



## **Master Thesis**

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### **Chosen traumas and national nostalgia: How AUR used psychoanalytical fantasies to mobilize the Romanian diaspora for the 2024 European elections**

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## Contents

Abstract .....	3
Introduction .....	4
Research context .....	4
Research problem.....	5
Research objective .....	6
Research question .....	7
Research argument.....	7
Contribution to literature.....	9
Roadmap .....	9
Literature review: nationalist parties and diaspora nationalism .....	11
Diaspora nationalism: national identity and electoral behavior.....	11
Nationalist parties and diasporization in the CEE .....	18
Theoretical framework: diasporas, nationalism and psychoanalysis.....	25
Diasporization through psychoanalytic lens .....	25
Fantasies and identification.....	29
Trauma, nostalgia and diasporization .....	31
Methodology .....	36
Case selection.....	36

Data collection .....	39
Data analysis .....	42
The AUR political fantasy - chosen traumas, national nostalgia and identification mechanisms.....	46
The captured state, the Romanian voivodes and the AUR militia .....	46
An alliance of villains and the chosen traumas of national decline .....	47
Nostalgia for the authentic Romanian greatness - the epoch of the voivodes .....	51
Saving the Romanian nation through identification with the AUR militia.....	55
Romanian diaspora's role in the AUR militia .....	58
Discussions and implications.....	61
Conclusions.....	67
Summary of results .....	67
Limitations .....	68
Future research agenda .....	70
Bibliography .....	72
Works cited .....	72
Primary sources.....	78

## Abstract

This study started from the empirical puzzle related to the Romanian diaspora's vote for AUR in the 2020 parliamentary elections. Although the literature on AUR offers a variety of explanations for its success both in the country and in the diaspora, my study proposes a further explanation inspired by the concept of fantasy developed in Lacanian psychoanalysis and later translated into nationalism studies. The method of data collection used in this study was social media ethnography. My dataset is a collection of 25 primary sources from the party's online campaign for the 2024 European elections.

Based on this dataset, this study argues that AUR produces a political fantasy through its discourse, which is structured around three components: a golden age nostalgia, which is a metaphor for different historical periods of Romania; a set of two villains, which embody the current Romanian political establishment and the Brussels neo-Marxists; and an identification mechanism, namely the concept of "AUR militia" (or *oaste*, in Romanian), which refers to all those who support the idea of a sovereign Romania. This study contributes to the literature from a theoretical perspective by presenting a hypothesis on the 20% that the AUR obtained in the diaspora in the 2020 parliamentary elections, as well as the result that it will obtain in the 2024 European elections. From an empirical perspective, this is the first academic analysis of the AUR's campaign for the 2024 European elections, although my research does not examine the entire campaign, but only its online component.

# Introduction

## Research context

Globally, nationalist parties have expanded their support base, particularly in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. As a result of the crisis in Central and Eastern Europe, nationalist parties came to power and, according to the literature, triggered a phenomenon known as democratic backsliding. This term refers to a process with three main features. First, it involves a slow abandonment of the components that make up democracy. Second, it is an elite-driven process, meaning that those in power can undermine a democracy through various legal means (Bakke and Sitter 2022, 24). Third, democratic backsliding is a process that may or may not lead to regime change, as is currently the case in Hungary, which is classified as a hybrid regime rather than a democracy. Democratic backsliding can use various means, such as taking over the media and thus monopolising public opinion, interfering in elections through gerrymandering or outright stealing, or undermining the rule of law (Bakke and Sitter 2022, 25). Parties at the forefront of democratic backsliding in the region include PiS in Poland and Fidesz in Hungary (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018). However, the reign of the Law and Justice Party in Poland came to an end with the parliamentary elections in 2023 (Markowski 2024).

Similar parties have tried to enter Romanian politics, but with little success (Soare and Tufiş 2023): one such party was the Greater Romania Party, which was a major player in the country in the 1990s. However, the 2020 parliamentary elections saw the emergence of a more recent conservative or, according to some commentators, right-wing party. In these elections, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), founded in 2019, passed the electoral threshold to become a member of the Romanian parliament. Moreover, the Romanian diaspora, which typically

supports liberal parties, gave AUR 20 per cent of its vote (Burean 2018). Political scientists have offered a number of theories as to why the diaspora votes for nationalist parties, such as that the turnover and the vote itself is determined by whoever is in charge of reaching out to the diaspora. This could be political parties or the state (Burgess 2018). However, nationalism studies have not provided sufficient explanations as to why immigrants start to support nationalist or populist parties.

### **Research problem**

The empirical puzzle of this study focuses on the factors that contributed to the AUR party winning 20% of the Romanian expatriate vote in the 2020 parliamentary elections. The literature attempting to answer this question has so far offered a variety of explanations. The first theory concerns the AUR's strategy. In this explanation, the party leadership's previous ties with diaspora communities may help explain its success (Soare and Tufiş 2023). A second hypothesis examines the policy agenda set out by the party in its manifesto, with the aim of understanding both the national vote and diaspora support. This hypothesis is important because it reveals the multi-layered construction of AUR's ideology and the party's tripartite conception of the nation, which includes not only the Romanian population living within Romania's borders, but also the historical diaspora from neighbouring states and the economic diaspora in Western Europe (Popescu and Vesalon 2023).

A third theory suggests that a contextual event contributed to AUR's success. AUR's anti-Covid rhetoric and stance against government restrictions made it popular, and the Covid-19 pandemic was seen by the party as an opportunity to gain electoral capital (Crăciun and Tăranu 2023). Although this hypothesis focuses primarily on Romanian voters within the state's borders,

another study supports it by showing how the government's restrictions during the pandemic also affected the Romanian diaspora. This suggests that the AUR's rhetoric against the government's pandemic health restrictions may have had an impact on Romanians living abroad (Mocanu 2021).

## **Research objective**

The empirical aim of my research is to examine the AUR campaign in the 2024 European Parliament elections. Unlike the previous elections four years ago, neither social unrest nor government health restrictions will affect the 2024 campaign or elections. Nevertheless, Romanian companies specialising in social and marketing research, such as INSCOP, indicate that at least 15% of voters would cast an AUR ballot in the 2024 European Parliament elections ("European Parliament 2024. INSCOP survey." 2024).

From a theoretical point of view, the aim of this study is to add a fourth explanation for the success of the AUR in the Romanian diaspora to the hypotheses previously discussed. As such, my study is inspired by the concept of fantasy, developed in Lacanian psychoanalysis and then translated into nationalism studies. A fantasy is a story that explains why something happened the way it did, and it has some main elements, namely a golden age to which people want to return, a villain who prevents people from enjoying that fantasy in the present, and an identification mechanism. In addition to providing an image of an idealised past, a fantasy can also be an imaginary instrument of consolation by providing an explanation for the problems of the present (Nobus 2020, 244). It is very important to note that fantasy operates at the emotional level of the audience.

In addition to being a useful complement to the three hypotheses discussed above, this psychoanalytic explanation can also be used as a means of providing an alternative interpretation

of AUR's discourse on the Romanian nation. According to this psychoanalytic explanation, political discourse functions as an identification mechanism because it presents the electorate with a variety of identity elements from which to choose and internalise. Therefore, examining a political discourse as a fantasy establishes a causal relationship between the political discourse and the reasons that voters, including those living abroad, may have for voting for the party. Simply put, Romanian citizens in the diaspora may vote for AUR because they identify, on a more or less emotional level, with its discourse and its proposed version of Romanian identity.

### **Research question**

The research question for this paper is as follows:

Based on the Lacanian definition of political fantasy as translated into nationalism studies, what aspects of the AUR's campaign for the 2024 European elections fall into this category?

### **Research argument**

The central argument of my dissertation is that the AUR campaign for the 2024 European Parliament elections is structured as a political fantasy consisting of three components: (1) a villain who creates a specific trauma (Homolar and Löfflmann 2021, 5) that prevents people in the present from experiencing the benefits of (2) a golden age in which they found enjoyment (Mandelbaum 2020, 467). The third component is an identification mechanism that allows voters to construct their identity based on the party's platform (Kabgani and Clarke, 2017). In AUR's campaign for the 2024 European elections, the golden age is a nostalgic construction, namely a metaphor for several historical periods of Romania. According to the party's message in this campaign, during the golden age the nation was united and sovereign because its leaders embodied the true



Romanian spirit. Each of these leaders embodies an important aspect of the Romanian spirit. As a result, five historical figures of voivodes/leaders feature prominently in both the party's offline and online campaigns: Alexandru Ioan Cuza, the reformer; Avram Iancu, the brave; Vlad the Impaler, the leader who brought justice; Stephen the Great, the defender of Christianity; and Michael the Brave, the first voivode to unite the Romanian principalities.

The villains of the AUR campaign are the current political elites of Romania and Europe, who are preventing the Romanian nation from living in the Golden Age. By selling the nation to foreign interests, the Romanian parties and intelligence services have created both the trauma of a captive state and the trauma of a pandemic. This prevents the Romanian people from enjoying the golden age of full sovereignty in the present. Because they impose neo-Marxist ideas – such as gender ideology, in AUR's jargon – on the Romanian people, European leaders are also seen as villains.

In AUR discourse, the identification mechanism is the concept of the 'AUR militia' (or *oaste*, in Romanian), which refers to all party current and potential members and supporters who support the idea of a sovereign Romania. The term militia comes from the old Romanian word '*oaste*', meaning an army of civilians mobilised by the voivodes to fight the invaders. By urging voters to join the AUR in its fight against opponents both inside and outside the country, the AUR militia plays a crucial role in the concept of the EU election campaign. The AUR militia includes both Romanians living in the country and members of the diaspora. In the AUR militia, however, the Romanian diaspora serves two purposes: first, the diaspora is an ally of the party, and second, it is an essential member of the AUR. It is therefore possible to interpret the AUR militia as an identification mechanism, which may explain the party's vote in the EU elections.

## **Contribution to literature**

My research contributes to existing knowledge in two ways. First, from a theoretical perspective, my study presents a fourth hypothesis that can explain both the 20% share that the AUR obtained in the diaspora in the 2020 legislative elections and the result that it will obtain in the 2024 European elections, even though at the time of writing the elections are only a few days away. To explain these findings, my thesis draws on a Lacanian approach to political discourse. Translated into the study of nationalism, this approach conceptualises political discourse as a fantasy with a villain, a golden age and an identification mechanism. The second contribution of my study is empirical and consists in the fact that my work is the first academic analysis of the AUR's campaign for the 2024 European elections, although my research does not examine the entire campaign, but only its online component.

## **Roadmap**

The structure of this dissertation is as follows. The purpose of the literature section is to identify the gap in knowledge – more specifically, the lack of a convincing explanation as to why diasporas, especially those whose host country is a consolidated democracy, support populist and nationalist political parties when voting at home. This topic is underexplored in the literature, while the few articles on the subject examine the influence of diasporas on home voting in regions other than Central and Eastern Europe. The main concepts of my research – fantasy, chosen traumas, national nostalgia and enjoyment – are explained in the theoretical framework section. The methodology section explains why I chose AUR as a case study, why I collected data from the EU 2024 campaign, which dataset I used, and how and which analytical tool I used. The concepts mentioned above, which are the main components of the AUR political fantasy created for the EU

campaign, are empirically illustrated in the case study section. Finally, the conclusions section provides a summary of the findings, then outlines the limitations of my research, primarily those related to data collection, and finally discusses the future research agenda. This includes my doctoral research project on the political fantasies created by Romanian political parties and state institutions to appeal to the Romanian diaspora abroad.

## **Literature review: nationalist parties and diaspora nationalism**

### **Diaspora nationalism: national identity and electoral behavior**

The empirical goal of my research is to understand why 20.23% of the Romanian diaspora (Vladimir Bortun 2020) voted for the extremist party AUR in the 2020 parliamentary elections. In this section, I will explain why the existing literature does little to answer the question of why the diaspora votes for right-wing parties. While the literature on diaspora nationalism addresses this question, it does not clarify why diasporas tend to vote for populist and nationalist parties because it focuses on three other issues: the relationship between states and diaspora formation, how political actors deal with diasporas, and the role of diasporas in the democratisation process.

In general, the literature on digital diaspora nationalism emphasises the impact that digital technology can have on both the political space and the actors involved in the formation of national identity. Unlike in the past, digital technology now allows any political actor to publicly challenge the state's monopoly on national identity by communicating their view of the nation to any audience. This is a monumental change brought about by digital media because it has broken the historical monopoly on defining national identity. Previously, national identity tended to have a single version, and one authority, usually the state, had hegemony over its definition. But now this single version of national identity can be publicly challenged on a large scale, and any actor has the political space to redefine it, and potentially access to many audiences to communicate it, all at very low cost. While digital media allow all political actors to participate in the political game of defining national identity, some of these actors may struggle to reach audiences due to limited skills or knowledge (Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez 2021, 338).

In addition to fostering competition in the space of defining national identity, digital media sometimes stimulates an aggressive form of nationalism that can lead to the rise of right-wing parties, in addition to stimulating domestic polarisation (Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez 2021, 339). People can interact with media and algorithms, but in doing so they create an environment in which they only encounter views that match their own. This is called an echo chamber and typically leads to divisions between groups. Zionist organisations and some Jewish groups in the United States are two examples of this, as both hold opposing views and promote competing narratives about Israel, often marginalising and condemning those who take a more moderate approach (Conversi 2012, 1370). This example also shows that the use of digital media can lead to changes in what William Safran calls the 'homeland myth'. This concept refers to the collective memory, vision or history of diasporas of their homeland (Safran 1991, 83). Because of the digital age and the rise of skilled actors capable of proposing new interpretations of national identity, I argue that the homogeneity of the homeland myth is fragmenting.

While digital technologies have expanded the political sphere, this expansion has not been all positive. As several recent elections in Central and Eastern Europe and elsewhere have shown, the expansion of the political sphere has also allowed right-wing parties to (re)enter the electoral arena and secure a significant share of the diaspora vote. However, the literature at the intersection of political science and nationalism studies fails to explain the relationship between diasporas and the political right. This is mainly because the literature is state-centric and dominated by three concepts: divided nationhood, politics of belonging and external voting.

First, the concept of divided nationhood is applied to countries that have lost part of their national territory. One such example is Hungary, with Hungarian ethnic groups that live within the borders of neighbouring countries (Waterbury 2020, 964). One possible explanation for diaspora

voting for populist or nationalist parties based on this example is that these parties seek to strengthen their electoral base and gain support by portraying divided nationhood as a cultural threat. This cultural threat is defined as a shift in the ethnicity and cultural identity of nations that needs to be reversed, an effort that often results in the mobilisation of fear against non-EU migration, while also emphasising the loss of historical diasporas (Waterbury 2020, 968). States respond to divided nationhood with kin-state policies. To continue with the Hungarian example, Hungary seeks to ensure the survival of the Hungarian people by preserving the cultural identity and heritage of its historical diaspora. In terms of policy, this goal is reflected in the political and financial support provided to Hungarian organisations operating outside of Hungary (Pogonyi 2017, 248). However, in order to explain why these efforts are effective, the literature refers to transnational political networks that provide ethnic Hungarians living abroad with electoral advantages. To this end, Fidesz established a loyalty and patronage network of funded foundations and organisations that mobilised voters while managing the collection of absentee ballots (Waterbury 2023, 9).

The second concept in this state-centred literature is the politics of belonging. As defined by Wimmer, the politics of belonging is a process of establishing ethnic boundaries that can occur by describing the world in terms of specific ethnic categories, while at the same time using symbols to identify and separate group members, or by politically creating a specific ethnic category to distinguish who belongs and who does not (Wimmer 2013, 11). Belonging is often politicised because the question of who belongs in a nation and who does not can now be debated by different political actors (Brubaker 2010, 64).

The politics of belonging has two dimensions: internal and external. The internal dimension refers to the population within a state or nation, while the external dimension includes the

population outside the borders of a state that claims or is claimed to belong to that nation (Brubaker 2010, 66). Regarding the population outside the state's borders, governments can create a sense of belonging through diaspora policies that promote their political inclusion and development (Popyk and Lesińska 2023, 5). When governments propose policies that extend voting rights to their diasporas while also engaging in a discourse of inclusion, this is referred to in the literature as the thickness of citizenship (Popyk and Lesińska 2023, 3). For example, when the right to vote is presented to diasporas as a duty or, on the contrary, as a requirement for national unity and identity, this could be classified as thick citizenship. Thin citizenship, on the other hand, occurs when the right to vote is seen only as a legal obligation and not as an emotional attachment to the kin state (Popyk and Lesińska, 2023, 4).

The third theme in this literature is external voting, and the focus is on the factors that influence it. The argument is that the voting preferences of emigrants can be influenced by factors in their home country. However, this is highly variable because these voters acquire a 'transnational status', which means that they are also influenced by the host country. Both the home context and the host country create a unique intermediate positionality with its own political agenda. In this sense, the literature also discusses the role of diaspora entrepreneurs in mobilising citizens abroad, emphasising their ability to influence political behaviour, but this concept has received little attention (Szulecki et al. 2021, 993).

Analysing the question of belonging highlights the importance of how states and actors define diasporas. Another factor to consider is what diasporas are and how governments or other actors mobilise them. To become a diaspora outside its state borders, an ethnic group must go through a process of diasporisation or diasporic mobilisation. In constructivist terms, this process can be described as a social strategic construction by an actor or state that gives the group a distinct

transnational identity (Adamson 2008, 11). Certain conditions must be met in order to develop a diasporic identity that can mobilise citizens abroad (Adamson 2008, 7).

The first condition addressed in the literature is the emergence of a diasporic entrepreneur who socially constructs a diaspora through identity framing and political mobilisation (Adamson 2008, 11). These entrepreneurs engage in the strategic and rational construction of specific frames, resulting in the formation of an identity for a community that already has a social network (Adamson 2008, 14). The formation of an identity can be seen as a diasporic practice. A diasporic practice (Adamson 2008, 15) is an activity carried out by a political actor within the state or a state institution in relation to its citizens living abroad. These practices are closely linked to a group's identity, so they often involve a process of memorialisation (Alexander 2013, 596). Collective memory and rituals can play an important role in the formation of diasporic communities, as telling and remembering a particular past lays the foundation for what belonging should look like in the future. This can also challenge the national view of memory, allowing diasporic memory to take on new meanings (Alexander 2013, 595).

When a migrant group acquires an identity and is classified as a diaspora, or even when a migrant group is in the process of developing such an identity, both states and sub-state political actors have an interest in interacting with them. Diaspora engagement is the concept that encompasses these relationships, and a frequently asked question is why states engage with their diasporas. Three perspectives have emerged to justify diaspora engagement. A utilitarian perspective emphasises the economic and political reasons for engagement: on the one hand, diasporas are important due to remittances, and on the other hand, depending on the regime type, they can be used for domestic political gains and/or foreign policy (Koinova and Tsourapas 2018, 313). In addition to the economic and political approaches, the identity-based perspective sees



diasporas as symbolic, and thus states need to maintain a link between their diasporas and the homeland in order to acquire symbolic capital. In this sense, framing diasporas as part of the homeland would facilitate the construction of, appeal to, or engagement with their identity through mobilisation (Koinova and Tsourapas 2018, 313).

The governance-focused perspective examines how diasporas can be managed through the use of embassies and/or civil society organisations (Koinova and Tsourapas 2018, 314). Thus, a second debate in the literature views diaspora engagement as a social or political engineering project, implying that it is a practice that seeks to shape the behaviour of diasporic citizens. By attempting to do so, a state could shape its diaspora into loyal non-resident members capable of participating in the affairs of their home country (Aksel 2022, 313). Following this line of thought, a third debate on diaspora engagement revolves around the idea that diasporas are the result of political entrepreneurs engaged in mobilisation activities. Labeling and claiming are two processes used in diaspora engagement, but there is still a lack of research on these dynamics, leaving the following questions unanswered: how are diasporas engaged, by whom, and for what purpose? (Birka 2022, 55).

The way a state manages diaspora engagement can have a significant impact on the democratisation process. Two examples are the participation of the Moldovan diaspora in the presidential elections in the last decade and the Ukrainian diaspora in the Euromaidan in 2014. According to the literature on the relationship between diasporas and democratisation, diasporas can influence the democratic trajectory of their homeland through financial contributions, the experience they bring to civil society organisations, as well as participation in electoral campaigns, protests and joining the political opposition (Aleksanyan et al. 2019, 89). The Moldovan diaspora is an example because it played an important role in the 2016 presidential run-off, when the

Moldovan diaspora across Europe advocated for European values and created initiatives such as providing a place to sleep for those abroad who wanted to vote, as well as initiating campaigns to counter Russian propaganda (Aleksanyan et al. 2019, 101). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Ukrainian diaspora has played an active role in the country's democratic transition. The Ukrainian World Congress (UWC), a non-profit organisation that brings together Ukrainians from around the world, has been instrumental in building ties between Canada and Ukraine. Thanks to its activities, Canada was both the first country to recognise Ukraine's independence and later to support its democratic path after the Euromaidan events of 2013-2014 (Deniz and Murat Özgür 2022, 251).

In some cases, diasporas are used to reinforce authoritarianism. To explain this, the literature proposes the concept of authoritarian diasporas, defined as a pattern in former authoritarian regimes of transferring influence and non-democratic practices to new parties and institutions abroad (Loxton and Power 2021, 468). Turkey provides two examples of this. First, Turkey established the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), an institution that implements policies aimed at mobilising conservative youth in the diaspora in pro-government activities and domestic policies in order to create a diaspora loyal to the state (Böcü and Baser 2024, 45). Beyond youth politics, the Turkish government has used a securitisation narrative in which it claims to be the leader of the Muslim world threatened by diaspora dissidents receiving Western aid. This securitisation narrative targets dissidents such as Kurds, Alevis and leftists, and Turkey's ruling party has mobilised its diaspora supporters against regime dissidents (Yilmaz, Shipoli and Dogru 2023, 522).

In conclusion, this section has shown how the new digital age enables new political actors to participate in the process of (re)making national identities by opening up new spaces for their

interpretation through the expansion of the political sphere. This in turn allows for new interpretations of national and/or transnational identity and belonging. Diasporas are affected in a number of ways, not least by being the target of identity-shaping activities in which national political actors and states work together or separately to create a specific transnational identity for their diasporas. Studying the relationship between political actors, states and diasporas is important because once a migrant group is mobilised and becomes a diaspora, it can act as a promoter of democracy or autocracy.

### **Nationalist parties and diasporization in the CEE**

Although nationalist parties in Central and Eastern Europe have been the subject of extensive research, relatively little of this research has examined the role of these parties in the formation of CEE diasporas in Western Europe. This is because the literature focuses on the reasons why parties engage with the diaspora and the nature of party discourse in populist and nationalist movements. I draw attention to a gap in the Romanian literature on foreign parties regarding the discursive interactions these parties have with the Romanian diaspora.

The literature on nationalist parties in Central and Eastern Europe is diverse, yet it does not examine these parties role in diaspora formation. One strand in the populism and nationalism literature looks at parties and their ideologies, particularly in Eastern Europe. First, one school of thought defines populism as a thin ideology because it does not offer viable solutions to societal problems. Here, a distinction between populist approaches emerges: on the one hand, there is a radical populist ideology that focuses on national identity and the fight against supranational institutions, and on the other, there is a centrist populist ideology that is characterised by

pragmatism because, while it criticises the EU, its narratives are less radical and aggressive (Petrović, Raos and Fila 2023, 270).

A second debate on democratic backsliding highlighted the role of cooperation between like-minded leaders in undermining democracy. A first example is the cooperation between Poland and Hungary in the run-up to the Polish parliamentary elections in 2023. The literature conceptualised this cooperation as a coalition whose role was to assist the two governments in implementing policies that led to backsliding by working in three stages. First, it provided its members with mutual protection at the EU level, as both countries have the right of veto, allowing one to block sanctions against the other. (Holesch and Kyriazi 2021, 7.) Second, this coalition was a learning mechanism because both countries can adopt each other's policies and practices, thus gaining more domestic power while weakening the opposition. Thirdly, the coalition acted as a mechanism of domestic legitimisation because it allowed the two governments to legitimise their domestic policies through praise, joint appearances or interviews with counterparts in the neighbouring country (Holesch and Kyriazi 2021, 12).

Another aspect of democratic backsliding can be found in the literature on nationalism and populism, which introduces the concept of illiberalism and explains how it manifests itself in ideology and politics. First, the concept is described as a reaction against liberalism, which is no longer seen as viable, and new solutions are proposed. Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, for example, has adopted and promoted this concept in his political speeches. These consistently show that liberalism is the creation of elites divorced from ordinary people, and its only notable result has been an individualistic and nihilistic society divorced from the nation-state. In Orbán's view, the solution to this is an illiberal state based on the examples of Turkey and China, which he

presents as models of economic growth that do not follow the Western liberal template (Laruelle 2022, 306).

The literature on transnationalism examines the role of political parties abroad, but it does not consider specifically the relationship between populist and nationalist parties and diasporas. In this literature, parties active abroad are described as ambassadors of their home country's politics, because they promote its values and identity. Their formal and informal engagement may make it easier for them to strengthen ties with elites abroad or to engage in lobbying. More importantly, parties reach out to the voters abroad because they can perform what is described as a classic function of a party: they become a channel of communication that can educate, promote political participation, participate in diaspora socialisation and generate symbols of identification and loyalty (Van Haute and Kernalegenn 2021, 11).

In the same vein, there is a growing interest in the mechanisms that lead to diaspora mobilisation in the home country and their participation in home country politics. Research on diaspora mobilisation combines migration and electoral studies and attempts to distinguish between civic engagement and political activism. The questions that researchers try to answer are whether diaspora activities affect participation at home, or why diasporas are associated with non-democratic values in the politics of the country of origin. (De Reguero and Peltoniemi 2023, 3). To understand the role of political parties abroad, some authors focus on the organisation of these parties, such as the way a party operates abroad. A notable tool for understanding this is that developed by Vincent Dain. Based on socio-psychological characteristics and political motives that explain diaspora identification with a party, Dain's framework includes elements of socialisation, familiarity with the political system and ideological incentives (Vincent Dain 2024, 3).

A framework that can capture the reasons why diasporas engage with a party's overseas branch is crucial because the literature on parties abroad has so far focused only on the reasons why political parties reach out to diaspora voters. This literature has emphasised parties' infrastructure and connections abroad to explain whether a party is more likely to engage with expatriate voters based on a cost-benefit analysis, concluding that parties are more likely to engage with expatriate voters when their benefits outweigh the costs. It follows that parties that are part of transnational networks have more incentives to seek external voters, while parties with a limited transnational infrastructure, such as party branches or associations, are less likely to seek external voters. Cost-benefit analysis plays an important role in explaining parties' reasons for engaging with overseas voters, but if diaspora voters are expected to make a difference in an election, this would be a strong incentive for any party, regardless of its transnational network, to try to compete for votes (Østergaard-Nielsen and Ciornei 2019, 624).

Parties use a variety of strategies to secure external votes. One such strategy is to include the local dimension in political campaigns. For example, after the 2017 French elections, a study of electoral campaigns in various constituencies found that the most successful were those that took into account the local political dynamics, history and sociological characteristics of expatriate voters (Van Haute and Kernalegenn 2023, 378). Regarding expatriate voters and their electoral choices, a study of six European countries found that voters exhibit hybrid tendencies during elections. They are influenced by both host and home politics, but home public opinion has a greater impact (Ognibene and Paulis 2023, 477).

The literature on the discursive dimension of populist and nationalist parties seeks to understand why diasporas vote for extremist actors, but without examining the ways in which populist and nationalist parties shape diasporic identities. Initially, the literature used socio-

demographic factors to explain why populists attract few diaspora voters. One explanation based on these factors is that populists receive more support from voters with lower levels of education. More recent studies attempt to explain voter turnout in terms of voters' attitudes rather than their education. According to this hypothesis, attitudes are more likely to predict support for populists, and also higher turnout, because voting for a populist party correlates with a desire to belong and a search for identity. It follows that if the country of origin is experiencing structural problems, such as economic decline or demographic change, that lead to emigration, this can explain changes in electoral attitudes. According to this line of thinking, migrants may be dissatisfied with the politics of their home country, which may lead to the need for protest voting, including voting for nationalist or populist parties (De Reguero and Jakobson 2023, 122).

The political climate in which immigrants live abroad may also explain their voting behaviour. This hypothesis suggests that the degree of political integration that immigrants have achieved in their new country correlates with their interest in domestic politics in their home country. Diaspora voters may support populist and nationalist figures in their home country if they live in a hostile political climate and feel excluded, discriminated against, or as a result of an anti-immigrant discourse or movement (Arkilic 2021, 596). While populist parties' anti-immigration narratives are less popular among diaspora voters, their success with this electorate is determined by whether their policies and political campaigns are designed to include and address transnational identities (Turcu and Urbatsch 2023, 588).

When reviewing the literature on Romanian parties abroad, it becomes clear that one focus of this literature is how Romanian parties organise their branches abroad. It is also clear that there is an increasing share of diaspora voters in the Romanian electorate, which leads to a greater influence of the diaspora in domestic elections. This is a strategic reason for Romanian parties to

establish branches abroad. In some cases, parties such as the Social Democratic Party, which traditionally receive fewer votes from abroad, have maintained their diaspora organisations for the sole reason of legitimacy. One aspect common to all Romanian party branches abroad is their lack of organisation and the existence of two types of leadership: one coordinated from the home country and another led from the country of residence (Gherghina and Soare 2023, 437). When it comes to Romanian parties' engagement with the diaspora, the literature agrees that their policies are constantly evolving. Both new and established parties pursue policies that support diasporas in their host countries rather than advocating for their return. This is due to their financial impact on the domestic economy, as remittances from abroad (Borz 2020, 915).

The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) is another case study that has become more and more important in the literature on Romanian parties engagement with the country's diaspora. AUR's mobilisation strategy has been studied due to its success among Romanian voters in the diaspora, but the reasons for this success and how it was possible remain unknown (Soare and Tufiş 2023, 105). One possible clarification comes from the literature on party engagement, which focuses on discerning the role of states versus that of parties in transnational voters engagement. Diaspora engagement can be led by the state or by a party, with a case study of four countries showing that when the state leads diaspora outreach, emigrant mobilisation is less effective, while party-led outreach has a better chance of mobilising the diaspora and encouraging electoral participation (Burgess 2018, 379). Applying this framework to Romania, we can see that since 2014 parties have begun to take the lead in mobilising the Romanian diaspora, while state leadership in this regard has waned.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, in the 2020 parliamentary elections, AUR emerged as one of the most successful parties in driving diaspora mobilisation, so I plan to study



this party and its strategies of engagement with the Romanian diaspora, how they mobilise it and how they shape diaspora identity. In the 2020 Romanian parliamentary elections, the Romanian diaspora exceeded all predictions and changed its traditional voting preferences for liberal parties, giving AUR 20% of its votes. Studying this puzzle, which is revealing for the link between the Romanian diaspora and an extremist party, can help us better understand the link between diasporas and right-wing parties. In order to explore this link, in the following chapter I use psychoanalytic tools introduced by Lacanian theory and translated into nationalism studies, such as the concept of fantasy, which may shed light on how AUR managed to appeal to Romanians abroad.

# **Theoretical framework: diasporas, nationalism and psychoanalysis**

## **Diasporization through psychoanalytic lens**

Constructivist interpretations of diasporas dominate rational explanations of the phenomenon. A first interpretation is that diasporas are the result of a process of social and political construction. Diasporas are not seen as natural entities, but emerge when an actor, usually a political one, creates them through discourse or mobilisation (Adamson 2008, 6-7). To construct or mobilise diasporas, political actors must identify a constituency in a diffuse social network and categorise it through discourse and symbols. Once a constituency is classified, a distinct identity must be created to serve as a boundary (Adamson 2008, 14). A second interpretation sees diaspora as a dynamic process influenced by space, place and time. It argues that diasporic identities are constantly manipulated and interpreted, making diaspora an evolving phenomenon rather than a static category (Mavroudi 2007, 474). However, these approaches fail to explain why people living abroad participate in the discursive process of diasporisation, such as that shaped by nationalist political actors.

The psychoanalytic concept of enjoyment (Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras 2006, 148) helps to explain the support for nationalist discourses that seek to construct group identities. In this view, what gives such discourses power is the existence of a fantasy that provides people with a sense of pleasure. This fantasy can be disseminated through mythology, rituals and education. Despite their widespread dissemination, fantasies almost never come true, and in nationalist discourse the fact that most fantasies remain unfulfilled is blamed on an external enemy (Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras 2006, 157). Constructivist interpretations, which focus on the actors who engage with

diasporas, do not take into account the subjective mechanisms described above. Instead, they examine the work of diaspora activists with emigrants or their descendants (Waldinger and Shams 2023, 404), the purpose of which is to establish a relationship between a diaspora and its heartland or homeland. While the term 'heartland' is applied to a particular faith or community (Shams 2021, 50), but not necessarily to a territory with which groups can identify, the concept of homeland denotes a territory that is a source of pride, identity or loyalty, and also contains a collective memory, and is therefore seen by groups as a place of return (Brubaker 2005, 5).

Migrants place a high value on home and identity because of their subjective significance, as shown by the literature on the subjectivity of migration, which starts its investigation from the desires and aspirations of those living abroad (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015, 83). Boccagni and Hondagneu-Sotelo (20-23, 162) develop the concept of homemaking to better understand the subjective experience of migrants trying to make a home outside their home country. While this concept can go some way towards explaining the challenges migrants face, it does not explain the traumas they experience in the process of migration. Therefore, I argue that a psychoanalytic approach is needed to better understand migrants' motivations for participating in the process of diasporisation driven by political actors. The psychoanalytic approach sees immigration as a traumatic experience because migrants have to assimilate into a new culture after leaving their home country. A second process that takes place during the migration experience is individuation. It involves the transformation of an individual's identity into a hybrid one through the assimilation of a new belonging, which may lead to dissociation as a coping mechanism (Lobban 2006, 74). These two processes result in what is referred to in the literature as a bicultural self, or a split in the migrant psyche (Oguz 2012, 69). This split causes a significant contextual shift and migrants struggle to make sense of the disruption (Oguz 2012, 69).

Therefore, migration trauma may be considered a factor in the process of diasporisation, as immigration often results in a suspended sense of self. The psychoanalytic literature provides the first argument for this approach, claiming that immigration and the grieving process are linked because moving abroad requires leaving one's old identity, family, language and social status. Migrants begin to invest in new things, especially in the host country, as a way of coping with their losses (Eng and Han 2000, 680). This behaviour is related to the assimilation process. In some cases, migrants are prevented from investing in their host country by the process of ethnic boundary making, in which both political movements and individuals exclude newcomer groups from society (Wimmer 2008, 1028). Racialisation is one such process that can occur when boundaries are drawn. It does not always involve racial differentiation, but rather cultural characteristics (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2012, 681). For example, Romanian immigrants in the UK were considered part of the European category by institutions, but the mass media portrayed them as a group to be excluded due to cultural differences (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2012, 691). When migrants cannot assimilate or invest in their host countries, they develop national melancholia. In a psychoanalytic reading, national melancholia has negative social implications because migrants' identity and desire to belong to the host society are not fulfilled (Eng and Han 2000, 673–74).

In attempting to understand such unconscious processes as national melancholia, the constructivist concept of identity is rather inadequate. To resolve this dilemma, the constructivist literature (Brubaker and Frederick 2000) replaces the term 'identity' with 'identification' because it is perceived as a less loaded term, and shifts the focus of analysis to the agents that create identification. In this literature, the state is described as an important agent in the identification process because it has the symbolic resources to impose categories such as ethnicity (Brubaker

and Frederick 2000, 16). However, the state is not the only agent capable of producing identifications, as any actor can do so through its discourse and public narratives (Brubaker and Frederick 2000, 16). The psychoanalytic literature, on the other hand, sees actors as more than mere vessels of identification because they can also produce fantasies through their discourse. In this reading, nationalist discourse in the home country creates fantasies with which emigrants can identify. And it is precisely this process of identification that initiates the process of nationalist diasporisation.

Constructivists argue that there are two dimensions to the process of identification. The first is relational, where one identifies with another person, and the second is categorical, where one identifies with a group formed on the basis of race, nationality or ethnicity. Identification also occurs as a result of a boundary-making process, as when immigrants attempt to cross the ethnic boundary, the dominant groups may reject or accept their attempt (Wimmer 2008, 1040). However, there is a distinction between constructivist and psychoanalytic approaches to identification. While constructivists see identification as a process guided by actors such as the state, in psychoanalytic theory identification begins with the subject identifying with a fantasy proposed by a political actor, Lacanian theory explains identification through the concept of lack. In this reading, lack is an “empty slot” that drives people to create their identities through imaginary and symbolic identification with those proposed by external actors. However, any such identification process is temporary and unsatisfactory, and the persistent sense of lack seeks fulfilment through identification with ideas that people believe will solve their problems. This is an important point because it shows that identity formation is inextricably linked to social constructs, such as ideologies, with which people identify in order to alleviate their sense of lack (Kabgani and Clarke 2017, 158) which may lead to anxiety.

## **Fantasies and identification**

Anxiety is a fundamental aspect of our existence because it affects our sense of self and causes feelings of emptiness, shame or guilt (Browning 2019, 224). At the same time, political actors can capitalise on these anxieties. The Leave campaign, for example, tapped into people's anxieties to support the UK's exit from the European Union. Some literature on the subject explains why some political discourses are more appealing than others - for example, the success of Brexit - by drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis. According to Lacanian logic, Brexit was a political fantasy that offered a phantasmatic narrative that reduced anxiety by emphasising objects of enjoyment. Such objects can be material or abstract, and can represent concepts such as 'freedom' or 'sovereignty' (Browning 2019, 230). In some cases, fantasies contain a nostalgic element, which increases their impact. A nostalgic fantasy criticises the present while glorifying the past as the only time when things were safe and stable (Browning 2019, 231). Furthermore, fantasies can contain a transgressive or obscene element, an element that makes them exciting but usually violates social norms. For example, official anti-immigrant narratives may discuss the threat of migrants stealing jobs, while also alluding to racist narratives (Browning 2019, 231).

Political actors can create a fantasy with two discursive components. The first such component is based on the concept of a lost golden age, a time when there was complete enjoyment (Mandelbaum 2020, 467). This golden age is an imagined past, but it is used in political campaigns to argue for a 'recapture of the golden age', as seen in Brexit and Trump discourses (Eberle 2018, 176). A key feature of these fantasies is that they blame the 'other' for stealing the object of desire (Eberle 2018, 177). From a psychoanalytic perspective, the use of the "other" is significant firstly because it shows that the "normal" way of life is in danger of disappearing. Secondly, it makes the Other responsible for the loss. (Ronderos and Glynos 2023: 634).

The second discursive component of a political fantasy is an appeal to nostalgia. The term nostalgia should not be interpreted as a source of suffering or depression, but rather as a positive experience, a longing for a past with happy personal associations (Hook 2012, 230). Thus, nostalgia can be conceptualised using four ideas: the past, because it is viewed optimistically; memory, because of the associations formed through recollection; longing, which is the desire to return to the past; and emotion, because thinking about the past is more positive (Srivastava et al. 2023, 620). In the context of diasporic nationalism, migrants turn to nostalgia when they perceive a loss of community, family or nation. Nostalgia is described as having no fixed ideology, i.e. it is neither traditionalist nor conservative, but it can serve as a basis for political programmes. For example, nationalists may use nostalgia to recall a country's golden age in response to a sense of national decline. This sense of national decline need not be based on reality, as it will still resonate with voters (Muro 2005, 576). Three invented myths give resonance to a nationalist discourse and contribute to the idea of national decline. A first myth proposes that the nation had a pure and authentic past; a second myth proposes national decline and the loss of the conditions that made the nation whole; and a third myth proposes salvation and the promise of a better future based on collective action (Muro 2005, 581-82)

Nostalgia resonates on a personal level because it serves as a mechanism for some people to protect their identity. It can be used to cope with an uncertain present or loss by recalling memories of an idealised past, but it can also be seen as a form of self-affirmation (Sedikides, Wildschut, and Baden 2004). The second type of nostalgia is group or collective nostalgia. Emerging in times of social change and transition (Smeekes 2015, 55), collective nostalgia differs from personal nostalgia in that it resonates on a collective level (Rogenhofer et al. 2023, 176). Particularly effective under conditions of uncertainty, collective nostalgia is an important

mnemonic tool that political actors can use to normalise a discourse of loss. It is usually deployed as an effective means by which political groups can claim moral and political legitimacy, framed as attempts to restore a lost golden age. Used in this way, nostalgia becomes a tool of political polarisation and demarcation for political groups seeking to restore either norms or an entire political system from the past (Rogenhofer et al. 2023, 177).

This section concludes by arguing that political fantasies based on nostalgia and the villain narrative can influence the identification process. As noted above, psychoanalysis defines enjoyment as the reliving of something lost. On a collective level, political projects, for example, employ a fantasy that promises to restore lost enjoyment. Moreover, in a political narrative with a nationalist tone, fantasies have a greater chance of shaping reality because they often blame an 'Other' for the loss. The 'Other' may take on different identities depending on the context: for example, the loss may be attributed to immigrants. Such a narrative has the potential to promote national unity and identity by assigning responsibility for the loss to an actor outside the collective (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008, 261). This shapes the identification process by providing an arena in which it can take place. This arena can be a discursive space shaped by political narratives or a popular culture space. Popular culture allows political actors to shape people's imaginations by serving as a 'dream factory' for them to identify with. In this context, identification occurs with heroes who appear in 'natural' plots (Eberle 2018, 177).

### **Trauma, nostalgia and diasporization**

In the previous two sections, I have shown that political actors who engage in diasporization practices do so by creating a political fantasy. This can help them gain votes because these fantasies provide diasporic voters with a sense of enjoyment. While this can be individual or



collective, political fantasies encourage collective enjoyment by appealing to memories of the nation's history. They frequently speak of great national tragedies or a lost golden age that will be recreated in the present. As a result, some literature (Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras 2006) suggests that nationalist actors generate fantasies using historical memory. In this section, however, I contend that diasporic fantasies are rooted in national nostalgia rather than historical memory. Nostalgia is an important component of any political discourse, particularly when directed at the diaspora, because it addresses a sense of loss that affects groups rather than individuals. It is also important to examine nostalgia-based narratives because people who have experienced loss are uncertain about how to interpret or remember it (Boym 2002, 30). Therefore, right-wing politicians who use politically manufactured nostalgia in their arguments may find it a useful tool.

Theorists argue that nationalism is based on a fantasy rooted in historical memory. Rather than viewing nationalism as a natural phenomenon, these approaches emphasize social and historical factors to explain why people adhere to nationalistic discourses (Finlayson 1998, 145), emphasizing how history shapes a sense of belonging to a nation (Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras 2006, 147). However, I argue that the nationalist use of the nation's historical memory is socially constructed and can be conceptualized as a form of nostalgia, which is not historical memory *per se*, but rather a form of “invented” history that has the ability to reinforce people's sense of security. In case of migrants in diasporas, their insecurities can stem from a loss of identity or the threat of economic instability in the present (Homolar and Löffmann 2021, 4). To address this, populist/nationalist narratives compare the insecure present to a glorious national past, fueling the idea of deprivation from the greatness of the past (Homolar and Löffmann 2021, 4). Furthermore, the populist narrative of a lost past is associated with what the literature refers to as a “chosen trauma”, namely a political discourse in which specific moments or events in the past are

remembered and given exaggerated emotional and historical significance. The remembrance of these past traumas in political discourse can instill specific fears, shape a group identity, and justify a desire for vengeance (Homolar and Löfflmann 2021, 5-6).

As previously stated, political actors can interpret key traumatic events in a nation's history as tragedies or triumphs (Homolar and Löfflmann 2021, 6). Based on the reconstruction of these events in the present, they construct a narrative that fosters a sense of group identity while also acting as a psychological mechanism for bringing together those who are afraid, powerless, or betrayed. Their story creates a tension between the present and the past, based on which the audience experience nostalgia. Nostalgia can be an effective political tool (Homolar and Löfflmann 2021, 5) because, as a narrative of suffering and loss inspired by historical events in a country's past, it elicits an emotional reaction. It is important to note that this story is more than just a fantasy: it has the potential to become an essential part of people's identities (Homolar and Löfflmann 2021, 6).

Trauma has a significant impact on a person's identity. Defined as an event that changes our perception of the world, trauma can be caused by something we have personally experienced or witnessed (Hutchison and Bleiker 2008, 388). It produces trauma-related emotions that are not only difficult to process and communicate on a personal level, but also have political implications. First, because trauma splits one's sense of identity, and this split can be used by a political actor to create a new collective identity as a result of the trauma (Hutchison and Bleiker 2008, 390). Second, actors who produce a phantasmatic narrative in the aftermath of trauma have the ability to present their fantasy as real because it instills pride and superiority in people at a moment when they need it most (Kinnvall and Svensson 2022, 532). Another benefit of his phantasmatic narrative

is that it also provides closure and wholeness by projecting the image of satisfying people's desires (Kinnvall and Svensson 2022, 532).

Political actors are able to make collective sense of trauma through cultural means and forms. A cultural means can be, for example, a social institution, and by forms I mean the ways in which traumas are reproduced, for example through practices such as commemoration, ceremonies or narratives (Misztal 2004, 75-76). One problem with the process of giving collective meaning to trauma is that it can lead to the politicisation of memory. A politicisation of memory is an attempt by a group to use a memory of the past, typically one of suffering or exclusion, to strengthen its identity and gain recognition from a central authority (Misztal 2004, 76). The politicisation of memory can lead to what is known in the literature as counter-memory, a concept that describes how a marginalised group or minority uses its knowledge of its past to gain political power. It is important to note that this minority understanding of the past differs from the official or majority understanding. Counter-memory is an important process because it allows people to interpret and make sense of traumatic events that become an important part of the group's history. This creates a moral obligation and makes each individual responsible for passing on the memory of the past to future generations (Misztal 2004, 77-78).

As noted above, counter-memory motivates people to exploit a moral obligation to their past, allowing nationalist discourses to express a form of national nostalgia. On the group level, nostalgia helps to maintain a collective identity by providing a new sense of social identity. This is accomplished through fantasizing about positive symbols and historical events (Smeekes and Jetten 2019, 134). National nostalgia is the desire to return to what one considers to be the good old days of one's home country. This nostalgia for a specific happy time in the past helps to alleviate current concerns about the future (Smeekes and Jetten 2019, 134). We can therefore argue that

nostalgia serves three main functions. First, it serves as a meaning-making mechanism: when people feel threatened, they can use nostalgia as a defensive mechanism (Hook 2012, 230). Second, in addition to serving as a defensive or protective mechanism, nostalgia can be viewed through a fetishistic lens. Here we should define a fetish as a specific feature or activity that allows us to ignore a threatening reality. According to psychoanalytic theory, fetishes allow people to deny reality (Hook 2012, 231). Finally, nostalgia can serve as a restorative tool by attempting to recreate the past “as it was” (Fowler 2022, 51).

In sum, the restorative function of nostalgia is a valuable tool in the process of diasporisation because it operates on two levels. At a basic level, it provides a narrative that attempts to reconstruct the present by returning to the past origins of the individual or collective. Political actors who engage in restoration by fantasy do not see the process producing nostalgia, but rather as expressing the truth, as they attempt to fill historical gaps in memory. At the second level, conspiracy theories are occasionally invoked. Conspiracies are useful because they dilute the complexity of history and emphasise the need to defend the country against imaginary enemies. Political actors in the homeland who use a restorative nostalgic narrative to mobilise citizens in the diaspora may be successful because they appeal to a strong emotion and a specific trauma: the fact that these citizens were forced to leave their homes, communities and countries of origin. This may also explain why the nostalgic political fantasies of far-right parties appeal to migrants in diasporas: not only do they propose to reconstruct the present on the basis of a lost golden age, but they also frame it as a struggle between 'us' and 'them', with 'them' depicted as blocking access to 'our' imagined past.

## Methodology

### Case selection

I have chosen the AUR party as a case study for two reasons. First, I looked at the real-life implications of its political rise, in particular the increasing support for populist and nationalist parties and the consequences this may have for democracy in the CEE region. The 2020 Romanian elections prove this assertion: a newly founded party, the AUR, received support from the Romanian diaspora, even though they had never voted for a populist party before. The second reason arises from the academic implications of studying the AUR. In particular, its nationalist orientation and its success in the diaspora make it necessary to study the party not only at the national level, but also to consider its transnational impact. After reviewing the existing literature on the AUR, I concluded that the literature has developed three hypotheses that explain the electoral success of the AUR in the diaspora in 2020.

The first hypothesis is that AUR was successful because of its strategy. Specifically, the party's leaders, George Simion and Claudiu Târziu, were able to mobilise voters for their movement because of their previous involvement in civil society and various associative networks. Before joining AUR, Claudiu Târziu, one of the co-presidents, was president of a cultural organisation which promoted Christian conservative causes. Through his work, he established links with pro-life networks supported by American neo-Protestant communities (Nae 2022, 40) and pro-Iron Guard organisations in Romania (Soare and Tufiş 2023, 109). The other co-president of the party, George Simion, on the other hand, comes from a very different associative background. Since 2006, he has been involved in activism as the leader of an organisation with a strong anti-communist, as well as in the gallery of a Romanian football team, where he spread

political messages, condemned corruption and advocated a pro-union movement between Romania and the Republic of Moldova (Soare and Tufiş 2023, 108). Simion also used the European Diaspora Civic Group, a group of Romanians living abroad, to advocate for a better, corruption-free Romania. This group was created to rally supporters and spread the party's message ahead of the 2020 parliamentary elections.

The second hypothesis is that AUR took advantage of a specific moment, namely the Covid-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, the Romanian government introduced strict rules and restrictions to combat the spread of the virus. Some of these restrictions applied not only to public gatherings, but also to religious processions. As a result, religious events for the 2020 Easter celebrations were restricted. This prompted the AUR to protest and mobilise the population to oppose the government's decisions (Crăciun and Țăranu 2023, 3) on the grounds that they restricted civil liberties. According to Crăciun and Țăranu, the party saw its actions against the sanitary restrictions as a duty to defend the Romanian Orthodox Church and its religious activities, which in turn meant the defence of national identity. AUR tapped into the frustrations of those who felt the government was restricting their religious expression, as well as the feelings of Romanians living abroad. In a speech to the Romanian diaspora before the Easter of 2020, President Klaus Iohannis urged Romanians living abroad to stay in their host countries because returning to Romania to celebrate Easter would risk spreading the virus. This statement had the potential to increase the stigmatisation of Romanians abroad, while also providing a political advantage to the AUR, which gained an opportunity to describe itself as the defender of all Romanians (Mocanu 2021, 32).

The third hypothesis is that AUR's electoral success was the result of its political agenda. As noted above, George Simion, one of the party's co-presidents was involved in anti-communist

organisations before founding the AUR party, and his past is reflected in the party's agenda and public discourse. The party describes Romania's current political parties as the descendants of the communists who took control of the country after the 1989 revolution. As a result, its narrative introduces the anti-communist struggle based on the idea that "they", the enemies, destroyed values such as the traditional family, nation or faith (Popescu and Vesalon 2023, 160). What is noteworthy about the AUR agenda is that the anti-communist narrative is mixed with the term "neo-Marxists". This term is used when the party publicly opposes what it calls gender ideology, political correctness or multiculturalism. According to their logic, the communists destroyed Romanian values, while "neo-Marxists" tried to impose gender ideology on the country's national values (Popescu and Vesalon 2023, 161). The inclusion of these elements in the AUR agenda helps the party to discredit the Romanian political establishment by portraying its members as the country's common enemy (Mocanu 2021, 47), who not only fail to represent the Romania's true values, but also seek to impose neo-Marxist ideologies on its population.

The hypotheses discussed previously looked at how the AUR used ideas such as anti-communism and anti-Marxism to demonstrate the importance of their struggle against the current political establishment. These hypotheses also highlight the importance of the party's leaders prior engagement with civil society and their ability to mobilise a specific social context in order to gain electoral support. However, in order to explain how AUR became a diasporic agent, i.e. how it managed to obtain more than 20% of the Romanian diaspora vote, I introduce a fourth argument. This is because the previous three, with the exception of the party strategy hypothesis, do not explain AUR's diaspora turnover. In my thesis, I argue that the AUR is able to attract the Romanian diaspora because it creates a political fantasy through its political discourse. Like any political fantasy, the one created by the AUR has a golden age that inspires national nostalgia, a villain, and

an identification mechanism that operates at a subconscious level and allows people who vote for the party to construct their identities by selecting elements from the party's discourse.

## **Data collection**

The data collection process for this thesis concentrated on the AUR campaign for the 2024 European Parliament elections. I chose this campaign because it targets Romanians living abroad, as well as Romanians living within the country's borders, who have the right to vote in the EU elections at Romania's diplomatic missions around the world. The campaign for the local elections, which will be held at the same time as the European elections on 9 June 2024, targeted only Romanians living in Romania, as the diaspora can only vote in the local elections if they do so in the localities where they live in the country. It is important to note that although each campaign was designed to reach a different electorate, at times elements from the EU campaign and the local elections had similarities. For example, AUR framed the need to defend the country for both Romanians abroad and those living at home. The EU campaign started in the first days of May 2024 and has two components.

The first component is an online campaign, particularly on social media platforms, aimed at both national and diaspora audiences. As a result, it is not always possible to identify the intended recipients of the videos. The second component of AUR's campaign is the offline one, which was realised through visits by party leaders to various cities in Romania and abroad, where speeches and performances with actors impersonating Romanian voivodes were held. Abroad, the party's leaders met with the diaspora and "relaunched" an event to present AUR candidates for the European Parliament elections. The party decided to relaunch this event in Italy, even though it had already been presented in Romania, because, as the party leader claimed, the majority of AUR



voters in the diaspora in the 2020 elections were from Italy, implying that this would also be the case in the 2024 EU elections.

In this thesis, the method of data collection was social media ethnography. This approach, which falls under the category of digital ethnography, is used to analyse patterns or behaviours expressed in social media posts or videos (Delli Paoli and D'Auria 2021, 263). On this basis, I selected videos of AUR campaign posts, speeches by party members and videos of historical figures that I had collected from Facebook. Although the party also posted its campaign content on other platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, I chose to use Facebook exclusively for two reasons. Firstly, short videos, cut from longer versions of the same video originally made for Facebook, were distributed on most platforms, including Instagram and TikTok. Second, I took into account the unique media consumption patterns of the Romanian diaspora. Initially, Romanian expatriates used forums and blogs to keep in touch with family and friends and to share social and political news. As social media platforms grew, the majority of communication shifted to Facebook (Mocanu 2021, 31).

My sample is a collection of sources gathered from Facebook that, according to the literature, fall into a category known as campaign virals. According to Postill (2014), 58, these virals are characterised as images, videos or slogans that gain popularity on the internet based on the number of people who share them. These particular sources meet the definition of viral content due to the number of plays, comments and reactions they have received on social platforms. For example, Mugur Mihăescu, a well-known Romanian actor and AUR candidate in the EU elections, interprets the song "I want AUR for Romania". More than 1.5 million people listened to the song, which received more than 13,000 reactions and 2,000 comments ("Mugur Mihăescu - AUR for Romania" 2024). The second example is an official video campaign launched by AUR for the

2024 European elections. In this video ("This is how His Highness, Stephen the Great, spoke" 2024), an actor portraying the Romanian voivode Stephen the Great introduces the party's team for the national and EU elections as the militia defending the country and the nation. More than 1 million people watched the video, which received 16,000 likes and 3,000 comments.

Using these Facebook sources, I have created a dataset that is better suited to what is referred to in the literature as an 'ethnographic place'. An ethnographic place is defined in the literature as a collection of entangled data resulting from a research procedure (Postill and Pink 2012, 127). My dataset for this study therefore consists of 25 primary sources. These were published online by the AUR on various Facebook pages between 1 and 29 May 2024. As the dataset includes viral posts made on Facebook during the campaign, it is representative of the research question of this study, although one might question the number of sources in the dataset. However, as the data collection process related to an election campaign, it is unlikely that a larger number of sources would have yielded different results, as a limited number of messages appear in any political campaign.

As mentioned above, some campaign videos went viral due to the number of interactions and views they received. Despite their widespread popularity, I have not been able to demonstrate whether these videos reached members of the Romanian diaspora using publicly available Facebook data. Furthermore, as this dataset does not include people's opinions or reactions to the videos, I am unable to demonstrate the diasporisation of Romanians living abroad as a result of the AUR campaign. Rather, in line with the research objective of my dissertation, this dataset shows the political fantasy that AUR constructs to target the Romanian diaspora and allows me to examine the elements of this fantasy.

## Data analysis

The data analysis tool that I used in my study was the trial version of MaxQDA software, which allows the analysis of a variety of data sets such as video recordings, web pages, images, text or tables. This software is widely used to analyse qualitative data because it effectively supports a variety of analysis strategies. Examples include discourse analysis, framework analysis and thematic analysis (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2019, 3). It is important to note that this software does not perform the analysis, but rather facilitates the process of organising, annotating, and retrieving data. I chose MaxQDA over other programs, such as NVivo, because it had a more user-friendly interface for coding and data visualisation. In addition, it was easy to use for someone like me who was new to qualitative software.

I have chosen a qualitative method of analysis because my thesis is an exploratory study and my research objective is to conceptualise the 2024 AUR campaign for the European Parliament as a fantasy and identify its fantasmatic elements. To accomplish this objective, my research uses psychoanalytic theory, which introduces concepts such as fantasy, trauma or national nostalgia, to understand how fantasmatic narratives are created. Therefore, a quantitative method was not appropriate for the purposes of this study. Given the Lacanian psychoanalytic theory used in this study, I could have used Lacanian discourse analysis as a method of data analysis. Lacanian analysis introduces four types of discourse that can be useful in analysing any given discourse. Lacanian methodology, in its current form, allows for the use of several categories in data analysis: a master discourse that helps to identify elements of power, a university discourse that captures elements of knowledge, a hysterical discourse that includes a narrative of questioning and challenging power, and finally an analyst discourse that challenges the status quo and proposes change by instilling desire (Tolis 2023, 2).

However, as there is no Lacanian methodology for studying political fantasies in particular, and as the above categories did not fit my data set, I preferred to use a traditional method of discourse analysis. Thus, I coded my data into four categories that I designed myself based on the theoretical framework in the previous chapter. Discourse analysis helps to examine the political language of a discourse. In this type of analysis, the context in which this language is used is important because a discourse can be shaped or conditioned by a particular social environment (Wodak and Busch 2004, 108).

As mentioned previously, based on my theoretical framework, I concluded that the data obtained from the social media ethnography can be divided into four main codes or categories, which I created in MaxQDA and then added the empirical material to each. The first category, 'An alliance of villains and the chosen traumas of national decline', examines the villains in the AUR discourse and argues that their alliance leads to a perception of national decline. The second category, 'Nostalgia for authentic Romanian greatness', presents what I define as the role models for the Romanian population based on Romanian history, personified by a series of five voivodes. In the campaign, these historical figures play the central role in promoting AUR as the only political force in Romania capable of continuing their past struggles for the nation's sovereignty. The third category is "The salvation of the Romanian nation and the identification mechanism - the AUR militia/oaste". This includes empirical material which describes how AUR uses the concept of militia (or oaste in Romanian) as an identification mechanism for the voters. In Romanian history, the word oaste refers to a civilian population that voivodes used to raise in battles against invaders. The fourth category examines the discursive appeal to the Romanian diaspora to get involved in the AUR militia/oaste by tapping into their traumas, while also offering them examples of Romanian expatriates who became members of the party.

This section will conclude with a discussion of the ethical issues raised by my research. Public opinion in Romania, especially liberal political parties or the press, consistently characterises the AUR as an extremist political group. For a number of reasons, I decided against using this label throughout my study. The aim of my study was to examine AUR's online campaign for the 2024 EU elections. After examining all 25 materials in my dataset, I came to the conclusion that AUR's messages in this campaign do not fit the definition of extremism, mainly because there is almost no hate speech. Moreover, AUR's discourse in this campaign takes a positive view of Romania's EU membership, stating that European membership has led to positive results for Romania, but complaining that these are only economic, while this membership in the EU has led to the nation's identity being influenced by leftist ideology. The party does, however, oppose any Ro-exit initiative, which is another reason why I do not use the language of extremism.

Parties from other EU member states and the CEE region that share AUR's ideology emphasise a strong anti-immigration narrative. However, AUR refrains from making hateful remarks about immigrants. AUR's campaign makes very little use of the Asian migrant workers currently living in Romania. The party's narrative uses these 'poor migrants' as a means of criticising the current political establishment in the country, claiming that local politicians fail to create the necessary conditions for the ethnic Romanian population to remain in the country ('Why can't Romanians work in their own country?' 2024), thus forcing them to work abroad, but without directly criticising or attacking Asian immigrants. Another ethical concern regarding my dataset has to do with the absence of the hate speech elements mentioned above. Although I did identify some hate speech elements, such as the party leadership making anti-LGBTQIA+ comments, I chose not to include them in my study because they were not very common in the campaign I studied and did not fit into any of my main categories of analysis.

Another ethical issue is the AUR public stance on the Holocaust. The party has been accused of anti-Semitism on several occasions, and Israeli Ambassador Reuven Azar met with party leader George Simion in 2023, with the issue of anti-Semitism being on the agenda of their meeting (Radio Free Europe). Although it does not appear in my dataset or categories of analysis, I feel that questions about the party's position on the Holocaust must be mentioned as an ethical issue. A final ethical issue worth mentioning is that the AUR's position on the Romanian Gulag has an impact on its views on the Romanian Holocaust.

Specifically, the AUR refers to some of the Romanian intellectuals and elites of the inter-war period as "prison saints", because these elites were imprisoned after the establishment of the communist regime in 1945, and most of them died while in detention in the penal colonies, the Romanian Gulag, which the communist regime established throughout the country and which all functioned as prisons for political prisoners until 1964. The term "prison saints" has generated controversy in the Romanian public sphere, especially among Romanian historians of communism. The fact that some of these intellectuals and elites were either supporters or members of the Iron Guard movement before the communist regime makes the label "prison saints" problematic. By using this label, the party supports some individuals who were directly involved in tragedies such as the Bucharest pogrom of 1941 and the Iași pogrom of the same year, both of which took place during the Legionnaires' Rebellion, or who indirectly supported these tragedies through their membership in the Iron Guard.

# **The AUR political fantasy - chosen traumas, national nostalgia and identification mechanisms**

## **The captured state, the Romanian voivodes and the AUR militia**

This chapter first aims to provide empirical support for my dissertation's theoretical argument that AUR's 2024 European election campaign messages create a political fantasy, and secondly to discuss the three fantasy mechanisms AUR uses in its campaign. First, the party's discourse draws on three specific traumas - that is, three different periods of Romania's troubled post-communist history. One example of a chosen trauma is the "captured state", which refers to the alliance of political parties and intelligence officials that, in AUR jargon, has controlled Romania since the 1989 revolution. The loss of Romanian national identity as a result of Brussels bureaucrats steering the country's identity away from its Christian and patriotic roots is the second trauma I identified in the empirical material. Finally, the third trauma refers to Romanian expatriates who experience a loss of identity as a result of multiple ideologies, including gender ideology, imposed on them in their host countries, in addition to their unique migration circumstances that produced individual traumas.

In order to recover from these traumas, the second component of AUR's fantasy is an identity protection mechanism, which consists of two components. The first is the prominence of the term 'oaste', which I have translated as 'militia', in the campaign's messaging, which characterises the AUR electorate as something that every Romanian, at home and abroad, should join. An ancient Romanian term, "oaste" or "militia" is associated with a series of Romanian voivodes who fought to keep the country free from foreign invaders and to bring the Romanian people together. By using these historic Romanian voivodes, the AUR campaign fosters a sense of

national nostalgia among people for a golden age when the nation was sovereign and ruled by remarkable leaders. The campaign message considers the Romanian diaspora as an essential component of the Oastea/Militia AUR, and thus all these selected traumas and identification mechanisms apply not only to Romanians living at home, but also to the Romanian diaspora abroad.

### **An alliance of villains and the chosen traumas of national decline**

The purpose of this section is to show how AUR used the idea of a villain to create the political fantasy for its 2024 European election campaign. Based on the party's public statements and messaging during the campaign, I distinguish two types of villains: the internal villain is the Romanian political establishment, and the external villain is represented by the bureaucrats in Brussels, and particularly embodies in the character of the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen. Although these villains can be seen as separate collective entities, AUR argues that they are linked because the result of their alliance is Romanian national decline.

These villains are characterised as an alliance in which Romanian representatives carry out the instructions of European bureaucrats, thus humiliating Romania and undermining its identity and integrity as a nation. AUR is able to select certain historical traumas and interpret them in its campaign, creating villains in its political fantasy who conspire against the well-being of the people. The Covid-19 pandemic is a recent trauma in which sanitary regulations, the number of deaths and the government's allegedly poor handling of the pandemic situation are used by AUR to support the idea that a coalition of elites, both inside and outside the country, wanted to harm the population.

In AUR's campaign discourse, the internal villain stands for those national politicians who amassed the nation's wealth after the fall of the communist regime in 1989. However, as various



party figures have shown throughout the campaign for the 2024 EU elections, the process of state capture has taken different forms throughout Romania's history. Party members explain state capture in their national campaign speeches (The Launch of AUR Candidates for the European Parliamentary Elections in the Diaspora, n.d.). The idea of state capture is then repeated in other online campaign materials, where viewers can understand the process through videos on an online platform called 'Captured State' ("Captured State," n.d.), which provides an explanation of the mechanism that enables state capture.

According to AUR's logic, Romania's political establishment consists of two villains. On the one hand, the National Salvation Front Council (FSN) emerged after the 1989 Revolution as the largest post-communist political party, winning the elections of the 1990s and establishing its dominance until 1996. Its offspring, the Social Democratic Party, has ruled Romania ever since. It took power between 2000 and 2004 and has held it since, with brief interruptions. The party achieved this by taking control of the media and capturing all state institutions. A second domestic villain in AUR's story is the so-called parallel or deep state, which has emerged as a result of its control of the media, institutions and the legislature. According to AUR's rhetoric, Traian Băsescu, the former president of Romania from 2004 to 2014, invented this parallel state. He was able to maintain the parallel state by passing laws against corruption with the help of the military commanders of the Romanian Intelligence Service and Laura Codruța Kovesi, the former chief prosecutor of the National Anti-Corruption Directorate. They are described as those who seized power and looted all the nation's financial resources ("Petrov (Băsescu), Coldea and Kovesi Destroyed Romania" 2024).

In addition to the local villain, AUR's campaign presents a second one, which, according to the party's narrative, pursues a more nuanced strategy. In the final days of campaigning for the

2024 European elections, the party released a series of Facebook videos featuring interviews with prominent Romanian historical figures, including Avram Iancu and Alexandru Ioan Cuza. In these videos, the historical figures talk about the battles they had to fight in their time and the successes they managed to achieve. These conversations allow the interviewer to draw connections between the historical challenges of defending the nation and those of the present. For example, Avram Iancu, who was one of the main leaders of the Romanians in Transylvania in the 19th century, when the region was part of Hungary, and who is still an icon today, especially among Romanian nationalists, argues that it is easier to defend the Romanian people and nation today than it was in his time.

The interviewer elaborates on this point by describing how Brussels was replaced by the Ottoman Porte, the central government of the Ottoman Empire to which each state used to send delegates to defend the interests of its citizens ("What Avram Iancu Would Say about Romania Today?" 2024). Another video features Alexandru Ioan Cuza, a leader elected in both Wallachia and Moldavia who brought about the unification of the two Romanian principalities in 1859. He asks whether Romanians today respect his legacy. The interviewer replies that while globalisation has helped the country's economy to flourish, its negative effects have left people's souls hollow ("Alexandru Ioan Cuza Remained in History as the 'Ruler of the Union' and the Most Important Personality" 2024). While in these speeches the external villain is alluded to as Brussels, in the speeches of other party members this allusion becomes clearer, as they name the Brussels bureaucrats under the leadership of Ursula von der Leyen, a neo-Marxist who is said to be destroying not only Europe but also Romania (Cristian Terhes, 2024).

Because of their perceived connections, the two villains highlighted in AUR's campaign discourse are significant. In most of their speeches, AUR party members emphasise their reasons

for fighting both the domestic and the European establishment. Over the past 30 years, not only has the current political establishment at the national level humiliated the Romanian people, but its representatives in the EU have also bowed their heads and surrendered Romania's interests to foreign powers (Serban Dimitrie Sturdza, 2024). The party leadership's similar stance supports the narrative that Romanian interests have been abandoned to foreigners. One of AUR's co-presidents credits the group's campaign for the European Parliament with adopting the slogan 'Defenders of the Romanian Homeland' because, according to him, the organisation has to protect the future of Romanian families – and, implicitly, children – from evils like gender ideology, same-sex relationships and the teaching of pornography in EU schools (Târziu 2024b).

In addition to the fight against gender ideology, the party also discussed what it called the eco-Marxist policies within the EU, in particular, the European Green Deal, which is perceived as a step closer to the destruction of all member states' economies ("Alliance for the Union of Romanians - Press Conference" 2024). AUR has also exploited the trauma of the Covid-19 pandemic. In a campaign song performed by a well-known Romanian actor who supports the party and is running on its list in the European elections, the verses "They humiliated you, they vaccinated you / You couldn't even bury your dead / They put a muzzle on your mouth" allude to the restrictions and measures imposed at the time ("Mugur Mihăescu - AUR for Romania" 2024) due to the disrespect that both the Romanian and European political establishment had for the Romanian people.

To summarize, in this section I have argued that the AUR's electoral narrative represents an alliance between the bureaucrats in Brussels and the current Romanian political establishment, with the role of the latter group being the betrayal of the country's interests. Several chosen traumas are mobilized to support this narrative, including the measures taken by the government during the

pandemic or the fact that the Romanian state was captured after the 1989 Revolution. The result of these traumas and the alliance between the Romanian political elites and Brussels is the decline of the Romanian nation, which the AUR presents as a loss of sovereignty that must be restored. In order to restore this sovereignty, the AUR identifies three main pillars of Romanian sovereignty and identity, namely the traditional family, the national economy and civil liberties. According to the party, the loss of Romanian identity and sovereignty is due to the fact that corrupt "traitors" were elected to office (Târziu 2024b).

### **Nostalgia for the authentic Romanian greatness - the epoch of the voivodes**

This section explores how the AUR campaign for the 2024 European elections is using the historical characters of the Romanian voivodes in the campaign messaging. These historical figures are at the centre of the party's narrative for these elections because they embody qualities such as justice, bravery and love for the nation and its people. As such, they represent the authenticity of the Romanian people, as opposed to the low character of the current political establishment. As such, they are an integral part of the national nostalgia constructed by the AUR in its campaign. The first aspect of this national nostalgia is that the voivods represent the glory of Romania's past: they are a reminder of the time when Romania was sovereign and free.

In addition, the campaign's emphasis on these historical personalities draws attention to the enjoyment at the heart of AUR's political fantasy in this campaign: voters can connect with and experience the glory of the voivods by watching them online, which is a powerful mechanism of national nostalgia. However, the current political climate makes it impossible to fully enjoy this golden age represented by the voivodes, especially its main quality, the nation's sovereignty, due to the actions of the two villains mentioned in the previous section: the elites in Brussels and the

national political establishment. Furthermore, the AUR creates a counter-memory with these historical figures in order to differentiate itself from other political groups.

In previous political campaigns in Romania, parties and candidates typically promoted public policies such as the need to improve infrastructure, fight corruption or strengthen the national economy. In the 2024 elections, however, AUR's campaign strategy is very different. Its strategy appeals to the masses, especially the non-voters, by using the figure of well-known voivodes or historical leaders who appear in all Romanian history (text)books, such as Vlad the Impaler, Michael the Brave or Alexandru Ioan Cuza. One such example is a campaign video featuring Alexandru Ioan Cuza, who invokes the concept of the Romanian spirit. According to the actor playing Cuza, the Romanian spirit remained untouched by the many occupations that Romania has endured throughout its history, despite the attempts of invaders. Another reason why the Romanian spirit endured over time was the unity of the people ("Alexandru Ioan Cuza Remained in History as the 'Ruler of the Union'" 2024).

AUR uses five historical figures in their campaign, with the reasoning being their authenticity as Romanians. Each historical figure used in the campaign's narrative represents an authentic aspect of the Romanian spirit that has given the country its dignity and resilience in the face of a difficult history. Alexandru Ioan Cuza represents the country's unifier, having not only unified Romania for the second time in the nineteenth century but also enacted significant reforms. Avram Iancu stands out for his bravery in representing the Romanian people in Transylvania in front of the Hungarian Monarchy and the Habsburg Empire in the nineteenth century ("What Avram Iancu Would Say About Romania Today?" 2024). Vlad the Impaler is the leader who, in the fifteenth century, established justice in the country by punishing treason and theft committed by foreigners who plundered it ("Campaign Video Depicting Vlad the Impaler" 2024). Stephen the

Great, ruler of the Principality of Moldavia in the fifteenth century, represents the defender of European Christianity. Finally, Michael the Brave was the first voievode to temporarily unite the Romanian principalities in the sixteenth century. In the campaign narrative, he leads the AUR militia ("Campaign Video with Michael the Brave" 2024), namely the identification mechanism which is central to the political fantasy constructed in this campaign and which shall be discussed in the next section.

The figures of the voivodes are used not only to serve as role models for what the Romanian spirit should be, but also to emphasize the importance of reclaiming the country. These figures of the voivodes overlap with the party's slogan presented at the start of the election campaign, "On June 9, we are taking our country back!" ("On June 9, We Are Taking Our Country Back!" 2024) and produces what the Lacanian theory refers to as enjoyment. The enjoyment emerges as the party alludes to the glory of Romanian voivodes while also framing the voters as voivodes' descendants. In one of his campaign speeches, AUR's president framed the party's use of the voivodes in the campaign as a reminder of past glory, of times when the nation did not have to kneel in front of foreigners ("Together We Are a Force!" 2024). However, the enjoyment of the people regaining the country and restoring Romania's lost glory has yet to be realized. The obstacle to this goal is the elections, which are described as a battle between “us”, the defenders of the homeland, and “them”, the system, both domestic and foreign, who yielded to foreign interests and betrayed national interests ("WE, Those from AUR - the Defenders of the Homeland, and THEM, the Parties of the System" 2024).

Various party members have emphasized the concept of worthiness in their speeches. The term “worthy” was used to disparage other political candidates by comparing them with the voivodes ("AUR Campaign in Piatra-Neamt" 2024). The appropriation of the voivodes' attributes

with the intention of challenging the current political leadership serves as a counter-memory mechanism (Jansen, 2007). In AURs framing of the voivodes, each of these historical figure brings a quality that is contesting the party's political opposition.

For instance, the vigilante image of Vlad the Impaler contrasts with the politicians who are currently in power because they are traitors. While the current leaders are betraying the interests of the country, Michael the Brave is a symbol of the leadership and unity of the people. Stephen the Great makes a great personal sacrifice to defend Christianity, thus being presented in contrast to today's politicians who reject Christian values and support un-Christian ones, like gender norms. While modern politicians prioritize their own interests, Alexandru Ioan Cuza was the champion of ideals such as fraternity and unity of the people. On the other hand, Avram Iancu taught the country how to negotiate with foreign powers in order to protect the Romanian people, thus standing in contrast to today's politicians who lack integrity and easily submit to foreign interests. In conclusion, based on Michel Foucault's essay (Foucault 1977), which introduced the term "counter-memory ," I argue that AUR creates a counter-memory not only by appropriating the voivodes, but also by framing Romanian voters as descendants of these historical figures in their discourses.

In summary, this section argued that AUR's campaign uses the voivodes as a mechanism of restorative nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia, as was previously discussed in the theoretical chapter, is a strategy used to recreate what people or groups believe to be lost, bridging memory gaps with myths or other products of the imaginary. In this sense, those political actors who appeal to nostalgia do not regard the past as definitive, but rather as a tool for reconstructing what they see as a deteriorating present (Zannoni 2023, 38). The appeal to voivodes in AUR's discourse serves to awaken the electorate to the fact that they were not always as weak as they are today

("George Simion Speech in Iasi" 2024). This is related to the campaign idea that AUR is promoting, which is that the people are the true descendants of the voivodes, and they must embody their character qualities. At the same time, the people are not alone in this fight because AUR describes itself as the only party that promotes allegiance to Romania's history, a history that others want to forget, because the campaign based on the voivodes was mocked ("AUR Campaign in Piatra-Neamt" 2024) by the liberal political establishment or the press.

### **Saving the Romanian nation through identification with the AUR militia**

This chapter previously introduced the concept of the "AUR militia/oaste", which in party jargon refers to all those who join the party in its fight against the villains discussed in the first section, namely the European and Romanian political establishment. From a psychoanalytic point of view, the use of this term creates an identification mechanism, firstly by creating a sense of alienation from the nation's aggressors, and then by providing the population with an identity with which they can identify as participants in the struggle to regain the country. In Romanian, the word "oaste" is closely associated with the historical figures of the Romanian voievodes, who organised this type of militia composed of ordinary people whenever the country was invaded. The English word "militia" itself is my chosen translation of the Romanian word "oaste", which AUR uses as one of its campaign slogans. The Romanian word itself is of Latin origin and refers to the civilian population organised by the voivodes in conflict with various enemies. Since the English definition of "militia" refers to a civilian population mobilised in armed conflicts, I have chosen to translate the Romanian word "oaste" with this term, which also corresponds to the Romanian usage of the word.

The term 'oaste' was used in AUR public discourse well before the 2024 election campaign. Specifically, at the 2022 National Congress, a resolution was passed to begin bilateral consultations



to determine possible steps for the reunification of the Romanian nation, including Romanians and Moldovans. It was during this congress that one of the party's co-presidents introduced this concept. Co-president Claudiu Târziu described AUR during the congress as the apostles of the nation, adding that his party was a militia/oaste capable of reviving the nation and the country ("AUR National Congress" 2022). As noted above, the term 'militia' or 'oaste' is associated with the voivods in the 2024 European election campaign. In the official campaign film featuring Michael the Brave, the AUR is the party that this voivod has given the authority to lead the militia and fight for international recognition and honour for Romania. During the campaign, the character of Michael the Brave states that the AUR militia is ready for battle, but that Romanians must mobilise - or rather 'return home' - because their return will provide the militia with fuel ("Campaign Video with Michael the Brave" 2024).

My analysis shows that there are three different meanings associated with the term 'militia' in the AUR discourse during the 2024 European election campaign. One of the three functions of the word "militia" or "oaste" is to strengthen national unity. Secondly, it emphasises the resilience of ordinary individuals who embody the Romanian spirit. Thirdly, the word connotes the mobilisation of a militia to fight for the restoration of individual and national sovereignty.

Firstly, the AUR interprets the word 'milia' or 'oaste' as a reference to national unity and uses it as a tool to counteract national division. The nationalist songs used in this campaign reinforce the idea of division by illustrating how at different points in the nation's history the Romanian people lived in peace and brotherhood, but that at other times various villains tried to divide the country ("We No Longer Want Villains to Lead the Country" 2024). In another video, the actor portraying Alexandru Ioan Cuza calls for the unification of the Romanian people, further strengthening the idea of a brotherhood amongst them. The Unification of Moldavia and Wallachia

in 1859 is cited as an example of how the Romanian people's unity was the only thing that allowed the country to accomplish such a significant milestone that was recorded in Romanian history. (“Alexandru Ioan Cuza Remained in History as the ‘Ruler of the Union’” 2024).

The word "militia" or "oaste" is also used to refer to the strength of the common people, who represent the Romanian spirit. The members of AUR, as well as the videos showing the voivodes, evoke this spirit. In a video in which an actor portrays Avram Iancu, there are allusions to the bravery of ordinary people who motivated others to join the country's struggle against the oppressive powers. Comparable to Avram Iancu's struggle against the Hungarian monarchy and the Habsburg Empire is today's struggle to choose a successor to carry on his legacy. In the same video, the actor portraying Avram Iancu says that in our time, courage is expressed in love and patriotism for the country. He goes on to say that only by daring to have a Romanian spirit can ordinary Romanians make a difference in an age of cosmopolitanism and globalisation. (“What Avram Iancu Would Say about Romania Today?” 2024).

In the context of the AUR's campaign for the 2024 European elections, a third interpretation of the word militia/oaste relates to the reclaiming of sovereignty. This reclaiming is twofold: on the domestic front it means getting rid of the villains, and on the foreign front it means taking back control from Brussels. AUR describes the current political party leadership at national level as a network similar to the Phanariot regime that ruled the Romanian principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Since the attainment of personal wealth was one of the main goals of the Phanariots, the Phanariot regime in the Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia under Ottoman rule has been characterised by most Romanian historians (Iordachi 2020), as well as in common parlance, as one of the darkest periods in Romanian history. This regime also brought political instability and corruption. According to the AUR, the current political

system in Romania is similar to that of the Phanariots, as all political parties on the national scene, as well as their members, prioritise their own interests over the needs of the population. (“Campaign Video with Marius Lulea” 2024).

From an external perspective, the lyrics "To be Romanian, to be masters / To make the surroundings a better place / Where a man is a man and a girl is a girl / Where one can call one's parents mother and father" ("Mugur Mihăescu - AUR for Romania" 2024) help to explain the idea of Romania gaining sovereignty from Brussels. These lyrics explain what the sovereignty of the Romanian people from Brussels means - that is, it is a means of resistance against the ideological policies imposed by the EU, especially gender policies. These lyrics also have the ability to unite Romanians against those who have sold out the nation and those who have subordinated its interests to external forces, thus marking their affiliation to the AUR militia/oaste.

### **Romanian diaspora's role in the AUR militia**

As mentioned above, AUR uses symbolic and imaginary references to the historical figures of the Romanian voivodes to give its supporters a sense of identity by giving them something to identify with. However, this identification goes beyond those living within Romania's borders, as the AUR discourse makes several references to the fact that members of the Romanian diaspora are full members of the AUR militia. To give this narrative force, the trauma of exile is at the centre of the story of Romanians living abroad. The party uses this trauma to create a fantasy that Romanians in the diaspora can identify with. The party argues that, firstly, the Romanian diaspora should join the AUR militia and, secondly, that by doing so they will be able to overcome their split identity. Both of the diaspora's roles in the AUR militia - as supporters and as militia members in their own right - are crucial to the party's efforts to save the country.

According to a speech by the president of AUR, the trauma of exile experienced by the Romanian diaspora is wrongly characterised as purely economic. Members of the diaspora have acquired the necessary skills and financial resources through years of living abroad, and their return to Romania may indicate a reinvestment of their funds and expertise. However, this speech argues that the government is deliberately keeping the diaspora abroad because its members are seen by the political parties currently in power only as a source of remittances. Adopting policies that would allow them to return could jeopardise the current political status quo. The political agenda behind this is that the ruling parties want to keep the same representatives in the EU. According to AUR, this is one of the reasons why the ruling parties oppose increasing the number of polling stations abroad or why they thwart AUR-recommended laws that would increase the number of seats in the Romanian Parliament given to Romanian citizens living abroad ("AUR Conference in Germany" 2023). AUR claims that these measures deliberately weaken the diaspora politically, as Romanians living abroad have the ability to overthrow the current political system with their votes if they were adequately represented (*The Launch of AUR Candidates for the European Parliamentary Elections in the Diaspora* 2024).

The current political establishment keeps the diaspora in exile abroad, but AUR refers to them as a nation outside their country of origin. When visiting Romanian diaspora communities, the party leadership characterises these Romanian citizens as heirs to a bygone era of European and Romanian civilisation. Every citizen in the Romanian diaspora is characterised in the AUR's discourse as possessing inviolable components of national identity, including the national flag, language, customs, chants and Christian values. (*The Launch of AUR Candidates for the European Parliamentary Elections in the Diaspora* 2024).

This discourse functions as an identification mechanism by organising the Romanian diaspora into what the AUR calls its militia, or *oaste*. In this militia, or *oaste*, there are two important roles for the diaspora. First and foremost, the Romanian diaspora is portrayed as a domestic political influencer in Romania, because individuals living abroad send money home and thus have an authority that allows them to influence their relatives living there. AUR's campaign messages make a strong case for the diaspora's increased involvement in this role, emphasising that the diaspora should use its influence to persuade Romanians in the country to support AUR's national and global campaigns. This, in turn, would allow them to live up to the Romanian spirit. In this sense, the messages of the AUR campaign heavily emphasised the word 'struggle', presenting the 2024 European elections as a struggle for the survival of the Romanian nation, making it a conflict between good and evil. The second function of the diaspora in the 2024 campaign is external. This level of the party's discourse emphasises the diaspora's ability to influence the European elections. At this level, the campaign's messages aim to create a narrative of mobilisation that will compel members of the diaspora to vote for the party.

Resolving the split identities of the diaspora is another aim of the AUR identification mechanism, developed through the use of the terms '*oaste*' or '*militia*' during the EU election campaign. As shown in the theoretical section of this thesis, migration involves a significant change of context, which typically leads to difficulties in adapting to the new social and political landscape in the host country. Because it allows migrants to reclaim their true identity as Romanians, the identification that AUR offers the Romanian diaspora through its discourses is a powerful tool. I have chosen two stories of AUR party members from the diaspora used in the campaign to illustrate this mechanism.

The first such example is the Romanian expatriate who welcomed guests to the AUR event "Diaspora revives patriots" in Germany, which took place during the campaign for the 2024 European elections. In his speech, he expressed his disappointment with what he termed "the so-called Romanian intellectual elites" of the last 30 years for their mismanagement of the country. Despite having lived abroad for more than 17 years, he felt he could make a contribution to his home country and set up an AUR branch in the German state of Baden-Württemberg. His two children served as one of his justifications for supporting the AUR-led movement, as he claimed that gender ideology carried a risk of negatively affecting them (Diaspora Revives Patriots Conference 2023). The second example is the coordinator of the AUR Diaspora branch, Ramona Lovin, who lived abroad in Italy for more than a decade. The AUR coordinator has stated in several speeches in Romania and abroad that the unreliability of the current Romanian political class was her main reason for joining AUR, although she joined the party after considering returning home ("Ramona Lovin Conference Speech" 2024).

## **Discussions and implications**

My research adds to a number of literatures. The first body of literature that my research adds to is the literature on nationalist and populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe. Several studies have focused on nationalist and populist parties in the region, in countries such as the Czech Republic (Petrović, Raos, and Fila 2023), Poland (Holesch and Kyriazi 2021), and Hungary (Bogaards 2018). According to these studies, the fundamental problem with these parties is that, once in power, they cause democratic backsliding or undermine democracy to the point where we can call them autocratic states (Ágh 2022). In my research, I analyse the recently formed AUR party in Romania. Although it has not yet gained political traction and has not participated in the

government, the media and political discourse in Romania portray AUR as a party that could cause an erosion of democracy, if not outright democratic regression in Romania, leading to its classification as an extremist party.

My research also adds to a second body of literature on the AUR. AUR-related literature began to emerge after the 2020 elections, mainly written by Romanian political scientists who sought to explain the party's success. There are three theories regarding AUR's success, as outlined in the case selection section of the methodology chapter. According to Soare and Tufiş (2023), the first hypothesis is that AUR's political strategy was the reason for its success. The second theory postulates that AUR capitalised on a specific opportunity, namely the Covid-19 pandemic (Crăciun and Țăranu 2023). The third theory postulates that AUR's political agenda contributed to its electoral success (Popescu and Vesalon 2023). My novel explanation of AUR's electoral success is what I bring to this body of literature. Using a psychoanalytic approach, I argue that the party's political discourse can be conceptualised as a fantasy that an electorate can relate to on an emotional level and, more importantly, that shapes its identity.

The literature on diasporisation is the third body of work to which my research adds. The Romanian literature did not address the fact that AUR received a significant number of votes from the diaspora in 2020. Alternatively, a body of research from several political science sub-fields examines, for example, why expatriates choose to support political parties with non-liberal ideologies (Turcu and Urbatsch 2023). Other authors (De Reguero and Jakobson 2023) have focused on the reasons why diaspora voters support radical parties from their home countries. In addition, a body of literature in international relations or nationalism studies, both with constructivist roots, examines the process of diaspora mobilisation or diasporisation. Typically, these authors investigate political entrepreneurs who mobilise a diaspora from an identity

perspective (Adamson 2008). Due to its constructivist methodology, this literature ignores the emotional processes that drive the process of diasporisation in favour of focusing on diasporic entrepreneurs. My contribution to this literature is that I analyse AUR's political discourse as a fantasy, which allows me to draw a link between the party's message as a political entrepreneur and the potential voter response. However, I only postulate this link without demonstrating it, as I explain in detail in the research limitations section of the conclusions.

In addition to its contributions, my study has a number of implications, the first of which concerns the literature in nationalism studies that analyses nationalist parties. In this literature, the focus is on the political actors, with less attention paid to the emotional level of the voters or the political actors themselves. For example, many political campaigns of nationalist parties use social media as a tool to share their videos among their social media followers. These videos are often not viewed critically because they evoke emotions that take precedence over rational consideration. Therefore, according to Lodge and Taber (2013), political campaign videos may have the ability to influence political behaviour on an emotional level. In studying the AUR campaign, I noted two such occurrences. First, during the 2024 campaign, AUR used the image of the Romanian voivodes to influence potential voters who see Romania's history in a positive light. Secondly, the popular Romanian actor Mugur Mihăescu's interpretation of the song "I want AUR for Romania", which was discussed in the previous sections, echoed all the party's narratives, from the suffering of the population during the pandemic to opposition to the EU's alleged gender policies ('Mugur Mihăescu - AUR for Romania' 2024). This song also has a folk rhythm, associated in Romania with the music played during some of the country's biggest protests, such as the pro-democracy demonstrations which took place in the University Square in Bucharest in the early



1990s. The Romanian urban folk rhythm makes this song likely to stay in people's memories and evoke strong emotions.

My research has a second implication, which has to do with the diasporisation of Romanians living abroad, particularly in Western Europe. There are studies on the Romanian diaspora, one of which is Ruxandra Gubernat's article focusing on the diaspora protests in Bucharest in August 2018 (Gubernat and Rammelt 2021). Other authors (Gherghina and Soare 2023) focus on Romanian political parties and their branches abroad. However, as studies on Turkey's approach to its diaspora have shown, there are two separate bodies of work on diasporas that rarely intersect, namely the work on diaspora political participation in political science and the literature on diasporas in diplomatic studies, which examines how a government interacts with its citizens abroad (Böcü and Baser 2024). The Romanian diaspora in Western Europe is increasingly involved in Romanian politics, as evidenced by the presidential elections of 2009, 2014 and, to a lesser extent, 2019, which saw an increase in both political and electoral participation by expatriates (Borz 2020). However, the current academic understanding of the diaspora mobilisation process within Romanian communities abroad is inadequate. In order to explain this process, one must first identify the actors in the diasporisation process and then understand their methods, but also map the way diasporic members react to their actions. To this end, I believe that comparative research is needed on the three most important actors in the diasporisation process of Romanian expatriates, namely Romanian political parties, state institutions and diaspora entrepreneurs.

My research also has implications for the study of both nationalist and liberal parties, particularly through the application of psychoanalytic theory. To date, few studies in nationalism studies (Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras 2006) or political science (Mandelbaum 2020) have used a

psychoanalytic approach. When studying nationalist parties, the psychoanalytic approach proposed in this paper could be used to explain why voters in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as around the world, vote for such parties and populist candidates. So far, not many articles use this theoretical approach to explain, for example, the reasons for Fidesz's popular support. However, existing research, such as Brubaker's work on Eastern civilisationalism (Brubaker 2017), suggests that Viktor Orbán's anti-European discourse has a significant impact on Hungarian voters because Orbán's discourse taps into Hungarian citizens' frustrations by exemplifying how the EU treats them as second-class citizens (Holmes and Krastev 2019).

On the other hand, because of their technocratic and typically unemotional discourse, liberal parties and their campaigns rarely manage to engage voters emotionally. In the case of Romania, such liberal parties present themselves as pro-European and are recognised as such, but their campaigns and outreach reach only a small percentage of urban voters. For example, Renewing Romania's European Project (REPER) is a pro-European and liberal party with several very active MEPs in the 2019-2024 European Parliament. However, opinion polls put the party's support at less than 2% (Morozanu 2024) ahead of the 2024 European elections. One possible explanation for these figures is that the campaign messages of these parties fail to create a political fantasy, which should include references to a golden age in order to trigger a nostalgic emotional response in the audience. This, in turn, makes it difficult for them to compete with nationalist parties in influencing the electorate on an emotional level. Moreover, the European Union was seen as a political fantasy before accession, whereas now it is seen as a normal political reality.

In the case of Hungary, Magyar Péter and his party Tisza have been at the centre of attention in the first half of 2024, with many voices claiming that Magyar could win a significant share of the opposition vote on 9 June 2024 (Bayer 2024). Using a psychoanalytic lens, one explanation

for Magyar's growth and potential electoral success could be that, unlike older opposition parties such as Momentum Mozgalom, its campaign for the European elections wins votes because it creates a national fantasy by referring to various golden ages of Hungarian history, such as the 1956 revolution. On the contrary, the traditional opposition, including the liberals, either speak only in terms of villains, namely Fidesz, or in terms of public policies, such as anti-corruption, both of which fail to create a political fantasy that could influence voters on an emotional level because their discourse does not meet all the criteria for such a fantasy.

## Conclusions

### Summary of results

I started this research with an empirical puzzle about the reasons behind the Romanian diaspora's 20% vote for AUR in the 2020 legislative elections, which resulted in this party passing the 5% electoral threshold and becoming a member of Parliament (Vladimir Bortun 2020). Since the AUR opposed health restrictions at the time, this may have affected its results in these elections (Crăciun and Șăranu, 2023), which took place during the pandemic. Consequently, the purpose of my research was to examine the first elections in which AUR participated as a parliamentary party in Romania, namely the 2024 European Parliament elections. These elections will differ from the 2020 ones in that they will take place under normal circumstances. It is important to note that at the time of writing, these elections had not yet taken place. As a result, my empirical focus was on the AUR's online campaign and campaign messages for the 2024 European elections.

The theoretical aim of my study was to conceptualise the political and electoral discourse of the AUR as a political fantasy. To do this, I first applied the Lacanian definition of fantasy as translated into nationalism studies (Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras 2006) and then used this concept to analyse AUR's campaign for the European Parliament elections. I concluded that AUR uses three elements in its discourse to create a political fantasy: a golden age which is a nostalgic construction, villains who prevent people from enjoying the fantasy in the present, and an identification mechanism that allows voters to identify with the party's platform.

In this campaign, the golden age is a nostalgic metaphor for several periods in Romanian history when, according to the party, the people were united and the country was sovereign. This golden age was embodied by the five Romanian voivodes, whom the party used in this campaign

as symbols of the true Romanian spirit and for their leadership in defending the country against foreign invaders. The Brussels neo-Marxists and the current Romanian political establishment are the villains in AUR's campaign discourse. The Romanian political establishment refers to the parties currently governing the country, which, according to the AUR, have betrayed the interests of the nation in collaboration with the secret services. To argue this point, the AUR campaign uses several 'chosen traumas', namely the pandemic and the post-1989 state capture, the combined effect of which is Romania's national decline. Finally, the identification mechanism in the fantasy produced by AUR in this campaign is the idea of the "AUR militia". The term "militia" (or *oaste* in archaic Romanian) describes the civilian population organised by the voivodes to repel invaders. According to the party's discourse, the Romanian diaspora is an essential component of the AUR militia, serving in two roles: first, as party supporters, and second, as members of the party's overseas branches.

## Limitations

My research has two major limitations, the first of which relates to the method of data collection. My work is a qualitative study based on the AUR 2024 online campaign for the European Parliament elections, and for this reason it has an exploratory character. My sample consists of twenty-five primary sources - including videos of actors impersonating the Romanian voivodes discussed in the analysis section - used by the AUR in the campaign. In response to the potential objection that my sample is small, I offer two arguments in favour of my method of collection and the size of the sample. Firstly, the sources included in my sample are campaign virals(Postill 2014), a concept that suggests that the videos used in the AUR campaign became known online due to the volume of shares they received. Second, given that I studied an election

campaign, it is unlikely that a larger sample size would have yielded different results due to the fact that political campaigns are typically based on a small number of issues.

The second limitation of my study has to do with the type of data I collected. More specifically, I selected only one category of data from the campaign, namely online sources. If I had conducted interviews, the results might have been different or more complex. I tried to contact AUR members in Romania and in the diaspora individually through social media, but I did not receive any response. I think that the fact that the people I wanted to interview were heavily involved in the campaign is the main reason why I did not hear back from them. This assumption is based on my previous research experience with the party. In 2022, while conducting research for my first master's thesis at Babeş-Bolyai University in Romania, I spoke to a number of AUR party members, most of whom graciously agreed to be interviewed.

Another issue regarding the data collection and analysis is the representativeness of the sample. It could be argued that my sample is not representative from a qualitative point of view in relation to the problem of diasporisation research. On the one hand, it could be said that the sample is not representative because the campaign video materials are aimed at both Romanian and diaspora audiences, so it is not clear which audience these materials reach, and I could not prove that these videos were watched in the Romanian diaspora based on the Facebook data. Furthermore, the data I used does not prove the process of diasporisation, in the sense that my sample does not reflect the reaction of diaspora members to these videos, even if the fact that some of them watched them could be proven. Additional data, such as interviews with AUR voters or party members living abroad, would have been needed to fully illustrate, if not prove, this process of diasporisation. While both concerns about the representativeness of my sample are valid, my counterargument is that my work focuses on the application of the concept of fantasy to the AUR

2024 EU election campaign. The fantasy that the party constructs through this campaign may facilitate the process of diasporisation, and is thus a mechanism that promotes diasporisation, but does not represent the process of diasporisation itself.

### **Future research agenda**

Given the limitations of this study and its implications, my doctoral project, which I am currently developing, focuses on what I see as a competitive process of diasporisation, in which numerous Romanian institutions are involved, each with its own agenda and constructing its own political fantasies. First of all, the Romanian diaspora is an important part of the electorate. According to data published by the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in 2022-2023 (Cornea 2023) there were about 5.7 million Romanian citizens living abroad. Second, as mentioned above, the Romanian diaspora began to mobilise politically in 2009, and it became important for political and institutional actors in the country to manage this mobilisation process. On the one hand, Romanian embassies and cultural institutes abroad are important actors in this process. At the national level, the institutions involved in diasporisation are government bodies that deal with the diaspora at various levels, such as the Romanian Government's Department for Romanians Abroad or the Presidential Administration's Department for Relations with Romanians Abroad. Moreover, Romanian political parties are a new player in the diasporisation game, as they seem to be eager to play a role in the diasporisation process, as they increasingly focus on opening party branches abroad (Borz 2020).

Against this background, I argue that the Romanian diaspora can be seen as a zone of political influence that different institutional actors try to shape. My doctoral research will focus on deepening the study of the diasporisation process in two ways. On the one hand, I want to

examine the fantasies that each of these actors proposes to mobilise the Romanian diaspora. On the other hand, if I can secure the necessary funding, I would like to conduct an ethnographic study using participatory observation in a Romanian community in Spain, Italy, France or the UK. The purpose of this study would be to see how these communities respond to or engage with the competitive diasporisation process initiated by Romanian institutional and political actors. Such a research design could provide qualitative evidence of the diasporisation process at the receiving end, namely the Romanian expatriates.

My doctoral research will also focus on the diasporisation of the second generation of Romanian expatriates. The Romanian diaspora gained momentum in the 1990s and reached new heights with Romania's accession to the EU in 2007. In the seventeen years since the accession, a second and sometimes even a third generation of Romanian citizens or dual citizens has been born abroad. Studies on Hungary's government initiatives to improve its diaspora relations (Kantek, Onnudottir and Veljanova 2023) and Turkey's establishment of the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) (Böcü and Baser 2024) are works that inspire the research I propose on the Romanian diaspora. Based on this literature, another component of my research objective in the doctoral project could be to determine whether the political fantasies put forward by Romanian political actors serve the same or different purposes for Romanian immigrants of the first as compared to the second generation.



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