

Nation in the Name of Faith: The Use of Orthodox Christianity in Shaping Romanian Identity

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Submitted to

Central European University

Department of Political Science

*In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts*

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Vienna, Austria

2025

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Niculae, I.-A. 2025. Nation in the Name of Faith: The Use of Orthodox Christianity in Shaping Romanian Identity. MA thesis, Department of Political Science, Central European University, Vienna.

Abstract

Framed as a spiritual battle between good and evil, Romanian politics has seen the rise of a new actor claiming divine legitimacy. The far-right Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) blends Orthodox Christianity with ethno-populism to construct a moralized version of politics that defends the sacred identity of the Romanian nation against moral decay. Religion, in AUR's discourse, is more than a heritage – it is a political instrument that draws symbolic boundaries and justifies exclusion. Building on theories of civilizationism (Brubaker, 2017a), religious instrumentalization (Roy, 2016), and right-wing populism (Mudde, 2004; Wodak, 2020), this thesis identifies how Orthodoxy is instrumentalized through thematic and corpus-assisted discourse analysis of speeches from 2020 to 2024. Findings reveal how AUR constructs binaries of good versus evil, Romanian versus foreign, and sacred versus profane. This strategy positions the party as both protector and savior of faith, echoing historical patterns observed in interwar Romania and regional trends seen in parties like Fidesz and PiS. By framing politics as a spiritual struggle, AUR highlights the unique, powerful role Orthodoxy plays in Romania, which successfully mobilizes a large part of the electorate.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Robert Sata, who turned this journey into an enjoyable experience and who made writing this thesis seem easy, even when it was not. His guidance and support motivated me. I am especially grateful for his genuine interest in my research and for the chance I had to work closely with him and learn so much.

Being part of the CEU community is an honor that comes with great responsibility. Therefore, I would also like to thank the Department of Political Science for creating such a supportive environment and for consistently believing in us. All the professors I had the chance to work with were a true source of inspiration.

I am deeply thankful to my dear friends – Tika, Anna, and Nikolay. Without their support and friendship, this journey would not have been the same. Special thanks go also to my best friend, Raluca, whose presence in my life has been a constant source of strength and emotional support. I am also grateful to Maria and Dumitru.

Finally, I extend my most profound appreciation to my family, without whom I would not have been able to go through all this. Mama, Tata, thank you! Your constant support, especially in helping me pursue my studies, and your belief in me have meant more than words can express. Bunica and Bunicu, thank you for being a constant source of inspiration since my childhood. I always carry your strength and love with me. I am especially thankful to my brother, David, whom I look up to and whose advice and insights were a real help in the process of writing.

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Introduction

In February 2022, Archbishop Teodosie of Tomis publicly blessed the new headquarters of the far-right Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) in Constanta, Romania (Teodoreanu, 2022). Similarly, in 2025, just days before the second round of the presidential elections, the Archbishop once again sanctified the party's office in a gesture of supporting the party's president, George Simion, in the run for office (Despa, 2025). Such public displays of clerical endorsement show that even if Romania is constitutionally a secular state, the symbolic boundaries between Church and State are blurred for political purpose.

Around the world, democracy is in retreat. Autocratic forces are tightening their grip, eroding democratic institutions and values from within, and dismantling the very principles that once seemed secure. This phenomenon, identified by scholars as the “third wave of autocratization” (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Maerz et al., 2020), is marked not by violent coups, but by illiberal leaders, who exploit democratic institutions to gradually erode the very essence of democracy (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). One of the key manifestations of autocratization is the rise of far-right populist movements across the globe and more specifically Europe, marked by a resurgence of nationalist, anti-immigrant and populist rhetoric.

Some states narrowly avoided the danger of far-right governments, while others are being ruled by such political leaders. Hungary, under Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party, exemplifies a consolidation of populist politics right within the European Union (Bogaards, 2018). Similarly, Poland's PiS has institutionalized nationalist and religious values and curtailed judicial independence during its reign (2015-2023). In Western Europe, Marine Le Pen's National Rally has gained momentum, driven by euroscepticism and anti-immigrant sentiments. Germany has

also witnessed the rise of far-right politics with AfD gaining parliamentary representation, even though mainstream parties have largely kept it out of governance for now. Austria's far-right FPÖ emerged as the most voted party in recent elections (Cole, 2024). Spain, by contrast, has managed to resist full-scale far-right dominance, despite the rise of Vox, maintaining a stronger commitment to democratic pluralism. Similarly, the far-right Irish Freedom Party, which advocates for Irish withdrawal from the European Union, continues to be a minor party and has not gained significant political representation (McGee, 2018).

Romania, too, has witnessed the rise of far-right politics through the Alliance of Union of Romanians, better known as AUR. This party entered the political scene relatively recently, but it has rapidly gained traction by leveraging a combination of nationalist, populist, and ultra-religious rhetoric. Despite being founded in late 2019, AUR emerged as a political force in the 2020 parliamentary elections, gathering more than 9% of the national vote (Permanent Electoral Authority, 2020), in the 2024 European election it reached 15% (Permanent Electoral Authority, 2024), and in the latest parliamentary elections became the second force in Romanian politics with 18% of the votes (Permanent Electoral Authority, 2024). The party's ideology emphasizes four core pillars – “family, nation, Christian faith, and liberty” (AUR Statute, Art. 4, Sect. 1).

AUR's appearance in Romania raises critical questions about the future of Romania's democratic backbone. If AUR continues its rapid rise and solidifies its political influence (as it is suggested by the 2025 April polls in Romania's presidential elections, where George Simion, AUR party leader, is set to win the first round), Romania's democracy may be at risk. Could the country experience backsliding similar to other European states where far-right forces have gained power? Shall we see a return of chauvinist Romanian nationalism? AUR's growth also highlights the

deepening intersection of religion and nationalism in contemporary far-right politics, shall we witness how Christianity is being “hijacked” for the sake of the nation (Sata, 2021)?

This thesis seeks to explore the mechanisms through which AUR uses religious discourse to construct an ethno-populist platform. The primary research question guiding this thesis is: *How does AUR instrumentalize Orthodox Christianity to shape the Romanian identity within its ethno-populist discourse from 2020 to 2024?* This thesis contributes to the growing scholarship on autocratization and the intersection of far-right populism, religion, and nationalism by examining how AUR instrumentalizes Orthodox Christianity to shape its nationalist discourse.

While the use of Orthodox Christianity as a cultural and political tool is not new in Romanian history (Iordachi, 2006), AUR’s approach represents a complex evolution of this strategy. This instrumentalization, or “hijacking” (Sata, 2021) of Orthodox Christianity, represents a threat to Romanian democracy, potentially leading to the erosion of democratic values for the sake of gaining power, claiming the upholding of conservative traditions. While previous research has explored the role of Orthodoxy in Romanian nationalism (Schifirneț, 2013; Clark, 2012), little attention has been given to how contemporary far-right actors in Romania strategically employ religious narratives to construct political legitimacy and mobilize support.

By combining Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis (CADA) (Baker et al., 2008), this thesis provides a systematic and empirical examination of AUR’s rhetoric. Thematic Analysis facilitates structured, presence-based coding of narratives, allowing the identification of trends over time. Additionally, CADA enhances this research by quantifying linguistic patterns in AUR’s discourse, tracking the frequency and collocations of key terms. This combination of qualitative and quantitative methods allows for a more holistic

understanding of how ethno-religious populist rhetoric is both constructed and reinforced in far-right populist discourse.

Beyond its focus on Romania, this study also contributes to broader discussions on the role of religion in European far-right movements. While much of the existing literature has been centered on Catholicism and Protestantism, the relationship between Orthodoxy and contemporary ethno-populist movements remains underexplored and traditionally focused on Russia. This gap is particularly striking given that scholars highlight Orthodoxy's central role in shaping national identities, unlike Catholicism, which aligns with a supranational Vatican authority, or Protestantism, which is historically fragmented into localized churches (Leuştean, 2009). Situating AUR's discourse within the larger European trend of far-right movements instrumentalizing religion, this thesis enhances our understanding of how different religious traditions are mobilized for political purposes.

This thesis' argument is structured in five parts: The first chapter provides the historical and political context necessary to understand AUR's emergence, situating the party's ideological positioning. The second chapter introduces the key theoretical lenses that frame the analysis of AUR's discourse. Chapter three details the methodological approach, explaining how the data was collected, coded, and interpreted. The fourth chapter presents empirical analysis, identifying the discursive patterns through which AUR fuses religious, national, and populist narratives. Finally, the last part of the thesis reflects on the broader implication of AUR's rhetorical strategy, offering insights into the potential consequences for democracy in Romania and beyond.

CHAPTER 1: The Context of AUR's Rise in Romania

This first chapter situates the emergence of AUR within the political, social, and historical landscape of Romania. It looks at the socio-economic conditions, cultural anxieties, and political dynamics that facilitated the party's ascent. By exploring historical nationalist traditions, Romania's long-lasting ties with Orthodoxy, and more recent political developments, the chapter provides the necessary background for understanding how AUR was able to build a discourse centered on religion, national sovereignty, and anti-elitism.

1.1 The fertile ground for AUR's rise

Historically, Orthodoxy has been closely tied to Romanian nationalism. Stan and Turcesu (2007) argue that “when national consciousness emerged in Eastern Europe,” the Church had a pivotal role in “the very definition of Romanianism.” This connection was especially evident in the 19th century, during Romania's struggle for independence and unification, when the Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC) promoted national unity through religious rituals. Furthermore, the predominant literature defending Orthodox nationalism is from the interwar period, when Orthodoxy was closely linked to fascism and anti-Semitic sentiments marked by the rise of the Legionary Movement and its paramilitary branch, the Iron Guard. Many Orthodox priests were part of the fascist movement (the Iron Guard), and Orthodoxy was “a touchstone of the unique «Romanian soul»” (Stan & Turcescu, 2007, p. 44).

Scholars examined how religious identity became central to political and ideological projects. Roland Clark (2012) explores this dynamic through the figure of Nichifor Crainic, a key intellectual who integrated Orthodox Christianity into Romanian ultra-nationalism during 1920s and 1930s. Before World War I, Romanian nationalism was largely secular, but post-war expansion of Romania's borders, which brought new ethnic and religious minorities, provided the perfect

ground for the rise of religious nationalism (Clark, 2012). Crainic, a theologian, publicist, and government minister, promoted a form of nationalist Orthodox Christianity, which advocated for the exclusion of minorities from full citizenship. By the 1930s, Orthodox Christianity had become fully part of the Romanian nationalist ideology, reinforcing the idea that Orthodoxy was an essential pillar for “Romanianess” – an idea that influenced later far-right movements and their use of Orthodoxy as a political tool.

Beyond its historical role in nationalism, the ROC has remained deeply embedded in the national-building process, even in the context of modernity. Constantin Schifirneț (2013) explores this relationship by introducing the concept of “tendential modernity.” This concept describes Romania’s unique and incomplete way in modernization, which diverges from the Western European experience maintaining a strong connection between religion and national identity. Schifirneț argues that Orthodoxy remains a central pillar of Romanian national identity, adapting to social and political changes rather than diminishing in relevance. The fall of communism reinforced this dynamic, as the ROC asserted itself as a guardian of Romanian cultural and spiritual heritage. Unlike Western democracies, where church-state separation is a defining feature, Romania’s model is characterized by cooperation rather than separation.

Romania’s political landscape has long been shaped by the presence of far-right movements and parties that blend nationalism, ethno-chauvinism, mysticism, and exclusionary rhetoric. The interwar period combined a virulent form of ultra-nationalism with Orthodox Christianity. The Legionary Movement sought to create a “New Romania” (Iordachi, 2006) rooted in spiritual and ethnic purity, often resorting to violence and anti-Semitism to achieve its goals. The movement’s ideology was built on the glorification of Romanian Orthodoxy as the foundation of national identity and rejection of modernist and liberal influences (Iordachi, 2006). The interwar Legionary

Movement was dismantled following WWII, but its ideological core, particularly the fusion of religion and nationalism, persisted and resurfaced in the post-communist period.

1.2 Post-communist transition and the rise of GRP

Following the fall of communism in 1989, Romania experienced significant socio-political instability. After the 1989 revolution, religion returned to the public discourse when 86.81% of Romanians declared themselves Orthodox (Alec, 2023). The immediate transition period was marked by uncertainty and the re-emergence of nationalist rhetoric, leading to the rise of Greater Romania Party (GRP/PRM), established in 1991 by Corneliu Vadim Tudor. Known for its ultra-nationalist, anti-Semitic, and anti-Hungarian rhetoric, the GRP positioned itself as a defender of Romania's sovereignty and cultural purity, garnering significant support in the 1990s (Bugajski, 1995). The party thrived in an era of political disillusionment, appealing to segments of the population unsettled by rapid socio-economic changes.

However, as Romania moved towards the European Union integration and adopted more democratic norms, the resonance of GRP's populist and inflammatory rhetoric began to fade. The decline of the GRP, which once played a dominant role in Romania's far-right scene, can be attributed to a combination of internal fractures, leadership controversies, and the changing political dynamics. By the 2008 parliamentary elections, the GRP failed to meet the electoral threshold, signaling its diminished influence (Permanent Electoral Authority, 2008).

In parallel with the rise of nationalist parties like the GRP, the post-1989 period witnessed a profound religious revival in Romania, with the Romanian Orthodox Church reclaiming its position as a key institution in the national consciousness. After 1989, the ROC quickly filled the ideological emptiness left by communism, becoming a moral authority and a symbol of national

continuity and unity (Stan & Turcescu, 2007). The ROC managed to maintain informal connections with political actors, often endorsing conservative and nationalist agendas that aligned with its view on morality, education, and national identity.

After 1989, the Church attempted to shape policies on issues such as education, homosexuality, and abortion (Stan & Turcescu, 2007). An example of this entanglement between the church and politics is Archbishop Bartolomeu Anania. In 1999, after a failed attempt by the Church to institutionalize representation in the Senate, Anania publicly proposed that the Church should be allowed to select parliamentary candidates. More than that, he advocated for priests to urge their followers during sermons to vote for these candidates. He also supported the revival of the proposal to formally appoint the members of the Holy Synod as Senators, arguing that Romania had never truly experienced a separation between Church and state. A draft of this law was prepared but never advanced in Parliament (Stan & Turcescu, 2000). Although these proposals were formally unsuccessful, they show the ROC's persistent ambition to reassert itself as a moral authority and a political actor.

1.3 The impact of widespread corruption on nationalist narratives

The 2008 economic crisis marked another turning point for the Romanian society. Faced with high levels of economic instability, mass privatization, and a severe labor force shortage (Boboc et al., 2020), the Romanian Government signed a bailout agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). By borrowing billions of euros, they worsened public discontent (Mihai, 2018), leading to widespread frustration with politics and fueling nationalist and populist narratives. Besides the high levels of economic instability, this period also saw heightened outmigration levels (István & Remus 2018) and extensive political corruption, with Romania ranking 0.78 on the Variety of Democracy (V-dem) index for political corruption during the early-

2000s. In this context, nationalist and religious narratives gained traction, offering perceived stability, moral clarity, and national pride to those alienated by socio-economic challenges.

However, after the decline of the GRP in the mid-2000s, there was a notable space left in the far-right political landscape. For nearly a decade, no major nationalist party managed to reach a similar level of influence as Vadim Tudor's GRP. While nationalist and Orthodox discourses persisted in society and were occasionally appropriated for electoral purposes by mainstream parties like the Social Democrat Party (PSD/SDP), there was no coherent political formation that fully used these sentiments for an ethno-populist platform. Instead, this period was marked by sporadic but significant civic protests, most notably in 2013, the Roșia Montană civic outrage against political corruption and the destruction of a historic village in Apuseni Mountains (Digi24, 2013). Similarly, in 2017, over a half a million people mobilized across Romania in response to an emergency ordinance (OUG 13) that would have effectively decriminalized certain forms of political corruption (Digi24, 2017). These protests were the largest since 1989.

1.4 Recent events and the Coalition for the Family

One of the most polarizing events in recent Romanian history was the 2018 family referendum, which sought to redefine the “constitutional gender-neutral definition of family” (Alec, 2023). The Romanian Orthodox Church was a strong supporter of this referendum, and it created massive disputes which at core had nationalist and religious stances. Alec (2023) argues that the initiative takers, the so-called “Coalition for the Family,” marked the beginning of a new wave of right-wing rhetoric, centered around warnings of a growing “Christianophobia” and the perceived need to protect children from the supposed “threats of gender ideology.” Despite intense debates and mobilization efforts from the ROC and the Coalition for the Family, the referendum ultimately failed to meet the required turnout threshold.

AUR originated during this referendum debate. Claudiu Târziu, one of the founders and co-presidents of AUR, was a member of the National Council for the Coalition for Family. This organization was advocating for family values, with strong religious and right-wing political views, anti-abortion measures, homophobic stances, and admiration for the Iron Guard. George Simion, the other founder and co-president of AUR, was an activist best known for advocating Romania's unification with the Republic of Moldova and being part of various NGOs and civic groups supporting the unification (*School Manager by Family Zone*, 2025). Despite these controversial positions of its leaders, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians has grown in popularity in the 2019-2020 period, specifically positioning themselves as vocal opponents of COVID-19 restrictions and vaccination efforts. The pandemic further deepened societal divisions, providing an opportunity for nationalist, anti-globalist, and religious narratives to gain traction.

1.5 AUR within the far-right landscape

AUR can be seen as the latest iteration of Romania's historical pattern of far-right movements as their rhetoric aligns with the historical use of religion and ethnicity by earlier far-right movements. The party explicitly references Orthodoxy as central to Romania identity, echoing ideological frameworks found both in the interwar Iron Guard and the post-1989 religious-nationalist revival. In its founding statute, AUR states that "the party collaborates with civil society and the Church in order to achieve the major spiritual, moral, and social objectives of Romanian society" (AUR Statute, Art.7, Sect.1). This articulation of Church-state cooperation underscores AUR's view of religion as a guiding force for political and societal development. By integrating such religious themes, combined with narratives of historical injustice, corruption, and national decline, AUR reframes traditionalist values into a modern ethno-populist platform.

Unlike its predecessors, AUR places Orthodoxy at the center of its nationalist platform, framing itself as the defender of Romanian identity against modern threats such as globalization, liberalism, and the European Union. In the party's manifesto, AUR explicitly mentions that "Christianity is the foundation of European civilization and the source of moral health" (pp. 1-2), highlighting that the Church should play a role in the state's social issues. The party positions itself against what it perceives as the erosion of traditional values, referring to globalist and foreign forces as threats to the country's cultural sovereignty and morality (AUR Manifesto, 2021). The strategy to fusion religion and nationalism is not by chance but grounded in a broader pattern of how political actors instrumentalize identity to consolidate support and legitimacy.

CHAPTER 2: Theoretical Framework – Instrumentalization of Religion

Understanding the intersection of populism, nationalism, and the instrumentalization of religion requires a strong theoretical foundation. This chapter outlines key conceptual frameworks relevant to the thesis, defining far-right, populism, and nationalism while exploring overlaps and distinctions. It also examines the role of Orthodox Christianity in Romanian national identity and how religion has historically been mobilized for political purposes. Drawing on seminal literature, this chapter situates AUR's discourse within the broader pattern of far-right politics, religious nationalism, and populism to help understand how AUR employs Orthodox Christianity as a strategic political resource in contemporary Romania.

2.1 Concepts and definitions

2.2.1 The far-right

Mudde (2019) finds that the far-right is distinct from the mainstream right due to its hostility towards liberal democracy. He divides the far-right into two main subgroups: the extreme right, and the radical right. The first subgroup rejects democracy altogether, opposing both popular sovereignty and majority rule. Fascist movements of the 20th century, such as Nazism in Germany and Mussolini's Italy are the most infamous example of this category. The second subgroup accepts democratic principles but opposes liberal democracy, especially minority rights, the rule of law, and the separation of power. Unlike the extreme right, the radical right does not seek to overthrow democracy, but instead undermines its moral foundations (Mudde, 2019).

Therefore, the far-right movement in Europe represents a complex combination of ideologies, including nationalism, authoritarianism, and anti-immigration sentiments (Camus &

Lebourg, 2017). Building on Mudde (2000), Kopeček (2007) identifies four core ideological elements that define the far-right: nationalism, xenophobia, law and order, and welfare chauvinism. These ideological components, combined with populist strategies, form the basis of contemporary far-right movements in Europe.

2.2.2. Populism

Populism as conceptualized by Cas Mudde (2004), is a “thin-centered ideology” that divides society into two antagonistic groups: the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite.” More than that, by referencing John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira (2002), Mudde (2004) notes that the key relationship of populism is between “the people versus the powerful.” Mudde (2004) defines the “*volonté généralé*,” or the general will of the people, as the ideal of politics for populists. He argues that because populism is a distinct ideology, which “does not possess the same level of intellectual refinement and consistency” (Mudde, 2004, p. 544) as others, it rather attaches itself to other ideologies such as communism, nationalism, conservatism, or socialism, depending on the context. From the populist perspective, the opposition is perceived as “evil,” not just “people with different priorities and values” (Mudde, 2004, p. 544).

Populism is a political phenomenon characterized by anti-establishment rhetoric (Mudde, 2004; Bušítková & Guasti, 2020). It can manifest as an ideology or political strategy, often exploiting institutional weaknesses and targeting liberal democratic norms (Urbinati, 2019). Populism involves a revolt against political and economic elites, with populist leaders claiming legitimacy by positioning themselves as the true representatives of the people. This often translates into a preference for direct democracy (Canonvan, 1999).

Populists are not merely challenger political actors that introduce new issues such as social inequality, or immigration. Their grievance is deeper and more systemic. Rather than focusing on specific policy failures, they denounce the entire democratic system as fundamentally corrupt and illegitimate. They often reframe existing democracies as authoritarian regimes in disguise, portraying political elites as betrayers of democracy. A crucial aspect of this strategy is the use of conspiracy theories, political paranoia, historical myths, and disinformation to construct a reality where the elites are engaged in this betrayal (Schedler, 2024; Moffit, 2016; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Populism often arises as a reaction to perceived failures of representative governments, and it seeks to fill the gap between the people and their elected representatives (Urbinati, 2019). Francisco E. González and Clifford Young (2017) conceptualize populism as a three-dimensional strategy that political entrepreneurs employ to achieve power: (1) The political entrepreneur – the leader who embodies anti-establishment sentiment and mobilizes groups; (2) the opportunity structure – the societal climate of insecurity and instability, often triggered by economic issues, demographic shifts, or perceived cultural threats, providing the ground for populist rhetoric; (3) and the public appeal – the widespread belief that the system is broken, creating anti-establishment narratives. Canovan (1999) emphasizes that populists thrive on the inherent tension within democracy itself. Populists appeal directly to the voices of the people, advocating for simplicity, transparency, and immediate action. This call for direct representation and grassroots mobilization is not just rhetorical but embodies a critique of perceived elitism.

2.2.3 Far-right populism

Populism and the far-right intersect to form what is commonly referred to as far-right populism (Wodak, 2020), which combines exclusionary nationalism, authoritarianism, and

xenophobia, with the anti-elitist, anti-establishment rhetoric characteristic of populist movements. This combination allows far-right populists to position themselves as the true representatives of the people, while framing the others as foreign influences that represent a threat to national identity and sovereignty. According to Ruth Wodak (2020), far-right populism is primarily characterized by nationalism, anti-elitism, authoritarianism, and historical mythologizing. She traces the history of far-right populism and asserts that socio-economic deprivation is not the only factor explaining far-right's appeal, but cultural factors play a crucial role as well. This type of narrative often employs a discourse of distancing from "others" while promoting a proximity to "the people." Wodak (2020) discusses how far-right populism has been normalized in mainstream politics, most of the time with the help of conservative parties.

Far-right populism does not simply oppose the political establishment. Instead, it actively reshapes political divisions by fostering deep societal polarization. Populist parties thrive on division, framing political and cultural conflicts as existential struggles. This dynamic extends beyond elite conflicts, reinforcing ideological divides and deepening political fragmentation (Enyedi, 2016). The concept of populist polarization is key to understanding how populist parties create and maintain political divides to consolidate their voter base and challenge democratic norms. They construct their opponents as existential threats to national or cultural identity and position themselves as the sole legitimate defenders of "the people" (Enyedi, 2016).

2.2.4 The instrumentalization of religion

Religion, including Islam and Christianity, is not inherently conflictual or peaceful. Its meanings are shaped by discursive representation influenced by historical and socio-political contexts (Omelicheva, 2016). The instrumentalization of religion in politics, understood as the use of religious reference to achieve political aims (Omelicheva 2016), is a phenomenon observed

across various contexts. The entire process of “instrumentalization” can be understood as a “sin of untruth,” involving the violation of the object’s nature and truth, leading to a change in the initial position of the instrumentalized object (Krzyzewski, 2021).

Omelicheva (2016) explores the instrumentalization of Islam by the governments of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to achieve political legitimacy. Her study examines how Islam, as a system of beliefs, can be used to serve various political purposes, including social control and regulation. Olivier Roy (2016) highlights the strategic use of religious symbols, narratives, and identities by political actors who achieve political ends, rather than to promote or uphold spiritual or theological doctrines. Roy (2016) offers a critical perspective on this phenomenon, especially within the context of populist movements. Roy argues that religion, especially Christianity, is often co-opted not for spiritual significance but as a cultural and civilizational marker. This approach reduces religion from its theological understanding to a “thin” identity.

Therefore, religion is a simplified symbolic representation detached from theological depth but rich in cultural meaning (Roy 2016). Starting from “othering” the out-groups and differentiating them from the in-groups, Roy highlights how populist parties and leaders employ this “thin” Christianity to construct an exclusionary “us versus them” framework identity (Roy, 2016). In this type of rhetoric, “us” is represented by the “true” cultural insiders, those who embody the nation’s tradition, values, and identity, and “them” is represented by the perceived threats to the national cohesion.

Nevertheless, religious identity is often strategically appropriated by illiberal actors to justify exclusionary policies and consolidate political power. Robert Sata’s (2021) concept, the “hijacking of religion,” illustrates how religion is not necessarily mobilized for spiritual purposes but rather as a cultural and political tool in illiberal governance. In Hungary, as Sata presents, PM

Orbán utilizes Christianity not as a faith, but as a civilizational marker, distinguishing between those who belong to the nation and those who threaten its cohesion – such as migrants, liberals, and progressive movements. This hijacking operates through two key mechanisms: framing Christianity as a moral and cultural foundation and using religious identity to construct an exclusionary nationalist discourse (Sata, 2021). Through these strategies, religion becomes a legitimizing force for illiberal democracy, allowing political leaders to portray their opposition as morally corrupt and position themselves as defenders of national and spiritual purity, reinforcing the homogenous national identity.

Rogers Brubaker's (2017a) concept of civilizationism offers a valuable perspective on how religion is instrumentalized not just as a matter of personal faith or national identity, but as a broader cultural and civilizational framework. Civilizationism positions religion as a defining feature of all civilizations, setting them apart from others perceived as incompatible or threatening. It emphasizes a clash between “our civilization” and an external adversary, which usually is Islam (Brubaker, 2017a). Brubaker argues that civilizationism transcends the individual or national level by aligning religious identity with broader cultural narratives.

In this type of framing, religion becomes a marker of belonging to a particular civilization. Similar to Roy (2016), Brubaker argues that civilizationism constructs an external “other” that threatens the cultural and moral integrity of civilization. Islam is often positioned as the primary antagonist in Western Europe, and this represents the case of many populist parties such as Fidesz, FPÖ, AfD, National Rally, and others. Brubaker's civilizationism creates a binary between the “civilized” in-group and the “uncivilized” (or incompatible) out-group (Brubaker, 2017a).

Civilizationism has emerged as a counter-hegemonic ideology, challenging liberal international order. Civilizationism offers a different vision of global politics, based on a distinct

sense of collective belonging, often illiberal (Bettiza et al., 2023). Saleem et al. (2022) explore the rise of Hindutva populism in India and describe civilizationist populism as a concept which combines identity politics and populism, resulting in a divided society between “the people” vs. “the others.” This dynamic often leads to intercommunal conflict and violence. The Hindutva movement exemplifies this trend, leveraging cultural narratives for political mobilization (Saleem et al., 2022). Stewart (2020) introduces the concept of “far-right civilizationism,” which is an “an alternative vision for capitalist world order” and it looks for replacing the concept of cultural cosmopolitanism and liberal internationalism (frequently framed by far-right movements under the term “cultural Marxism,” portraying it as a threat to national identity), with a “Western chauvinism” (Stewart, 2020, p. 1213).

2.2.5 Nationalism

Theorists such as Ernest Gellner (1983) and Benedict Anderson (1991) argued that nationalism is a consequence of modernization, industrialization, and the rise of bureaucratic states requiring a homogenized culture. Gellner (1983) viewed nations and nationalism as products of processes like capitalism and industrialism. Anderson (1991) popularized the concept of “imagined communities,” arguing that nations are socially constructed communities, imagined by people who perceived themselves as part of them, despite never meeting most of its members.

By contrast, Anthony D. Smith (2006) proposed the ethno-symbolist view, which sees modern nations as building upon pre-existing ethnic communities (ethnies), rich with shared myths, memories, traditions, and cultural symbols. These, he argued, provided the cultural resources necessary for nation building. This dual framework captures perfectly the paradox of nationalism – a modern political project with roots in pre-modern culture. In Smith's view,

understanding nationalism's emotional force requires acknowledging its symbolic links to ancient identities (Smith, 2006).

Nationalism is a complex concept encompassing both ideology and the political movement, rooted in the belief that a nation's interests are of prime importance (Özkırımlı, 2019). Walker Connor (1993) clarifies that nationalism is an emotional attachment to one's ethnonational group, while distinct from patriotism, which represents the attachment to one's state or country. Nationalism, under the influence of German Romantic thought, has been strongly connected to the idea of exclusivist nation based on ethnical and cultural differences (Özkırımlı, 2019). At its core, nationalism is a discourse about the nation as a sovereign and homogenous community, often defined by shared territory, history, and cultural values (de Cleen, 2017). It constructs in-group/out-group distinctions to define who belongs to the nation and who does not, based on ethnic, cultural, or national marks.

While nationalism and populism are distinct in their definitions and strategies, they often point in the same direction, driven by a shared "us vs. them" dichotomy. Both rely on the construction of "the people," whether defined in national, ethnic, or cultural terms, in opposition to perceived "others." These "others" are typically foreigners, minorities, or political elites, who are framed as threats to the unity, sovereignty, and identity of the nation. Populism, too, creates an "us" (the people) vs. "them" (the elites) dynamic. However, when populism takes a nationalist form – ethno-populism – it often reframes to focus on cultural or national threats rather than purely economic or political elites. While populism typically focuses on anti-elitism, nationalism emphasizes national unity and sovereignty, often in opposition to global influences or multiculturalism. Nevertheless, both share the same mechanisms of exclusion.

In the context of far-right politics, nationalism and populism often overlap, with populist leaders using nationalist rhetoric to mobilize support, constructing dangerous “others” who are portrayed as threats to the nation’s cultural identity and sovereignty. These leaders then position themselves as the defenders of the people and the protectors of the nation, thus blurring the lines between populist and nationalist agendas. From a discourse perspective (Essex School), nationalism and populism share a common focus on sovereignty (de Cleen, 2017). Nationalism constructs sovereignty around the nation, while populism constructs sovereignty around the people. The nation-state remains the dominant political framework, within which both nationalism and populism operate, reinforcing each other (de Cleen, 2017).

In Romania, the use of historical myths for nationalist purposes is particularly evident in protochronism. Katherine Verdery (1995) describes protochronism as a cultural and political strategy that revived interwar ideas about Romania’s national essence, but distinct in the context of Ceausescu’s national-communist regime. Vladimir Tismaneanu (2003) defines it as an ideology that exaggerates or reinterprets a nation’s cultural and historical contributions to portray them as exceptional or superior. Protochronism is not just about pride in historical achievements, rather it constructs false histories to sustain an image of national greatness (Tismaneanu, 2003). As an example, protochronist narratives may glorify the Dacian-Roman origins of the Romanian people as the peak of European civilization, while omitting the contributions of other ethnic groups.

During Nicolae Ceausescu’s national communist regime, the Romanian folklore and exceptionalism were selectively appropriated to promote the idea of Romania’s uniqueness and cultural superiority. Under Ceausescu, protochronism was used to cultivate anti-West and anti-Soviet sentiments and to assert a form of national independence by creating an “us vs. them” narrative, often directed against perceived foreign threats (Tismaneanu, 2003; Verdery, 1995). As

Verdery (1995) argues, this strategic manipulation of history served to legitimize the state's authority and to improve the inferiority complex specific to Romanian nationalism. While many nations engage in forms of national pride or aggrandizement, protochronism is rooted in the deliberate construction of historical myths to legitimize exclusionary policies. Protochronism in today's Romania can be seen as a continuation of Romania's historical pattern of using myths and to foster national cohesion while promoting exclusionary and revisionist narratives.

2.2.6 Processes of othering

Othering is a process of creating social distinctions between “us” and “them,” often leading to the marginalization and exclusion of minority groups, including those defined by race, religion, ethnicity, or sexual orientation (Jimoh, 2019; Jensen, 2011). Edward Said (1979) famously conceptualized this process in “Orientalism” arguing that the West (Occident) defines the East (Orient) as an inferior, exotic, and a fundamentally different “other.” This distinction, he argues, is not just descriptive but is a tool of domination and hegemony. The process of “othering” constructs the Orient not just as different, but as subordinate, and thus justifying the West's dominance over the East.

However, the form of “othering” most relevant to this thesis is the one central to the construction of national identity. “Othering” inherently involves defining an in-group – “the nation,” by contrasting it with an out-group – “the other” (de Cleen, 2017). National othering shapes identity boundaries, determining inclusion and exclusion based on ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, or cultural markers. The process of othering is not specific to any nation, rather, it is a common and recurring mechanism through which national identities are constructed and maintained. Hagren (2021) analyses discursive processes of othering in Sweden, while Göl (2005) argues that Turkish national identity was constructed through the othering of Armenians. These

cases demonstrate that othering is a powerful and adaptable tool in nationalist projects, used to define the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.

Anna Triandafyllidou's (2006) concept of "significant other" provides valuable framework for understanding how this dynamic functions. She argues that national identity is not constructed just internally through shared cultural and historical features, but also shaped externally through interactions with "others," who serve as a contrast to the national in-group. Triandafyllidou (2006) highlights how racial and cultural markers are used to differentiate and subordinate these groups, consolidating the national majority's identity. For example, immigrant communities become perceived as "significant others," challenging the host nation's perceived cultural and ethnic purity (Triandafyllidou, 2006).

The process of othering takes on a political and institutional dimension as well. Angelos Chrysogelos (2018) highlights how populist movements create an antagonistic relationship between "the people" and "the power," framing elites and international institutions as "the others." These "others" are portrayed being detached from the interests of the "real people." In this sort of formulation, the other is no longer an ethnic or cultural outsider but an internal enemy within the nation itself, such as the political elites, the media, or supranational organization like the European Union or NATO. This dynamic is particularly evident in far-right populism, which often merges national othering with populist antagonism. In this case, the enemy is simultaneously external and internal.

In understanding "othering," Rogers Brubaker (2017b) provides a nuanced framework by introducing two dimensions: the vertical and the horizontal. These dimensions help to explain how populism constructs its narratives of "othering" and how it mobilizes support (Brubaker, 2017b). The vertical dimension of populism is the classical one which emphasizes the division between

the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite.” Brubaker (2017b) argues that Cas Mudde’s definition of populism is centered only on this vertical dimension. The horizontal dimension adds another layer to populism by defining “the people” not just against elites but also in opposition to “outsiders” or “others.” In this dimension, “the people” are understood as a “bounded collectivity, and the basic contrast is between inside and outside” (Brubaker, 2017b, p. 12). The “others” can be minorities, immigrants, foreign powers, or even ideological opponents who are seen as threats to the cohesion and purity of the nation. “The people” are constructed as a homogenous group sharing cultural, religious, and historical bonds. “The others” are framed as incompatible with or threatening to the nation’s values and identity. This dimension, the horizontal one, often intersects nationalism, making populism a powerful exclusionary force (Brubaker, 2017b).

Othering involves defining the “in-group” in opposition to an “out-group.” Sata’s (2021) examination of how “othering” plays a central role in the political discourse of Orbán shows that this is a strategy to redefine both the in-group and the out-group. He highlights the flexible discursive nature of this process which reinforces identity formation, not just a symbolic exercise, but a political tool that legitimizes marginalization or exclusion of groups perceived as threats. Religion, particularly Christianity, is used as a civilizational marker to create unity within the in-group and to portray the mainly Muslim “others” as aliens or even dangerous.

2.2 Hypotheses to examine AUR’s discourse

Drawing on the theoretical foundations laid out in this chapter, AUR can be conceptualized as promoting a form of right-wing ethno-religious populism with a civilizational dimension. The party blends perfectly Orthodox Christianity, nationalist discourse, and populist anti-elitism into a coherent political project that claims to defend Romanian identity against both internal and

external threats. AUR positions Romania as a culturally distinct Christian nation, threatened by secularism, multiculturalism, liberalism, and globalist ideologies.

Religion is instrumentalized because AUR does not only engage with theology per se, but also mobilizes Orthodoxy as a marker of identity, morality, and belonging, reinforcing its nationalist claims. AUR's discourse reflects themes of civilizational threat, historical grievance, and moral decline, framing Orthodoxy as the cultural core of Romanian nationhood and sovereignty, and at the same time aligning the broader ethno-populist discourse around Europe. Its populism is not only anti-elitism, but it also defines who belongs and who is excluded from the national community.

This thesis will demonstrate how AUR's discourse functions not just as a reflection of Romania's past but as a strategic tool to shape its political future. To systematically analyze AUR's discourse, this thesis explores how AUR uses religious symbolism and historical narratives to construct an exclusive Romanian identity, mobilize support, and frame political adversaries and minorities as threats to the nation's spiritual and cultural integrity. The following hypotheses derive from this chapter's conceptualization:

1. AUR's religious-nationalist rhetoric draws on interwar nationalist themes using Orthodox Christian symbols and historical grievances to legitimize its agenda.
2. AUR frames Christianity as central to Romanian identity and sovereignty, contrasting it with secular globalist threats and emphasizing Christian values as protective.
3. AUR constructs exclusionary narratives by othering minorities and secular elites, defining "true Romanians" in opposition to internal and external threats.
4. AUR reinterprets historical figures and events to legitimize its agenda, using them as symbols of resistance to foreign control and liberal modernity.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological framework employed to investigate how AUR instrumentalizes Orthodox Christianity within its nationalist discourse. The objective is to examine rhetorical strategies, thematic patterns, and linguistic features that underpin AUR's communication, particularly how religious narratives are mobilized to construct national identity, legitimize political positions, and promote exclusionary views and how this narrative evolves across different political contexts from 2020 to 2024.

To address this objective, the chapter outlines a multi-method qualitative and quantitative research design that integrates Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis (Baker et al., 2008). These approaches are combined to enable both an in-depth interpretation of AUR's discursive strategies and systematic examination of recurring themes and linguistic patterns over time. This methodological integration constitutes a form of methodological triangulation, allowing the thesis to offset the limitations of each individual method while enhancing the depth of analysis (Rheindorf, 2023).

3.1 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and accessibility, as well as its ability to structure and synthesize a large and diverse body of qualitative data. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) distinction between semantic and latent levels of analysis, the initial stages focused on identifying semantic patterns, recurring topics and references that were explicitly present in the texts. These themes later formed a more interpretative analysis.

The thematic coding was conducted in NVivo 15 and involved a combination of deductive and inductive coding. A preliminary scheme was developed deductively based on expectation

derived from the literature – such as codes for Orthodoxy, national identity, sovereignty, othering, and historical revisionism. In the later stage, after familiarizing with the data, this scheme evolved inductively: new codes were added to capture emerging themes. The inductive themes were identified from recurring discursive patterns.

In addition to thematic codes, metadata tagging was applied as well to each document and coded segment in NVivo. This included information such as the speaker (e.g., Georg Simion, Claudiu Târziu, etc.), year of publication or delivery (2020-2024), type of material (e.g., public speech, interview, podcast, social media post), and platform (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, press conference, etc.). This structure allowed for cross-comparison by actor, context, platform and period, enabling the identification of shifts in rhetorical emphasis or strategy depending on the speaker. These metadata codes were critical for organizing the dataset and later became the basis for queries comparing discourse across individuals and time.

Throughout the six steps of thematic analysis: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) initial coding, (3) theme generation, (4) reviewing and refining themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final analysis, the process was an iterative and reflective one. The earlier codes and themes were regularly revisited, especially after completing the coding of different years and speakers, to ensure consistency and thematic coherence (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The final coding framework includes the categories illustrated in **table 1** (see the appendix).

By mapping these themes over time and across actors, thematic analysis provides a structural foundation for identifying rhetorical trends, shifts, and points of emphasis. The analysis is supported using visualizations generated in NVivo, which help identify prominent codes in different time periods and exploring relationships between key themes. These visualizations

support the identification of dominant narratives and evolving rhetorical strategies, contributing to a more systematic and transparent interpretation of the data.

3.2 Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis (CADA)

To complement the structure provided by thematic coding, this thesis incorporates elements of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis (CADA). While not a full corpus linguistic (CL) study, the approach draws on key principles of CL to identify and visualize lexical patterns, word frequency, and thematic co-occurrence across the set of texts. The integration of CL tools within a discourse-analytical framework offers productive coordination (Baker et al., 2008; Ancarno, 2020). Therefore, this method is particularly well suited for identifying lexical and thematic patterns across large datasets, while grounding analysis in context and interpretive depth. CADA facilitates the integration of qualitative and quantitative techniques (Ancarno, 2020) and is valuable for enhancing transparency and empirical grounding in critical discourse analysis (Baker et al., 2008).

While the corpus is relatively small, this light integration of CADA allows for an overview of linguistic trends in the dataset and enabling a more transparent and triangulated analysis of AUR's rhetoric. This thesis uses corpus techniques within NVivo to support analysis by enabling word frequency analysis – to track the prominence of key terms across the dataset, co-occurrence queries, and thematic co-occurrence visualizations.

3.3 Data collection

The empirical foundation of this thesis is formed of a dataset of texts produced by leaders and members of AUR, or by official communication channels of the party, between 2020 and 2024. The materials include public speeches, parliamentary interventions, interviews and podcasts, Facebook posts, YouTube videos, and campaign materials. These materials are primarily authored

or delivered by the two co-presidents, George Simion and Claudiu Târziu, but also by other high-profile AUR members, such as Dan Tanasă – AUR’s vice-president, Sorin Lavric – key member of the party, and AUR’s official communication channels (official Facebook page, YouTube channel, etc.).

The number of texts varies slightly across years: 30 texts in 2020, 27 in 2021, 27 in 2022, 26 in 2023, and 30 in 2024, depending on the volume and availability of relevant materials, allowing for meaningful comparative insights. A detailed breakdown of all materials, including sources, speaker, the type of the source, and year, is provided in **table 2** in the appendix. These sources were selected using a purposive sampling strategy (Palinkas et al., 2015) based on two criteria: (1) time-based – a balanced selection of materials from each year; and (2) thematic relevance – texts were selected on the presence of the four core pillars of the party which constitute the party’s ideology – “family, nation, Christian faith, and liberty” (AUR Statute, Art. 4, Sect. 1), ensuring alignment with the thesis focus.

Following Palinkas et al.’s (2015) framework, the sampling strategy combines elements of criterion sampling (targeting discourse that explicitly reflect the party’s ideological principles) and theory-based sampling (selecting texts that exemplify the theorized intersection between religion and nationalism in populist discourse). The aim was not statistical representativeness, but rhetorical richness and theoretical relevance, in line with Moffitt’s (2016) selection of cases that best reflect the performative and stylistic aspects of populist discourse. In a similar vein, the materials analyzed in this thesis were chosen because they feature clear instances of religious-nationalist framing, all central to the thesis’ research question.

To collect the data, a systematic search was conducted across multiple platforms and media outlets. News articles were gathered by browsing the archives of Romanian media outlets (e.g.,

Digi24, Adevărul, HotNews, etc.), focusing on political interviews, public speeches, and coverage of AUR events that were directly quoting AUR members. Video materials were sourced primarily from AUR's official YouTube channel. Relevant videos were then transcribed into text for analysis. Official Facebook pages of AUR and its key leaders were manually examined, with posts filtered by publication date to ensure chronological balance. Posts and speeches were selected based on their relevance to the party's ideological pillars and their discursive richness.

3.4 Limitations and mitigation

Several methodological limitations must be acknowledged. First, the dataset does not include all AUR's communications. Internal party communications, private social media groups activity, or social media comments and interactions with the public were not used. Second, as with most qualitative research, the interpretive nature of thematic coding and discourse analysis might introduce a degree of subjectivity. Although the analysis was guided by established frameworks and systematically applied codes, interpretive judgement inevitably shapes the identification of themes and discursive strategies. Third, while corpus-based tools provide additional empirical grounding, their output is context-sensitive. Word frequency alone cannot determine meaning or rhetorical function.

To address these limitations, the thesis adopts a triangulated methodological strategy in line with Rheindorf's (2023) approach to research design. Rather than seeking to verify results through multiple methods, triangulation is used in this thesis as a means of broadening perspective and extending insights of individual methods. Triangulation is not a pathway to objective truth but a deliberate strategy to increase the range depth and contextual richness of analysis (Rheindorf, 2023).

CHAPTER 4: Analysis of AUR's Ethno-Populist Discourse (2020-2024)

This chapter presents the analysis of AUR's political discourse from 2020 to 2024, using a thematic structure that aligns with the hypotheses outlined in Chapter 2. Drawing on concepts from the theoretical framework, the chapter reveals the mechanisms through which AUR instrumentalizes religion, constructs crisis, establishes notions of 'self' and 'other,' and deploys historical narratives for political legitimacy. The structure of the analysis is as follows: (1) an overall discourse overview, and (2) a thematic breakdown. This structure allows for a systematic exploration of AUR's rhetoric, demonstrating how the party navigates these themes extracted from the literature presented in Chapter 2, to construct an ethno-populist narrative.

4.1 Faith, family, nation, and freedom – overview of AUR's discourse

This section provides a structured overview of the main ideological pillars of AUR's discourse across three critical discursive periods: (1) *Foundational rhetoric* – early rhetoric (2020-2021), corresponding to AUR's emergence and early mobilization before and shortly after entering the Parliament; (2) *Institutional consolidation time* – mid-rhetoric (2022-2023), during which AUR operated as a parliamentary party; and (3) *Electoral intensification* – recent rhetoric (2024), marked by heightened mobilization in the context of national elections. Drawing on **figure 1**, the analysis maps the evolution of key themes – *populism, nationalism, crisis and mobilization narratives, religion, and values promoted vs. values opposed* – to illustrate how AUR's political rhetoric solidified and intensified over time.

For this illustration (**figure1**), AUR's discourse is structured around key thematic areas, according to **table 1** (see the appendix), some of which are aggregated to capture broader strategic narratives. The *us vs. them* theme includes all instances of othering, political antagonism, and the framing of the EU as a cultural/political adversary. *Crisis and mobilization narratives* is an

aggregated category that includes *conspiracy narratives*, *crises narratives*, and *calls for action*. These three elements are strategically combined to create a sense of emergency (Canovan, 1999; Moffit, 2016; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Figure 1 - Key themes along the three discursive periods

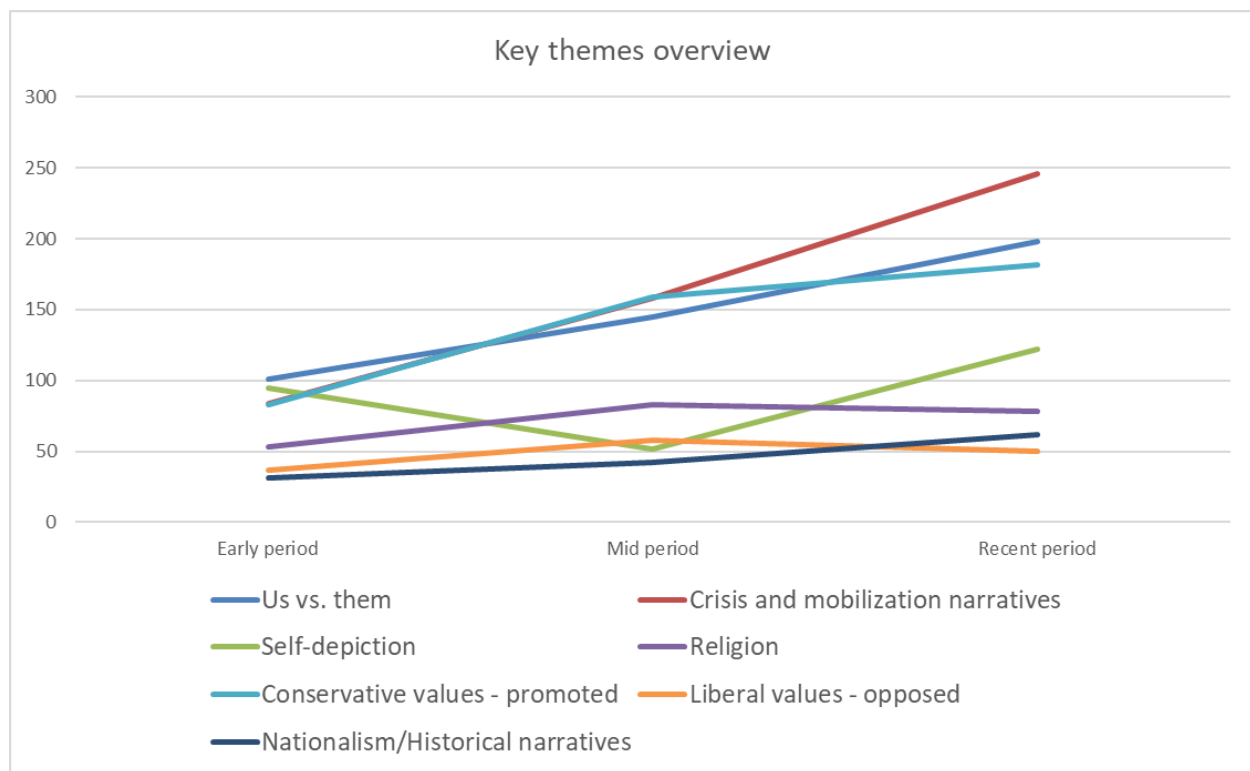


Figure 1 illustrates clear patterns in AUR's discourse, highlighting shifts in both their strategy and ideological emphasis. AUR's discourse is heavily driven by a binary logic of *us vs. them*, where *us* symbolizes the virtuous Romanian people, defined as moral, Christian, and patriotic, while *them* represents corrupt elites, minorities, seculars, migrants, the EU, and cultural outsiders. This antagonistic framing is most pronounced during the mid and recent periods, coinciding with AUR's consolidation of its ideological narrative and the campaign for a new term. The growth of *us vs. them* discourse reflects AUR's strategic use of populist logic to establish a moral divide between ordinary Romanians and political elites both at home and in Brussels.

The use of *conspiracies*, *crises*, and *calls for action* shows the most dramatic increase, especially in recent rhetoric. This evolution coincides with the 2024 electoral cycle, which included presidential, parliamentary, local, and European Parliament elections. The narratives of crisis for political mobilization serve not only to delegitimize political opponents but also to intensify a sense of urgency and collective struggle among its supporters. Similarly, the *self-depiction* theme rises in recent rhetoric, showing the tendency for AUR to portray itself as the protector of the nation and religion. Throughout time, the party continuously frames itself as a revolutionary party fighting against corruption and decay.

Nationalism in AUR's discourse is anchored in ethno-populist religious narratives that emphasize Romania's historical continuity and spiritual uniqueness. The use of historical references to national heroes and symbols of past resistance serves to construct AUR's narrative as the modern continuation of historical struggles for sovereignty and cultural purity. In the mid and recent rhetoric, there was a noticeable rise in historical framing, indicating a strategic deployment of national history as a form of legitimacy and a possible campaign strategy.

Orthodox Christianity and *religion* are central pillars in AUR's political narrative, functioning as both the moral anchor and the marker of national identity. Religion is presented as inseparable from the notion of Romanian sovereignty and moral purity, distinguishing true Romanians from secular influences. The relative stability of religious references throughout the three periods highlights its consistent role in legitimizing AUR's political platform.

AUR's discourse consistently promotes values of *traditionalism*, *national sovereignty*, *family*, and the *church*, while opposing *secularism*, *liberalism*, *gender equality*, and *modernity*. These value conflicts are used strategically to construct boundaries between AUR's vision of a "moral Romania" and the liberal/secular policies associated with the current state of the EU and

the West. Over time, opposition to liberal values intensifies, as AUR creates more ties with other conservative organizations within the EU, thus reflecting a deeper entrenchment of ideological conflicts as AUR grows politically stronger both in Romania and in the EP.

4.2 The “social plague” – populist breakdown

Us vs. them

The ‘us vs. them’ binary framework is central to AUR’s political narrative, constructing a moral and political division between the Romanian people (us) and various adversaries (them). **Figure 2** of othering mechanisms captures how AUR’s discourse differentiates between groups adversarial to Romanian purity and sovereignty. The categories include: *seculars* – framed as a threat to Romania’s moral and religious fabric; *minorities* – targeted as disruptors of national unity, with a particular focus on ethnic minorities and the LGBTQ+ community; *migrants* – presented as external threats; *foreign elites* – symbolizing EU bureaucrats and Western political figures; and *elites* – represented by Romanian political elites depicted as corrupt and detached from national values.

Figure 2 – Othering mechanisms in all three rhetorical periods

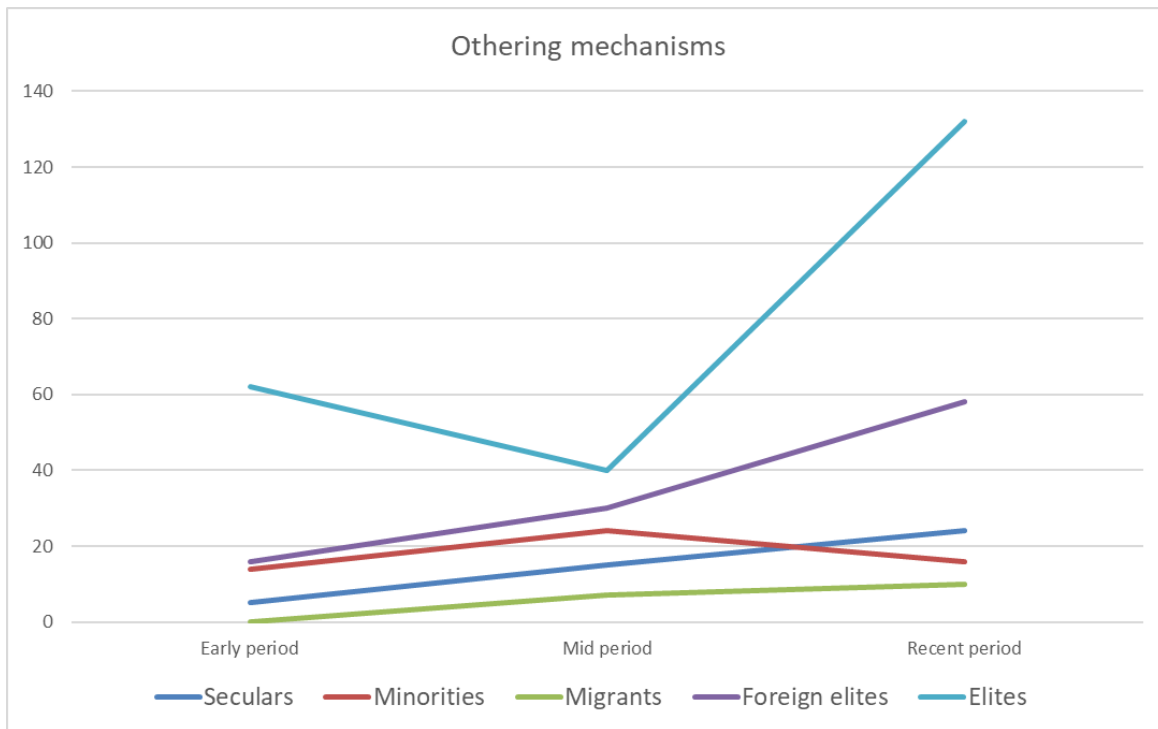


Figure 2 shows that *ethnic* and *minority*-based othering did not have the highest frequency during the early period. Instead, the early discourse defined internal adversaries in political and moral terms. The main adversaries were the corrupt elites, depicted as betrayers of the nation's moral and spiritual fabric – “Let's drive out these thieves who have led us until now” (Simion_6_2020). This pattern indicates that vertical populism (Brubaker, 2017b) dominated AUR's early speeches, emphasizing a political and moral betrayal by Romania's own ruling class, often aligned with globalist or EU interests – “The Constitution is good, but it must be supported and defended from usurpers both here, in Bucharest, and in Brussels” (Simion_2_2021).

Seculars were also referenced – “Remember when they tried to remove icons from schools? When they tried to eliminate religion from the curriculum?” (Tarziu_4_2020). Such statements are emblematic of AUR's populist strategy to construct a clear *us vs. them* narrative, where ‘them’ is

represented by secular elites, seen as agents of cultural erosion. This rhetorical framing positions secularism as an active threat to Romania's religious and cultural heritage. "We" are the true defenders of Orthodoxy, and "we" are under siege by forces seeking to sever national identity from its spiritual roots.

Minority targeting focused primarily on Hungarians in Transylvania and the Roma community. With declarations such as: "Hungarians are citizens of the Romanian state and should therefore be part of Romanian parties" (Lavric_2_2020), AUR was creating a hierarchical vision of national belonging. This narrative of enforced assimilation is not extended to the Roma people, perceived as a "social plague" (Lavric-1_2020), reflecting a deeper layer of exclusionary discourse that seeks societal marginalization. By labeling an entire ethnic group as a burden or threat, AUR's discourse actively constructs hierarchies that delegitimize minority claims.

The consolidation time of AUR's discourse saw a shift in the process of othering. These mechanisms were diversified and covered in more categories. While *elites* decrease in frequency, the mid-period witnessed a notable increase in the *us vs. them* dichotomy. Therefore, AUR was signaling a movement from vertical populism, towards a horizontal populism – 'true Romanians' vs. cultural outsiders (Brubaker, 2017b). The expansion of out-group targeting can be attributed to broader dissatisfaction with migration, which has been a contentious issue within the EU for some time. AUR saw the chance of building on people's disillusionment with the EU and adopted the same strategy as other conservative parties.

The rise in references to *foreign elites* and *seculars* supports the interpretation that AUR increasingly framed Romania as under siege from external, morally corrupt, globalist forces, this narrative being closely tied to the party's criticism of the EU and Brussels bureaucracy. AUR's early discourse had no mentions of *migrants* as representing a threat to the Romanian population.

Nonetheless, once the party started to consolidate its rhetoric and its relationship with other conservative parties (e.g., PiS), AUR adopted specific discursive strategies to other *migrants* – “What can we see in Europe today? Hell! Hell because we have illegal migrants” (Simion_4_2023).

AUR blamed the European Union for permissive immigration policies, portraying Brussels as a complicit in orchestrating demographic and cultural erosion: “We have the solutions, and they do not include importing citizens from other continents” (Simion_4_2022). Thus, AUR became the protector of the nation against unwanted migration policies of the EU, which were representing “the destruction of natural identity and the decline of Christianity” (Simion_4_2023). This shift in rhetoric aligns with the civilizational logic emphasized by Brubaker (2017a), whereby migrants are not seeking refuge, but they are perceived as incompatible or threatening.

Seculars became a prime target as well. With statements such as “AUR (...) wants a union of sovereign states and predominantly Christian nations” (Simion_2_2022), the party sharpened its ideological boundary-making between the sacred and the profane. They effectively cast secularism as a corrosive force that undermines national identity, European identity, and moral order, in contrast to how the union was “envisioned” by the “founding fathers” (Simion_2_2022). In this framework, religious belonging becomes a marker of political legitimacy. With the co-president Târziu’s statement – “God is with us. Who can be against us?” (Tarziu_12_2022), AUR positioned itself as occupying a superior moral rank, justified through its religious alignment.

The ‘us vs. them’ antagonism was internationalized, *foreign elites* rose in frequency, thus becoming central antagonists in AUR’s civilizational narrative during AUR’s consolidation. They

were often framed as agents of globalist or bureaucratic agendas, accused of diluting national sovereignty and enforcing foreign ideologies under the guise of EU policies:

Romanian state is no longer the political organization of the Romanian people but rather a structure designed to extract Romanian resources for the benefit of interest groups made up of politicians, white-collar criminals, occult organizations, and multinational corporations (Tarziu_2_2023).

The party frequently labels its opposition as “neo-Marxist” or the “radical left,” associating any political force with liberal traits as “satanic” and a “threat.” Statements like “The European Commission is run by sick minds” (Simion_2_2023) and “The true disease threatening the world: neo-Marxism” (Simion_1_2022), illustrate AUR’s absolutist framing. This discursive strategy reduces the ideological spectrum to a binary: good (the right) vs. evil (the left).

When othering *minorities*, AUR focuses on more than just ethnic ones. The LGBTQ+ minority is also part of the “threats” AUR must fight to protect the Romanian traditions from. These groups are not targeted just as distinctive, but also as evil. The party’s rhetoric portrays LGBTQ+ rights as ideological tools of a broader liberal-globalist agenda. This framing is particularly evident in the education sector, where AUR has repeatedly opposed the inclusion of any content to gender identity or sexual education at all. “To all those who want to sexualize our children, mock them, or infiltrate LGBT ideology into the educational system, our duty is to say no” (Tanasa_1_2023).

AUR continued to target Hungarians in Transylvania and portray the minority’s party (UDMR/DAHR) as “illegal.” This growing hostility reveals a paradox. While demonizing the Hungarian minority, AUR also expressed admiration for Viktor Orbán’s model of illiberal governance. In multiple speeches, AUR members have accused DAHR of betraying the nation: “We find the attitude of the DAHR extremely concerning, as its leaders’ alignment with the Orbán

regime and their complete submission and vassalage towards the leader of the neighboring state” (Tanasa_1_2022).

Despite these direct accusations, AUR continues to draw ideological inspiration from Orbán’s vision of national sovereignty, Christianity, and defiance of Brussels. The Hungarian PM is simultaneously portrayed as a geopolitical threat and a political model – “AUR wants Romania to follow in the footsteps of (...) Hungary, (...) whose political classes have had the dignity to stand up to the neo-Marxist bureaucracy in Brussels” (Lavric_1_2022). This duality underscored the strategic selectivity of AUR’s rhetoric: Hungary is dangerous when imagined as an ethnic competitor within Romania’s borders, yet admirable when positioned as a fellow civilizational defender against the EU.

In the recent period, AUR’s discourse shifted towards a more aggressive and diversified form of othering. **Figure 2** shows a significant spike in the targeting of *elites*, indicating a comeback of AUR’s anti-establishment narrative. *Elites* are framed as corrupt agents that are deliberately eroding Romania’s sovereignty and morality. Statements such as, “This regime of Iohannis and Ciolacu is anything but democratic! The ongoing coup, through violations of the Constitution...” (Simion_5_2024), reflect the party’s heightened antagonism towards the oppressive decision-making actors. By using exaggerated words such as “coup,” the party induces unrest and fear.

Migrants increased in frequency as well. Unlike the mid-period, where migration was mostly linked to broader EU policies, the recent rhetoric portrays migrants as direct threats to Romanian culture and economic sovereignty. AUR employs fear-based narratives, claiming that

migration leads to crime and economic instability. The party openly criticizes the EU's migration policies, claiming:

We now issue over 300,000 work permits annually, primarily for unskilled workers from Asia and Africa (...) We've seen this strategy before in the so-called civilized West of Europe, where, in many neighborhoods, the police no longer even enter because the massive import of immigrants has caused those states to lose control over certain areas (Tanasa_2_2024).

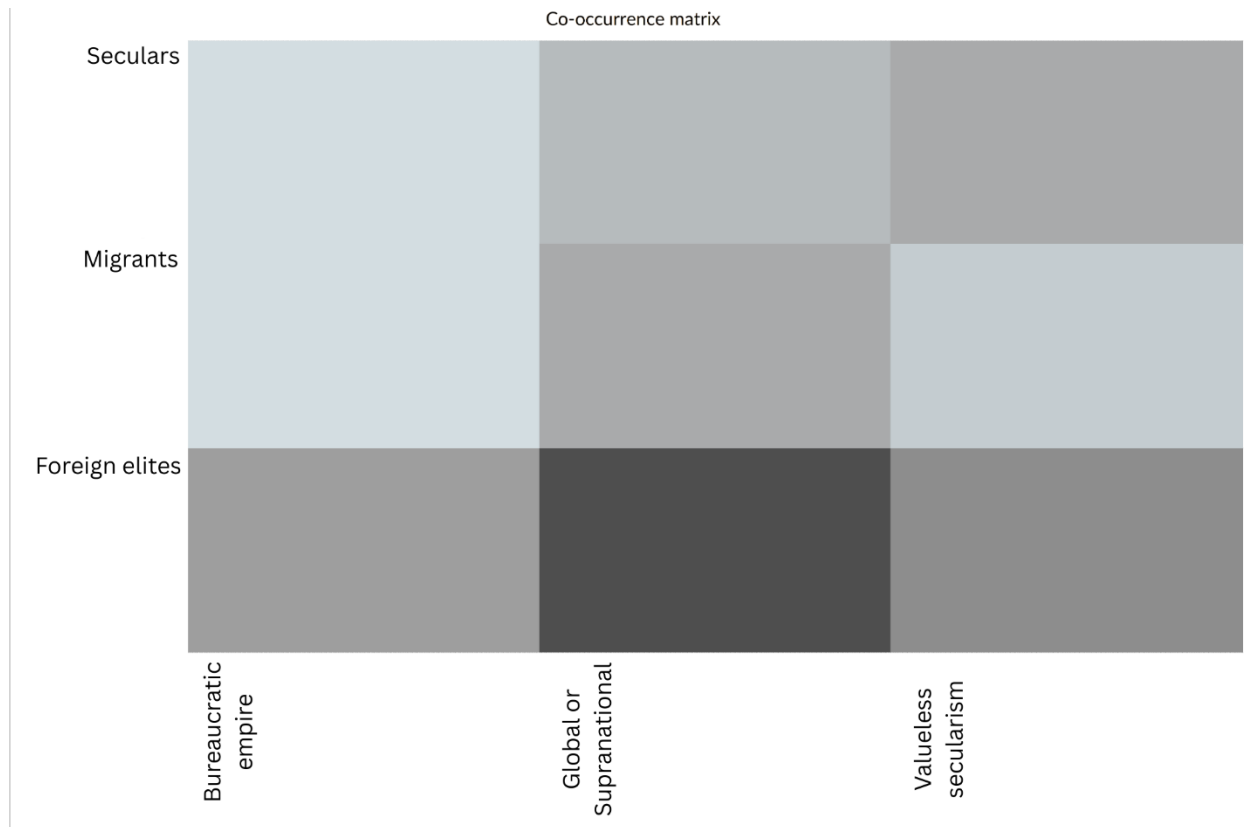
Seculars also reemerged as significant adversaries, with increasing mentions of secular policies as corrosive to national identity. In the recent period, AUR expanded its rhetoric to distinguish between 'true Romanians' and 'compromised Romanians':

There are Romanians and 'Romanians.' Those from the second category work against national interests. Voting for all the soul-, mind-, and economy-destroying ideological aberrations in the previous legislature, together with their political groups, hardly qualifies them as good Romanians (Tarziu_7_2024).

The European Union

AUR's discourse often portrays the EU not just as a political structure, but also as a symbol of globalist intervention, bureaucratic overreach, and secular erosion. As **figure 3** illustrates, the representation of the EU intersects with key out-groups identified in AUR's rhetoric – *seculars*, *migrants*, and *foreign elites*. The co-occurrence matrix emphasizes three primary frames through which AUR constructs the EU: *bureaucratic empire*, *global/supranational threat*, and as a promoter of *valueless secularism*.

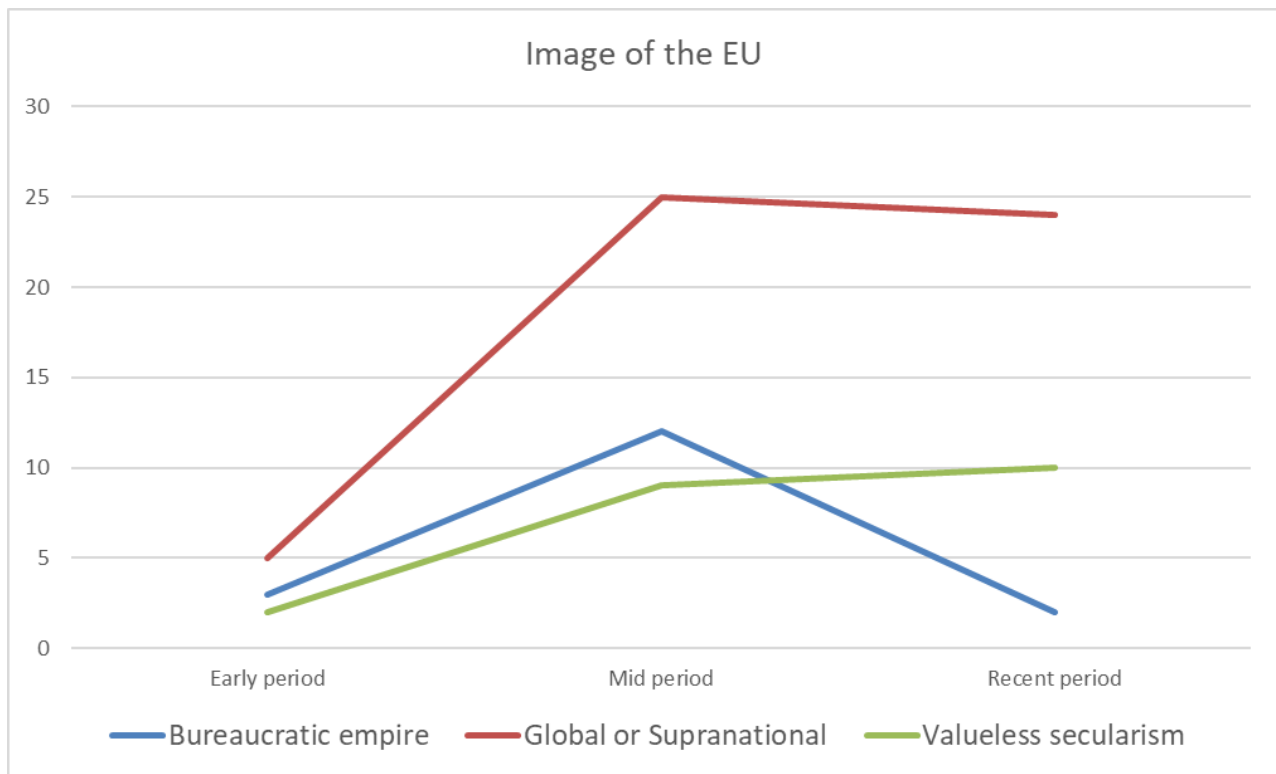
Figure 3 – Out-groups and images of the EU



source: own calculations, co-occurrence heatmap, darker colors stand for higher numbers

Figure 3 shows that references to the EU intersect significantly with the othering of *foreign elites*, *seculars*, and to a lesser degree, *migrants*. AUR's portrayal of the EU is part of a broader civilizational conflict, where the party positions itself as the defender of Romanian identity against moral and political decay. This co-occurrence of EU with out-group targeting indicates a deliberate strategy to link European integration with threats to national purity, sovereignty, and faith.

Figure 4 – The evolution of the rhetoric on EU



AUR's early rhetoric portrayed the EU as an external force undermining Romanian tradition and sovereignty. Early statements depicted the EU as a technocratic structure that was missing cultural or spiritual connection to the Romanian people: "We do not agree with any federalization or regionalization effort (...) nor with aligning with certain European provisions – we believe our Constitution is very good" (Simion_2_2021). For AUR, the EU was advancing *valueless secularism* and eroding traditional values and faith: "They tried to uproot us from our families, friends, faith, community, and Romanian heritage" (Simion-8_2020).

As depicted in **figure 4**, the notion of the EU as a *global or supranational* threat is the dominant theme. The mid-period, when this theme rose in frequency, coincided with AUR's rising influence in the Romanian politics and a growing alignment with other conservative parties across Europe, although not yet part of the EP – "Conservative, sovereigntist, and patriotic parties have

the duty to stop the European Commission” (Tarziu_3_2023). The discourse evolved to accuse the EU actively promoting multiculturalism and forced migration policies that threatened Romania’s cultural identity. These associations intensified AUR’s broader narrative of cultural siege, portraying Brussels as a civilizational threat eroding Romania’s moral core – “This Commission promotes atheism, globalism, partnerships between homosexuals, and transgender absurdities” (Simion_2_2022). “Their Europe,” as AUR described it, is not compatible with Romania’s sacred and sovereign future. Instead, the party argued that Romania needs to stand as a cultural and spiritual exception, capable of reclaiming the true mission of European civilization, one rooted in faith, family and tradition – “Our fight started out of love for God, nation, family, and freedom” (Tarziu_11_2022).

As AUR entered the recent discursive period, the framing of the EU as a secular threat intensified, aligning with AUR’s broader strategy of moral polarization. Statements from party leaders accused the EU of undermining Orthodox values by promoting liberal policies that contradict the traditional family structure: “Europe must return to a culture of life and renounce the culture of death” (Tarziu_1_2024). The matrix illustrated in **figure 3** further illustrates this narrative, highlighting strong co-occurrence between *valueless secularism* and the targeting of *seculars* and *foreign elites*. AUR’s discourse in this phase was no longer merely oppositional but openly civilizational, asserting that Romania’s spiritual mission was incompatible with Brussels’ secular policies – “This ideology seeks to corrupt and destroy everything we value and everything that defines our humanity” (Tarziu_3_2024). The party deepened its rhetoric by linking the EU to the erosion of national identity and sovereignty – “We want to pray in our churches freely. We want to honor our heroes, martyrs, and saints without fear of anyone or anything” (Tarziu_9_2024).

4.3 “We are the people” – self-depiction in AUR’s discourse

Positioned as a defender of the traditional Romanian identity, AUR framed itself as a *party of the people*, standing against perceived corrupt elites and foreign influences, leading to the self-depiction as a core pillar of their political narrative. The party often frames itself as *the moral guardian of Romania’s national identity*, *the protector of Christianity*, and *the last defender of traditional values*.

Figure 5 – Evolution of AUR’s self-depiction



Figure 5 shows that in the early rhetoric (2020-2021) AUR’s discourse was rooted in anti-establishment sentiments, aiming to channel public frustrations into a movement against the mainstream political parties – “We have proven that we could achieve something great with limited resources because we were united by our shared desire for justice in Romania” (Focsa_1_2020).

This discursive phase was marked by the party's use of Orthodox Christianity as a moral compass rather than a governance framework. The focus was on rejecting secularism and liberal ideologies while reaffirming the sanctity of traditional Romanian values – “In AUR's vision, atheism is a deviation born from arrogance” (Simion_3_2020).

In the early phase, they concentrated on promoting values that resonated deeply with Romania's conservative electorate: tradition, family, the church, and sovereignty. These values were presented as cornerstones of Romanian identity, appealing to voters who felt alienated by the perceived moral decay and by the political elites of Romania. AUR's strategy involved contrasting the purity and continuity of traditional values against the disruptive nature of multiculturalism. During this discursive phase, the party positioned itself as an *anti-elite revolutionary party*, emphasizing its grassroot origins and the commitment to protecting Romania from corrupt elites and foreigners.

The portrayal of *elites*, *seculars*, and *minorities* as fundamental threats to Romania's culture and moral order, reinforced AUR's image as *the sole defender of the nation*, standing against those who sought to erode traditional values and morality. The *elites* were considered traitors, more aligned with the EU than with Romanians who were in need for a *protector*. By portraying Christianity as the heart of Romanian identity – “The unity that AUR promotes at the national level (...) revolves around Christian values” (Focsa_1_2020) – they reinforced the notion of moral decline that could be combated only by a political force that is also *the defender of Christianity*.

By 2022, AUR had successfully transitioned from this emerging nationalist movement to a consolidated political force within the political system of Romania. Its electoral success and growing influence signaled a shift from just *anti-establishment* rhetoric to a more structured ideological platform. This phase marks AUR's attempt to solidify its core values and mainstream

its oppositional framing. This evolution was not by chance, but it occurred within a broader context of heightened regional and international conflicts and instability. The outbreak of the war in Ukraine and the increasing public disillusionment with European institutions, contributed to a rise in Euroscepticism and fears about national sovereignty. In this scenery, AUR's rhetoric intensified in a civilizational framing, portraying Romania as a nation needing moral restoration.

During consolidation time (2022-2023), AUR moved beyond simple populist messaging to position itself as the *anti-elite revolutionary party*. This transformation is visible in **figure 5**. In the mid-phase, AUR's rhetoric softened, shifting from pure protest to a savior movement narrative. It framed itself as *the defender of Christianity* and *guardian of the nation*, emphasizing sacrifice for Romania's redemption:

We conservatives from AUR did not enter politics to play games with power or offer Romanians false hopes. Given the overwhelming power of our adversaries, (...) we entered politics to sacrifice ourselves (Simion_2_2022).

As a result, AUR began presenting itself as the only true force for national revival.

AUR's recent rhetoric re-configures self-portrayal, with the party increasingly casting itself as Romania's last line of defense morally, spiritually, and nationally. As **figure 5** shows, the most dominant themes of self-representation are those positioning AUR as an *anti-elite revolutionary party* and as the *sole defender of the nation*. This evolution shows a sharpening of earlier discursive strategies and a clear effort to consolidate the party's identity around themes of exceptionalism, duty, and moral superiority – “In the past years, our party has solidified itself as the only opposition force and the sole force that truly stands with the Romanian people” (Simion_11_2024).

The narrative of AUR as Romania's moral savior is prevalent. The party portrays itself as the only political force capable of resisting both domestic betrayal and foreign subjugation. This heroic self-imagery ties directly into broader populist strategies. However, AUR's version of this

dichotomy is charged with religious and historical symbolism. The party is not only challenging corrupt governance but also waging a civilizational battle for the soul of the Romanian nation and European civilization – “We are today defenders of the Romanian Homeland and European Christian civilization” (Simion_5_2024).

Among the coded categories, *AUR as the anti-elite revolutionary movement* is the most prominent. The rhetoric is echoing revolutionary and even sacrificial themes

What did we want when we entered politics? Why did we get involved in this mess, this mire? In this sulphureous area where we have been hit, spat on, and continuously insulted since we appeared on the public stage? What were we looking for here? (...) Justice for Romania (Tarziu_9_2024).

Leaders of the party frequently invoke the legacy of past resistance movements claiming lineage and continuity – “We are reborn from remnants scattered through history and regroup swiftly, like the Romanian armies crushed at Stalingrad, within seconds” (Simion_5_2024).

The party also presents itself as *the sole defender of the nation*, a narrative that further distances AUR from other political actors. In this sort of framing, all other parties are depicted as either complicit with external enemies or ideologically corrupted. Meanwhile, AUR’s leaders emphasize that their party alone carries the mission of the Romanian people, one rooted in Orthodoxy, sacrifice, and purity. This identity, as Romania’s only moral and cultural guardian is also weaponized against perceived cultural threats, most notably sexual minorities and political correctness. AUR positions itself as anti-elite, anti-woke, thus burrowing from other conservatives around the world. They present progressive currents as part of an ideological assault on the Romanian soul. As Târziu frames it, “We are dealing with one of the preferred methods of political correctness to annihilate opinions, beliefs, and attitudes that do not align with the neo-Marxist ideology” (Tarziu_6_2024).

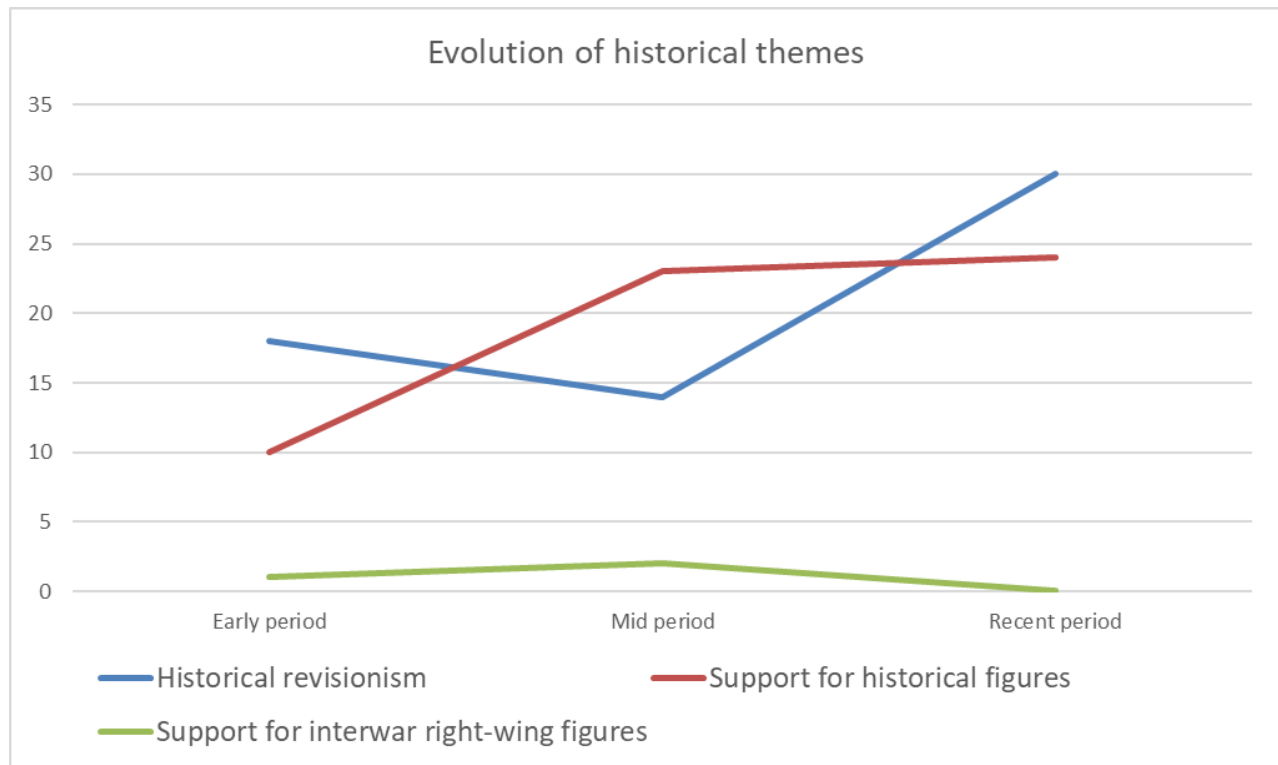
While slightly less dominant, the theme of *AUR as the defender of Christianity* reinforces the religious-nationalist character of their discourse. In these narratives, political leadership becomes a spiritual calling, defending religion equals to defending Romania itself, and protecting Europe from self-destruction. These references are not just cultural, they are framed as necessary acts of moral resistance: “With God's help, we will stop them all – from Juncker to Ursula von der Leyen, Dr. Fauci and all those trying to impose this new global order” (Simion_6_2024).

Therefore, this recent phase of self-depiction is marked by a combination of religious, revolutionary, and national imagery. AUR presents itself as a soldier, a martyr, and a prophet, and exactly this allows them to remain anti-system, while being part of the system. The fusion of Christian moralism, national exceptionalism, and populist grievance produces a militant self-narration that highlights the party’s appeal based on religion, nationalism, and frustration with the post-communist transition.

4.4 “Let’s build Romania as it once was” – nationalist historical continuity

From the beginning, AUR’s rhetoric strategically incorporated historical references to build a sense of moral continuity and national authenticity. By invoking historical figures, the party positioned itself as heir to Romania’s longstanding struggle for sovereignty and cultural identity. As **figure 6** shows, during the early rhetoric, *support for historical figures* and broader *historical revisionist* themes appeared consistently. During this discursive period, AUR made minimal references to *interwar far-right figures*, instead focusing its historical appeals on widely respected national heroes (e.g., Avram Iancu, A.I. Cuza, Horea, Cloșca, and Crișan, etc.) – “We still have the spirit of Michael the Brave, Stephen the Great, and Avram Iancu within us” (Simion_8_2020).

Figure 6 – The evolution of historical themes



By selectively framing the past, AUR sought to set itself within a patriotic tradition without overtly embracing extremist legacies that could alienate broader segments of society. Nevertheless, traces of far-right ideological sympathy still surface. In a 2021 speech, Senator Sorin Lavric publicly praised figures such as Mircea Vulcănescu and Valeriu Gafencu, both known for their nationalist, Orthodox, and controversial ties to Romania’s interwar fascist movement. Such symbolic gestures contributed to public accusations that AUR was rehabilitating the memory of fascist-aligned personalities. The party's discursive blending of Orthodoxy and nationalism reinforced this perception, further fueling debates about its political positioning.

However, during consolidation time, AUR’s historical discourse took on a more strategic and emotionally charged role, evolving from general patriotic references to a sharpened narrative of grievance, pride, and territorial loss. AUR intensified its effort to ground their ideological

legitimacy in admired symbols of national unity and moral strength, thus instrumentalizing history. Figures like *Avram Iancu*, *Mihai Viteazul*, *Ștefan cel Mare*, *Alexandru Ioan Cuza*, and *Vlad Țepeș*, became increasingly central, celebrated as embodiments of the nation's eternal mission.

Besides admired historical figures, AUR uses themes related to national heroes who died for the country as moral exemplars whose sacrifices are read in almost religious terms. The party merges national martyrdom with Christian imagery to sacralize patriotic death, portraying fallen heroes as spiritually immortal and morally superior. This fusion offers a moral framework in which loyalty to the nation becomes a sacred duty – “Jesus Christ conquered death through resurrection and our heroes earned eternal life through their sacrificial death” (Simion_2_2022).

The most common words in the discourse (**figure 7**) confirm that AUR instrumentalizes national history to sacralize its political platform, drawing heavily on heroes and national symbols. Words like *nation*, *Romanian*, *country*, *identity*, *flag*, *homeland* and *unity*, dominate, indicating how AUR foregrounds the nation-state as the sacred core of political belonging. National heroes appear prominently as well, being widely recognized as symbols of national resistance. The appearance of *freedom*, *sacrifice*, *soldier*, *defend* and *blood* suggests that these individuals mythologized as guardians of Romanian sovereignty. The inclusion of terms like *Orthodox*, *glorified*, *saints*, *ancestors*, *Christian*, *liturgy*, *martyrs*, and *spirit*, points to a religious framing of history. AUR does not merely remember historical events but canonizes them, linking national survival to divine sanctions.

Figure 7 – Word cloud of the support for historical figures code



The sacralization of national sacrifice and glorification of moral-patriotic themes which AUR employs is not without precedent. While trying to build a “New Romania” (Iordachi, 2006), the interwar Legionary Movement combined ultra-nationalism with Orthodox Christianity, glorifying martyrdom, and resorting to violence in the name of moral and ethnic cleansing. Today, AUR’s narrative echoes that same spiritualized nationalism by elevating historical suffering and sacrifice to a moral imperative, framing it as a sacred duty passed down through generations: “We all have an ancestor whose memory we must honor because they fought in the great army of the nation or sacrificed themselves in wars that shaped our historical destiny” (Tarziu_9_2022). This link between blood, memory, and destiny positions contemporary Romanians as the inheritors of a timeless civilizational struggle. AUR revives protochronist and revisionist interpretations of history and reactivates a deeper emotionally charged mythology of Romanian exceptionalism, adopting the style of the fascist Legionary Movement.

In the recent period, AUR's engagement with historical themes became directed towards solidifying its nationalist platform. The marked increase in *historical revisionism* (**figure 6**) signals a deliberate effort to anchor its political project in narratives of historical continuity and unresolved national missions, portraying territorial grievances and unfulfilled historical ambitions as moral imperatives:

We will not be truly sovereign until we reunite the Romanian state within its natural borders. Bessarabia cannot be forgotten. It must come home. Northern Bukovina cannot be forgotten; Southern Bessarabia cannot be forgotten (Tarziu_2_2024).

In this narrative, *historical revisionism* serves as a political tool to legitimize calls for political sovereignty and territorial reclamation, tapping into sentiments of loss and betrayal. This shift towards heroic imagery serves to invoke nostalgia and to frame contemporary political struggles as part of a long-standing tradition of survival. Through the idea that “As Romanians, we have the duty to fight to defend our cultural values, identity, and the traditions inherited from our ancestors” (Tudor_1_2024), current political mobilization is linked to historical continuity, suggesting the preservation of Romanian identity as a sacred obligation and a historical inheritance.

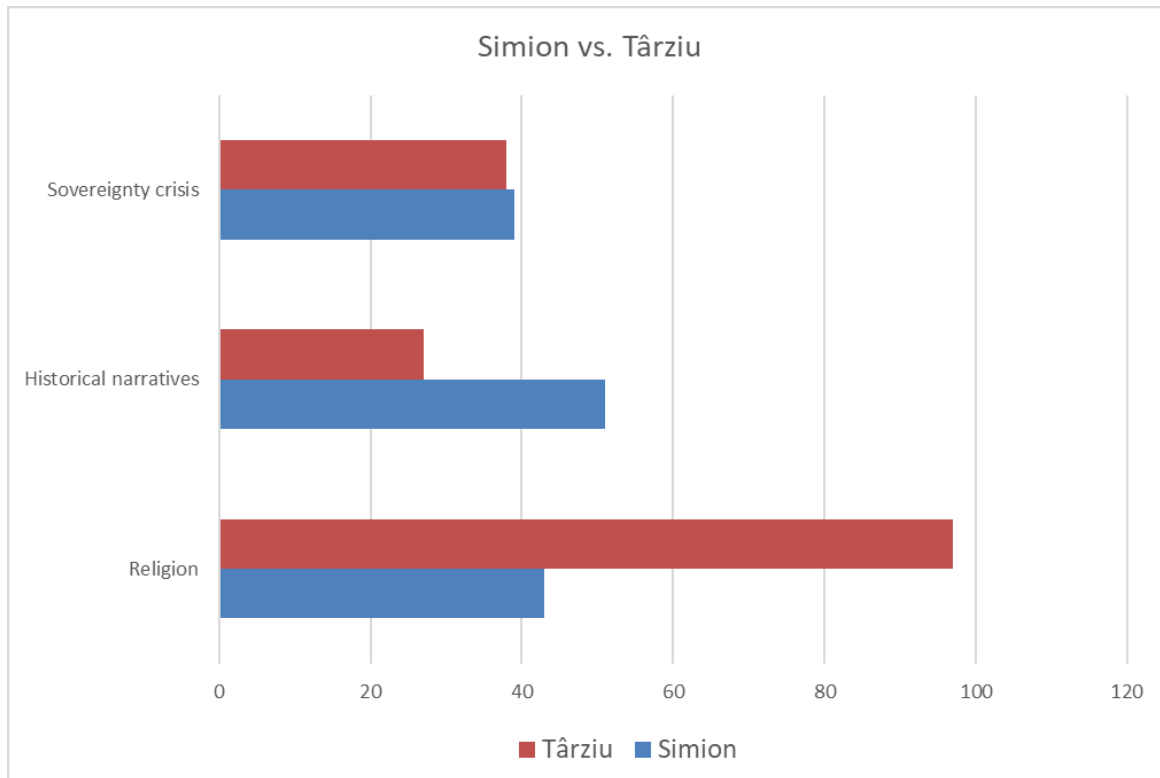
The use of *historical narratives* was a strategic move in the recent period, which served a practical function: mobilization as the elections were coming. AUR's framing of history was not just a commemorative action but a tool to incentives its voters into thinking that AUR is the true descendant of national heroes, the 1989 revolutionaries, and other historical figures that fought for Romania's independence. **Figure 6** shows this intensification which is especially visible in campaign slogans envisioning these historical figures and public speeches that invoke the memory of national heroes to legitimize AUR's claims: “What did we want to do in 2019 when we founded this party? We wanted to be like our national heroes” (Tarziu_9_2024).

AUR's discourse frequently connects *historical revisionism* with themes of *national sovereignty*. Rather than being isolated rhetorical tools, *historical narratives*, particularly those invoking past injustices or unfulfilled national aspiration, are consistently used to frame Romania's sovereignty as under threat. These themes work together to legitimize AUR's political agenda, casting it as a continuation of a historical mission to defend the nation. AUR's political strategy is not just populist in its anti-elite framing, but also fundamentally rooted in a reimagining of history that legitimizes its nationalist strategy. The party's ability to mobilize historical narratives to address contemporary crises illustrates the experienced manipulation of cultural memory as a tool of political mobilization.

4.5 "If God is with us, whom shall we fear?" – the religious framing

One of the main characteristics of AUR's discourse is its consistent reliance on Orthodox Christianity to legitimize its political platform. Rather than serving a clearly divided strategy and ideological function, religion operates through a fusion of belief and utility, thus mobilizing support. This dynamic becomes visible in the contrasting discursive styles of AUR's two co-founders. Claudiu Târziu, with a longstanding background in Orthodox activism, projects a sincere ideological commitment to religious values. George Simion, by contrast, frequently invokes Orthodoxy in the context of nationalist themes, suggesting a more instrumental use of religious references to build support and consolidate identity.

Figure 8 – Simion’s vs. Târziu’s discourse



Târziu emerges as the party’s genuine religious believer, as seen in **figure 8**, consistently embedding Orthodox faith as the moral cornerstone of AUR’s nationalist project. His speeches are saturated with references to Christian values, moral restoration, and spiritual purity, positioning Orthodoxy as both political and cultural shield against immoral influences:

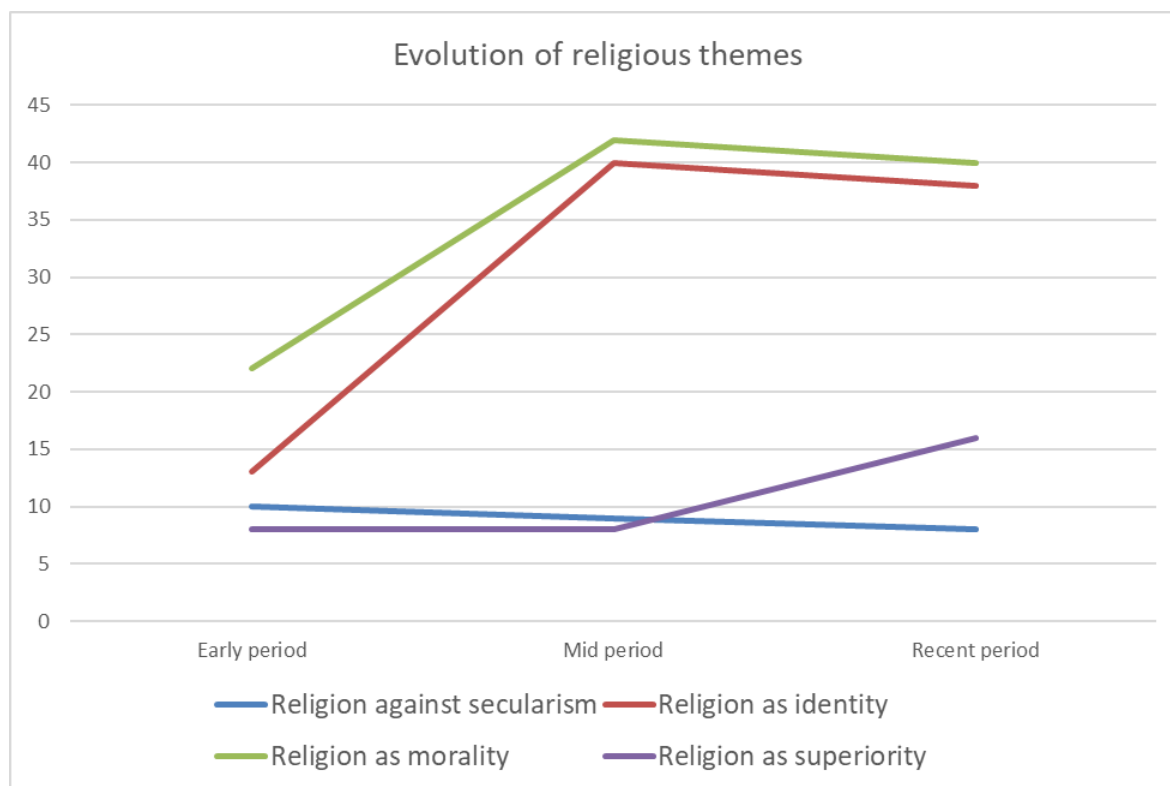
Romanians, when times are tough, hope lies in prayer. Lift your gaze to Heaven and keep moving forward! We have embarked on this hard struggle together with you, and with the Good Lord always above us (Târziu_1_2022).

Conversely, George Simion’s rhetoric, while not devoid of religious references: “We thank God for uniting Romanians today. We thank Him for giving us a country and allowing us to celebrate December 1st” (Simion_8_2024), gravitates more towards historical narratives and the ideal of a “Greater Romania.” His discourse frequently evokes symbols of national sovereignty and

historical resilience, invoking moments of Romanian struggle as justification for contemporary nationalist ambitions. This strategic differentiation allows AUR to broaden its appeal.

Therefore, AUR's political discourse has consistently framed religion as both a moral foundation and an identity marker, evolving strategically across its three main rhetorical periods. **Figure 9** captures the trajectory of religious themes in AUR's rhetoric, highlighting four principal framings: *religion against secularism*, *religion as identity*, *religion as morality*, and *religions as superiority*. These themes, while constant in their presence, have shifted in prominence over time, reflecting strategic adaptation in AUR's political messaging.

Figure 9 – The evolution of religious themes in AUR's discourse



In constructing national identity, AUR's early rhetoric placed Orthodox Christianity at the center of its moral and political vision. Religion in AUR's discourse was framed as a moral compass central to national sovereignty, tradition, and identity. Orthodox faith was presented as

the spiritual foundation that sets the Romanian people apart from perceived enemies – “The Romanian people can still choose the right path (...) Christian brothers, we have been humiliated, mocked, insulted, and persecuted in recent years” (Tarziu_4_2020). Such rhetoric appeals to Christian unity by emphasizing shared suffering and positions Orthodoxy as a guiding force in the fight to resist threats.

Rather than offering doctrinal or theological arguments, AUR rhetorically instrumentalized religious language to emphasize collective morality, historical continuity, and communal solidarity. Orthodoxy was presented as the core source of moral order, linking faith to broader societal values such as *family*, *tradition*, and *freedom*. The party’s messaging emphasized the spiritual and ethical superiority of Orthodoxy as an antidote to both political corruption and societal moral decline. “If God is with us, whom shall we fear? AUR’s values will never be up for negotiation. Faith, Family, Nation, and Freedom are the pillars that the Good Lord Himself protects when Christians call upon Him” (Focsa_1_2020), thus implying divine endorsement for their political agenda.

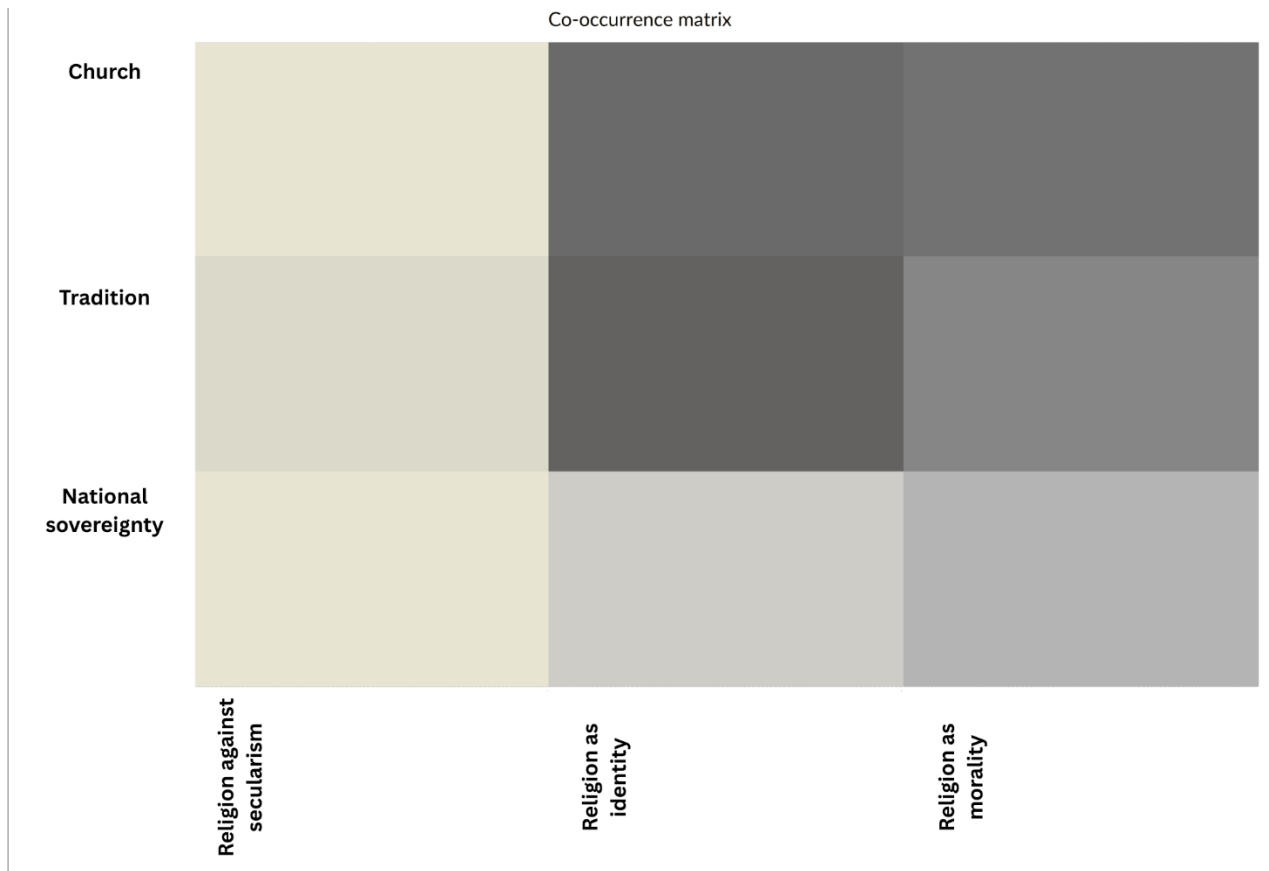
The strategic use of Orthodoxy is evident in early discourse, where terms like *Christian* appear alongside *family*, *faith*, and *freedom* (see **figures 14** and **15** in appendix), reinforcing a morally charged national identity. *Orthodox* is frequently linked to the *Romanian nation* and *the Church*, signaling a symbolic bond between religious belonging and national authenticity. AUR mobilized religious values as boundary makers, distinguishing the virtuous national community from secular, liberal, and foreign ‘others.’

During the mid-period, AUR’s religious framing evolved from a predominantly moral discourse to a powerful instrument of national identity and superiority. This shows a strategic deepening of AUR’s ideological alignment with Orthodoxy, linking religious values directly to

Romanian national character and civilizational exceptionalism. The mid-period witnessed a rise in the framing of Orthodoxy as integral to Romanian national identity and as the spiritual backbone of Romanian sovereignty. Religion is a marker that distinguish ‘true Romanians’ from secular or globalist influences. This rhetorical evolution is evidenced by AUR’s constant invocation of Romania as a Christian nation – “We wish all Romanians to remain in the spirit of Christ, our Lord and Savior” (Lavric_3_2022).

Figure 10 further supports this interpretation, revealing strong co-occurrence between *religion as identity* and key conservative concepts such as *tradition* and *the Church*. This link demonstrates AUR’s attempt to present Orthodoxy as the authentic expression of Romanian nationhood, essential for preserving the nation’s character and resisting foreign influence, in this narrative, any deviation from Orthodox values is framed as a betrayal of Romanian identity.

Figure 10 – Religious themes and nationalist values



source: own calculations, co-occurrence heatmap, darker colors stand for higher numbers.

AUR's invocation of *religion as identity* also served a boundary-making function, establishing clear distinctions between 'authentic' Romanians (aligning with Orthodox faith and tradition) and the perceived outsiders. This rhetoric emphasized AUR's populist strategy of delineating a pure in-group against a corrupt out-group, reinforcing nationalist narratives that suggests Orthodoxy is inseparable from the essence of Romanian citizenship. The slogan "Be Romanian, not pagan!" (Simion_9_2023) became emblematic of this ideological stance.

In parallel with its role as a marker of identity, Orthodoxy was also framed as the primary source of moral values during this period. AUR positioned itself as the defender of Orthodox morality, using it as a platform to critique corruption, liberalism, and moral decay:

Because he supported FREEDOM in Christ during the pandemic, the Archbishop of Tomis was brutally sanctioned today by Klaus Iohannis (...) Today, he insulted not only a high-ranking cleric of the Romanian Orthodox Church but also the entire Romanian people by interrupting a religious service (AUR_3_2022).

Public debates on education, family values and national policies are infused with religious language, reinforcing the idea that to support AUR is to protect Romania's moral foundation - "They want to forbid us from using words like mother, father, or homeland. It is truly hell" (Simion_4_2023).

Figure 10 highlights how *religion as morality* intersects with themes of *tradition*, *Church*, and *national sovereignty*. This demonstrates that AUR's portrayal of Orthodoxy was not abstract but tied to everyday practices, such as religious education, family life, and public expression of faith. While references to *religion as superiority* were already present in AUR's early discourse, they became more pronounced during the mid-rhetoric. In this phase, the idea that Orthodoxy was not only central to Romanianess but also inherently superior to secularism was articulated more explicitly. This civilizational framing positioned Orthodoxy as a moral compass against moral decline - "Our Europe - the Europe as we see it - is based on cultural and religious freedom. Their Europe, the Europe of today's Brussels bureaucrats, means restrictions and totalitarianism" (Simion_1_2022).

Secularism continues to be depicted as a Western imposition aimed at eroding Christianity rooted in spirituality and national cohesion. Târziu's statement: "A spiritual war - that has not ceased since the beginning of the world, is a battle between good and evil, and in the end, good will triumph" (Tarziu_8_2023) shows that no matter what, Christianity (the good) will triumph over secularism (the bad), thus inducing the idea of superiority.

A defining feature of AUR's recent rhetoric is the explicit fusion of Christianity with the functions of governance and national identity. This discursive period portrays religion as a divine foundation of governance. Statements such as "Faith has guided us" (Simion_3_2024), articulate that faith, thus religion, is inseparable from public life. The shift to sacralizing authority itself marks a critical rhetoric escalation in which AUR now presents political legitimacy as a spiritual alignment with religion.

Furthermore, **figure 9** shows that the most striking development in the recent phase is the sharp increase in *religion as superiority*, which more than doubled compared to the mid-phase. This evolution suggests that AUR moved from using religion to preserve national values to framing it as superior to secular liberal models of governance. The discursive shift is aligned with the broader evolution of AUR's rhetoric. In the early period, religion was mainly a moral anchor and a marker of cultural authenticity. In the consolidation phase, it became a civilization boundary. In the most recent rhetoric, religion is redefined as a source of political supremacy. This evolution reflects the internal dynamics of AUR's leadership, where Târziu emphasizes spiritual authority, while Simion frames religion through nationalist utility. This shift is visible in statements such as "We must remember that freedom is a gift from God, not a privilege handed out by masters" (Tarziu_8_2024), and "The motto is FREEDOM, and its Holy Purpose. Avram Iancu fought for freedom" (Simion_3_2024).

Yet, what intensifies this religious-political logic in recent rhetoric is the escalation of conspiracy narratives. AUR increasingly positions itself as the sole protector against the globalist efforts to "eliminate Christianity" and erase Romania's spiritual roots. President Simion's assertion – "I sincerely thank each of you here and at home who (...) have not been crushed by a harsh propaganda that tried to destroy the Romanian spirit and eliminate the Christian identity of our

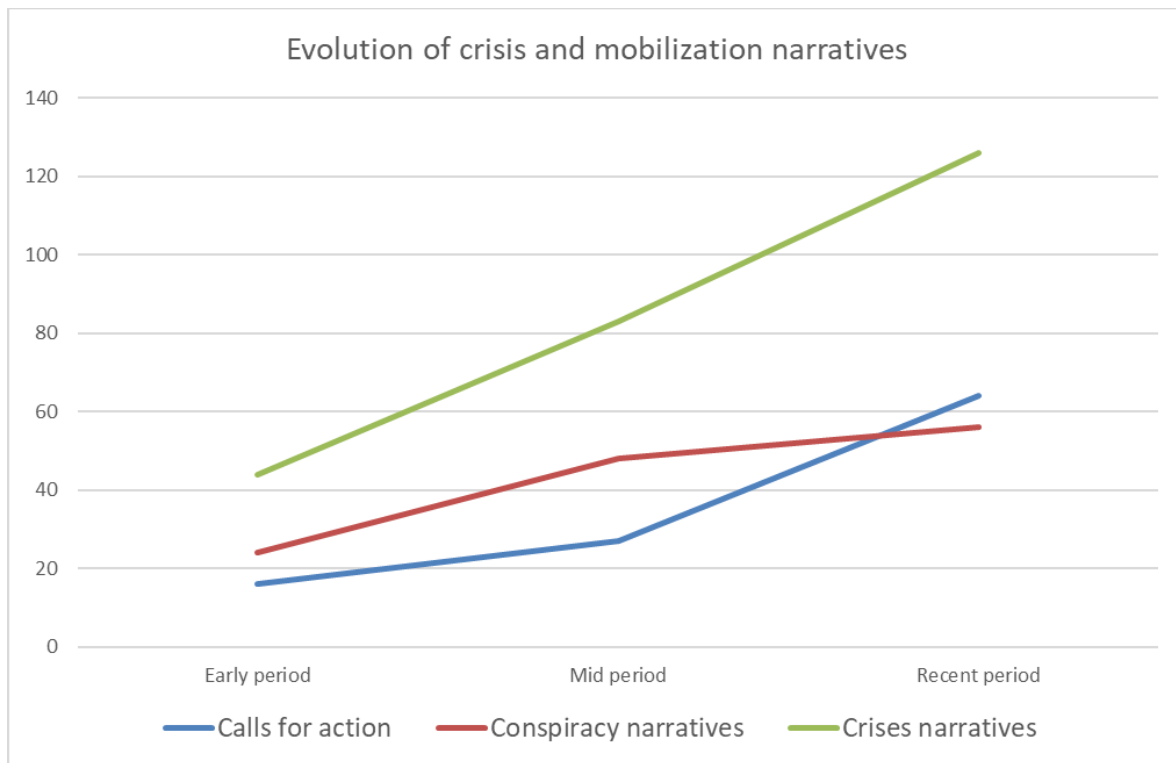
country” (Simion_8_2024), exemplifies how the party combines religious nationalism with a sense of spiritual siege. This framing transforms political opposition into moral treachery, and secular or liberal governance into an existential threat to national survival.

By intertwining religious faith with political sovereignty, AUR intensifies its civilizational rhetoric, suggesting that any deviation from Orthodox values is an act of betrayal against the Romanian spirit. The party’s repeated syntagm that “God is with us!” (Tanasa_1_2024) reflects a strategy that casts Romanians, and Orthodox Romanian as being superior because God is with them and only them.

4.6 “Long live free Romania!” – crisis and mobilization narratives

AUR’s political discourse across all three discursive periods demonstrates a strategic and deliberate use of *crisis and mobilization narratives* to gather support and to consolidate its ideological platform. These narratives are structured in three primary axes: *calls for action*, *conspiracy narratives*, and *crisis narratives*, each evolving in complexity and intensity over time, as illustrated in **figure 11**.

Figure 11 – Crisis and mobilization narratives



In the early period, *calls for action* were primarily centered on civic engagement beyond just electoral participation. This theme breaks into *activism*, *elections*, and *protests*. The core of AUR’s activism rhetoric was built on mobilizing Romanians to reclaim their perceived lost sovereignty and resist government overreach. During 2020-2021, the focus was on mobilizing people against the COVID-19 restrictions and health policies, using this narrative to gain electoral support and visibility. Speeches and public addresses called for civic resistance, encouraging citizens to defy lockdowns and health mandates: “Stay calm, dear Romanians, you can go out freely, hug your relatives and friends, because no repressive system in this world can confine you to your home” (Simion_8_2021).

The *elections* subtheme also reflects a clear populist logic. Elections are not just civic duties but acts of rebellion and resistance against corruption. AUR leaders encourage supporters to view

their vote as a direct challenge to the political establishment and an opportunity to restore Romania's sovereignty. This is exactly what helped the party enter parliament just one year after its foundation. Electoral participation is framed as a moral imperative. Voting is seen as a means of collective vengeance against those who had humiliated and oppressed the Romanian spirit:

Vote for AUR to avenge our humiliation and the unjust attacks we've endured. Vote for AUR for a better future for your children. Vote for AUR to prove your integrity and to unite Romanians! (Tarziu_4_2020).

In the same sense, *protests* are a crucial component of AUR's *calls for action*, especially during its early rhetoric. They were framed as direct confrontations with state overreach, particularly around the contested issue of the green certificate for vaccination. AUR positioned itself as the orchestrator of street mobilizations, rallying citizens to actively resist government policies perceived as infringing upon personal freedoms and national sovereignty – “If we have to stay in the streets for three months to stop the green certificate, we'll do it” (Simion_4_2021).

Like *calls for action*, *conspiracy narratives* have served as critical mechanisms for AUR to frame political and social issues as orchestrated threats against Romanian sovereignty, often mixing those with religious ideas. During the early phase, AUR leveraged the global pandemic to articulate *conspiracy narratives* around public health measures. The party consistently portrayed COVID-19 restrictions as tools of authoritarian control rather than necessary health precautions. Public addresses suggested that the Romanian government, in tandem with supranational entities, were exploiting health crises to suppress freedoms and consolidate power. For example, AUR's rhetoric emphasized the militarized nature of enforcement, invoking imagery of state violence: “Romanian citizens are fined, threatened, and beaten if they wear their mask slightly off-center” (Simion_7_2020).

AUR's conspiratorial framing extended beyond health policies to include narratives about *the EU as a globalist empire*. In this rhetoric the EU was portrayed as an imperial force seeking to dilute Romanian sovereignty and erase national identity. In a speech, the party questioned the symbolism of new Romanian ID cards issued according to EU norms: "Legitimate questions regarding the new ID cards: Why does the Romanian flag not appear? (...) Is this yet another step toward erasing national identity and re-educating the population?" (AUR_1_2021).

The third conspiratorial subtheme is closely tied to the portrayal of EU. This subtheme focuses on the role of *foreign elites* in manipulating Romanian politics and societal norms. AUR frequently discussed about hidden globalist agendas driven by non-Romanian interests, particularly targeting multinational corporation, the EU bureaucracy, and figures like George Soros. This rhetoric framed foreign influence as morally corrupt, seeking to dismantle Romanian sovereignty through hidden policies – "This draft law hides, under the guise of encouraging birth rates, a neo-Marxist policy that seeks to promote completely artificial single-parent families" (Coleasa_1_2021). AUR's suspicion of global manipulation extended to the COVID-19 vaccination campaigns, which were depicted as profit-driven and secretive. The party accused EU institution of concealing vaccine contracts and withholding critical information from the public: "The contracts for purchasing COVID-19 vaccines are censored and kept secret by the EU and member states" (Tarziu_3_2021).

During the early rhetoric, *crisis narratives* are also important in how AUR frames Romania. This theme is strongly linked to narratives of "denationalization, de-Christianization, and cultural dissolution" (Tarziu_4_2020). The party depicted progressive policies, LGBTQ+ rights, and secular initiatives as manifestations of an agenda aimed at eroding Romanian values. AUR's

rhetoric positions itself as the defender of tradition against what is called “a new form of oppression” (Tarziu_4_2020).

AUR’s early rhetoric also tapped into widespread economic discontent by portraying Romania as a nation stripped of its economic sovereignty and exploited by foreign interests. This narrative hinged on the idea that Romania’s resources were being stolen. AUR was calling for the reclamation of national assets and industries: “Our oil should belong to Romanians, our natural gas should serve Romanians first, and our gold should be ours” (Simion_8_2020). This was a direct call for *economic sovereignty*, and AUR articulated this narrative through the lens of moral obligation to protect Romanian families and workers.

The party painted a dark picture of economic decline, underscoring the fact that “Half of the Romanian nation is now outside the country’s current borders, and Romania continues to depopulate” (AUR_1_2020).

AUR’s most potent *crisis narrative* in the early period centered on the idea of a *sovereignty crisis*. The party argued that Romania’s political sovereignty had been systematically eroded through corrupt domestic leadership and foreign manipulation. The party’s rhetoric called for a dramatic reassertion of national independence, framing the political establishment as agents of foreign control. AUR demanded liberation from what they described as “the Bolshevik-Stalinist domination of Klaus Iohannis, Ludovic Orban, and Raed Arafat” (Sosoaca_1_2020).

The mid-period of AUR’s discourse (2022-2023) marked an evolution in narrative intensity, reflecting a growing focus on the international landscape. This phase coincided with broader global concerns over migration and economic dependencies. AUR capitalized on these geopolitical dynamics to frame Romania as a nation under threat from supranational entities.

Unlike the early rhetoric, which focuses more on local grievances, the mid-period positions Romania as a frontline in an ideological war between “sovereignists and globalists” (Simion_2_2022). The EU was no longer just a bureaucratic force but also a supranational empire seeking to dissolve nation-states and erase cultural identities. AUR members invoked the image of a federal superstate emerging from Brussels, designed to control all aspects of life, tapping into the conspiratorial idea:

The ultimate goal of Brussels is a federal superstate – a single government, a single parliament, and a singular president. In this superstate, everything will be monitored and controlled: private life, spending habits, political beliefs. If you oppose it, you will be eliminated bloodlessly (Simion_2_2022).

Furthermore, the party presented its political mission as part of a civilizational struggle. AUR was framing itself as the sole party defending Romania from cultural and political subjugation. They often paint a dystopian image of Europe:

There is a suicidal policy: through illegal immigration, through the dissolution of the idea and notion of family, and all the rest – it’s nothing but a policy of death (Tarziu_10_2023).

AUR’s conspiratorial rhetoric during the mid-period also broadened to include accusations of *foreign control over national politics*. This subtheme built upon earlier claims but became far more explicit, alleging that Romania was no longer a sovereign state but a “vassal, humiliatingly dependent on Brussels and Washington” (Simion_2_2022). AUR members accused Romanian politicians of being “puppets controlled by foreign interests” (Simion_2_2022), stripping Romania of its autonomy and economic independence.

This narrative was not limited to the EU’s influence but also targeted Romania’s historical relationship with other powers. AUR’s rhetoric against Austria serves as notable example. In a public statement, Simion framed Austria’s economic presence in Romania as a modern form of colonialism:

We gave the Austrians everything we could as a bribe. Omniasig insurance, banks, oil, natural gas. (...) Tonight's protest at the Austrian Embassy at 6:00 PM (...) is against how we've become a poor colony ruled by the High Gate of Vienna (Simion_3_2022).

This narrative also extends into broader cultural and societal domains. AUR started accusing global figures like George Soros of monopolizing civil society: "Whether we talk about art, culture, literature, or civil society, which should not belong only to Soros" (Simion_6_2023).

The recent period of AUR's discourse, captured in 2024, marks the most intense phase of its *crisis and mobilization narratives*. As Romania entered a critical electoral cycle, AUR amplified its rhetoric to portray nearly all external and internal actors as threats to national sovereignty. The party frames the EU, corporations, ethnic minorities, and globalist elites as aggressor undermining Romania's cultural identity, economic independence, and moral foundation. This heightened antagonism reflects AUR's strategy to attempt to consolidate support by constructing *crises*. Thus, *crisis narratives* surge dramatically and are no longer depicted as isolated challenges. Instead, they are presented as symptoms of a broader assault on Romania's autonomy.

In terms of cultural crisis, the EU is framed as an agent of moral decay and cultural erosion. AUR members accuse the European Commission of promoting ideologies that are anti-ethical to Romanian values, with Orthodox Christianity depicted as the primary target of these globalist agendas. AUR also extends its critique of reproductive rights, openly opposing policies aimed at expanding abortion access: "They wanted the possibility of terminating a pregnancy to be turned into a fundamental right to abortion" (Lavric_1_2023).

Their depiction of an *economic crisis* evolved significantly, too. No longer limited to vague references to Western exploitation, the rhetoric becomes far more detailed and accusatory. AUR emphasizes that Romania had been systematically drained of its natural resources by foreign corporation with the complicity of local political elites – "They've seized control (...) They took

all our Romanian oil” (Simion_3_2022). The sovereignty narrative is also tied to energy independence and economic re-industrialization. The party declared its full commitment to restoring Romania’s energy sovereignty: “Another priority for our party, should we lead the country, will be ensuring energy sovereignty and reindustrializing Romania” (Tarziu_5_2023).

The narrative also expanded to include Romania’s growing debt, which AUR claimed was a deliberate strategy of economic enslavement orchestrated by foreign elites:

Today, Romania's external debt exceeds 150 billion euros. Romania will never be able to pay off its external debt. Every year, Romania pays hundreds of millions of euros in commissions and interest (Tanasa_1_2023).

These statements reflect a deep-seated Euroscepticism, framing Romania’s economic hardships as symptoms of EU membership.

Yet, the most aggressive component of AUR’s *crisis narratives* during the recent period is its depiction of a *sovereignty crisis*. AUR frames Romania’s relationship with international organizations as a surrender of national rights and territorial integrity. This rhetoric is visible in accusation against the Hungarian political influence in Transylvania, where AUR claims there was an arranged effort to erode Romanian cultural dominance.

The ongoing ethnic cleansing of Romanians from these counties, the ostentatious display of separatist or foreign state flags on Romanian soil, complicity in the seizure of invaluable heritage buildings, and efforts to undermine Romanian language education in these counties are just a few of the methods used by these so-called leaders of the Hungarian community in Romania (Tanasa_1_2022).

Such statements not only cast Hungarian political actors as foreign but also position AUR as the sole defender of Romanian sovereignty.

4.7 “We do not steal because we have God” – values promoted vs. values opposed

AUR’s discourse in the three periods analyzed reveals a sharp ideological distinction between values it seeks to promote and those it opposes. The thematic breakdown of *values promoted*, and *values opposed* in AUR’s discourse reflects its strategic positioning as a defender of traditional Romanian culture and an antagonist of liberal, globalist ideologies. The *values promoted* are consistently framed around four key subthemes: *church*, *family*, *national sovereignty*, and *tradition*. On the other hand, the *opposed values* are categorized into four main subthemes: *gender equality*, *liberalism*, *modernity*, and *multiculturalism*.

Figure 12 highlights a clear and contrasting trajectory between the values AUR seeks to promote and those it vehemently opposes. The upward trend of values the party promotes reflects AUR’s growing emphasis on Orthodox Christianity, traditional family structures, and national sovereignty as the structure of its ideological platform. The recent period is marked by a peak in value promotion, aligning with AUR’s electoral gains and the solidification of its political message, suggesting that value-based rhetoric is strategically employed to consolidate its support base and legitimize its political claims. Inversely, the *values opposed* show a much slower, steady increase. This trend indicates a consistent but less dramatic rhetorical attack on Western liberal democratic principles and globalist ideologies.

Figure 12 – The evolution of values opposed vs. Values promote



Note: Green lines represent values promoted by AUR; red lines indicate values opposed. Line styles distinguish individual themes within each group.

Thematically, AUR framed its early discourse through a sharp moral contrast between the values it promoted and the ones it opposed – “Our alliance openly declares its opposition to any form of contemporary Marxism” (Simion_3_2020). The party’s rhetoric consistently emphasized *national sovereignty*, *family*, *tradition*, and *the Church* as core pillars of Romanian identity, while declaring *liberalism*, *gender equality*, *modernity*, and *multiculturalism* as incompatible with Romanian values. For instance, the party’s rejection of *gender equality* was reflected in statements such as “No man seeks intelligence, depth, or clarity in a woman” (Lavric_1_2020).

Meanwhile, the centrality of *family* was highlighted through statements such as: “The family is the fundamental cell of any viable society” (Simion_3_2020), reinforcing traditional

social structures as the foundation of national resilience. AUR's early narrative placed stronger emphasis on affirming and promoting traditional values rather than only attacking liberal or modernist principles. This rhetorical choice suggests that AUR's initial discursive strategy was centered less on aggressive rejection of the external 'other,' but rather on constructing a positive moral vision of the 'us,' rooted in Romanian traditions.

The mid-rhetoric phase marked a clear intensification in the way AUR articulated its core values, emphasizing *tradition*, *sovereignty*, and *religious identity* with greater assertiveness. While these elements were already present during the early period, they now moved to the center of the party's discourse, serving as non-negotiable pillars of its nationalist project. This evolution reveals a strategic broadening of AUR's ideological commitment to Orthodox morality, traditionalism, and national sovereignty as the cornerstones of its political agenda. Building on the early rhetoric, the *church* and *family* themes became central to AUR's rhetoric as they were framed as the moral backbone of Romanian society. AUR's emphasized the "natural family," defined through Orthodox principles: "Defending the natural family, as created by God, is a duty we all share" (Tarziu_5_2023).

AUR's advocacy for *national sovereignty* became more vocal during the mid-rhetoric, reflecting growing concern over EU centralization. *Sovereignty* was framed as an economic necessity, with AUR emphasizing the importance of Romanian self-sufficiency in the face of EU policies – "I believe in a union of free and sovereign nations" (Simion_1_2022). *Tradition* also raised in importance, increasingly tied to the preservation of Romanian cultural identity and collective memory. During this phase, AUR's speeches often invoked the imagery of Romanian diaspora members as carriers of cultural memory and national spirit.

The concept of “genius loci,” or the spirit of the land, as described by the Romanian philosopher Lucian Blaga, was evoked to show the spiritual connection between Romanians and their homeland:

This means that you, the diaspora, carry the spirit of the land, this genius loci, as Lucian Blaga called it. When you go and live abroad, you are the bearers of this space and this mioritic spirit (Lavric_2_2022).

This romanticization of tradition served to frame AUR as a guardian of cultural continuity amidst global homogenizations.

In the recent period, AUR’s rhetoric continued to reflect its broader ideological project as **figure 12** shows. The promotion of conservative values reached its peak during this discursive period. This trend indicates a solidification of AUR’s platform as the guardian of Romania’s moral and cultural heritage. Meanwhile, the rhetoric against *values opposed* remained somewhat constant through time, highlighting AUR’s positioning as the only protector against decay. In term of subthemes, the discourse against *gender equality* became more confrontational branding it apart of a broader globalist conspiracy aimed at dismantling traditional family structures and national identity – “The boundless madness propagated by neo-Bolshevism and all its offshoots, whether they are called woke, green transition, or gender pseudo-science” (Tarziu_3_2024).

The criticism towards *liberalism evolved* intertwined with religious and nationalist framing. For instance, AUR criticized the blurring of gender norms and identity politics, equating it with a deeper moral confusion perpetuated by liberalism: “Those who can’t decide who’s a woman and who’s a man” (Simion_5_2024). *Modernity* is similarly cast as a threat to Romanian identity and spiritual purity. AUR leaders describe modern globalist ideologies as decaying moral standards that distance Romanians from their faith and traditional roots: “In an increasingly

morally decayed world, our behavior should be guided by the words and example of the Savior” (AUR_2_2024).

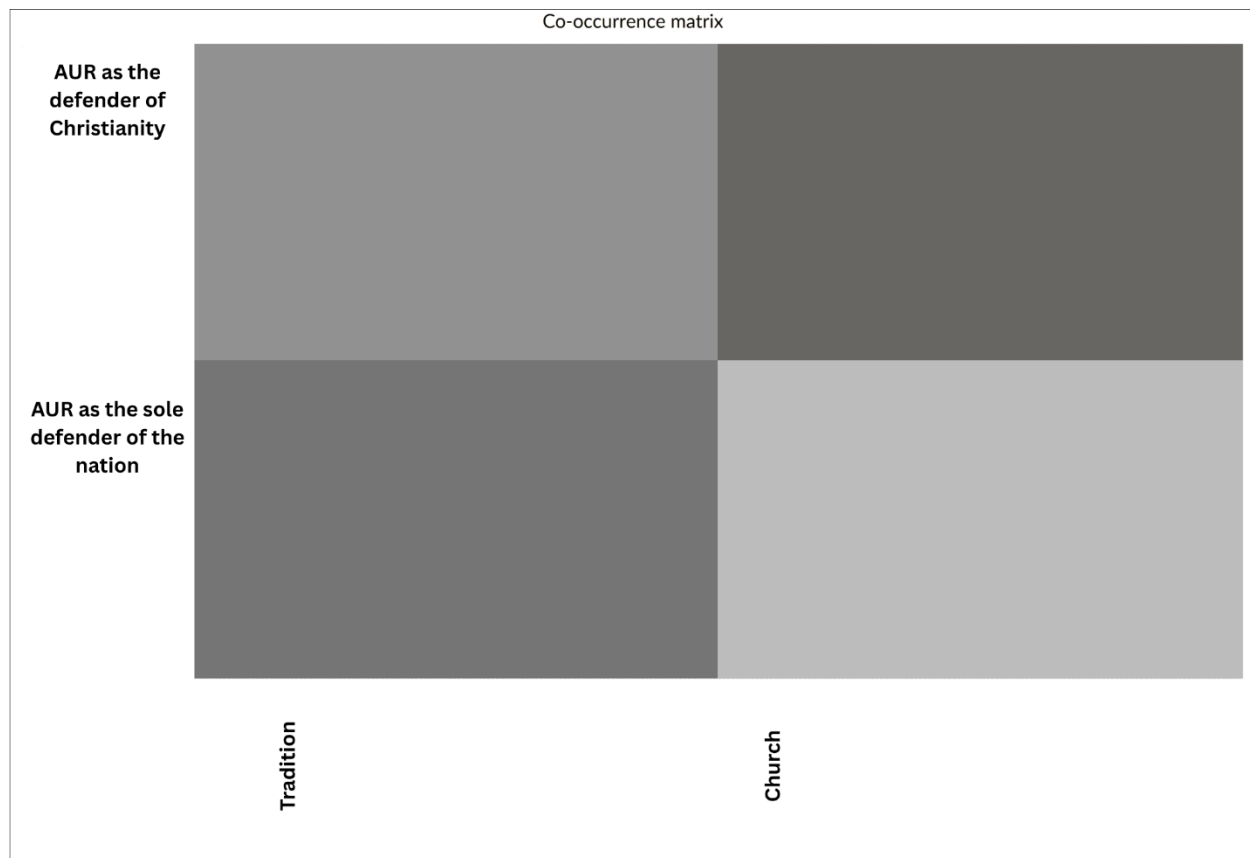
The church remains central to AUR’s ideological arsenal, symbolizing national continuity. *The church* is depicted s under threat from globalist ideologies that seek to secularize Romanian society: “A harsh propaganda that tried to destroy the Romanian spirit and eliminate the Christian identity of our country” (Simion_8_2024). Therefore, *the church* is no longer just an institution but a cornerstone of national resistance. *Family* is, as well, emphasized as a critical element of national survival, with AUR leveraging demographic decline as evidence of moral decay and globalist manipulation – “Every year, the National Institute of Statistics raises alarms about the demographic decline our country is facing” (Tanasa_2_2024). Thus, preserving the traditional family becomes equal to preserving the nation itself.

National sovereignty grows substantially in recent rhetoric, remaining the core belief in AUR’s discourse, with historical references being used to stimulate nationalist sentiments:

In 1859, we took the first step toward sovereignty, but we were not truly sovereign (...) Today, history places us once again in a context where great empires are clashing. We are, as always, at a crossroads and must navigate these great empires to obtain, preserve, and strengthen our sovereignty (Tarziu_2_2024).

Lastly, *tradition*, even if decreases, is portrayed as the soul of Romanian identity, a spiritual and cultural compass meant to withstand the pressures of modernity: “I believe it is important not to forget our roots, the traditions that unite us, and the faith that has guided us over the centuries” (Simion_3_2024)

Figure 13 – Values promoted and self-depiction



source: own calculations, co-occurrence heatmap, darker colors stand for higher numbers.

To provide a clearer understanding of how AUR incorporates its *promoted values* into its discourse, **figure 13** shows a tight interconnection between AUR's conservative *value promotion* and its *self-depiction*. The two main conservative values represented by *church* and *tradition*, are mapped against self-images as both *the defender of Christianity* and *the sole defender of the nation*. This is the essence of AUR's rhetoric, which frequently equates its political mission with the protection of Orthodoxy. In speeches and statements, party members emphasize the notion that AUR is the last bastion of Christian faith, framing political battles as spiritual struggles.

Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis of AUR's discourse reveals key mechanisms through which religious ethno-populism can be constructed, sustained, and normalized by political actors. Starting from the central question of how AUR uses Orthodox Christianity to shape its ethno-populist platform, the analysis has traced how religion, tradition or history are strategically combined to legitimize political goals, serving as a mechanism for boundary-making between 'true Romanians' and external or internal enemies. By evoking historical figures, AUR positions itself as the modern defender of Romania's historical legacy and territorial unity. This symbolic revival of nationalist heroes is used to construct a narrative of continuity, positioning AUR as the rightful heir to Romania's nationalist struggle.

AUR's rhetoric around national sovereignty crisis underscores a typical far-right populist fear of external domination, framed as a direct threat from globalist elites. By portraying Brussels as a bureaucratic empire, secular supranational actor that seeks to erode Romanian identity and impose liberal values, AUR constructs a dichotomy of 'us' (patriotic/sovereign Romanians) vs. 'them' (globalists/Western liberal elites). This resonates with Brubaker's (2017a) concept of civilizationism, where national identity is defended not only against ethnic minorities but also against supranational governance perceived as culturally imperialistic. Building on this, the analysis of this thesis introduces a new dimension by showing how AUR frames Romanians as a superior nation, revealing nuanced echoes of protochronist thinking (Verdery, 1995; Tismaneanu, 2003).

Religion plays a critical role in AUR's discourse, going beyond moral reference to becoming an instrument of national identity and political legitimacy. As demonstrated in the analysis, religion as identity and religion as morality are consistently invoked to frame AUR's

vision of Romania as inherently Orthodox and morally superior. This reflects Roy's (2016) argument on the strategic use of religious symbols, narratives, and identities by political actors to achieve political ends. The party's slogan, "Be Romanian, not pagan!" encapsulates this dual strategy: asserting religious belonging while simultaneously delegitimizing any deviation from traditional Orthodox values.

AUR's self-portrayal is crucial to its populist narrative. Through themes of defending Christianity, protecting national sovereignty, and safeguarding tradition, the party constructs itself as the only true representative of the Romanian people. The populist leaders are the political saviors, stepping in where mainstream political forces have failed (Moffit, 2016). Therefore, the party's rhetoric frames AUR as the last bastion against foreign influence and cultural decay. It adopts a revolutionary posture, one that positions itself as fighting not just political corruption but a moral and cultural war.

The party uses cultural, economic, and sovereignty crises to identify and construct various enemies, portraying them as existential threats to the Romanian nation. AUR follows the pattern of other illiberal actors, employing a discursive strategy to perform crises and shape the national identity around perceived threats. Even in the absence of real dangers, AUR exploits the imagery of crises to redefine the political and cultural 'self' in opposition to a threatening 'other' (Sata, 2021). AUR reframes external actors as agents of national decline. This strategic performance legitimizes the party's agenda and mobilizes support.

The calls for protests, direct civic engagement, and electoral mobilization are framed as moral imperatives, acts of resistance against oppression, and cultural annihilation (Moffit, 2016; Canovan, 1999). This crisis-driven mobilization aligns with broader theoretical definitions of populism. AUR's discourse echoes Mudde's (2004) definition of populism as a "thin-centered

ideology” that pits ‘pure people’ against corrupt elites. The enemy is not just seen as political opponents but also as conspirators, bureaucrats, and liberal ideologues, who allegedly threaten Romania’s cultural and religious foundations. Therefore, AUR’s discourse is a perfect example of how nationalist, religious, and populist narratives can be intertwined to mobilize support.

The analysis reveals that AUR employs Orthodoxy to achieve three primary political objectives: legitimization of its political agenda, construction of an exclusionary national identity, and mobilization against perceived threats. Far from being invoked only in religious terms, Orthodoxy is used as a political tool, framed as the moral and spiritual backbone of Romanian society. By portraying itself as the defender of sovereignty, traditional family, and moral purity, AUR gains symbolic authority and frames its political platform as divinely endorsed. Within this narrative, being Romanian means being Orthodox, marginalizing other perspectives. Even more, AUR mobilizes Orthodoxy to counteract globalism and the EU as existential threats, positioning the party as a protector against the collapse of Christian civilization.

Through these three political objectives, AUR successfully uses Orthodox Christianity to create a powerful ethno-populist narrative that resonates with a very religious nation, such as Romania. The strategic use of religion amplifies the party’s political message and positions it as a moral crusader against cultural and political threats. In doing so, AUR is part of the bigger regional pattern in Central and Eastern Europe, where parties like Fidesz and PiS similarly intertwine religion, nationalism, and populism to consolidate power. Future studies could build on this by comparatively assessing these cases to identify shared discursive strategies and divergences. A broader comparison between CEE and Western Europe context could further deepen our understanding of how religion functions within far-right populist projects across different political and cultural environments.

Appendix

Table 1: Thematic coding

Theoretical framework	Type of coding	Codes	Subcodes	Definition
Populism – mobilization Canovan, 1999; Moffit, 2016	Inductive	Calls for Action	Activism	Appeals for civic engagement beyond elections, including direct involvement in public life.
			Elections	Rhetorical calls to vote, usually as a way to reclaim national sovereignty.
			Protests	Invitations to participate in collective action or public demonstrations, often as resistance against elites
Populism –political style Moffit, 2016	Deductive	Conspiracy Narratives	Anti-vaccine & public health	Claims suggesting that vaccination campaigns, lockdowns, or health measures are tools of control or manipulation.
			EU as a globalist empire	Portrayals of the EU as a supranational force aiming to erase national identity or sovereignty through covert agendas.
			Foreign elites as controlling Romania	Assertions that international actors (e.g. Brussels, Soros, globalists) secretly dominate or undermine Romanian politics.
Populism – construction of crisis Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017	Deductive	Crises Narratives	Cultural crisis	Depictions of national values, traditions, or identity as being under threat from foreign influence or other ideologies.
			Economic crisis	Framing economic hardship or dependency as systemic failures.
			Sovereignty crisis	Claims that Romania has lost control over its laws, borders, or decisions due to external interference or elite betrayal.
Nationalism Smith, 2006; Tismaneanu, 2003	Deductive	Historical Narratives	Historical revisionism	Reinterpretations of Romania's past that challenge mainstream historical accounts, often

				to serve nationalist aims. This includes elements of protochronism, which exaggerates Romania's historical role as a central or ancient civilization.
			Support for historical figures	Positive references to prominent Romanian figures or historical events used to legitimize current political positions
			Support for interwar right-wing figures	Endorsements of controversial leaders from Romania's interwar far-right presented as patriotic role models.
Populism – elite Brubaker (2017)	Inductive	Image of the EU	Bureaucratic empire	The EU is portrayed as a distant, technocratic, and undemocratic structure that overrides national decision-making.
			Global/ Supranational	The EU is framed as promoting supranational homogenization, eroding national identity.
			Valueless secularism	The EU is described as morally bankrupt, anti-Christian.
Othering – the ‘them’ Brubaker, 2017	Deductive	Othering	Elites	Domestic political, economic, or intellectual figures portrayed as corrupt, detached, or betraying national interests.
			Foreign elites	External actors depicted as controlling or undermining Romania
			Migrants	Non-citizens framed as cultural, economic, or security threats to Romanian society.
			Minorities	Ethnic, religious, or sexual minorities that are depicted as incompatible with national identity or values.
			Seculars	Individuals or groups criticized for rejecting religion, often presented as morally inferior or harmful.
Instrumentalization of religion Roy, 2016 Brubaker, 2017	Deductive	Religion	Religion against secularism	Christianity vs. Western secularism, often depicting secularism as a moral or existential threat.

			Religion as identity	Orthodoxy is instrumentalized as a marker of national identity, strategically invoked to distinguish Romanians from "others."
			Religion as morality	Presentation of religion as the primary source of moral values.
			Religion as superiority	Claims that Romania or Romanians are spiritually superior due to their faith.
Othering – the ‘us’ Mudde, 2004 Wodak, 2020	Deductive	Self-Depiction (AUR)	AUR as a party of the people	AUR presents itself as aligned with ordinary citizens, using affective, humble, or familiar language.
			AUR as the anti-elite revolutionary party	AUR is framed as leading a moral or political uprising against a corrupt establishment.
			AUR as the defender of Christianity	The party claims a mission to protect religious values, institutions, and faith.
			AUR as the sole defender of the nation	AUR asserts exclusive legitimacy in safeguarding Romanian sovereignty, identity, or culture.
Othering – the ‘them’ Brubaker, 2017 Triandafyllidou, 2006 Mudde, 2004	Deductive	Values Opposed	Gender equality	Rejection or criticism of feminist ideas, gender rights, or non-traditional gender roles.
			Liberalism	Opposition to liberal democratic values.
			Modernity	Critique of contemporary social or cultural changes, framed as morally degrading or alienating national traditions.
			Multiculturalism	Depiction of ethnic or cultural diversity as a threat to national unity or identity.
Othering – ‘us’ Brubaker, 2017	Deductive	Values Promoted	Church	Positive references to the Orthodox Church as a moral authority, cultural pillar, and guardian of national identity.
			Family	Promotion of the traditional family structure as the foundation of society.
			National sovereignty	Emphasis on political and territorial self-determination, often

				framed against foreign influence.
			Tradition	Affirmation of inherited cultural practices, beliefs, and values as central to Romanian identity.

Table 2: Speeches

ID	Type of source	Speaker	Year	Link
Simion_1_2020	Media article	G. Simion	2020	link
Simion_2_2020	Media article	G. Simion	2020	link
Simion_3_2020	Media article	G. Simion	2020	link
Sosoaca_1_2020	Media article	D. Șoșoacă	2020	link
Simion_4_2020	Media article	G. Simion	2020	link
Volosatii_1_2020	Media article	B. Volosatii	2020	link
AUR_1_2020	Media article	AUR	2020	link
Focsa_1_2020	Media article	D. Focșa	2020	link
Tarziu_1_2020	Media article	C. Târziu	2020	link
Lavric_1_2020	Media article	S. Lavric	2020	link
Simion_5_2020	Media article	G. Simion	2020	link
Stoica_1_2020	Media article	C. Stoica	2020	link
Lavric_2_2020	Media article	S. Lavric	2020	link
Simion_6_2020	Media article	G. Simion	2020	link
Simion_7_2020	Media article	G. Simion	2020	link
Damureanu_1_2020	Facebook post	R. Dămureanu	2020	link
Simion_8_2020	Video (YT)	G. Simion	2020	link
Simion_9_2020	Video (YT)	G. Simion	2020	link
Simion&Sosoaca_2020	Video (YT)	G. Simion & D. Șoșoacă	2020	link
Tarziu_2_2020	Video (YT)	C. Târziu	2020	link
Tarziu_3_2020	Video (YT)	C. Târziu	2020	link
Tarziu_4_2020	Video (YT)	C. Târziu	2020	link
Tarziu_5_2020	Video (YT)	C. Târziu	2020	link
Simion_10_2020	Facebook post	G. Simion	2020	link
Simion_11_2020	Facebook post	G. Simion	2020	link
AU_2_2020	Facebook post	AUR	2020	link
AUR_3_2020	Facebook post	AUR	2020	link
Tarziu_6_2020	Video (YT)	C. Târziu	2020	link
Tarziu_7_2020	Blog post	C. Târziu	2020	link
Tarziu_8_2020	Blog post	C. Târziu	2020	link
Lavric_1_2021	Media article	S. Lavric	2021	link
Coleasa_1_2021	Parliament speech	A. Coleașa	2021	link
Tarziu_1_2021	Media article	C. Târziu	2021	link
Tarziu_2_2021	Media article	C. Târziu	2021	link
AUR_1_2021	Facebook post	AUR	2021	link
Tarziu_3_2021	Media article	C. Târziu	2021	link
AUR_2_2021	Facebook post	AUR	2021	link
AUR_3_2021	Facebook post	AUR	2021	link
AUR_4_2021	Facebook post	AUR	2021	link

AUR_4_2021	Facebook post	AUR	2021	link
AUR_6_2021	Facebook post	AUR	2021	link
AUR_7_2021	Facebook post	AUR	2021	link
Tanasa_1_2021	Parliament speech	D. Tanasă	2021	link
Simion_1_2021	Facebook post	G. Simion	2021	link
Simion_2_2021	Parliament speech	G. Simion	2021	link
Simion_3_2021	Facebook post	G. Simion	2021	link
Simion_4_2021	Facebook post	G. Simion	2021	link
Simion_5_2021	Facebook post	G. Simion	2021	link
Simion_6_2021	Media article	G. Simion	2021	link
Sosoaca_1_2021	Parliament speech	D. Șoșoacă	2021	link
Simion_7_2021	Media article	G. Simion	2021	link
Simion_8_2021	Parliament speech	G. Simion	2021	link
Tarziu_4_2021	Facebook post	C. Târziu	2021	link
AUR_8_2021	Facebook post	AUR	2021	link
AUR_9_2021	Facebook post	AUR	2021	link
AUR_10_2021	Facebook post	AUR	2021	link
Simion_9_2021	Video (YT)	G. Simion	2021	link
AUR_1_2022	Media article	AUR	2022	link
Enachi_1_2022	Parliament speech	R. Enachi	2022	link
Scripnic_1_2022	Parliament speech	L. Scripnic	2022	link
Tanasa_1_2022	Parliament speech	D. Tanasă	2022	link
Lavric_1_2022	Parliament speech	S. Lavric	2022	link
Simion_1_2022	Speech	G. Simion	2022	link
Chelaru_1_2022	Speech	M. Chelaru	2022	link
Lavric_2_2022	Speech	S. Lavric	2022	link
Tarziu_1_2022	Blog post	C. Târziu	2022	link
Tarziu_2_2022	Blog post	C. Târziu	2022	link
Tarziu_3_2022	Blog post	C. Târziu	2022	link
Tarziu_4_2022	Blog post	C. Târziu	2022	link
Tarziu_5_2022	Blog post	C. Târziu	2022	link
Tarziu_6_2022	Blog post	C. Târziu	2022	link
Lavric_3_2022	Blog post	S. Lavric	2022	link
Simion_2_2022	Video (YT)	G. Simion	2022	link
Tarziu_7_2022	Video (YT)	C. Târziu	2022	link
Tarziu_8_2022	Facebook post	C. Târziu	2022	link
Tarziu_9_2022	Facebook post	C. Târziu	2022	link
Tarziu_10_2022	Facebook post	C. Târziu	2022	link
Tarziu_11_2022	Facebook post	C. Târziu	2022	link
Tarziu_12_2022	Facebook post	C. Târziu	2022	link
Simion_3_2022	Facebook post	G. Simion	2022	link

Simion_4_2022	Facebook post	G. Simion	2022	link
Simion_5_2022	Facebook post	G. Simion	2022	link
AUR_2_2022	Facebook post	AUR	2022	link
AUR_3_2022	Facebook post	AUR	2022	link
Simion_1_2023	Media article	G. Simion	2023	link
Coleasa_1_2023	Media article	A. Coleaşa	2023	link
Lavric_1_2023	Media article	S. Lavric	2023	link
Badiu_1_2023	Media article	G. Badiu	2023	link
Simion_2_2023	Media article	G. Simion	2023	link
Simion_4_2023	Media article	G. Simion	2023	link
Simion_5_2023	Media article	G. Simion	2023	link
Tarziu_1_2023	Blog post	C. Târziu	2023	link
Tarziu_2_2023	Blog post/interview	C. Târziu	2023	link
Tarziu_3_2023	Video (YT)	C. Târziu	2023	link
Tarziu_4_2023	Blog post/interview	C. Târziu	2023	link
Tarziu_5_2023	Blog post/interview	C. Târziu	2023	link
Simion_6_2023	Video (YT)	G. Simion	2023	link
Tarziu_6_2023	Video (YT)	C. Târziu	2023	link
Tarziu_7_2023	Video (YT)	C. Târziu	2023	link
Tarziu_8_2023	Video (YT)	C. Târziu	2023	link
Simion_7_2023	Facebook post	G. Simion	2023	link
AUR_1_2023	Facebook post	AUR	2023	link
Simion_8_2023	Facebook post	G. Simion	2023	link
Tarziu_9_2023	Facebook post	C. Târziu	2023	link
AUR_2_2023	party program	AUR	2023	link
Tanasa_1_2023	Facebook post	D. Tanasă	2023	link
Tarziu_10_2023	Video (YT)	C. Târziu	2023	link
Tarziu_11_2023	Blog post	C. Târziu	2023	link
Simion_9_2023	Facebook post	G. Simion	2023	link
Tanasa_2_2023	Speech	D. Tanasă	2023	link
Simion_1_2024	Speech	G. Simion	2024	link
Simion_2_2024	Speech	G. Simion	2024	link
Tarziu_1_2024	Interview	C. Târziu	2024	link
Cosma_1_2024	Speech	D. Cosma	2024	link
Simion_3_2024	Blog post	G. Simion	2024	link
Simion_4_2024	Blog post	G. Simion	2024	link
Simion_5_2024	Blog post	G. Simion	2024	link
Tarziu_2_2024	Media article	C. Târziu	2024	link
Simion_6_2024	Media article	G. Simion	2024	link
Simion_7_2024	Media article	G. Simion	2024	link

AUR_1_2024	Media article	AUR	2024	link
Simion_8_2024	Facebook post	G. Simion	2024	link
Simion_9_2024	Media article	G. Simion	2024	link
Simion_10_2024	Facebook post	G. Simion	2024	link
Simion_11_2024	Media article	G. Simion	2024	link
Tarziu_3_2024	blog post	C. Târziu	2024	link
Tarziu_4_2024	blog post	C. Târziu	2024	link
Tarziu_5_2024	Facebook post	C. Târziu	2024	link
Tarziu_6_2024	blog post	C. Târziu	2024	link
Tarziu_7_2024	blog post	C. Târziu	2024	link
Simion_12_2024	Video (YT)	G. Simion	2024	link
Tarziu_8_2024	Video (YT)	C. Târziu	2024	link
Tudor_1_2024	Facebook post	L. Tudor	2024	link
Tudor_2_2024	Facebook post	L. Tudor	2024	link
Neamtu_1_2024	Facebook post	M. Neamțu	2024	link
Tarziu_9_2024	Facebook post	C. Târziu	2024	link
AUR_2_2024	Facebook post	AUR	2024	link
Tanasa_1_2024	Facebook post	D. Tanasă	2024	link
Tanasa_2_2024	Facebook post	D. Tanasă	2024	link
Tarziu_10_2024	Facebook post	C. Târziu	2024	link

Figure 14 – Word tree for “Christian” in AUR’s Early Rhetoric

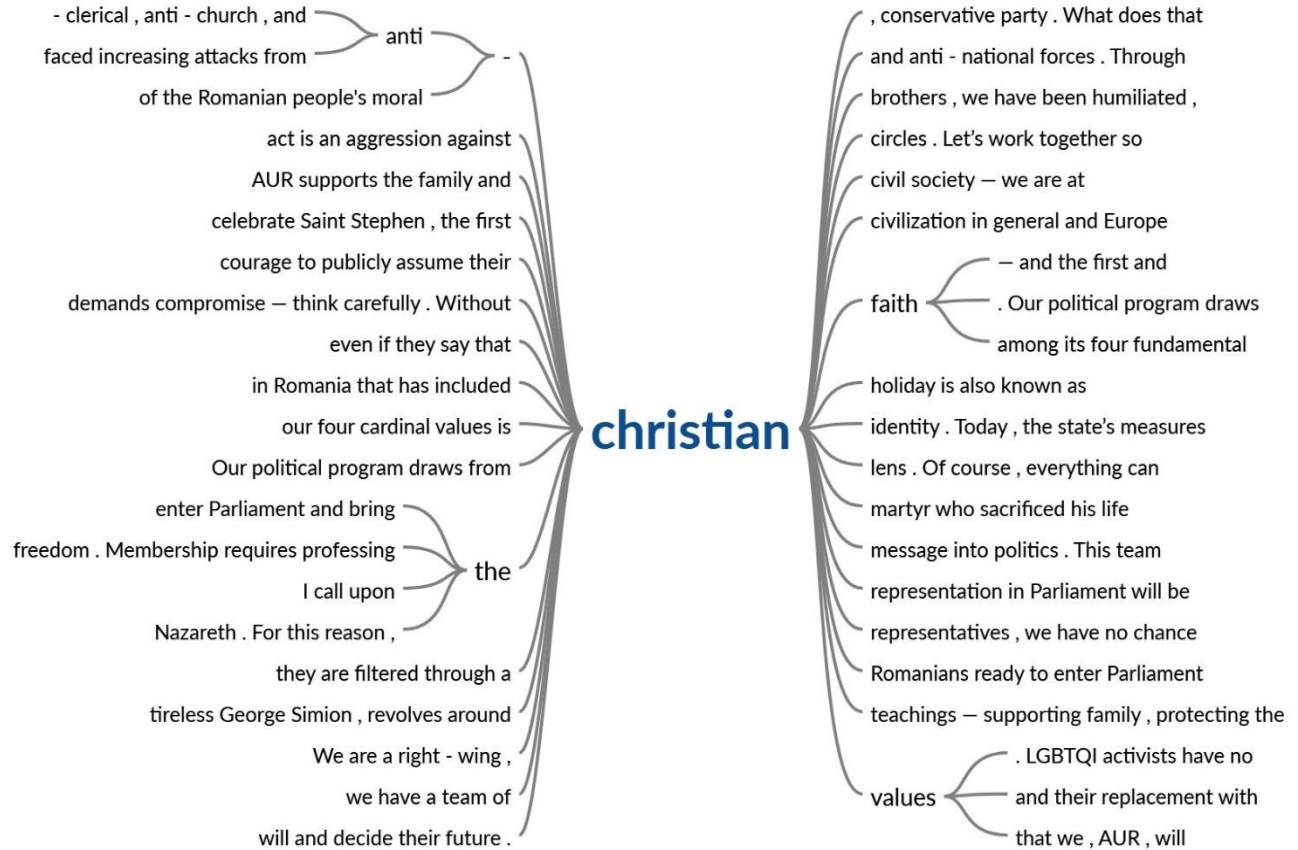
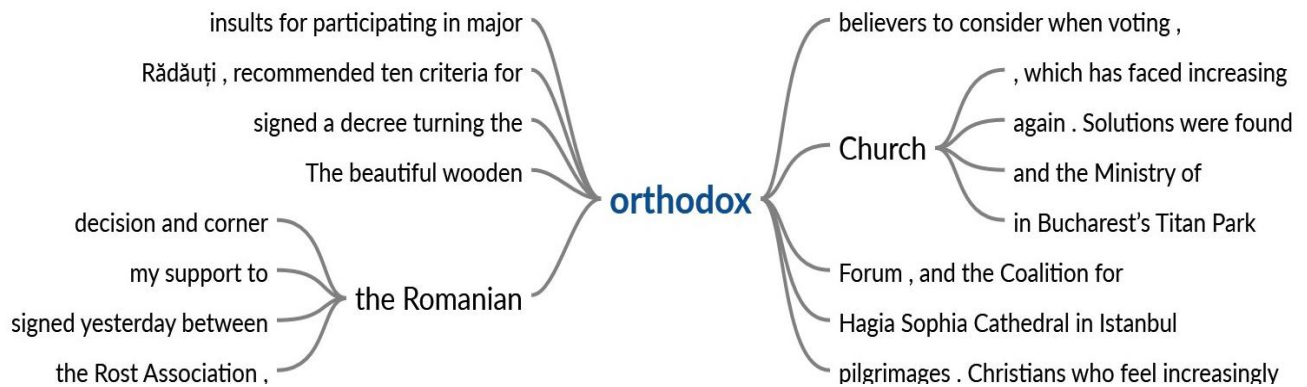


Figure 15 – Word tree for “Orthodox” in AUR’s Early Rhetoric



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