 1987 in Pécs and active until 2010¹¹². The version of the song featuring the popular folk musical formation, Csík zenekar¹¹³ has more than 11 million views on Youtube¹¹⁴ (on May 9, 2019) and it is safe to say that it has become an important piece of Hungarian musical culture. Though probably merely a play on intertextuality, grounding the hashtag and thus the boycott movement in Hungarian popular culture, the use of this quotation was apprehended by the pro-government newspaper *Magyar Idők* in Hungary. In an article entitled *The Sanctity of Marriage Could Be Strengthened with Hungarian Help in Romania This Weekend*, the political daily criticized the choice of the song¹¹⁵ on the grounds that the song belongs to a band of the Hungarian "left-liberal subculture". At the same time, the front man of the band, Lovasi András reacted to the viral use of the quote and expressed his discontent regarding the utilization of his lyrics for political purposes.¹¹⁶

The Hungarian community in Romania visually borrows and uses the same profile picture frame as the Romanian community, however, there is an act of localization of the text. Through the implications of the above described intertextuality at play, there comes about a change in the agency expressed by the frame: while the Romanian *stau* is a first-person singular verb in declarative mood, performing the act of demonstrative about the stance of the speaker, the Hungarian form of *maradj*¹¹⁷ ('Stay!') is an imperative addressed directly to the reader as an act of demand.

¹¹¹ The lyrics in question are: *Maradj otthon, nézzél tévét. Töksötét vonatokat mutat minden csatorna* 'Stay at home, watch TV, pitch dark trains are shown on every channel' (<http://www.zeneszoveg.hu/dalszoveg/5720/kispal-es-a-borz/csillag-vagy-fecske-zeneszoveg.html>, last accessed on: May 9, 2019)

¹¹² https://index.hu/kultur/zene/fesztival/2010/08/07/23_ev_onismereti_szakkor/ (last accessed on May 9, 2019)

¹¹³ Both Kispál és a borz and Csík zenekar have received the Kossuth Prize, Hungary's most prestigious State Awards in the field of Hungarian culture.

¹¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xxVqDZcLSyY> (last accessed on May 9, 2019)

¹¹⁵ Source: <https://www.magyaridok.hu/kulfold/magyar-segitseggel-erosithetik-meg-a-csalad-szentseget-a-hetvegen-romaniaban-3550685/> (last accessed on: May 2, 2019)

¹¹⁶ <http://itthon.transindex.ro/?pp=45> (last accessed on: May 2, 2019)

¹¹⁷ Hun. *maradni* 'to stay' (inf.); *maradj* 'you stay' (second-person singular)

7.2 *The Children of the Referendum* – creating fear in the anti-Referendum campaign

Wodak argues that the perspective of fear in right-wing populist discourses is meant to be shared by all people regardless of their ideological stance and quotes David Altheide's work from 2002: "while liberals and conservatives may differ in their object of fear, all sides express many fears and point to 'blameworthy' sources" (Altheide, quoted by Wodak 2015: 28-29). Those against the Referendum acknowledge this universal existence of fear and in the most widely shared anti-Referendum video they mirror the fear for children expressed in the pro-Referendum materials by building on a potential (hyperbolic) consequence of a valid Referendum. The *stauacasa.ro* website operated by the *Declic* community¹¹⁸ and the *ACCEPT Association*¹¹⁹ published the video entitled "The Children of the Referendum"¹²⁰ with more than 158K views on Youtube and more than 2.5M views on Facebook.¹²¹

The video is a mimesis of the American dystopian television drama, *The Handmaid's Tale*, but here the handmaids are young girls around the age of 10. The terrified girls dressed in the characteristic uniforms composed of the long red dress and the white bonnet are being instructed by a very severe looking middle-aged woman dressed in white, reminding of an active member of a totalitarian regime. The subordinate relation between the children and the woman is also made evident by their body language (the woman is standing and walking around with a stick in her hand, while the girls are either sitting, or walking in a row when they move, with their heads bowed down even when they talk), the volume of their voice (the woman is speaking very loudly, while the girls are timid and quiet), altogether evoking the communicative situation characteristic of a classroom (the woman/teacher/instructor asks questions with a didactic purpose, eliciting answers from the students; the space also resembles a classroom with a board that has the words *6-7 oct* written on them, the dates of the Referendum).

The viewers are alternately shown frames from two different sites. In the first one, the girls and their instructor are in a dark room that seems to be an abandoned church (also evoked by the

¹¹⁸ They define themselves as "the first Romanian online campaigning community" (source: https://www.facebook.com/pg/de.clic.ro/about/?ref=page_internal; last accessed on: May 2, 2019)

¹¹⁹ "The first human rights NGO in Romania that protects and promotes LGBT rights." (https://www.facebook.com/pg/asociatia.accept/about/?ref=page_internal; last accessed on: May 2, 2019)

¹²⁰ The original Romanian title: Copiii Referendumului (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4C6f_HGn338; last accessed on May 2, 2019)

¹²¹ As of May, 2019

sound of bells during the first frame) with the girls sitting on chairs, and the instructor walking around. The second site is in an open field, where the girls are walking as they are followed by the instructor who, once they reach their destination, forces them to watch the execution of a woman being burnt alive. In addition to building on the imagery and symbolism of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the image of three roses is used in several instances (e.g., the window of the church, the instructor's armband), which is a visual reference to the Romanian governing political party, PSD (Social Democratic Party). The creators of the video thus formulate a stance against the governing party, aiming to affirm the theory popular within the boycott movement that the Referendum was in fact not initiated by the Coalition for Family, but by the Social Democratic Party (PSD) in order to divert attention from its shortcomings and the scandal building around it (as described in Chapter 2).

The video does not stop at the level of images in reiterating this theory, but focuses the whole rhetoric of the video on it, as we can see below, in the transcript of the dialogue between the instructor and the girls (Figure 7):

The Instructor: So, once again, what do we celebrate on October 6 and 7?

One of the girls: *The Referendum for the definition of the family.*

The Instructor: *Yes, my sweethearts, everything started then. Through an exemplary mobilization, your parents succeeded in returning to traditional values. All this at the urging of the party and of the leaders* [she points to a large portrait of a male figure that is a merged image of the current leader of the largest party in the government, PSD, Liviu Dragnea, as well as that of the former Prime Minister of Romania, Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu, the leader of the ALDE party, the other member of the Romanian governing coalition].

All girls: *Dare to believe, dare to believe, dare to believe...*

The Instructor: *Do not forget that you owe them everything. Because you are...*

All girls: *...the children of the Referendum.*¹²²

¹²² The original text in Romanian:

In this dystopian reality, there is only one party as implied by the assumption that such a party is known to exist by the use of a definite article in *the party*. The merged portrait of two Romanian political leaders is another reference to the assumption that the Referendum was orchestrated by the governing Social Democratic Party.



Figure 7 The Children of the Referendum

The creators of the video presented the Referendum from an indisputably extreme perspective by mimicking the most frequently alluded pro-Referendum scenario: children are in danger. However, the young girls in this video are presented as being deprived of their free will, made to look useful only as prospective reproductive machines. The system does not consider them individually: it sees them as a faceless mass equally subordinated to the power of the state; however, the close-ups of the girls' faces display emotions of fear, dread and helplessness, which make them objects of concern and sympathy. In the final cut, the camera moves from the girls

-
- Deci, încă o dată... ce sărbătorim noi în 6 și 7 octombrie?
 - Referendumul pentru definirea familiei.
 - Da, dragele mele, atunci a început totul. Printr-o mobilizare exemplară, părinții voștri au reușit să se întoarcă la valorile tradiționale. Totul la îndemnul partidului și al conducătorilor.
 - Îndrăznește să crezi! Îndrăznește să crezi! Îndrăznește să crezi!
 - Să nu uitați că lor le datorați totul! Pentru că voi sunteți...
 - Copiii referendumului!

standing in front of a burning stake to a wider frame in which we see a dark building resembling the Palace of the Parliament, the seat of the Romanian Parliament, with the following text inserted in the corner of the image:

The future we prepare for them depends on us.

*IF YOU CARE, YOU STAY AT HOME.*¹²³

This text is similar to those used in the pro-Referendum discourse in that it argues that the future of the children is at stake. However, in the anti-Referendum discourse, the role of the nation is the exact opposite: the gravest harm for the future of the children is represented by the alleged interest of the nation in the election, i.e. the participation in the Referendum. In conveying their message, the creators of this video chose to show images of girls in order to expose the harm of the pro-Referendum stance: the violence of the nation against girls' bodies implicated as prospective "vessels" come to expose the state power as sexually violent. In addition to the images, the use of the feminine pronoun in the final text is also significant: *ce viitor le pregătim* 'what future we prepare for them [feminine]'. Even if there is no mention of the nation, there is an implied sense of belonging evoked by the use of the first person plural (*pregătim* 'we prepare'), but in this case it interpellates us, the responsible citizens who do not participate in the Referendum, and this way protect the little girls from the cruel pact the advocates of the 'nation' are to force them to endure.

7.3 "Whose Referendum?" – National sentiments and universal values

In this section, I analyze the content (mainly images containing texts) shared by the Boicot and the MozaiQ Facebook pages. I explore the ideological work performed by the linguistic tools used to evoke national feelings of exclusivity. The elements identified in the anti-Referendum agenda of these platforms do not include the motifs of children, or distant historical events. On the contrary, they operate with feelings of love, hate, a sense of belonging that is familiar to everyone, while they still urge for some "progress of the nation" to be achieved collectively by boycotting the Referendum.

¹²³ The original text in Romanian:
„Depinde de noi ce viitor le pregătim.
DACĂ VĂ PASĂ, STAȚI ACASĂ.”

As mentioned before, one of the main claims of the anti-Referendum discourse was that a valid Referendum would be discriminatory towards LGBTQ people. Among other Romanian LGBTQ organizations, MozaiQ started its own campaign on Facebook, and their most often shared text image said: “Love is not a matter of vote.”¹²⁴ By appealing to the sentiment of love, just like in the dominant international pro-LGBTQ rhetoric, the subject in question becomes universal as all people can somehow relate to the feeling of love. Different types of social exclusion are often interpreted in the context of hate (see also *hate speech*, *hate crime*), that operates as a common ground in individuals’ set of emotions; one of the MozaiQ content relies on this: “Romanians do not believe in hatred.”¹²⁵ Here, besides fighting discrimination, the aim is to evoke a sense of superiority in their Romanian-ness suggesting that true Romanians are better than those who are hateful. The Boicot Facebook page takes the question of hatred further by appealing to the religiosity of Romanian people with a text image that reads: “Hate does not send you to heaven”¹²⁶, being complemented by a more explicit message in the description of the picture: “Don’t use God and don’t use the image of a child to justify a referendum that changes nothing and leaves behind only hatred.” In these texts the major themes used in the pro-Referendum rhetoric are criticized (religion, God, children), and the arguments against the Referendum are briefly summed up.

The anti-Referendum campaign wishes to overcome the “traditional values” by choosing an appeal to “progress”, and it encourages some sort of an ideological (and thus, in its effects, material) catching up with “Europe”, the part of the world that is imagined to promote their desired, progressive values: “Romania’s place is in Europe!”¹²⁷ While in the pro-Referendum discourse, other European countries represent deterrents that should be avoided, here, instead of the preservation of the nation through isolation, Europe is understood as a new horizon. Another

¹²⁴ The original Romanian text: “Iubirea nu se votează”

(<https://www.facebook.com/mozaiqromania/photos/a.1228537373826607/2369760013037665/?type=3&theater>; last accessed on: May 5, 2019)

¹²⁵ The original Romanian text: „Românii nu cred în ură”

(<https://www.facebook.com/mozaiqromania/photos/a.1228537373826607/2367778616569138/?type=3&theater>; last accessed on: May 5, 2019)

¹²⁶ The original Romanian text: „Ura nu te trimite în rai.”

(<https://www.facebook.com/boicotlareferendum/photos/a.455535981607098/461539931006703/?type=3&theater>; last accessed on: May 5, 2019)

¹²⁷ The original Romanian text: „Locul României este în Europa!”

(<https://www.facebook.com/mozaiqromania/photos/a.1228537373826607/2362625793751087/?type=3&theater>; last accessed on: May 5, 2019)

MozaiQ text urges a joint action: “Together we conquer.”¹²⁸ The use of the word *conquer* is borrowed from a military vocabulary where, by default, there is always a defeated party and joy over ‘our’ victory. At the same time, this rhetoric is characteristic of nationalistic discourses; and by reversing that logic but speaking to an emotional commitment, the overall aim of the anti-Referendum campaign comes to be addressing the largest audience possible.

The rhetoric used by the Boicot Facebook page builds on an *us–them* opposition characteristic of nationalist discourses (see Anderson 1983), however, the *other* in this case is not an external force, but one within the nation: those at the top of the political hierarchy. The citizens of the nation face an unspecified power, one of images even containing texts addressing the identity of this authority: “Whose Referendum?” This distancing in the *us* vs. *them* relation is expressed in other texts as well, e.g.: “My faith and *their* politics do not make up a good church,”¹²⁹ which is not only achieved through the use of possessives, but also by the concepts of *faith* and *politics* set up in a binary divide. It is also significant that this particular slogan dislocates the pro-Referendum rhetoric presenting itself as safeguarding Christian values and the supporters of the anti-Referendum as heathens. The use of the possessive *my* with the concept *faith* emphasizes the fact that people against the Referendum are also believers, and the election is not about faith, but about political machinations. The description of this image also criticizes a widely addressed aspect of the Referendum, namely the separation of Church and state, that the Church should be free of politics, and no religious authority should mobilize people to participate at the Referendum.

The profile picture of the Boicot Facebook page is the map of Romania filled with a black and white mass of people. While in the pro-Referendum imagery, the colors of the Romanian flag are used extensively, the Boicot movement chooses different shades of grey setting a more neutral atmosphere instead of the patriotic sentiments of celebrating the nation imposed by the colors of the flag. The anti-Referendum discourse builds substantially on the concrete problems of the country, these being expressed on images with texts such as: “A referendum that changes nothing

¹²⁸ The original Romanian text: „Împreună învingem”

(<https://www.facebook.com/mozaiqromania/photos/a.1228537373826607/2368585396488460/?type=3&theater>; last accessed on: May 5, 2019)

¹²⁹ The original Romanian text: „Credința mea și politica lor nu fac biserică bună împreună”

(<https://www.facebook.com/boicotlareferendum/photos/a.455535981607098/460070224487007/?type=3&theater>; last accessed on: May 5, 2019)

is a referendum spending public funds¹³⁰”; while others combine social issues with a mimicking of the motifs used in the pro-Referendum agenda: “God is above, and he can see that people are dying in hospitals¹³¹”. Another powerful positioning of the unspecified *them* is realized through the direct address made to political authorities in the text image: “We have not forgotten what you did on August 10.¹³²” August 10, 2018 marks the day when the Romanian authorities intervened with an unprecedented level of violence at the mass demonstration against corruption and low wages called *Diaspora at Home* when around 100,000 protesters gathered in Bucharest alone.¹³³ This event is a clear example of how the nation was divided between power and those subjected to power, and it aims to demonstrate that the Referendum is once again a political matter in which the country is divided on the same basis. While contemporary populism mobilizes against the enemy from abroad (Pelinka 2013, quoted in Wodak 2015: 28), these anti-Referendum discourses focus on the “enemy above”.

7.4 “What do I tell my kid when...” – statistical data vs. imagined threats

The RiseOUT Facebook page is run by a group that defines itself as a community organization with the “mission to inform, educate, support and empower the LGBT people of Iași, Romania,”¹³⁴ a city in the eastern part of the country. Their Facebook page was launched in and currently has 7.9K followers. At the beginning of October 2018, they asked their followers to join them in their campaign against the Referendum and help them distribute some leaflets in the city of Iași, the message of which was that the Referendum did not address the real problems of Romanians. On

¹³⁰ The original Romanian text: „Un referendum care nu schimbă nimic e un referendum care cheltuie inutil banii publici.”

(<https://www.facebook.com/boicotlareferendum/photos/a.455535981607098/460945834399446/?type=3&theater;> last accessed on: May 5, 2019)

¹³¹ The original Romanian text: „Dumnezeu e sus și vede că mor oamenii în spitale.”

(<https://www.facebook.com/boicotlareferendum/photos/a.455535981607098/463794777447885/?type=3&theater;> last accessed on: May 5, 2019)

¹³² The original Romanian text: „N-am uitat ce-ați făcut pe 10 august.”

(<https://www.facebook.com/boicotlareferendum/photos/a.454880441672652/461373911023305/?type=3&theater;> last accessed on: May 5, 2019)

¹³³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-romania-protests/anti-government-protest-in-romania-turns-violent-idUSKBN1KV1YO> (last accessed on: May 5, 2019)

¹³⁴ https://www.facebook.com/pg/riseoutorg/about/?ref=page_internal (last accessed on: May 2, 2019)

the following day, they uploaded their leaflets to their Facebook page, and since then the album (Figure 8) containing the 14 photos has been shared more than 21.9K times.

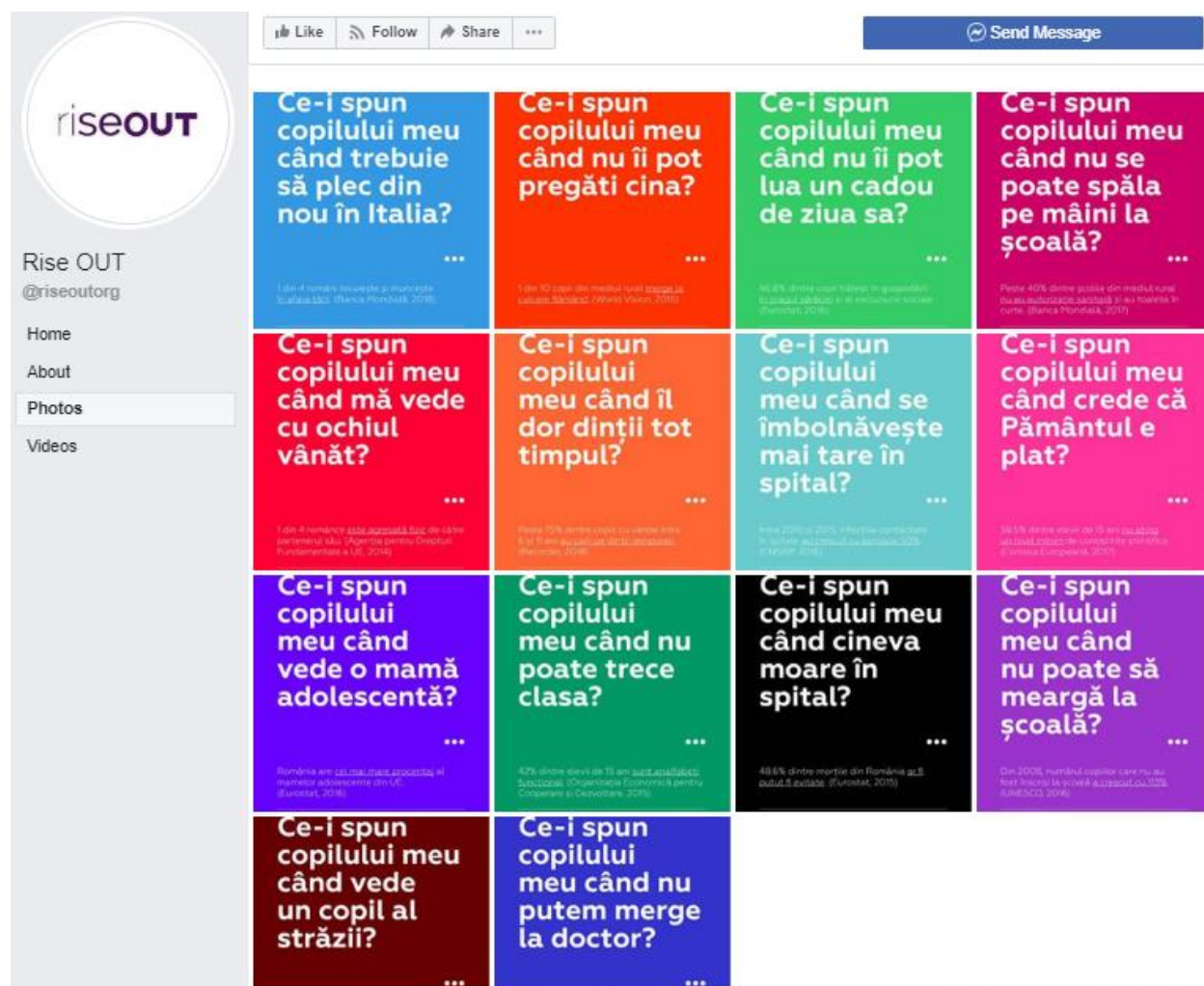


Figure 8 The album of the anti-Referendum campaign of RiseOUT¹³⁵

As stated before, the main goal of this campaign was to name and point out what they saw to be the real problems of the Romanian society. RiseOUT chose a visually minimalistic style to convey a powerful message: against the background of different colors, the texts are placed and structured identically. Each leaflet starts with a question beginning with “What do I tell my kid when...?”, followed by statistical data meant to warrant the scale of the given issue formulated in the question. Each leaflet ends with the line: “The October 6-7 Referendum will not resolve the

¹³⁵ https://www.facebook.com/pg/riseoutorg/photos/?tab=album&album_id=1866583523390666 (last accessed on: May 3, 2019)

problems of these families. You should rather stay at home.”¹³⁶ Here *family* does not denote an idealized institution the preservation and safeguarding of which will ensure protection against diverse threats – as suggested by the pro-Referendum discourse – but it is constructed in terms of its Romanian reality as presented by the statistical data, which is not only far from ideal but emerges as an image of intrinsic instability due to the discussed social issues. The authenticity of the data presented in the RiseOUT campaign is conferred by the authority of the institutions providing the statistical information. While some of the data explicitly refer to Romania (Leaflet no. 1, 4, 7), other statistics remain unspecified and might be interpreted in a broader, international context when the existing social problems are addressed (Leaflet no. 2, 3, 5, 6), while keeping the formal focus on children. In the following, I provide the translation of some of these leaflets, representing the constituent elements of the different threatening situations outlined by them (the examples will be numbered randomly for easier referencing).

Leaflet no. 1:

What do I tell my kids when I have to leave again for Italy?

1 out of 4 Romanians lives and works outside the country. (World Bank, 2018)¹³⁷

Leaflet no. 2:

What do I tell my kids when I can't make them dinner?

1 out of 10 children from rural areas goes to bed hungry. (World Vision, 2016)¹³⁸

Leaflet no. 3:

What do I tell my kids when they can't wash their hands at school?

¹³⁶ The original Romanian text: „Referendumul din 6-7 octombrie nu va rezolva problemele acestor copii. Mai bine stai acasă.”

¹³⁷ The original Romanian text:

„Ce-i spun copilului meu când trebuie să plec din nou în Italia?

1 din 4 români locuiește și muncește în afara țării. (Banca Mondială, 2018)”

¹³⁸ The original Romanian text:

„Ce-i spun copilului meu când nu îi pot pregăti cina?

1 din 10 copii din mediul rural merge la culcare flămând. (World Vision, 2016)”

More than 40% of the schools in rural areas do not have health authorization and have a loo only in the courtyard. (World Bank, 2017)¹³⁹

Leaflet no. 4:

What do I tell my kids when they see me with a black eye?

1 out of 4 Romanian women is physically abused by her partner. (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014)¹⁴⁰

Leaflet no. 5:

What do I tell my kids when they only get sicker in the hospital?

Between 2010 and 2015, the number of infections contracted in hospitals increased by almost 50%. (The National Center for Statistics and Public Health, 2016)¹⁴¹

Leaflet no. 6:

What do I tell my kids when they think that the Earth is flat?

38.5% of the 15-year-old students do not reach a minimum level of scientific knowledge. (European Commission, 2017)¹⁴²

Leaflet no. 7:

What do I tell my kid when they see a teenage mother?

Romania has the highest rate of teenage mothers in the EU. (Eurostat, 2016)¹⁴³

¹³⁹ The original Romanian text:

„Ce-i spun copilului meu când nu se poate spăla pe mâini la școală?

Peste 40% dintre școlile din mediul rural nu au autorizație sanitară și au toaleta în curte. (Banca Mondială, 2017)”

¹⁴⁰ The original Romanian text:

„Ce-i spun copilului meu când mă vede cu ochiul vânat?

1 din 4 românce este agresată fizic de către partenerul său. (Agenția pentru Drepturi Fundamentale a UE, 2014)”

¹⁴¹ The original Romanian text:

„Ce-i spun copilului meu când se îmbolnăvește mai tare în spital?

Între 2010 și 2015, infecțiile contractate în spitale au crescut cu aproape 50%. (CNSISP, 2016)

¹⁴² The original Romanian text:

„Ce-i spun copilului meu când crede că Pământul e plat?

38.5% dintre elevii de 15 ani nu ating un nivel minim de cunoștințe științifice. (Comisia Europeană, 2017)”

¹⁴³ The original Romanian text:

„Ce-i spun copilului meu când vede o mamă adolescentă?

România are cel mai mare procentaj al mamelor adolescente din UE. (Eurostat, 2016)”

The dominant trope used in the RiseOUT campaign is that of the child as well, however, I argue that the intention behind it is more complex than in the previous cases where the figure of children was also central. In the pro-Referendum discourse, children are presented as happy, carefree and joyful by nature, thus depicting an unrealistic and idealized image of childhood, which is impersonal and very inclusive at the same time since all parents would like their children to have these characteristics. This portrayal results in an unrealistic dimension of time as well; the happy children running in the field give an impression of suspended time. *The Children of the Referendum* video is also unrealistic from the temporal point of view as it is based on a dystopian future. The group of young girls presented also becomes inclusive as most parents can relate to sentiments of worry and anxiety regarding their children's future.

The RiseOUT campaign refuses to use any of the above connotations, and instead of *our children, the children of Romania*, they use the more personal and specific singular form of *my kids*, inviting the sympathetic reader to assume that position and identify with the particular forms of concern.

Although, as suggested by Sherr (1999), children are deliberately used to convey emotional sentiments in political discourses, the use of this trope in the RiseOUT campaign is more likely to invite the reader to engage in a dialogue, and refocus the pro-Referendum campaign centered on the figure of children. They aim to expose the reality of the Romanian child (poverty, absence of the parents, domestic violence on a daily basis) through the images of precarity against the idealized image of some joyful childhood that is assumed to be worthy of protection according to the pro-Referendum logic.

The leaflets address the most common issues of Romanian society by using the dominant tool of the pro-Referendum discourse and presenting them through the lens of children. For example, as in the case of RiseOUT leaflet no. 1, the primary victims of emigration motivated by economic instability are the children as parents tend to leave them at home in the care of grandparents or others¹⁴⁴, nevertheless, the social ongoing “demographic catastrophe”¹⁴⁵ should also be acknowledged and acted upon. There are leaflets directly targeted at exposing the poor

¹⁴⁴ <https://www.salvaticopiii.ro/ce-facem/protectie/copii-cu-parinti-plecati-la-munca-in-strainatate> (last accessed on: May 4, 2019)

¹⁴⁵ Since Romania joined the European Union, 17% of the total population fled Romania. (<https://emerging-europe.com/news/new-statistics-confirm-romanas-demographic-catastrophe/> last accessed on: May 4, 2019)

economic situation of the country (RiseOUT leaflet no. 2 and 3), while others (RiseOUT leaflet no. 5 and 6) point to the deficiencies and failure of the Romanian health and educational system.

Taking a closer look at the reality of the Romanian families by providing data on domestic violence (see RiseOUT leaflet no. 4) is intended to break down the illusion of the sanctity of the family so often reiterated in the pro-Referendum discourse, saying that the abuse against women is characteristic of Romanian families, and the protection of the *traditional family* means passing on this “tradition” as well.

RiseOUT leaflet no. 7 seemingly refers to the high rate of teenage mothers, but it also implies the issue of the lack of sexual education from the Romanian educational system. The pro-Referendum discourse interprets sex education in schools as a danger, and warns against this tool of “reeducating children”, but the RiseOUT campaign highlights the direct consequence of the missing sexual education and the prevailing taboo around the topic of sex: teenage mothers.

In sum, in this chapter I analyze some instances of the anti-Referendum campaign that went viral on social media. They were rather used as means to rewrite the pro-Referendum stance and invite the reader to engage in a dialogue with the pro-Referendum campaign without an explicit renationalization project. Those opposing the Referendum immediately came to the conclusion that LGBTQ people would have been the victims of a valid Referendum, hence their very active implication in the anti-Referendum movement. In *The Children of the Referendum* video the strategy of using children was applied similarly as in the pro-Referendum discourse, however, the conveyed message was a completely new one. The MozaiQ and Boicot pages provided new meanings that can be associated after all with the institution of the family as the societal problems discussed affect all Romanians. The RiseOUT campaign used the strategy of conferring authority to their arguments by basing them on statistical information.

8. Conclusions

The main argument of the thesis is that the mechanisms of right-wing populism (including a rhetoric of fear) can be identified in the pro-Referendum discourse even if the Referendum itself was not initiated by a political party. Throughout the chapters that analyzed the pro- and anti-Referendum discourses, I was able to point out the constitutive strategies of right-wing populism.

In Chapter 5, I addressed the renationalization discourse within the pro-Referendum campaign aiming to evoke a sense of belonging in the voters by constructing an image of '*We*' (the nation) in the first place. Some of the analyzed material relied on the collective history of the nation, and urged its audience to act by taking part in the Referendum and respecting the legacy that their ancestors fought for. In the focus of the pro-Referendum discourse are children portrayed as those who need to be protected from a yet-unspecified threat, as they represent the future of the nation. Besides reiterating the importance of *marriage between a man and a woman* as the only way to *save the children*, and thus the future of the nation, there are rare descriptions of the *traditional family* or the values associated with it. In the pro-Referendum discourse it can be witnessed how the banality of the Romanian national flag is used excessively in campaign materials in order to maximize national sentiments, and thus this banality is transformed in an active agent capable of evoking feelings of belonging. The need to reinforce the integrity of the nation was also fueled by a strong Euroscepticism, that manifested in the pro-Referendum campaign by extending the borders of the nation, and pointing to the example of the Romanians living in the diaspora who voted in order to protect the *traditional family* as they have already witnessed the manifestations of the ideological (i.e. liberal) threats coming from the West.

In Chapter 6, I discussed the ways in which the actual scapegoats of the Referendum rhetoric were created. Othering and distancing strategies were identified based on the informative videos on *the marriage between two men* published by the Coalition for Family Facebook page. The rhetoric of fear was implemented by posing children and their innocence as the main targets of the threats imposed by the immoral homosexuals, while even basic values such as freedom of speech and freedom of belief were displayed as the casualties of what is to come in the case of a failed Referendum. I also pointed to the heterosexist understanding of gender dichotomy that

conforms to the common-sense and simplistic definitions applied in right-wing populism, but also to the conservative set of values.

Chapter 7 addressed the contents that went viral in the context of the anti-Referendum discourse. Although certain nationalistic elements could be identified in the materials of the Facebook pages launching an anti-Referendum discourse as well, these were rather used as means to rewrite the pro-Referendum stance and invite the reader to engage in a dialogue with the pro-Referendum campaign, or as rhetorical techniques to simply have the desired effect on the audience, however, an explicit renationalization project could not be detected. Those opposing the Referendum immediately came to the conclusion that LGBTQ people would have been the victims of a valid Referendum, their arguments were mostly built on the existing social and economic problems of the country, issues related to the political system and the governing party, while the power of the Orthodox Church was also criticized. Even within the anti-Referendum discourses, the different platforms used different techniques in convincing their audience, while some contents sought an emotional response, others took a more intellectual approach basing its arguments on statistical information.

On the basis of these findings, I argue that the rhetoric right-wing populist politics represents a relevant analytical frame for the discourses constructed on the ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’ divide, apply a rhetoric of fear and other constitutive elements of right-wing populist politics.

In the chapter on the research design (Chapter 4), I proposed that there might be an implied, less obvious reason that could explain the low voter turnout at the Referendum different from the fact that it became associated in some contexts with the ruling party. In Chapter 2.3., I argued that current understandings of sexuality in Romania are still strongly marked by the legacy of the communist era in which sexuality became a source of fear. The tabooization of sexuality prevails even today (as attested by the lack of a sexual education, and the ideological connotations attributed to it), which inherently results in the tabooization of private life as well. In a deeply religious country, a *fight* proposed for the safeguarding of traditional (Christian) values could be expected to be supported by many, but the constant insistence on the common-sense simplistic definition (characteristic of right-wing populism) of family as the marriage *between a man and a woman* had a reverse effect. Due to its frequent reiterating, it became more and more obvious that *family* is more, less or just simply different than this simplistic definition – this being attested by

the private experiences of people that here proved to be more powerful than the common ground aimed to be established. In addition, when the anti-Referendum discourses took a closer look at the Romanian *traditional family*, implications of poverty, a tendency of emigration and domestic violence were exposed, which showcase traits that no one would want to preserve.

The rhetoric of fear at play in the pro-Referendum discourse also built on scapegoating a sexual minority still underrepresented and hardly visible in the Romanian public discourse. As both abortion (and thus sexual relations) and homosexuality were regulated by law in communism, the general reaction to them is turning away, therefore the explicit images of half-naked men will first trigger an emotional response of ignorance.

Based on the above, I argue that constructing an entire discourse on different interpretations of sexuality results of the Referendum not only demonstrate the distrust of people for the things that become associated with the ruling party, but on a more conceptual level, the low vote turnout shows that private life still constitutes a taboo for some, and transferring it to the public realm is not an option. The findings of my thesis attest that any form of sexuality, be it traditional or untraditional, should still be kept behind closed doors in Romania.

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