

Illiberal discourse in Romania: the year of exception 2020

The health crisis and the electoral campaigns,
vectors of hatred in public discourse.



CENTRUL PENTRU
**JURNALISM
INDEPENDENT**

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Executive summary

The present study follows and analyzes the elements that form the illiberal discourse in Romania in 2020 and its spread by political actors in the mainstream press. Data collection took place between March 15th 2020 and December 10th 2020 and was done through media monitoring. Qualitative research methods such as discourse analysis were used. Three major events structured both the data collection and the present analysis: the state of emergency declared as a result of the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, responsible for the Covid-19 pandemic, in Romania (March 16th - May 15th), local (September) and parliamentary elections (December). Exceptional moments like these see an increase in political debates in society. The results of our research show that:

- ▶ During the state of emergency and the state of alert (monitoring March-August) the most common illiberal themes were: anti-Roma racism, intolerant speech against Romanian citizens working abroad or the “diaspora”, attacks on fundamental rights such as the freedom to expression and the right to information, and anti-justice discourses. Topics such as population control and militarism were also very popular, especially in the months of the state of emergency. The actors who most commonly spread these themes are politicians (representatives of all governing political parties), both from the local and the national level.
- ▶ During the local elections (the pre-campaign and the electoral campaign itself, July 20th - September 26th, 2020), the illiberal discourse instrumentalized the perceived - or the assumed - minority identity of candidates in order to discredit them. Predominant were anti-feminist, anti-LGBTQ and xenophobic sentiments, which sought to minimize and downplay violence against women, children and minorities, weaponizing it to serve political interests. Politicians have been the main vehicle for the spread of this type of discourse.
- ▶ The illiberal discourse during the parliamentary election campaign was dominated by nationalism with an emphasis on anti-Hungarian sentiment, religious discourse against anti-Covid-19 protection measures and attempts to restrict fundamental rights such as

the right to information. Although less present in the mainstream press, the illiberal discourse during the parliamentary election campaign was very present on social media platforms, especially on Facebook and at rallies organized by the AUR party, where the most virulent illiberal topics were intensely promoted.

The rise of a far-right party in the Romanian Parliament shocked a part of the Romanian public. But the illiberal discourse promoted by organisations like AUR is not a novelty in the Romanian public space. The press plays the role of an amplifier for this speech, and often the simple quote, without a proper context, is enough to legitimize it in the eyes of the public. The responsibility of the press to present balanced messages remains and is even more vital now. Diversification of information sources and of newsrooms, media education, professionalization of the press and of politicians are essential to combat illiberal discourse in the future.

Introduction

After the exit-poll results to the Romanian parliamentary elections held on December 6th were published, the entry of a far-right party into the Parliament dominated the political analyses for days. The news that the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) obtained 9% of votes came as a shock. The mainstream Romanian press barely covered AUR, as a political contender in the upcoming elections. Their representatives were not seen at debates, they did not have electoral campaign materials running on the TV networks with national coverage, nor were they asked what books they read or what they thought of sexual education modules in schools¹. With few exceptions, they did not give interviews during the campaign, nor did they present their governing programme in press releases. For most Romanians, AUR meant nothing. For the mainstream press, it did not represent a subject relevant enough to be discussed. However, more than 500,000 Romanians at home and abroad voted for them.

There are two major questions concerning this surprising outcome. Why were we not aware of AUR and why did we not consider it relevant? And why has a political organisation that promotes an ideology of hatred become so popular? While the first question may require a methodological approach other than the discourse analysis, the latter will be partially answered through this study. The context that allowed AUR a spot on the Romanian political scene is to be considered over a long span of time. However, its success in the year 2020 - not as a right-wing movement, but as a political party - has to be understood through the lens of the pandemic. In March 2020, once the state of emergency was instated, the Center for Independent Journalism (CIJ) started monitoring illiberal themes in public speech and the way in which it was propagated in the mainstream press. Social media platforms and pages that spread disinformation or conspiracies were monitored only punctually (for example, when a specific event was heavily addressed on specific pages).

This qualitative study follows the construction of illiberal speech in Romania during exceptional events: the Covid-19 pandemic, the local and parliamentary elections. Illiberal speech was defined for this study's purpose by three main categories of elements: hate speech, speech that promotes social control and speech that attacks fundamental human rights, such as the right to freedom of expression or the right of access to information.

The results of this study show that AUR's ascension in Romania during a crisis year should not shock anyone. Nationalism and attacks on ethnic minorities have been a leitmotif in the repertoires of all the Romanian political leaders, starting with the President of Romania. Misogyny and attacks on the LGBTQ community are politically weaponized, especially during the elections, when being "gay" becomes an insult to which the reply is fervent denial. The need for order and discipline, of police intervention and punishments have been themes frequently invoked by the governing leaders in the past year and before. Fundamental rights were limited specifically through censorship or lack of access to information, but also by threatening the press or accusing it of spreading false information. As a consequence, the AUR ideology does not stand out in this discursive frame. Nationalism, neo-conservative values, intolerance to difference, social darwinism - on one hand, and order and discipline - on the other, these are all elements found within the discourse of all political parties. What sets AUR apart from other political actors, however, is the consensus regarding these values at an organizational level. While other parties have different ideological tendencies or different levels and nuances of adherence to these illiberal values, AUR seems to be, as of yet, a much more coherent ideological block.

AUR's illiberal speech coexists in the public sphere alongside other instances of illiberal speech belonging to central political actors. The relationship of the press to this type of speech leads to its amplification, in most cases. Therefore, this present study will also analyze how the press handles illiberal speech - how it manages the need to inform in relation to not reproducing hatred and intolerance. Once this context is established, AUR's ascension may still look like a surprise, but it stops being an accident.

¹ See the Recorder project "Whom do we elect? The complete catalogue of the upcoming Parliament", an extensive approach to present all the candidates to the 2020 parliamentary elections, but which fell short by only showcasing the members of already well-established political parties. The catalogue is available here: <https://recorder.ro/pe-cine-alegem-catalogul-aproape-complet-al-viitorului-parlament/>

Introduction, methodology

This study uses qualitative research methods, in order to answer the following questions:

- ✕ What are the elements of illiberal speech in Romania in 2020?
- ✕ Who are the actors who spread this type of speech in the public sphere?
- ✕ How does the mainstream Romanian press handle this speech? Which are the positive and negative practices noticed during the study?

The data collection lasted from March 15th 2020 to December 10th 2020. The events that have structured it were:

- ✕ The state of emergency (March 16th - May 15th) and the state of alert (May 16th - August 15th 2020) (224 incidents)
- ✕ The campaign and the local elections (August 28th - September 26th 2020) (79 incidents)
- ✕ The campaign and the parliamentary elections (November 6th - December 5th 2020) (91 incidents)

Alongside the media monitoring conducted by CIJ researchers, other monitoring projects were also used - journalists from Casa Jurnalistului monitored the public speech during the state of emergency² and the local elections³, and G4Media kept track of the public speech on television during the parliamentary elections⁴.

The public speech was monitored throughout the year, with a specific focus on the exceptional periods, such as the state of emergency and the electoral campaigns. These are moments when the political communication is stimulated and the opportunity for intense dialogue arises in society.

Monitored actors:

- ✕ Public figures, representatives of state institutions, such as: the President, the Prime-Minister, ministers and other figures responsible with the management of the health crisis; leaders of political parties; leaders of the local administration; representatives of influential institutions like the Police, the Army or the Romanian Orthodox Church
- ✕ Opinion leaders, such as: journalists and intellectuals with a strong public presence
- ✕ Rarely: celebrities or athletes

Monitored press organizations:

- ✕ Sites of television networks with national coverage with the highest audience during the news shows: ProTV, Digi24, Antena 1, Antena3, România TV⁵;
- ✕ National and local online press
- ✕ Specifically: social media pages of public figures, if they initiated an incident.

² <https://coronavirus.casajurnalistului.ro/>

³ <https://alegeri.casajurnalistului.ro/>

⁴ <https://www.g4media.ro/alegeri-parlamentare>

⁵ We considered the audience numbers of news shows at the beginning of the data collection phase, starting March 2020: <https://www.paginamedia.ro/2020/04/audiente-stiri-martie-2020#>.

Introduction, methodology

The qualitative research method used in this study allows the deconstruction of illiberal speech and its elements. After a pre-monitoring period where major themes were identified and after consulting specialty literature in the field, the following list of illiberal speech elements was established:

Isolationism	Racism and xenophobia	Classism	Gender and Sexuality	Authoritarianism/Statism
Anti-EU sentiments	Religious intolerance, anti-Roma and anti-Hungarian sentiments	Anti-emigrant, anti-poor, anti-socially assisted sentiments	Misogyny, homophobic, transphobic, anti-LGBTQ, anti-abortion speech	Militarism, anti-justice speech, promotion of population control and punitive measures

The study has also monitored the type of speech that attacks the fundamental rights which guarantee the freedom of the press - the right to freedom of expression and the right to access to information.

For a functional definition of illiberalism, Paweł Surowiec's & Václav Štětka's⁶ proposal was considered. They define the illiberal discourse as a neo-conservative ideology focused on patriotism, religious values, traditional values, often containing ethnocentric, racist or homophobic tendencies. We have added authoritarianism and classism to these elements, because, more often than not, those who adhere to the illiberal values support a strong police state and a weak social state. According to a study from 2014, speech which instigates to hatred is a very important part of this type of speech, and in Romania, it targets Roma, Jews, Hungarians, the sexual minorities (LGBTQ), as well as religious groups. The study also shows that the sources of this speech are most frequently the journalists, politicians and opinion leaders, but public authorities, law enforcement institutions and far-right groups as well.⁷ Local political actors are more prone to use illiberal speech than those who operate at a national level.⁸

⁶ Paweł Surowiec & Václav Štětka (2020) Introduction: media and illiberal democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, *East European Politics*, 36:1, 1-8, DOI: 10.1080/21599165.2019.1692822

⁷ Daniela Anghi și Gabriel Bădescu, 2014, *Discursul instigator la ură în România*, available here: http://www.fdsc.ro/library/files/studiuL_diu_integral.pdf

⁸ Active Watch, 2019, *Raportul privind discursul intolerant și instigarea la ură*, available here <http://blog.activewatch.ro/diverse/rapraportul-anual-cu-privire-la-discursul-intolerant-si-instigator-la-ura/>

The state of the press in 2020

Freedom and pluralism of the press. The financial sustainability of journalism in Romania is one of the issues signaled with priority and recurrence by most press observers in the country. The report “State of Romanian Mass-Media”, published by CIJ in March 2020⁹, names the major problems of the Romanian press, as defined by the interviewed journalists: “issues related to financial sustainability, the concentration of economic power in the hands of big players, political pressure and unacknowledged partisanship, both in the local and the national press.” The report adds: “The dilution of journalistic identity is one of the fundamental problems of Romanian media. Competing against social media platforms, the press chases online traffic with a never ending string of news articles, but with little focus on the public interest.” Regarding media pluralism, the latest Media Pluralism Monitor report identifies the lack of inclusivity found in the Romanian press as a high factor of risk. Access to media for minorities is very limited¹⁰, only the Hungarian community has its own media system catered to its needs, however, it is politically seized by the Hungarian political leaders in Transylvania, and lately, also by the Hungarian government of Prime-Minister Viktor Orbán¹¹. The Roma community, at least as numerous, does not have its own television, newspapers, online press or radio, being the community most exposed to scarcity, poverty, social and economic exclusion in Romania.

The financial situation of the press. The media industry found itself on an upward financial slope in 2019, with all types of media in steady growth, except for the print media, which had seen a decrease in revenue in 2019 compared to 2018. If before the health crisis growth predictions were expected, the state of emergency turned the media into one of the most vul-

nerable sectors. Media Factbook estimated a 16% decrease in the commercial media market, which would account for losses of approximately EUR 78 million, out of the total of EUR 480 million recorded by the industry in 2019¹².

Only a week after the state of emergency was declared, the Romanian Joint Industry Committee for Print and Internet (BRAT) estimated the online media’s ad revenue had dropped by 50% compared to the same period in 2019. Newspaper kiosk revenues fell to 10% of the previous year’s revenue, due to the traffic restrictions imposed by the state of emergency. Ironically, this happened while traffic doubled for online news, and the overall consumption of information published on sites increased by 54% since March 9th¹³. To combat some of the economic effects of the crisis, the Romanian government had set up a financial aid package of EUR 50 million for the press. Some media organizations have refused to access these funds, arguing that this type of funding may raise questions concerning the credibility of the press, and could limit the independence of media organizations. Recorder¹⁴, Newsweek România, G4Media¹⁵, RFI are among the organizations that have publicly stated that they will not accept money from the government through this funding scheme.

It is important to note the context of the financial state of the press and of the media pluralism and freedom, even briefly, because it offers a structural understanding to the issue of illiberal speech and its spread in Romania.

⁹ <https://cji.ro/starea-mass-media-2020/>

¹⁰ Monitoring Media Pluralism in the Digital Era: Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania and Turkey in the years 2018-2019, Country Report: Romania, available here: https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/67815/romania_results_mpm_2020_cmpf.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

¹¹ Kiss T. (2018) Media Consumption and the Hungarian-Language Media in Transylvania. In: Kiss T., Székely I., Toró T., Bárdi N., Horváth I. (eds) Unequal Accommodation of Minority Rights. Palgrave Politics of Identity and Citizenship Series.

¹² Media FactBook 2020 is available here: <http://www.mediafactbook.ro/>

¹³ <https://www.brat.ro/stiri/comunicat-de-presa-sprijin-din-partea-autorita-ilor-pentru-editorii-legitimi-de-presa-scrisa-i-online.html>

¹⁴ <https://recorder.ro/recorder-nu-se-inscrie-pe-lista-institutiilor-de-presa-care-solicita-bani-de-la-guvern-cateva-explicatii/>

¹⁵ <https://www.g4media.ro/ce-nu-ve-ti-au-zi-niciodata-de-la-presa-finantata-de-guvernul-orban-cum-au-capitalizat-liberalii-moguli-care-nu-aveau-nevoie-sau-nu-merita-ajutor.html>

The health crisis and our collective sin

The recording of the first cases of SARS-CoV-2 in Romania in February - March 2020 triggered a conversation in the public sphere about the causes and ways in which the virus entered and spread throughout the country. Although the virus was already taking hold in Europe, especially Italy, Spain and France, in Central and Eastern Europe the number of cases was significantly lower. During the first week under the state of emergency, Romania counted an average of 55 new infections per day¹⁶. With the state of emergency going into effect on March 16th¹⁷, strict measures to control the population were imposed, such as limiting the right to free movement, the right to assembly and the institutionalisation (quarantining) of people who tested positive. Attempts have also been made to limit the dissemination of “false” information about the pandemic by blocking online pages and articles. Failure to comply with these measures would have serious financial consequences, such as fines of at least 2,000 lei (approximately EUR 400) in case of going out in public without an official signed statement (detailing the identity, address, reason for being in a public space and the exact route of the person), or with this document in possession, but incorrectly filled out. In the spring of 2020, Romania was locked down at home due to a pandemic caused by a virus of which little was known, and that was wreaking havoc in several countries around the world. Fear and insecurity were the background noise of the year.

The themes of the dominant discourses during the health crisis crystallized early on in the public sphere. The queues at the customs, the cases of non-compliance with the ban on free movement, the stinging fines, the illegal gatherings - these subjects were spread like a cobweb all over the news programmes and the written content. From the topics monitored by CIJ during the state of emergency and during the first three months of the state of alert, anti-Roma racism, hatred directed towards returning Romanian emigrants and statist discourse with a strong emphasis on population control were the prevalent topics found in the public speech. If anti-Roma and anti-emigrant speeches were vehiculated among a variety of actors at national and local levels - politicians, journalists, local authorities, sports personalities, etc., the statist speech was predictably delivered by state representatives and reproduced in the media with little resistance or context.

1. ANTI-ROMA RACISM

On March 9th 2020, one week before the state of emergency was declared, the “issue” of some of the first Covid-19 victims’ Roma ethnicity was already circulating in the public sphere. At that time, most European countries had been counting a significant number of Covid-19 infections, and Romania had also identified its first case in February. However, when in Timișoara - a city in Western Romania - the first case was discovered in a high school, the Roma ethnicity of the infected student was used as reasoning to “explain” the disease. The county school inspector recorded a conversation with the prefect of Timiș, who refused at the time to consider measures to contain the spread of the virus, linking the occurrence of the case to the Roma ethnicity of the infected student. The structural prejudices of Romanian institutions came - yet again - to light during the pandemic, and determined the course of the crisis response.

An IRES¹⁸ study on how Roma are perceived during the pandemic shows that 52% of the surveyed population read or heard news about Roma during the state of emergency, 83% of them received this information from television, and 7% from social media platforms. The proportion of negative news about Roma was almost double that of positive news: 41% negative news versus 28% positive news. 28% of the respondents categorized the news as neutral. Although the Romanian public is still connected to television, social media platforms are becoming very present as a source of information, and not only among the youth. The same study shows that online media articles dealing with topics involving Roma have a higher rate of comments than articles on other topics, and they are 80% negative. Also, with the onset of the state of emergency, articles in the online environment that mention Roma saw an increase of 36%.

¹⁶ <https://www.cnsctb.ro/index.php/analiza-cazuri-confirmate-covid19/1643-analiza-cazuri-confirmate-pana-la-5-04-2020/file>

¹⁷ <https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/decrete-si-acte-oficiale/decret-semnat-de-presedintele-romaniei-domnul-klaus-iohannis-privind-instituirea-starii-de-urgenta-pe-teritoriul-romaniei>

¹⁸ Institutul Român pentru Evaluare și Strategie (The Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy), source: <https://ires.ro/articol/403/percep-ia-asupra-romilor-in-timpul--pandemiei-de-covid-19>

1.1. Ethnicity - the source and the antidote to the virus

While the Roma ethnicity was seen, at first, as a possible cause of infection with the new coronavirus, in other instances it became the protective shield against the virus. If the Roma get infected, it is because they are Roma, not because they are exposed to the virus, and if they do not get infected, it is because the “gypsy antibodies” protect them. An article published on March 20th, 2020 by Evenimentul Zilei, titled “Gypsy antibodies defeated “the Eurovirus” in the neighborhood “La Capace” in Jilava”¹⁹ best illustrates this topic. It suggests, with an ironic tone, that Roma people are immune to the new virus. The only interaction with a local, reported by the publication, shows that the villagers understand that they must keep social distance and protect themselves: “We protect ourselves for our health. It is normal to be scared, to protect our children and grandchildren from this disease.” This aspect is not further commented on, the article presenting instead, in detail, the precarious living conditions of the villagers, emphasizing the fact that they steal electricity and live on lands that they do not legally own. The comparison to the Wild West - Jilava is a locality in the immediate vicinity of Bucharest, the Romanian capital - calls upon the classic racist anti-Roma theme: savagery, associated with criminality, witchcraft, Roma bodies either protect them from the virus or make them the main spreaders. In both cases, the result is the total negligence of the authorities.

1.2. The fear of Roma people and the police raids

Cases of police interventions against Roma communities from different parts of the country: the Bolintin-Vale case²⁰, police raids in Cluj²¹, in Bucharest in the Rahova neighborhood²² din București, in Babadag²³ were widely covered in the Romanian press, both in the traditional one and on the social media platforms. The scenario of these news materials follows a similar narrative: a group of Roma people, from a neighborhood or a locality where the Roma are the majority, do not respect the measures imposed during the state of emergency. Most of the time it is related to a party or a social event. Meetings were forbidden during the state of emergency, resulting in the violation of law by those who organized or participated in these meetings. Police raids on these events were overwhelmingly characterized by violence: physical aggression against those who did not comply with the measures - the Rahova and Bolintin-Vale cases were among the most covered; acts of violence against the police; arrests; zonal quarantining.

¹⁹ <https://evz.ro/anticorpii-tiganesti-au-invins-eurovirusul-in-cartierul-la-capace-din-jilava.html>

²⁰ <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/raport-oficial-cum-se-apara-seful-politiei-din-bolintin-care-a-batut-un-rom-culcat-la-pamant-2969029>

²¹ <https://gazetadecluj.ro/revolta-romilor-de-la-spitalul-de-boli-infectioase-din-cluj-napoca-inabusita-de-pulanul-jandarmilor/>

²² <https://www.antena3.ro/actualitate/petrecere-scandal-rahova-politia-paste-2020-567343.html>

²³ <https://www.g4media.ro/povestea-cartierului-de-romi-horahai-din-orasul-tulcean-babadag-care-a-intrat-in-carantina-totala-in-2016-primarul-le-a-demolat-casele-construite-ilegal-si-a-castigat-alegerile-la-un-singur-vot.html>

Most of the time, the high volume of force is justified in the press by the use of alarming terms: revolt, war, scandal on the one hand - police batons, gunfire, hundreds of policemen and gendarmes, on the other.

“War scenes ensued in the Rahova neighborhood, where hundreds of policemen and gendarmes intervened to calm the spirits.”²⁴

“Roma revolt at the Infectious Diseases Hospital in Cluj Napoca, suppressed by the gendarmes’ baton”²⁵

The social conflict between the Roma and law enforcement is implicit. Rarely does the content of the news include the perspective of the groups targeted in the police raids, statements or interviews are taken with the representatives of state institutions, and the images presented often include law enforcement in intimidating poses, similar to an occupation force.

SOURCE: G4Media²⁶

The same study published by IRES shows that only 19% of respondents believe that the force used against the Roma is exaggerated, the rest claiming that it is appropriate or too weak. 80% of respondents believe that the Roma people have complied with the restrictions less than other ethnic groups.

The anti-Roma discourse was initiated in the media either by the violent incidents described above, or it was promoted by political figures such as former President Traian Băsescu, Traian Berbeceanu, Chief of Staff to Minister Vela²⁷, and former mayor of Târgu Mureș, Dorin Florea.

Voices condemning the violence against Roma were often the representatives of the Roma community such as Romani CRISS²⁸ and the Civic Union of Roma Youth, Emil Neia Lăcătuș, president of the Roma Party²⁹, representatives of the National Council for Combating Discrimination, such as the president of the institution, Asztalos Csaba³⁰, and voices from the activist and academic circles.

²⁴ <https://www.antena3.ro/actualitate/petrecere-scandal-rahova-politia-paste-2020-567343.html>

²⁵ <https://gazetadecluj.ro/revolta-romilor-de-la-spitalul-de-boli-infectioase-din-cluj-napoca-inabusita-de-pulanul-jandarmilor/>

²⁶ <https://www.g4media.ro/povestea-cartierului-de-romi-horahai-din-orasul-tulcean-babadag-care-a-intrat-in-carantina-totala-in-2016-primarul-le-a-demolat-casele-construite-ilegal-si-a-castigat-alegerile-la-un-singur-vot.html>

²⁷ <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/traian-berbeceanu-sef-de-cabinet-al-lui-marcel-vela-la-violenta-trebuie-raspuns-cu-violenta-2963088>

²⁸ <https://www.agerpres.ro/comunicate/2020/04/24/comunicat-de-presa-romani-criss--492595>

²⁹ <https://www.observatorbn.ro/2020/03/17/emil-neia-lacatus-apel-in-sprijinul-romilor-cea-mai-vulnerabila-etnie-la-raspandirea-coronavirusului-le-cere-autoritatilor-sa-nu-ii-excluda-in-planurile-lor-de-limitare-a-epidemei/>

³⁰ <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-23919137-ura-raspandeste-mai-repede-mai-intens-decat-coronavirusul-interviu-asztalos-csaba-seful-cncd-despre-riscurile-crizei-prin-care-trece-romania.htm>

Povestea cartierului de romi horahai din orașul Tulcea Babadag, care a intrat în carantină totală/ În 2016, primarul le-a demolat casele construite ilegal și a câștigat alegerile la un singur vot

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Cartierul Bendea din orașul Tulcea Babadag este locuit în totalitate de romi, care numără aproape o treime din populația comunității. Cartierul este situat la marginea orașului, pe drumul care leagă Tulcea de Constanța, și a fost izolat complet sâmbătă, după ce 12 persoane au fost depistate cu COVID-19.

Decizia i-a aparținut primarului care a propus ca Bendea să fie închis complet circulației în locul carantinării întregului oraș: "Azi noapte se pune problema izolării întregului oraș Babadag, iar eu nu am fost de acord cu acest lucru pentru că, cel puțin până acum, nu există cazuri de infectare cu coronavirus în rândul comunității, cu excepția familiilor din Bendea care au fost confirmate ieri", a declarat primarul Georgian Caraman pentru G4Media.

Caraman susține că romii din Bendea nu respectă restricțiile și prevederile ordonanțelor militare, așa că a fost nevoie de intervenția Armatei care a păzit efectiv locuințele familiilor din cartierul respectiv, exact ca în cazul Tândărei.

The health crisis and our collective sin

2. THE ANTI-EMIGRANT SENTIMENT

A local publication from Prahova County, The Prahovean Observatory (Observatorul Prahovean), summarizes - in one of the most violent articles collected during this research - one of the symbolic themes of the state of emergency in Romania: the migrant who has not contributed to the public health system for years, and is, after years of illegal activities in the West, returning to take advantage of the services provided by the Romanian state:

You parasitic slackers (putori³¹), you didn't pay taxes once, yet now, you come back to steal from us and kill us! How much longer should we put up with your rudeness, quarantine, hospitalization, whims and graces?³²

Illiberal discourse often contains xenophobic themes against migrants, foreigners, invaders who want to take advantage of, destroy or annihilate the local population. The best-known European political figures promoting these topics are the Hungarian Prime-Minister Viktor Orbán, the President of the French National Front, Marine le Pen, or the UKIP leader, Nigel Farage. The anti-migrant discourse is usually directed against a population of different nationality than that of the inland majority. In Romania, exceptionally, these themes are used against people who are part of the autochthonous population. The “invaders” are those Romanians who did not remain abroad once the health crisis broke out, in countries such as Italy, Spain and France, where most Romanian emigrants work. Once holding a status of heroes, who sacrificed themselves for the good of the country, considered civilizing forces, the Romanian emigrants became “parasitic slackers” who “came to kill us”.

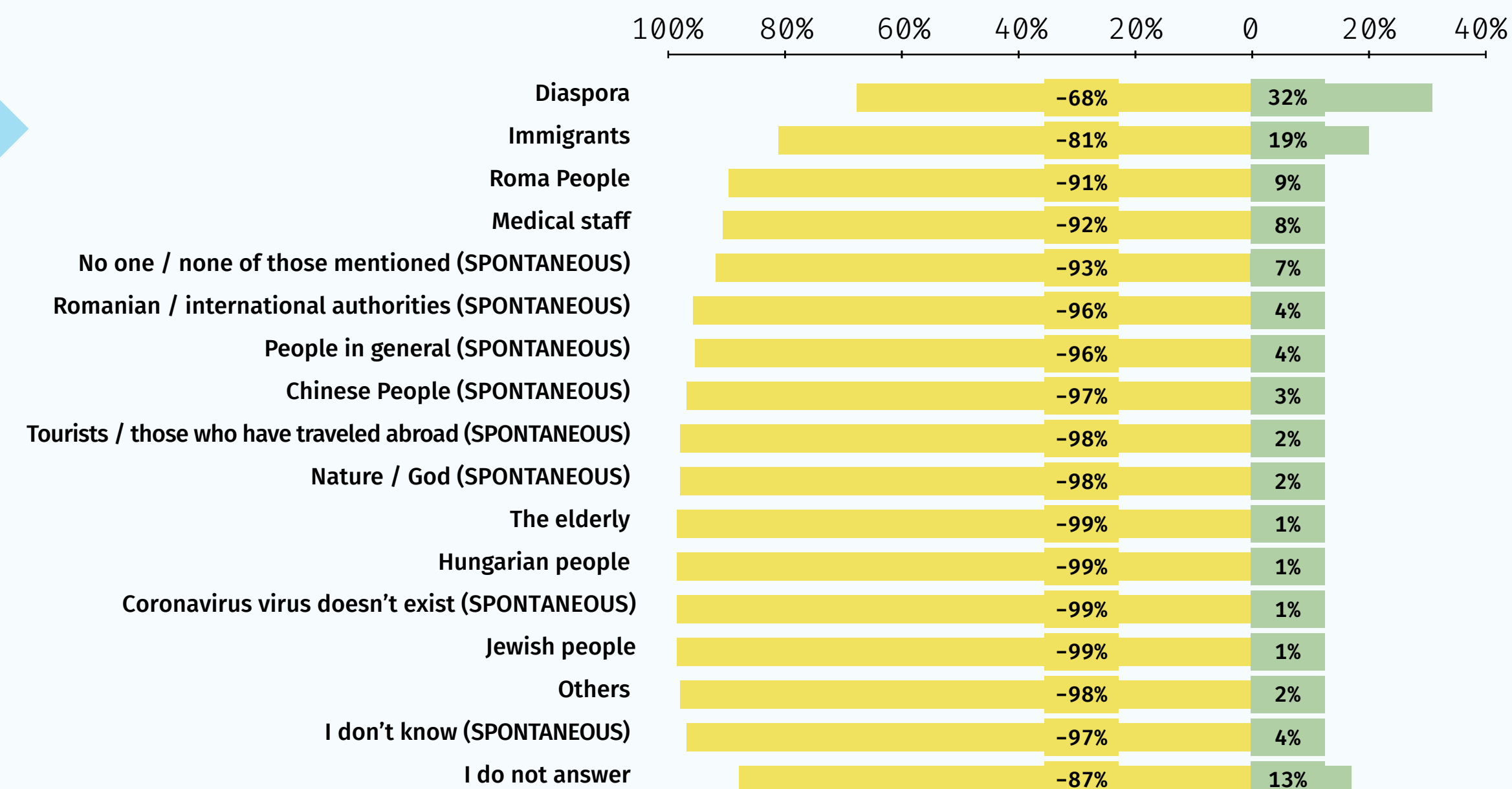
The belief that the Romanians who returned are the main spreaders of the virus was widespread in Romania. According to IRES, 32% of Romanians believe that the diaspora is at fault for the spread of the virus, 19% believe that immigrants are to blame and 9% believe that the Roma are responsible.

SOURCE: IRES study, funded by the Together Agency Foundation³³

THE PERCEPTION ABOUT ROMA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC (OPINION POLL, JUNE 2020)

Who do you believe to be most at fault for the spread of the new coronavirus in Romania?

YES NO



The hypothesis of Roma people being at fault for the spread of COVID-19 is confirmed by 1 in 10 Romanians. Roma people are the 3rd most responsible group perceived at fault for the spread of the virus, while the diaspora is considered the main factor.

³¹ It is a term used in Romanian to describe in a derogatory manner “lazy” people who refuse work

³² <https://www.observatorulph.ro/voxpública/2565173-bai-putorilor-care-n-ati-platit-un-leu-impozit-si-v-ati-intors-sa-ne-furati-iar-si-sa-ne-omorati-pana-cand-sa-va-mai-suportam-nesimtirea-carantina-spitalizarea-figurile>

³³ https://www.scribd.com/document/467755005/IRES-AGENTIA-IMPREUNA-Perceptia-Romilor-in-Timpul-Pandemiei-Covid-19-2020#from_embed

The health crisis and our collective sin / 2. THE ANTI-EMIGRANT SENTIMENT

The press describes the congestion at the entry points in the country in sensationalist terms such as "the inferno at the Nădlac Customs"³⁴, "the danger is at the country's borders"³⁵, "the assault of the diaspora on the borders"³⁶.

Doctor from the Nădlac customs: *Those who can no longer get away with theft and prostitution have come back.*³⁷

The mechanism by which this theme is propagated is that of overwhelming numbers: over 200,000 Romanians will enter or have entered the country, over 57,000 Romanians come from Italy. The images associated to this news suggest the same idea: overwhelming numbers, disorder, onrush, invasion:

SOURCE: DIGI24³⁸

This issue of painting the emigrants as responsible for the spread of the virus was triggered by transit blockages at the customs in the west of the country, but also by the statements made by President Iohannis asking Romanian emigrants to remain in the countries where they work, without considering that returning to Romania was, for most of them, a necessity, not a choice.³⁹ The Minister of Internal Affairs, Marcel Vela, "invited" them to the Covid-19 isolation centers with an ironic and disrespectful tone. Representatives of the PSD⁴⁰ (Social Democrat Party), UDMR⁴¹ (The Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romanian) și PMP⁴² (People's Movement Party) political parties also launched public attacks on Romanian workers who worked and lived abroad and were now returning to the country. Practically, the entire political spectrum in Romania had representatives with aggressive public outbursts against emigrants, without getting sanctioned in any way by their leaders or colleagues. The consequences of these attacks would be seen in the impressive election results of a new political party that promoted, in opposition and underground, the pride of being Romanian.

Anti-emigrant discourse is often interlocked with elements of anti-Roma racism and classism. For a more coherent analysis of illiberal discourse, we have created individual categories or units, such as anti-Roma racism or anti-emigrant discourse, but the reality is that these elements often merge in journalistic texts.

³⁴ <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/video-infernul-de-la-vama-nadlac-ce-se-intampla-acum-la-24-de-ore-dupa-o-situatie-cu-mare-risc-epidemiologic-1308523>

³⁵ <https://www.capital.ro/avertizarea-cumplita-a-lui-rafila-pericolul-e-la-granita-romaniei-ce-ne-va-lovi.html>

³⁶ https://adevarul.ro/news/eveniment/de-s-a-oprit-asaltul-diaspora-granite-1_5e8c9d2a5163ec4271825b03/index.html

³⁷ <https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/actualitate/medic-din-vama-nadlac-au-venit-cei-carora-nu-le-mai-merge-cu-furturile-si-prostitutia.html>

³⁸ <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/video-infernul-de-la-vama-nadlac-ce-se-intampla-acum-la-24-de-ore-dupa-o-situatie-cu-mare-risc-epidemiologic-1308523>

³⁹ <https://www.businessmagazin.ro/actualitate/apelul-presedintelui-iohannis-pentru-diaspora-oare-cat-de-multe-victime-va-face-epidemia-nu-stim-dar-depinde-de-noi-sa-fie-cat-mai-putine-19046109>

⁴⁰ https://adevarul.ro/news/politica/psd-pnl-pune-zilnic-pericol-romani-incompetenta-hotie-mii-infectati-intra-zilnic-tara-din-prostia-cabinetului-pnl-1_5f003b475163ec42719f4140/index.html

⁴¹ https://www.stiridiaspora.ro/un-deputat-udmr-cere-taxarea-romanilor-care-se-intorc-in-ara-in-aceasta-perioada_438739.html

⁴² <https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/politic/un-parlamentar-ii-critica-pe-unii-romanii-din-diaspora-zici-ca-noi-suntem-datori-la-ei.html>

VIDEO. Infernul de la Vama Nădlac. Ce se întâmplă, la 24 de ore după o situație cu mare risc epidemiologic

17.05.2020 19:03

Au trecut trei zile de la încetarea stării de urgență și instituirea stării de alertă și există deja o situație periculoasă, cu risc mare epidemiologic: **aglomeratia infernală de la Vama Nădlac, care a început sâmbătă și a continuat și duminică. Situația a părut scăpată de sub control acolo, deși au fost trimiși în vamă și jandarmii. Sunt sute de oameni care au stat 24 de ore pur și simplu claie peste grămadă, fără să respecte niciun fel de precauție împotriva coronavirusului.**

Abia redeschis traficului rutier, punctul de trecere a frontierei de vest este plin de mașini, atât pe sensul de ieșire, cât și pe cel de intrare în țară. La Vama Nădlac mii de oameni au stat înghesuiți unul într-altul, fără niciun fel de distanțare. Autoritățile române și maghiare au decis deschiderea punctului de trecere a frontierei Borș ca urmare a situației din Vama Nădlac I.

Vama Nădlac, ziua a doua. Cine sunt românii care vor să vină în țară

„Huooo, huooo” - în huiduieli și claxoane a început și a doua zi a marilor înghesuieli de la vama din Arad.

Agglomeratie infernală în vămile din vest
Peste 13.000 de români în carantină instituționalizată, 15.854 în izolare

embed <iframe src="https://www.digi24.ro/embed/stiri/actualitate/video-infernul-de-la-...>

Vor primi românii compensații pentru reacțiile adverse grave la vaccin? Răspunsul lui Valeriu Gheorghită a explicat procedura

Cum se vor vaccina profesorii, începând de miercuri. Valeriu Gheorghită a explicat procedura

Un medic cere regândirea strategiei naționale: Toate spitalele ar trebui să aibă zone COVID. Anul trecut ficăm rabat de la dezinfecție

Mii de oameni sunt înghesuiți unul într-altul, fără niciun fel de distanțare, la punctele de trecere a frontierei. Sunt românii care vor să revină în țară, odată ce carantina nu mai e obligatorie.

„Pe mine mă duc în carantină acum, după condițiile astea, mă duc cu virusul acasă. Poate m-am ferit în Anglia să nu-l iau și mă duc acasă să dau la familie”, spune **infuriat** unul dintre românii care așteaptă să treacă

The health crisis and our collective sin

3. PRO-ORDER AND ANTI-JUSTICE DISCOURSE

Another topic that marked the public discussions in Romania was the compliance to the virus prevention measures and the involvement of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) in the management of the health crisis. Once the state of emergency was instated, a series of penalties were imposed for those who did not comply with these measures. The free movement of the population was severely restricted, and access to public space was allowed only with a statement of personal accountability containing the exact route of the person and the reason for travel - and the latter was regulated by law and narrowed to a number of strictly defined circumstances. The fines for non-compliance with this measure started from 2,000 lei (approximately EUR 400), a restrictive amount even for a middle-class citizen in Romania. Once the Ministry of Internal Affairs became the main coordinator in the health crisis management⁴³, and the Strategic Communication Group one of the main communicators in relation to the press and the population, the crisis seemed less a sanitary one and more a crisis of public order.

“Cluj-Napoca will be monitored by drones. People will be checked for compliance to isolation.”⁴⁴

“10,000 soldiers took to the streets. The reason why they are equipped in battle attire”⁴⁵

VIDEO *“The army sent out soldiers and military vehicles on the streets of Bucharest. The center of the capital, packed with police, gendarmerie and military.”⁴⁶*

SOURCE: DIGI24⁴⁷

⁴³ Article 5 of the Decree no.195 from March 16th 2020 regarding the establishment of the state of emergency on Romanian territory: <http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/223831>

⁴⁴ https://www-wall-street-ro.cdn.ampproject.org/v/s/www.wall-street.ro/articol/Sanatate/253138/o-noua-era-clujenii-vor-fi-verificati-daca-respecta-izolarea-cu-drone.html-amp?usqp=mq331AQFKAGwASA=&fbclid=IwAR3mURtbuctMEIP8iRagAd0IPWzyw90VMvbj_tNio2VntCjN7jsl-ElE9U&_js_v=0.1#aoh=15864428437301&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com&_tf=De%20pe%20%251%24s&share=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.wall-street.ro%2Farticol%2FSanatate%2F253138%2Fo-noua-era-clujenii-vor-fi-verificati-daca-respecta-izolarea-cu-drone.html

⁴⁵ <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/10-000-de-militari-au-iesit-pe-strazi-de-ce-acestia-sunt-echipati-in-tinuta-de-lupta-1281031>

⁴⁶ <https://www.g4media.ro/video-armata-a-scos-pe-strazile-din-bucuresti-soldati-si-vehicule-militare.html>

⁴⁷ <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/10-000-de-militari-au-iesit-pe-strazi-de-ce-acestia-sunt-echipati-in-tinuta-de-lupta-1281031>

The screenshot shows a news article on the DIGI24.ro website. The article title is "10.000 de militari au ieșit pe străzi. De ce aceștia sunt echipați în ținută de luptă". The author is Mihnea Leșăr, and the date is 25.03.2020 15:26. The article features a photograph of a soldier in full combat gear, including a helmet and a face mask, holding a rifle. Below the photo, there is a section titled "DIN ARTICOL" with a sub-heading "De ce vedem militari cu căști pe cap și arme de asalt la vedere". The main text of the article discusses the military's role in maintaining public order during the health crisis, mentioning the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of National Defense. It also includes a quote from Colonel Spănu, head of the Information Directorate of the Ministry of National Defense, regarding the military's contribution to the effort.

The image presented by most news programs was that of a country under siege, where the danger of an attack on the physical integrity of the citizen was imminent. The press has rarely challenged the decision which enabled the military to manage the health crisis and enact control over an airborne virus.

Through the voices of President Iohannis, Prime Minister Ludovic Orban and Interior Minister Vela, calls for compliance were omnipresent. The number of policemen on the streets, the number of fines and the countless cases of violation of restrictions had become the daily topics in the news. Calls for compliance are not authoritative in themselves, but when they are coupled with punitive measures and “threats”, they create the image of a state that controls only through punishment, or using fear as motivation. This image that was painting the law enforcement as a necessary manager of the health crisis was seriously affected once the Ombudsman contested the state’s punitive measures in the Romanian Constitutional Court (CCR), and fines that were too high - and lacked transparent enforcement procedures - were declared unconstitutional. Forced quarantining of infected people and the state of alert which succeeded the state of emergency were also declared unconstitutional. Following these decisions, Prime Minister Ludovic Orban (then the leader of PNL - National Liberal Party) launched a series of attacks on the Ombudsman, calling the institution “the enemy of the people”⁴⁸, demanding the dismissal of Renate Weber⁴⁹, accusing the Constitutional Court of thwarting the fight against the pandemic⁵⁰ and claiming that these institutions are subservient to the Social Democratic Party⁵¹.

VIDEO The government has adopted the law project on quarantine, isolation and compulsory hospitalization. Orban: *“It is an unprecedented situation, CCR is a PSD branch.”*

Promoting anti-justice discourse alongside pro-order discourse is a dangerous combination, because it legitimizes the state’s strong arm to the detriment of the one overseeing precisely the potential abuse of power. Once the health crisis had been defined as a crisis of public order and the number of infections had increased, whom do we hold accountable? The intuitive answer is: those who do not respect the public order. And if we take into account the number of fines applied during the state of emergency, it comes easy to conclude that the enemy is the country’s population itself.

⁴⁸ <https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/politic/orban-in-ultimele-luni-avocatului-poporului-s-a-transformat-in-dusmanul-poporului.html>

⁴⁹ <https://www.agerpres.ro/politica/2020/06/22/orban-renate-weber-nu-mai-este-de-mult-avocatul-poporului-ne-straduiam-sa-obtinem-sustinere-pentru-demiterea-sa--527440>

⁵⁰ <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/autoritatile-nu-ii-mai-pot-tine-pe-romani-in-izolare-si-carantina-pacientii-covid-au-inceput-sa-plece-din-spitale-incepand-de-vineri-1332925>

⁵¹ <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/proiectul-de-lege-privind-carantina-in-sedinta-de-guvern-3056637>

4. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION

A number of restrictive measures against the press have to be mentioned, although they are not *per se* part of the discourse analysis during the state of emergency.

4.1. The right to expression

The state of emergency was initially introduced in Romania by Presidential Decree no.195, for 30 days, on March 16th 2020, and was renewed on April 14th for another 30 days. The text of the presidential decree restricted fundamental rights, such as the right to free movement, the right to strike, the right to family and private life. The decree contained some directives which would have concerning effects on the freedom of expression. **Paragraph 54** of the presidential decree mentioned the possibility of blocking the content of online publications or blocking users' access to them, if it was deemed that "the content promotes false news about the evolution of COVID-19 and about the protection and prevention measures." Initially a public institution with technical tasks and without any expertise in fundamental rights, the National Authority for Administration and Regulation in Communications (ANCOM) was tasked with deciding what content was considered harmful and would have to be blocked as a consequence. Subsequently, the responsibility of the decision-making was transferred to the Strategic Communication Group (GCS), yet again another institution without expertise in matters that pertain to freedom of expression. Moreover, the expertise of GCS members was and still is not known, as the identities of the group have not been made public, despite specific FoI requests made by the CIJ and other civil society and media organizations. During the state of emergency, 15 websites were suspended and two others were forced to delete published articles from their platforms. The suspension ceased immediately after the state of emergency was lifted.

Attacks on the freedom of expression also came from the Police. Two cases of such violations were reported in Florești, Cluj-Napoca County. Iulia Ungureanu from Florești, a student in Cluj-Napoca, was fined for criticizing the way the mayor managed the health crisis⁵², and a man was beaten after displaying an anti-police banner on the balcony of his house⁵³. The local press reported other cases in which Facebook users were fined under Law 61/1991 for insults directed at the Police. Thus, in Borșa, Șișești (Maramureș) and Hârlău (Iași) three people got fined after criticizing the Police for the way they managed the enforcement of restrictions imposed by the state of emergency, in all cases insulting language was directed at the institution. The local press in Satu Mare informed that seven people were fined based on the same law for insults brought to the institution, although it does not specify the insults.⁵⁴

⁵² <https://www.apador.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Sesizare-MAI-abuz-politie-locala-Floresti.pdf>

⁵³ <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/video-barbat-din-cluj-incatusat-de-agenti-pentru-ca-a-pus-pe-balcon-un-banner-in-care-critica-politia-2966569>

⁵⁴ <https://www.presasm.ro/amenda-mare-pentru-un-cetatean-dupa-ce-a-injurat-politia-pe-facebook/>

4.2. The right to information

A direct attack on the right to information was the doubling of the response time of public institutions to requests for public information, from 10 to 20 days in the case of simple requests, from 30 to 60 days in the case of complex requests, and from 24 to 48 hours in case of requests from the press. In practice, the activity of information provision was *de facto* suspended. In two cases documented by the press, the County Health Directorates - DSP Cluj and DSP Botoșani - refused to respond to requests for information during the crisis. An order to the prefects from the Ministry of Internal Affairs dated March 21st 2020 forbade the publication of local information regarding the number of applied COVID tests, the number of people who tested positive, the state of health of hospitalized patients and the locations where quarantine centers would be set up. Other institutions - including the Ministry of Internal Affairs - have simply ignored requests for information.

There were also reports of threats to medical staff who had contact with the press and provided information about the health crisis management, such as the manager of the Infectious Diseases Hospital in Iași who got fired⁵⁵, or the case of a union leader of the Timiș Police, who was put under disciplinary investigation and then placed in reserve when he spoke publicly about the practices of encouraging policemen to give as many fines as possible⁵⁶. Subsequently, following the public reactions of disapproval to this decision, the policeman was reinstated in his job.

The right to free speech and information are not elements of illiberal discourse per se, but are part of the instruments used by illiberal leaders in order to promote their agenda and stay in power. Access to information allows the public and journalists to verify the statements, promises, actions of political leaders, and freedom of expression offers the opportunity to challenge those in a position of power. Once they are restricted, the power of political elites is less controlled. At the discursive level, attacks on these fundamental rights signal a trend towards impunity and are a reliable indicator of illiberal tendencies in political power.

⁵⁵ <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/mihnea-hurmuzache-destituit-sef-de-sectie-carmen-dorobat-3054402>

⁵⁶ <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/valer-kovacs-politist-ipj-timis-si-lider-de-sindicat-sefi-pun-presiuni-pe-noi-sa-dam-mai-multe-amenzi-in-starea-de-urgenta-2954262>

Local elections and the rebirth of traditional values

Originally scheduled for June 28th, 2020, the elections for local administration in Romania were postponed due to the pandemic and held on September 27th, a date established by law no. 135/2020⁵⁷. The elections took place in an extremely difficult political context, both in terms of the health crisis and because of political tensions between a minority government and the parliamentary majority⁵⁸.

The organization of the elections had been challenged by various politicians. The first voice that reacted and pleaded for the postponement of the local elections belonged to Ionuț Moșteanu, USR vice-president and spokesman of the USR-PLUS Alliance (centre-right), who called the organization of the elections an “irresponsibility” and asked President Iohannis to consult with the parties⁵⁹. A few days later, the USR-PLUS Alliance sent a press release in which it drew attention to the fact that the organization of local elections in the given pandemic conditions could influence the participation of citizens, and this would alter the democratic process as a consequence⁶⁰. The leader of ProRomânia (centre-left), Victor Ponta, claimed that it would be necessary to postpone the local elections because the people involved in their organization would be exposed to a high risk of infection⁶¹. In early September, voices of PSD (centre-left) leaders, such as Marcel Ciolacu, said that local elections should be postponed for the same reasons that had to do with the danger to the population during the pandemic and accused the government of “double standards” - if schools will not be reopened, why would the elections be organized?⁶² Rareș Bogdan, the vice-president of PNL (centre-right), was among the only voices in PNL who requested the postponement of the local elections, also for reasons related to public health⁶³.

In Romania, local public authorities are elected by direct vote, based on a single ballot, for a term of 4 years.

Despite the warnings, the turnout on September 27th at the elections did not decrease significantly: 46.62% of eligible citizens voted, only 2 points less than in the 2016 local elections. Although Bucharest had the lowest voter turnout in the country, 36.92%, it was still 4 points higher than in 2016.⁶⁴

The Bucharest City Hall was won by the independent candidate Nicușor Dan, supported by the main right-wing parties (PNL and USR-PLUS Alliance), with 42.81% of the cast ballots.⁶⁵ At national level, PNL scored a percentage of 34.58% on local Town Halls, PSD - 30.34%, and USR-PLUS - 6.58%.

Illiberal discourse in local elections

In the pre-campaign period, as well as during the election campaign itself (July 20th - September 26th, 2020⁶⁶), the illiberal discourse aimed specifically to instrumentalize the perceived - or otherwise affirmed - minoritarian or underrepresented identity in order to discredit candidates. Predominant were anti-feminist, anti-LGBTQ and xenophobic discourses, which sought to minimize and downplay the violence against women, children and minorities, weaponizing it to serve political interests. Politicians were the main vehicle of this type of speech, as well as its source, and the press played an important role in saturating the public sphere with illiberal messages, by simply quoting politicians' statements, without context or critical framing.

⁵⁷ <http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/227889>

⁵⁸ <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/guvernul-orban-i-este-demis-urmeaza-guvernul-orban-ii-ce-se-intampla-mai-departe-1255611>

⁵⁹ <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/un-lider-usr-cere-amanarea-alegerilor-locale-pe-fondul-pandemiei-/30730245.html>

⁶⁰ <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/usr-plus-cere-am%C3%A2narea-alegerilor-%C8%99i-consult%C4%83ri-cu-iohannis-/30753968.html>

⁶¹ <https://www.digi24.ro/alegeri-locale-2020/victor-ponta-si-a-unit-fortele-cu-robert-negoita-la-primaria-capitalei-dar-vrea-amanarea-alegerilor-locale-1342120>

⁶² <https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/politic/ciolacu-vrea-amanarea-alegerilor-locale-daca-nu-se-deschid-scolile-in-14-septembrie.html>

⁶³ <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/rare-bogdan-prim-vicepresedinte-pnl-spune-ca-alegerile-locale-din-septembrie-s-ar-putea-amana-1343089>

⁶⁴ <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/ce-arata-prezenta-la-vot-/30860145.html>

⁶⁵ <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/rezultatele-finale-ale-alegerilor-locale-2020-3147242>

⁶⁶ The articles were collected during July-September 2020.

Local elections and the rebirth of traditional values

1. RACISM AND XENOPHOBIA

Anti-Roma racism also made its reappearance, this time in the electoral discourse. If at the beginning of the pandemic the Roma were the ones who spread the virus, during the local elections we return to the already established racist rhetoric among Romanian politicians, through which the Roma community “sells itself for votes”, “does not work” and must be “cleaned” from Romanian territory. Roma people are reduced to stereotypes, and the “danger” they represent for Romania is instrumentalized to win votes.

During an electoral year, in pre-campaign period, the Iași City Hall demanded the evacuation of a Roma family from the house they occupied under the legal basis of a disability certificate, because “the neighbors get no peace” and “their children are terrorizing them”⁶⁷. There have been several complaints of public disorder against the family. The author of the article, who uses racist terms such as “gypsies”, informs us that the incumbent mayor, Mihai Chirica, ordered the demolition of several buildings with seismic risk since 2017, buildings occupied by “gypsy families that caused disturbance in the area”, reason for which the area was declared a risk, “due to criminal activity”. Moreover, the same journalist writes about a multifunctional center for “gypsy families”⁶⁸ waiting to be built by the Iași City Hall. There is, therefore, a recurring theme in the behavior of the mayor’s office under the leadership of Mihai Chirica, reactivated before the elections: “cleaning” neighborhoods of Roma families, and even veiled facilitation of segregation of the Roma community in Iași - a form of institutionalized racism, which, especially during a pandemic, endangers the lives of these Romanian citizens.

On August 18th, the online newspaper *Bugetul.ro*⁶⁹ writes that, in a recording published online, Nicolae Giugea, the PNL candidate for Craiova City Hall, “promises social aid from public funds (...) to Roma who complain that they do not have a pension

due to the fact that they did not work”. The Roma are then blamed for this approach and reduced to the stereotype of the lazy person who refused work, the one who does not deserve social assistance, the one who is burdening the state, although the state does not offer the Roma community real chances at social and economic inclusion. Not only does the article ignore the socio-economic implications of the situation presented through anti-social security discourse, a classist discourse in itself, but it is also an example for the intentional (re)production and propagation of racist language (“gypsies”). The journalist from *Bugetul.ro* retrieves the article from *stiripesurse.ro*⁷⁰, where the text does not contain racist terms such as “gypsies”, but in his article this racist term finds a place in the sensationalist title and in the racist text.

An illustrative episode of the high degree of toxicity and injustice that hate speech brings, especially the anti-Roma one, is the use of negative associations of the Roma ethnicity with the purpose of intimidating and discrediting political candidates. The USR-PLUS candidate for Slatina City Hall, Florin Duca, is questioned by Daniel Militaru, the president of PLUS Olt⁷¹, about his alleged name change, writes *Libertatea*⁷². Militaru insinuated that Duca would have changed his name in 1997 from Fieraru to Duca. The discussion between the two brings up the topic of Roma ethnicity, Militaru asking Duca if he is “of ethnicity”, a euphemism frequently used, often ironically, to designate the Roma ethnicity. However, their dialogue crafts the association of the Roma ethnic group with “criminals, sweepers, etc.”, as if the Roma people were not worthy of actively participating in politics. Militaru claims that in 2014, a person named Fieraru Florin from Slatina was convicted of tax evasion and believes that Duca Florin is that person. The PLUS Ethics Commission ruled that Militaru’s insinuation of Duca was discriminatory and that Militaru was to be suspended from office. Even if such racist displays are denounced and charged consequently among the political elites, the Roma ethnicity is still abstracticized and reduced to a political campaign tool.

⁶⁷ <https://www.bzi.ro/primaria-iasi-a-cerut-evacuarea-unei-familii-de-tigani-din-centru-au-terorizat-profesorii-arhitectii-si-medicii-din-zona-4007832>

⁶⁸ <https://www.bzi.ro/zona-cicoarei-va-avea-un-centru-multifunctional-pentru-familiiile-de-tigani-licitatia-pentru-serviciile-de-asistenta-tehnica-a-fost-anulata-4011468>

⁶⁹ <https://www.bugetul.ro/inregistrarea-care-arunca-n-aer-scena-politica-pnl-le-ofera-pensii-tiganilor-de-pest-60-de-ani-pentru-a-obtine-votul-comunitatii-se-poate-face-treaba-asta/>

⁷⁰ https://www.stiripesurse.ro/video-candidatul-pnl-la-primaria-craiova-promite-ajutoare-sociale-pe-post-de-pensii-romilor-care-au-decis-sa-il-voteze_1496955.html

⁷¹ Within the USR-PLUS Alliance, the two otherwise distinct parties - USR and PLUS - had decided through various internal procedures whose candidate runs for which office, as a representative of the alliance. The episode reminisced here happens during an internal online meeting of the PLUS Olt council with PLUS party members on May 26th 2020, 2 months prior to the pre-campaign period.

⁷² <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/usr-plus-penalizeaza-un-sef-care-a-interogat-un-candidat-te-ai-nascut-de-etnie-cum-ca-sa-stim-si-noi-eu-te-intreb-ca-esti-candidatul-nostru-3107168>

On election day, the incumbent mayor of Șeica Mare, Sibiu, is filmed explaining to a group of Roma people⁷³ how to vote for him, how to stamp the ballot. The mayor was fined⁷⁴. The press reports this incident in a simplistic way, blaming the Roma and ignoring the reality of the high degree of illiteracy among Romanian citizens of Roma ethnicity⁷⁵ due to unequal access to education, a fact speculated by politicians in their own interest.

The anti-Roma racist discourse disregards, dehumanizes and uses Roma people to serve the purposes of the political class. It creates a rhetoric that normalizes discrimination against Roma and legitimizes aggression as a way to maintain the social order. In an article by Libertatea⁷⁶ we find out about the ethnic tensions in Borca, Neamț County, where the Romanian ethnics threaten the Roma community with expulsion or arson, as revenge for the deed committed by four young Roma who beat up a young Romanian and stole his phone. We find out that a protest was organized three days before the local elections, where both the candidates for the local administration from AUR (far-right) and ProRomânia (centre-left), as well as the incumbent mayor, the teacher and other locals expressed their opinions against the Roma. We also find out about the practiced speech on social media platforms - aggressive, dehumanizing the Roma people - “rats”, instigating the mobilization of the Romanian ethnics in order to take matters into their own hands to enact justice where they consider that the authorities had failed. Because it presents the context of the ethnic tensions in Borca, the role of the local elites in instigating conflict and racial hatred, the structural conditions that allow the reproduction of this discourse, and the role of social media platforms in its propagation, the article published in Libertatea is an example of good practices in reporting about racism in the press.

*“Honestly, I would take 20 liters of gasoline and set them on fire like rats! God forgive me!
Then I would personally call the police!”*

*“Without witnesses, a few broken legs and hands, you’ll see how they calm down or
provoke us so hard that we’ll set them on fire.”*

*“Borca had worthy men, gentlemen and fathers, do not let fear enter your children,
if there is no mayor and police, use classic methods. That works.”*

SOURCE: Libertatea

This discourse is constantly present in the public sphere and is responsible for igniting social conflicts by intensifying the anti-Roma statements and attitudes displayed purposefully by politicians and reproduced by the press without employing a critical framework on these incidents.

⁷³ <https://www.zf.ro/politica/alegeri-locale-2020-un-primar-din-judetul-sibiu-a-fost-filmat-in-19579649>

⁷⁴ <https://sibiu100.ro/eveniment/204734-primarul-din-seica-mare-amendat-cu-1-400-de-lei-ce-incidente-electorale-s-au-mai-produs-in-judet/>

⁷⁵ https://www.economica.net/analfabetismul-pe-etnii-romanii-stau-mai-rau-decat-maghiarii-romii-sunt-in-top_57263.html

⁷⁶ <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/metoda-bolintin-romanii-grup-facebook-propun-expulzarea-incendierea-romilor-comuna-neamt-3148106?fbclid=IwAR0tBZKItiXh3NsF688uKJb7zBk4xxF3Brij-149U-uHe052DKjlogMhg5Q>

Metoda Bolintin. Românii dintr-un grup de Facebook propun expulzarea sau chiar incendierea romilor dintr-o comună din Neamț

Pe 20 septembrie, într-o zi de duminică, Damian, un adolescent de 16 ani din comuna Borca, județul Neamț, a fost tâlhărit și bătut de patru tineri romi, cu vârste între 17 și 23 de ani. Băiatul, căruia i s-a furat telefonul mobil, s-a ales cu traumatism cranio-cerebral, hematom cranian și contuzie coloana cervicală.

Agresorii au fost reținuți chiar a doua zi și trimiși în arest preventiv, pentru 30 de zile.

Dar, pentru unii săteni, intervenția autorităților nu a fost satisfăcătoare.

În câteva zile, oamenii au început să discute despre expulzarea romilor din comună sau chiar despre incendierea lor.

“Trebuie să se ieie singuri și să plece de acolo de unde o venit, de acolo din India (...) Trebuie expulzați”, a spus un bărbat tânăr într-un live.

“Sincer, eu aș lua 20 de litri de benzină și le-aș da foc ca la șobolani! Să mă ierte Dumnezeu! După care eu personal aș suna la poliție!”, a scris o femeie pe un grup de Facebook.

“Revolta etnică”

Mai întâi a avut loc un protest, prezentat în presă ca o “revoltă etnică”. “Localnicii acuză membri ai comunității rome că le-au făcut traiul insuportabil”, a titrat Adevărul. Protestul, organizat de un candidat la primărie, s-a desfășurat pe 24 septembrie, cu trei zile înaintea alegerilor locale. Au participat peste 100 de localnici.

O nouă boală gravă este tot mai întâlnită în rândul copiilor, odată cu izbucnirea pandemiei. Părinții trebuie să fie foarte atenți

Previțiuni astrologice pentru perioada 27 februarie – 5 martie 2021. Lună Plină în Fecioară. Marte va intra în zodia Gemenilor | VIDEO URANISSIMA

Ce job-uri a avut Gina Pistol înainte să fie celebră. N-ai fi zis că va deveni vedetă

Dacă nu ai economii care să-ți acopere un an, e bine să fii prudent. Află tot ce trebuie să știi despre economisire (Publicitate)

Local elections and the rebirth of traditional values

2. GENDER AND SEXUALITY

When we talk about illiberal discourse, we cannot ignore the dimensions of gender and sexuality. With a perspective that engages strong religious beliefs, during the local elections we find some elements that operate at a societal discursive level in the spirit of gender minority exclusion, in the spirit of trivializing rape and pedophilia and violating women's sexual autonomy. In this space, the spreaders of the illiberal discourse seek to depreciate the quality of the woman as a political candidate and use gender identity that does not fall within cis/heteronormativity as a political weapon.

2.1. The trivialization of sexual violence

Bogdan Davidescu, former PSD mayor in the commune of Șotrițe, Prahova, ran again for mayor in 2020, although he had been definitively convicted of "child pornography"⁷⁷. He was reelected⁷⁸. PNL Mayor Damian Butnariu from the Mogoșești-Siret commune, Iași, ran again for mayor after revelations about his involvement in a human trafficking case opened 13 years ago, where he was accused of having paid to "have sex" with trafficked underage girls⁷⁹. He was also reelected⁸⁰. How does the political class handle the sexual violence committed by its members? Davidescu and Butnariu are excluded from the political parties they were part of prior to the discovery of the acts they had committed. The political parties openly distance themselves from the behavior of their morally incompatible candidates, but do not enlist candidates in the run for the respective communes⁸¹, offering de facto free rein to former members for a new term. Moreover, the campaign materials of the now independent candidates used the same graphics as those of the parties they were members of⁸², clearly suggesting closeness to the parties in question, PSD and PNL⁸³.

SOURCE: campinatv.ro

There are also numerous articles in the press that document rape cases but do not make a clear distinction between consensual intercourse and rape, using expressions that romanticize rape, or normalize it. Libertatea writes, for example, that Butnariu "made love to underage girls"⁸⁴. The language used in the article describes an alternative reality, in which raping a kidnapped and trafficked underage girl is just another way in which two people can engage in sexual intercourse. Similar to the situation in Șotrițe⁸⁵, in Mogoșești-Siret, the villagers do not consider that Butnariu would be unworthy for a new candidacy, nor that he had committed inadmissible acts, but they do hold the trafficked girls at fault for what happened⁸⁶. And this apologetic speech, which is quick to rather blame the victim than the rapist, contributes to maintaining gender inequality, making women vulnerable in the Romanian space.



⁷⁵ <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/un-fost-primar-psd-condamnat-pentru-pornografie-infantila-candideaza-din-nou-instanta-nu-mi-a-interzis-dreptul-asta-3103493>

⁷⁶ <https://www.actualitateaprahoveana.ro/editia-electronica/stiri-locale/condamnat-reales-invalidat-primarul-din-sotrite-a-fost-refuzat-de-instanta-30261>

⁷⁷ <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/primarul-iesean-care-a-intretinut-relatii-sexuale-cu-adolescente-traficate-candideaza-din-nou-3103921>

⁷⁸ <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/primarul-din-mogosesti-siret-care-a-intretinut-relatii-sexuale-cu-doua-minore-chiar-in-primarie-a-castigat-un-nou-mandat-3139308>

⁷⁹ <https://www.g4media.ro/primarul-din-judetul-iasi-care-a-facut-sex-in-sediul-primariei-cu-minore-traficate-candideaza-din-nou-folosind-culorile-pnl-oficial-a-fost-exclus-din-partid-in-ianuarie-dar-liberalii-nu-au-candida.html>

⁸⁰ https://campinatv.ro/News/Article/6749620a-7b2a-4c09-a6c7-0f110a4f7939_bogdan-davidescu-condamnat-pentru-pornografie-infantila-candideaza-pentru-un-nou-mandat-de-primar-la-sotrite

⁸¹ <https://www.g4media.ro/primarul-din-judetul-iasi-care-a-facut-sex-in-sediul-primariei-cu-minore-traficate-candideaza-din-nou-folosind-culorile-pnl-oficial-a-fost-exclus-din-partid-in-ianuarie-dar-liberalii-nu-au-candida.html>

⁸² <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/primarul-din-mogosesti-siret-care-a-intretinut-relatii-sexuale-cu-doua-minore-chiar-in-primarie-a-castigat-un-nou-mandat-3139308>

⁸³ <https://www.vice.com/ro/article/k7qv4z/primarul-condamnat-pentru-pornografie-infantila-din-sotrite>

⁸⁴ <https://recorder.ro/video-partidul-iarta-orice-pacat-pnl-il-tine-in-brate-pe-primarul-care-a-facut-sex-cu-minore/>

2.2. Women candidates and sexist terms

Nicușor Dan, an independent candidate for Bucharest City Hall, makes the following statement at the moment of presenting a favorable opinion poll on the vote intention, while his main opponent, Gabriela Firea (PSD) was 2.5 points behind him:

“The fight for values, in which I want my little girl to not be told that a tramp (panaramă) is some big star, yes? And, unfortunately, we are tying. Every society has its tramps⁸⁷, (panarame), but in a normal society they live somewhere in the outskirts of the city.”

These statements come in the context in which Nicușor Dan claims that the fight for the Bucharest City Hall would be between “the propaganda apparatus that claims that Bucharest has never done better”, referring to what the authorities declare under Firea’s leadership, and people who believe in certain values through which they must regain their dignity and “resistance [...] to rudeness, to superficiality, to imposture.”⁸⁸

Accused of sexism by the civil society⁸⁹, he claims after the backlash that he uses the term “panaramă” with the meaning of “ridiculous person seeking scandal”⁹⁰, and not in the deeply demeaning and misogynistic sense - a woman of loose morals⁹¹. Regardless of the meaning that Dan attributes to the word “panaramă”, his statements have exclusionary tendencies, an attitude which is, in fact, illiberal.

Gabriela Firea, the incumbent mayor at the time and Dan’s main opponent, uses the feminist trend that denounces his sexism and declares:

“I tried to make their lives (women’s) as easy as possible. They’re struggling! They’re not panarame, as one candidate says. They’re mothers, grandmothers, daughters, wives, friends, girlfriends. Like me.”

SOURCE: EFOR

⁸⁷ According to the Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language (DEX), the term “panaramă” is defined as: 1. a ridiculous person, who seeks scandal in an aberrant manner; 2. scandal, ruckus; 3. a woman of loose morals. (<https://dexonline.ro/intrare/panarama%4%83/309396>) Most online Romanian-English dictionaries translate “panaramă” to sexist, pejorative terms such as: skank, tramp, whore, floozy.

⁸⁸ https://www.gandul.ro/stiri/nicutor-dan-despre-valori-si-apa-calda-fiecare-societate-are-panaramele-ei-dar-intr-o-societate-normala-ele-stau-unde-la-periferie-19507665#live_close

⁸⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/Feminism.Romania/posts/3387421981325338>

⁹⁰ One of the definitions found in the DEX verbatim.

⁹¹ The term is rather used in this sense by the majority of Romanian speakers, and thus, most associations to this term pertain to sexism - which is signaled and condemned by the civil society.

English

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Raport și harta interactivă – Participarea femeilor la alegerile locale din 2020

Participarea redusă a femeilor la viața politică din România rămâne o realitate și runda asta de alegeri. La localele de săptămâna viitoare situația nu s-a schimbat mult față de 2016, după cum vom arăta mai jos, cu toate că au apărut partide noi în competiție.

Instituțional lucrurile stau chiar mai prost: birourile de circumscripție publică acum mai puține date decât în iunie 2016. **Între informațiile care s-au scos se află data nașterii și genul candidaților!** Aceștia sunt indicatori importanți pentru a vedea dacă un candidat are vârsta minimă de 23 de ani și poate participa în aceste alegeri; ori dacă partidele politice respectă reglementările și bunele practici privind reprezentarea ambelor sexe pe listele electorale. Mai mult, aceste numere ar trebuie adunate și publicate conform documentelor internaționale la care România a aderat.

În anul 2016, din 267.242 de candidați la locale (nivel județean și local, combinat) doar 57.149 (21,38%) au fost femei. Acum în 2020, cum spuneam, asemenea informație oficială lipsește. **EFOR a proiectat deci un set de algoritmi și a analizat astfel lista celor 256.038 candidați înscrși pentru funcții județene sau locale, ca să putem afla câți din ei sunt femei.** Metoda poate genera unele erori, dar estimăm că ele sunt neglijabile. În tot cazul, e singura cale pentru a suplini dezinteresul și lipsa de transparență în această privință a instituțiilor ce gestionează procesul electoral (birourile electorale, Autoritatea Electorală Permanentă).

[Citește raportul integral aici.](#) (pdf)

Baza de date construită de noi se găsește [aici](#).

Concluziile analizei EFOR:

- Procentul de femei care candidează în alegerile locale a crescut față de iunie 2016, însă nesemnificativ, doar cu 1.5%, de la 21.4% la 22.9%
- Distribuția teritorială pe județe, însumând toate cele patru tipuri de funcții alese aflate în competiție pe 27 septembrie, e prezentată în Fig. 1. Diferențele sunt destul de însemnate și **nu se observă vreo corelație cu nivelul de dezvoltare sau regiunea istorică:** județe din diverse colțuri ale țării, cu forță economică și grade diferite de modernizare socială, se pot găsi atât în top, cât și în coada listei. În cinci județe procentul candidaților femei a scăzut față de 2016, dar variațiile sunt foarte mici.

1. Candidații femei în alegerile locale, total județ+localități

Județ	2020 (%)	variația față de 2016 (%)
BUCHUREȘTI	34.3%	
CONSTANȚA	26.7%	
TULCEA	26.5%	
HUNEDOARA	26.1%	
ARAD	25.1%	
BOTOȘANI	24.9%	
BACĂU	24.8%	
TIHÎȘ	24.8%	
ELDO	24.6%	
MUREȘ	24.4%	
IALOMIȚA	24.3%	
BRĂILA	24.2%	
DĂMBROVIȚA	23.8%	
PRAHOVA	23.6%	
BIHÖR	23.5%	
HARGHITA	23.4%	
ARGHEȘ	23.3%	
ILFOV	23.2%	
BRĂȘOV	23.2%	
MEHEDINTI	23.1%	
VĂLCEA	23.0%	
ALBA	23.0%	
SATU MARE	22.9%	
CARAS-SEVERIN	22.5%	
MARAMUREȘ	22.4%	
IĂȘI	22.4%	
GALATI	22.2%	
NEAȚ	22.2%	
CĂLĂRAȘI	21.6%	
GORJ	21.5%	
COVAȘNA	21.3%	
SILVAȘ	21.0%	
VRANCEA	21.0%	
BUZĂU	20.9%	
TELEORMĂN	20.8%	
VASLUI	20.6%	
SUCEAVA	20.5%	
GIULI	20.2%	
GIURGIU	19.8%	
SIBIU	19.5%	
GIŁ	19.3%	
BISTRITA-NĂȘĂUD	18.8%	
TOTAL	22.9%	

- Situația cea mai disproporționată se întâlnește la funcția de primar, unde sub 10% sunt candidații femei. Poziția de Președinte de Consiliu Județean are un procent similar. Cu alte cuvinte, **funcțiile alese direct și care dau**

This message feeds and settles a conservative understanding of women, where women are strictly defined by their relationship to a man or to their family, thus reiterating the position of women (understood traditionally - as female sex and gender) in the patriarchal order, excluding Dan's "tramp" from the political society. However, both messages are, in fact, misogynistic⁹². The difference between the two messages is that Nicușor Dan excludes "the tramp" from the political life and the community, whereas Firea constrains "the tramps" to the private space. And if we look at the fact that only 22.9% of candidates for local elections were women⁹³, as it was also reported by the press⁹⁴, the misogynistic discourse practiced by politicians is a strong factor of the inaccessibility *de facto* to the political scene for gender minorities.

If the national press signals and condemns the misogynistic displays of politicians, in the local one they go unnoticed or are amplified. For example, in Bistrița-Năsăud, journalists join the sexist cascade meant to question the eligibility of candidates and reduce them to already recurring stereotypes - either "they succeeded in life due to influential men", or they are "a little hysterical"⁹⁵. In any case, women are not the candidates Romania needs, but, best case scenario - the secretaries who hinder the smooth running of the administrative structures, according to the sexist campaign video of the ProRomânia candidate for Sibiu City Hall, Sorin Claudiu Susanu. In that video, Susanu is shown walking confidently towards what appears to be the city hall building, surrounded by three male bodyguards. They enter a room where we are shown two women in the role of secretaries, who seem much more concerned with makeup than the work they are supposed to be doing, but they immediately change their attitude as soon as Susanu announces to them imposingly that "starting today, things are changing"⁹⁶.

2.3. Reproductive control

The ability of women and minorities to hold public office is not the only issue constantly questioned in illiberal discourse. By its deeply religious-conservative nature, illiberal discourse seeks to legitimize the restriction of fundamental rights, such as the right to abortion. PressOne, an online news portal based in Cluj-Napoca, Transylvania, writes about a woman who died as a result of a botched abortion procedure in Băicoi, Pravoha county. PressOne asks the Ministry of Health for a point of view about the incident, and the spokesperson of the Ministry of Health, Oana Grigore, states that "the Ministry of Health encourages birth" and "is not responsible for an act of personal will", and says about doctors that it is at their discretion if they accept to perform such a practice, it is not an obligation⁹⁷. The attitude of the Ministry of Health is irresponsible given that, currently, women's reproductive rights are restricted in Romania, with 72% of state hospitals not performing abortion on request⁹⁸. In addition, the anti-abortion discourse is intensifying in Eastern Europe (see Poland⁹⁹), and Romania is facing hampered access to sex education, accentuated by the decision of the Romanian Constitutional Court, which considered that the law that replaces "sex education" with "sanitary education" constitutional.

⁹² https://www.gandul.ro/stiri/nicisor-dan-despre-valori-si-apa-calda-ficare-societate-are-panaramele-ei-dar-intr-o-societate-normala-ele-stau-unde-19507665#live_close

⁹³ <https://expertforum.ro/raport-participare-femei-locale/>

⁹⁴ <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/canddati-alegeri-locale-femei-reprezentare-bucuresti-3127326>

⁹⁵ <https://www.observatorbn.ro/2020/08/09/o-analiza-pe-bune-pentru-candidatii-la-primaria-bistrita/>

⁹⁶ <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/clipul-sexist-candidatului-pro-romania-primaria-brasov-atenia-consiliului-antidiscriminare-3123236>

⁹⁷ <https://pressone.ro/cum-ajungi-sa-mori-in-romania-dintr-o-intrerupere-de-sarcina-pe-bani-putini?fbclid=IwAR34nKDO9Uc-kFd3BCIk4gRmd1LvXRpyWM3UYgsrUUUsqyWuTSEnJ559pOU>

⁹⁸ <https://coronavirus.centrulfilia.ro/avortul-si-covid19/>

⁹⁹ <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/avort-malformatii-congenitale-polonia-3187210>

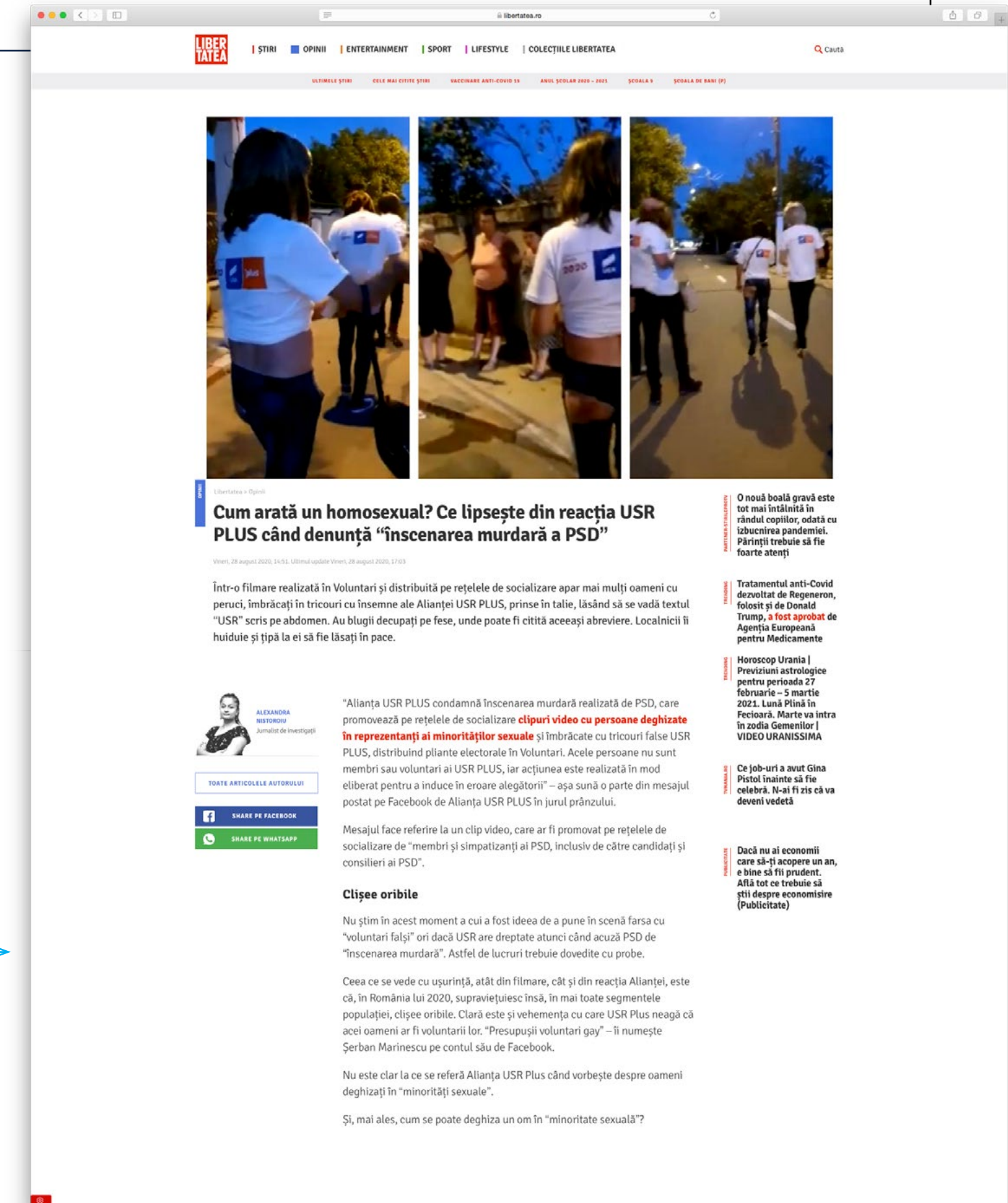
2.4. The LGBTQ community - the secret weapon

On an intersectional note, we must mention the first Roma transgender woman candidate in the history of Romania, Antonella Lerca Duda¹⁰⁰, who set out to run for a seat in the Local Council of Sector 2, Bucharest. She did not succeed in gathering the necessary signatures to register in the electoral race, but her mere presence in the political space was a first step for a more inclusive political representation. For the most part, the press respected Antonella Lerca's gender identity¹⁰¹, but there were also exceptions.

In an increasingly weak secular political climate, anti-LGBTQ sentiments have been aggressively reactivated. A new citizens' initiative to redefine the Constitution was formulated, where the family would be defined as marriage between a man and a woman, two years after the similar "referendum for the family"¹⁰², which had failed. In addition, the Senate adopted a bill in summer 2020 which aimed to ban discussions on "gender ideology" in spaces dedicated to education¹⁰³. While the European Council warns that the lack of a legal framework recognizing same-sex marriages in Romania is an act of discrimination¹⁰⁴, Cozmin Gușă (PSD) asks Nicușor Dan, the independent candidate for the City Hall of Bucharest supported by PNL and USR-PLUS, to reveal if he is gay¹⁰⁵ and claims that he would not vote for a gay person, because they would be "self-conscious" and thus become hostile towards the heterosexual majority. Libertatea is among the newspapers that covered this incident in an appropriate manner, showing the discriminatory dimension of Gușă's statements¹⁰⁶. However, this incident is not the only time when, during the campaign for local elections, sexuality and gender identity were exploited in order to discredit a candidate. A video distributed on the internet shows several people wearing T-shirts with the USR-PLUS logo, identified by USR-PLUS to be "PSD volunteers disguised as sexual minorities"¹⁰⁷.

SOURCE: Libertatea

These statements are as problematic as the caricaturization of a minority community for political purposes. The alleged act of PSD reduces the LGBT community to a costume and dehumanizes it. The USR-PLUS statements only confirm within the public sphere that association with this community is not desired - a deeply homophobic and transphobic attitude, which encourages the normalization of the exclusion of the LGBT community from political life. Libertatea steps in with an opinion piece, questioning the hypocritical attitude of USR-PLUS and explaining why we cannot "disguise" ourselves as sexual minorities.¹⁰⁸



¹⁰⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/LercaS2/posts/156980505912843>

¹⁰¹ <https://www.mediafax.ro/politic/antonella-lerca-transgender-nu-pot-schimba-lumea-dar-pot-schimba-sectorul-2-19438904>

¹⁰² <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/un-nou-proiect-de-modificare-a-constitutiei-pentru-redefinirea-familiei-a-fost-depus-in-parlament-de-un-grup-de-cetateni-doar-barbatul-si-femeia-impreuna-au-dreptul-de-a-se-casatori-3093974>

¹⁰³ <https://www.edupedu.ro/orice-referire-la-identitatea-de-gen-a-fost-interzisa-in-scoli-si-universitati-de-senat-camera-decizionala-initiatorul-amendamentului-un-senator-pmp-teolog-scolit-in-sua/>

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/consiliul-europei-subliniaza-absenta-unui-cadru-legal-de-recunoastere-a-relatiilor-de-acelasi-sex-in-romania/?fbclid=IwAR31888Ux1iHGGAk5JR8-z4d2FCq0inPwqfttAXR8jUEspYZUiWf4ETaMLc>

¹⁰⁵ https://www.stiripesurse.ro/cozmin-gusa-am-informatii-ca-nicuser-dan-este-homosexual-il-astept-sa-mi-confirme-asta_1493133.html

¹⁰⁶ <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/cozmin-gusa-afirmatii-homofobe-atac-la-nicuser-dan-3087517>

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/video-usr-plus-reactie-la-clipul-cu-presupusi-militanti-ai-aliantei-purtand-peruci-de-femei-si-alungati-de-cetateni-indignati-o-inscenare-marca-psd-3106334>

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.libertatea.ro/opinii/cum-arata-un-homosexual-ce-lipseste-din-reactia-usr-plus-cand-denunta-inscenarea-murdara-a-psd-3106604>

Parliamentary elections and the shock of right-wing extremism

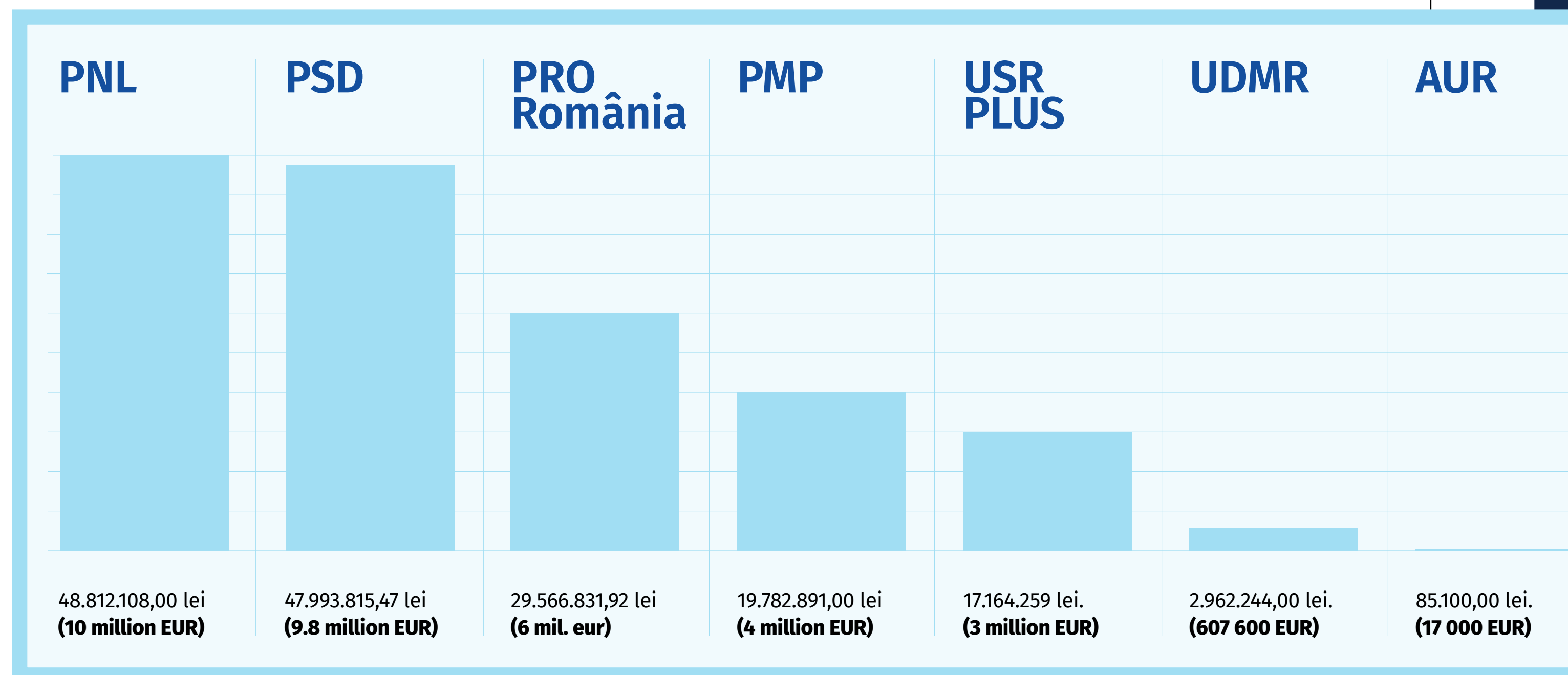
The parliamentary elections of 6 December 2020 were not hinting at any major surprises. The health crisis and its management dominated public discourse. With few exceptions, public debates were absent, the election campaign took place on television, and traditional public gatherings, celebrations and events were banned. The political scene seemed to be split between the ruling coalition, dominated by the National Liberal Party (PNL) supported, sometimes hesitantly, by the USR-PLUS Alliance - on the one hand, and the Social Democratic Party on the other. Small parties such as the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR), the People's Movement Party (PMP) and the PRO România Party only made episodic appearances in the public space. Parties such as the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) were practically non-existent in the mainstream public space, although they were very present on social media platforms and in communities with an affinity for conservative values.

For a perspective on the financial efforts made by the parties during the campaign, the Permanent Electoral Agency (AEP) reports the amounts spent, estimated at approximately 166 million lei (EUR 34 million), as follows¹⁰⁹:

According to EFOR (Expert Forum), AUR is the only political party that registered big discrepancies between the amounts declared by the Agency and the sums declared by the party: "It was to be mentioned that according to the income and expenses report published on 15.12.2020, AUR declared 1,474,616.53 lei [approx. 303 000 EUR]. Although minor differences exist in the case of other parties as well, AUR is the only party where such a significant difference existed between the two sources".¹¹⁰

These resources had been used extensively to buy advertising space on major television networks. Starting at EUR 1,500 for a 30-se-

cond prime-time video placement (evenings after 6pm) and reaching 1-hour electoral shows that produced up to EUR 100,000 for the hosts¹¹¹, the televised election campaign cost candidates more than the posts on social media platforms. The topics most often addressed by parliamentary candidates were those related to the management of the health crisis, the state of the health and education systems, the development of infrastructure or the lack thereof and the corruption of members of rival parties¹¹². Political debates were almost entirely absent, except during the last week of the campaign, when major television stations held debates between members of the main political parties.



¹⁰⁹ <https://www.roaep.ro/prezentare/comunicat-de-presa/comunicat-de-presa-privind-rambursarea-cheltuielilor-electorale-afere-alegerilor-pentru-senat-si-camera-deputatilor/>

¹¹⁰ <https://expertforum.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Raport-observare-final-parlamentare.pdf>

¹¹¹ <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/exclusiv-c%C3%A2te-mii-de-euro-cost%C4%83-un-minut-de-promovare-la-televizor-pentru-partide/30965099.html>

¹¹² <https://www.g4media.ro/alegeri-parlamentare>

Parliamentary elections and the shock of right-wing extremism

If televisions took the lion's (RON) share during the campaign, Facebook also attracted some of the funds. How much did the big parties spend on Facebook advertising between September and December 2020?

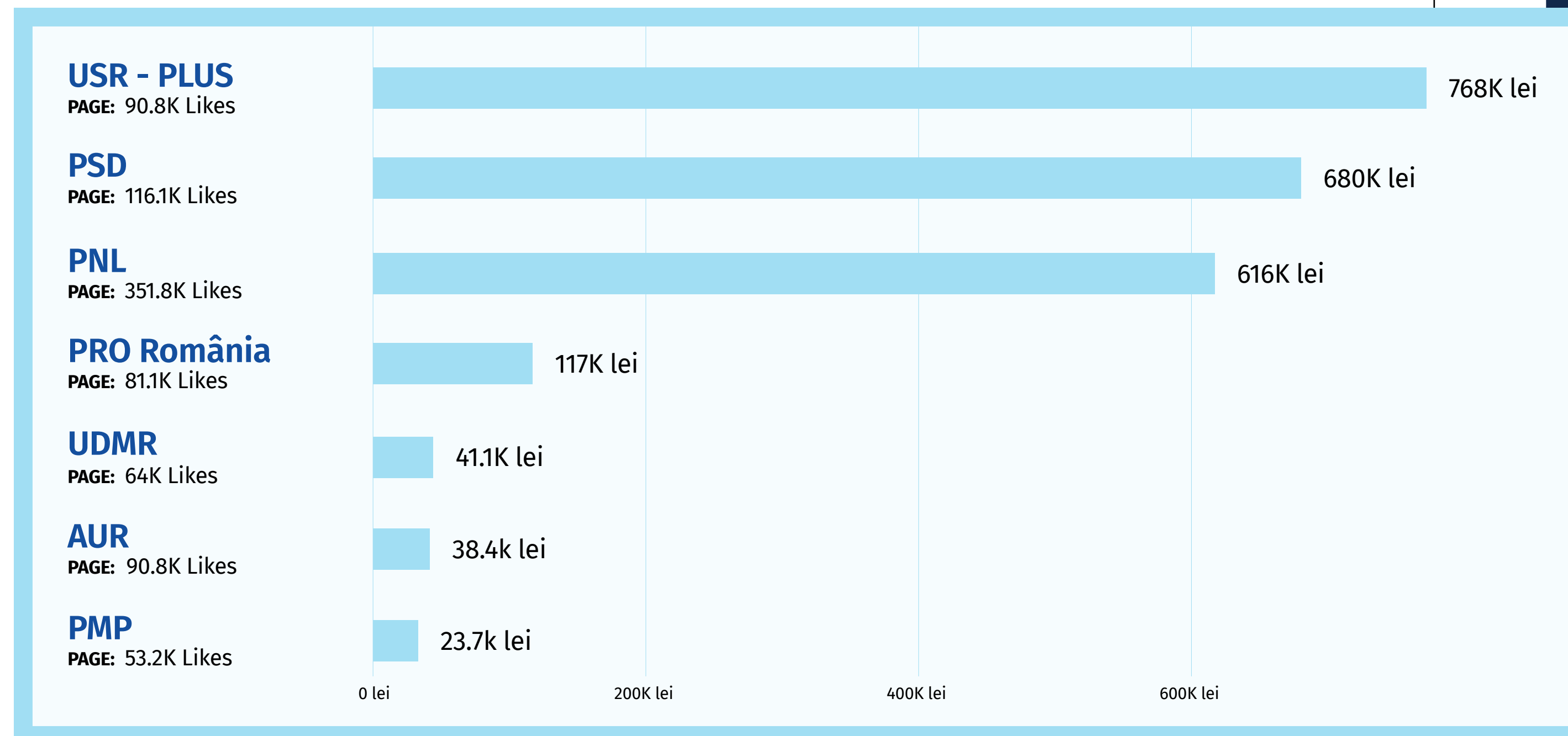
From the end of September to the end of December, amounts between EUR 5,500 (PMP) and EUR 155,000 (USR-PLUS) were spent on electoral advertising on Facebook. They are much smaller spendings than the budgets required by television networks, but with a potentially bigger impact. The trend stays the same in this environment too, with the big parties investing more than the smaller parties, although we do see a USR-PLUS more invested in online promotion than its rivals.

SOURCE: Facebook Ad Library, data obtained on December 30th, 2020

A study coordinated and published by the Association for Technology and the Internet (ApTI) concluded, in regard to the electoral advertising on Facebook during the parliamentary election campaign, that “parties such as PSD, USR-PLUS and AUR resorted to paid promotion of posts that denigrated other parties or to the promotion of sensitive messages and topics during this period, which aroused, on the one hand, feelings of sympathy for the party and its candidates, and on the other hand, resentment towards the current Government, the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic or the evolution of Romania post-Revolution.”¹¹³

But the election results were not proportional to the amounts spent, and the surprising result of AUR in the election showed that. The final results¹¹⁴ placed PSD in first place (28.90% for the Chamber of Deputies and 29.32% in the Senate), PNL in second place (25.19% for the Chamber of Deputies and 25.58% in the Senate), the USR-PLUS Alliance on the third place (15.37% for the Chamber of Deputies and 15.86% in the Senate). AUR, the party that had by far the lowest electoral expenses of all the parties that entered the Parliament, ranked fourth, obtaining a percentage of 9% of the total votes cast. The turnout was 33.24%, the lowest in 30 years of post-communist electoral democracy.

The illiberal discourse during the election campaign for the parliamentary elections was dominated by nationalism with an emphasis on anti-Hungarian sentiments, religious discourse directed against the protection measures and attempts to restrict fundamental rights such as the right to information. This is the illiberal discourse on the surface. Compared to previous periods analyzed by this report - the state of emergency and the electoral campaign for the local administration - the period of the parliamentary elections seemed a moment of respiro. But on social media platforms, especially on Facebook and at rallies organized by AUR, the most virulent illiberal themes were intensely promoted.



¹¹³ <https://apti.ro/analiza-apti-reclame-politice-facebook-alegeri-parlamentare-2020>

¹¹⁴ https://parlamentare2020.bec.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/com_1423.pdf

Parliamentary elections and the shock of right-wing extremism

1. NATIONALIST THEMES: ROMANIAN VEGETABLES AND NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY

The nationalist themes that stood out during the parliamentary elections revolved around a discursive nucleus related to national sovereignty, or, more precisely, to its vulnerability.

1.1. The Romanian manufacturer under siege

The security measures imposed by the government in early November included the halting of commercial activity in the closed spaces of the agro-food markets. A decision coming during the biggest sales season of the autumn harvest, as a consequence of the significant increase in the number of daily SARS-CoV-2 infections, the measure to close producer markets but to allow supermarkets to function has created a wave of protests and condemnation from the population. In the mainstream media, the theme of the small Romanian producer left unprotected against international interests was exploited by PSD and, occasionally, PMP, the opposition parties that had access to these specific communication channels.

PSD President Marcel Ciolacu accused the government of favoring international supermarket chains to the detriment of the Romanian producer¹¹⁵, Lucian Romașcanu, PSD spokesman, suggested that the closing down of markets was done intentionally to protect international interests¹¹⁶, and PMP leader Eugen Tomac asked for the protection of the *Romanian apple*¹¹⁷, (to be read as the Romanian agriculture sector) without alluding to external interests to justify his statements. Protecting small local producers is a topic that can have different connotations on a discursive level: from the protection of the environment or vulnerable classes, to arguments related to the taste or quality of food. What brings this issue into the sphere of nationalism is the inclusion of nuances such as the foreign danger and the primacy of the producer's nationality in justifying their protection.

¹¹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/1395939193764858/posts/5336166893075382/>

¹¹⁶ <https://www.g4media.ro/lucian-romascanu-despre-inchiderea-pietelor-acolo-este-locul-taranilor-incep-sa-ma-gandesc-ca-e-ceva-programatic.html#comments>

¹¹⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/tomaceugen/photos/a.775885229102832/3918075021550488/>

¹¹⁸ <https://www.g4media.ro/lucian-romascanu-despre-inchiderea-pietelor-acolo-este-locul-taranilor-incep-sa-ma-gandesc-ca-e-ceva-programatic.html#comments>

¹¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/2212856535602171/videos/281087176590452>

¹²⁰ On December 30th, 2020 <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1447736608764953>

¹²¹ On December 30th, 2020 <https://www.facebook.com/2212856535602171/videos/281087176590452>

¹²² The caption in the video, making reference to the alleged words of a Romanian medieval prince who briefly “united” the three Romanian territories of Moldova, Valahia and Transylvania, saying “the want I wanted most was a great Romania, a proud Romania”: <https://www.facebook.com/george.simion.unire/videos/281087176590452>

Lucian Romașcanu, on closing the farmers' markets: *“That is the place of the farmers. I’m starting to think it’s programmatic.”*¹¹⁸

The party that had marched on very explicit anti-globalization issues, such as the vulnerability of the small Romanian producer in front of foreign multinationals and the uprooting of the Romanian peasant and the forcing to “coerced labor” abroad, was AUR (far-right). These issues are related to the reality of a market economy that sees the concentration of economic power in the hands of the yet fewer, but continuously expanding economic agents, as well as to the precarity of a society that has suffered from massive migration in the last 30 years. But alongside these references to exploitation, comes a suggestive “solution”: the unification of all Romanians, the “establishment of a Romanian movement”¹¹⁹, the fight against foreigners inside and outside of the country. The video “Don’t close down the farmers’ markets” had 1.2 million views¹²⁰, and “The drama of a woman selling in the farmers’ market in Călărași” had 1.4 million views¹²¹.

SOURCE:
Facebook
George
Simion¹²²



1.2. The anti-Hungarian discourse

During the parliamentary elections, the role of “enemies from within” was taken over by those in political power. If during the state of emergency the Roma were the dangerous allogeneic element, now the Hungarians become a danger to the country. The Hungarians were, for a short moment, the target of President Iohannis’ political attacks in the spring of 2020, when, along with PSD, UDMR members were accused of trying to steal a region of the country¹²³. In the parliamentary campaign, Hungarians became the target of PNL and AUR leaders.

From the ruling parties, Rareș Bogdan, PNL vice-president, suggests to UDMR leaders to read the Romanian Constitution every morning, implying a veiled accusation that the party has secessionist tendencies¹²⁴. After the elections, when the alliance with UDMR was formed, he tempered his tone and appealed to European values that stand against ethnic conflict.¹²⁵ The Liberals, in turn, were accused by Mihai Tudose, former prime-minister, member of the European Parliament and PSD vice-president, of supporting a European initiative that expands the rights of ethnic minorities in the EU, the Minority Safe Pack¹²⁶, and which would give the Székely the opportunity to demand a form of autonomy in Romania. PSD has been, for the last 30 years, in various formulas of governance, supported by the UDMR. The anti-Hungarian nationalist discourse is easy to identify in the public discourse in Romania because it appeals to the well-known themes of the danger of stealing, annexing, seceding Transylvania from Romania.

AUR is a declared unionist (in relation to the Republic of Moldova) and nationalist party, which has often used anti-Hungarian rhetoric in public discourse. During the electoral campaign, the president of AUR, George Simion, even went to Sfântu Gheorghe, Covasna County (a county with Hungarian majority, part of the region called Székely Land), to lay flowers at the monument of Romanian soldiers who fought in the First World War and to call upon the unity of all Romanians, regardless of ethnicity and social class, without

uttering one word about Hungarian Romanians¹²⁷. Another video filmed for December 1st (The Romanian National Day) in Alba Iulia¹²⁸ also includes AUR supporters who, in Hungarian, stage a false dialogue in which a person claims to speak only Hungarian¹²⁹. The attacks on the Hungarian ethnic group and the public conflict with their political representatives intensified immediately after the elections, when AUR also proposed a ban on parties that were formed on ethnic grounds, such as the UDMR¹³⁰.

1.3. Undermining protection measures: Pilgrimages

The Romanian state’s relationship with the Orthodox Church during the health crisis was a difficult one. Especially with certain archbishops who suffered significant material losses, once the religious manifestations during the major holidays and the annual pilgrimages were banned. The state and the church cooperated when the police allowed the Orthodox Easter light distribution ritual¹³¹, despite the high epidemiological risk of distributing candles from house to house, or when pilgrimages were partially allowed for those who were residents in the locality where the event was held. But some church officials protested the restrictions, blatantly violated them and publicly urged non-compliance. Unlike the Roma communities, which had been surrounded by armored vehicles in the spring of the same year, pilgrims and religious leaders of the church did not suffer major consequences. The discourse regarding the pilgrims did not reach the same level of hatred directed against the Roma earlier in 2020, and if a classist rhetoric was present in the public sphere, it rarely came from public figures.

The most notorious conflicts between the state and the church took place in October on the occasion of the pilgrimages of St. Parascheva in Iasi and St. Dumitru in Bucharest, and in November on the occasion of the Feast of St. Andrew¹³². All these religious events were allowed to take place less than two months before the parliamentary elections.

¹²³ In April 2020, a bill demanding the autonomy of the Székely Land passed the Chamber of Deputies tacitly, as the Parliament did not meet during the state of emergency, and the law was approved by default. President Iohannis made a public statement accusing PSD of conspiring with UDMR to take advantage of the health crisis in order to “give Transylvania to the Hungarians”, mocking the accent of Hungarian ethnics and their language. The bill was rejected by the Senate:

<https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/politic/o-noua-sedinta-la-cotroceni-discutii-despre-masurile-care-se-vor-aplica-dupa-15-mai.html>

¹³¹ <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/rares-bogdan-atac-dur-la-udmr-sa-exerseze-in-fiecare-dimineata-art-1-din-constitutie-privind-statul-national-unitar-mesaj-si-pentru-liderii-usr-plus-3250748>

¹²⁵ <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/ce-le-transmitea-aseara-rares-bogdan-liderilor-udmr-acum-liberalii-au-nevoie-de-voturile-maghiarilor-pentru-a-ramane-la-guvernare-3315399>

¹²⁶ <https://www.g4media.ro/mihai-tudose-guvernul-liberal-e-partas-cu-ungaria-care-vrea-sa-santajeze-comisia-europeana-prin-impunerea-proiectului-dedicat-minoritatilor-nationale-minority-safepack.html>

¹²⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/george.simion.unire/videos/2703810583265398>

¹²⁸ The Union of Transylvania with the Kingdom of Romania was proclaimed on December 1st 1918 in Alba Iulia.

¹²⁹ A stereotype often used in the anti-Hungarian speech is that Hungarian Romanians refuse to learn or speak Romanian.

¹³⁰ <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/aur-udmr-parlament-george-simion-tanczos-barna-3315933>

¹³¹ Unlike the protection measures taken during the Catholic Easter, when religious masses and practices were not allowed, which led to the sanctioning of the Ministry of Internal Affairs by the National Council for Combating Discrimination on grounds of cult discrimination:

<https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-24320039-ministerul-interne-sanctionat-cncd-dupa-acordul-incheiat-doar-bor-perioada-pastelui.htm>

¹³² <https://www.g4media.ro/video-arhiepiscopul-tomisului-teodosie-sfideaza-din-nou-restrictiile-si-spune-ca-vrea-sa-organizeze-pelerinajul-de-sf-andrei-cum-sa-nu-ajung-eu-la-pestera-este-imposibil-si-cum-sa-nu-ajunga-cons.html>

1.4. The Christian vote

The conflict between the government and the church also had electoral implications. With the start of the campaign, the Archdiocese of Suceava urged believers, in an official statement, to vote for political parties that explicitly support Christian values, that are against abortions and research on human embryos, that are for the traditional family formed of man and a woman, along with encouragement for promoting the local economy and environmental protection¹³⁴. The press release was posted 88 times on Facebook (public posts) with a cumulative audience of over 1 million users and had over 324 public interactions. It was distributed on Facebook by pages affiliated to AUR and PMP¹³⁵, the two political formations closest to the conservative values of the Church. There are also factions in PSD that are very conservative, and the religious discourse has strong support, especially since the years when former leader Liviu Dragnea came to the head of the party. The referendum for the family was a PSD project with support from all political parties, except USR. The National Liberal Party, theoretically a supporter of liberal values, supported the referendum, revising the Romanian Constitution with a restrictive definition of marriage „between a man and a woman.” The referendum that took place on October 6th and 7th, 2018 was not validated due to the turnout of less than 30% of the total number of voters, the threshold needed to validate the results. The conservative religious discourse is, therefore, very present in the political discourse in Romania, but AUR is the most explicitly anti-abortion. Themes already known in neo-conservative politics in the United States, Poland, Hungary, anti-abortion and traditional heterosexual pro-family policies are always accompanied by hatred or intolerance towards sexual minorities. As AUR’s program says:

“Our alliance openly opposes any form of contemporary Marxism. Currents of political correctness, gender ideology, egalitarianism or multiculturalism are camouflaged forms of the neo-Marxist plague. No dialogue can be linked to those who, under the false pretend of combating discrimination, end up destroying the hierarchies and values that centuries of tradition have raised with patience and love¹³⁶.”

Neo-Marxism, sometimes Sexo-marxism, or simply Marxism, are terms or accusations used against those who promote gender equality, sexual minority rights, internationalism and other values considered “non-traditional”.

SOURCE: ProTV¹³³

The screenshot shows a news article on the ProTV.ro website. The main headline is "Mii de români au mers în pelerinaj la peștera Sf. Andrei. Spațiul a devenit neîncăpător" (Thousands of Romanians went on a pilgrimage to the cave of St. Andrew. The space has become overcrowded). The article includes a video player showing a large crowd of people gathered in a cave. The text describes the pilgrimage to the cave of St. Andrew in Dobrogea, Romania, where thousands of people gathered for the feast of St. Andrew. The article mentions that the cave is overcrowded and that the space is becoming increasingly cramped. It also includes a quote from a woman who says she wants to pray for her family. The article is dated 30-11-2019 17:20 and is written by StireproTV.

¹³³ <https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/actualitate/mii-de-romani-au-mers-in-pelerinaj-la-pestera-sf-andrei-spatiul-a-devenit-neincapator.html>

¹³⁴ <http://www.arhiepiscopiasucevei.ro/viata-bisericii/recomandari-pastorale-pentru-un-vot-responsabil-si-corect>

¹³⁵ Source: Crowdtangle

¹³⁶ https://www.partidulaur.ro/program_au

2. RESTRICTIONS ON SOME FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS: THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION

The most alarming trend observed in the autumn of 2020 was the attempt to limit the right to information through three different legislative initiatives by three different actors. Without coordination, representatives of PNL, PSD, USR-PLUS, as well as members of the Executive supported legislative and normative changes that would have limited access to information for citizens and for the press. As the CIJ informed in an open letter¹³⁷, signed by four other civil society organizations, the three initiatives aimed to:

- ✦ Introduce an Amendment of Law 544 of 2001, by redefining the information of public interest and restricting it to “administrative acts of a normative nature regarding the general public interest”; restricting the number of pages that can be released upon request, the obligation to submit the request in person and the introduction of a fee for processing, multiplying, anonymizing, scanning and searching for information. The initiator of the amendment was the PSD deputy Eliza-Mădălina Peța-Ștefănescu, supported by PSD and PNL deputies.

- ✦ Introduce Law 529 of 2020, which would have allowed “the communication of data in open and automatically processable electronic formats and the establishment of an electronic public register containing all requests received and all answers to them”, but which would have annulled an article of the current law which allowed the submission of requests in electronic format. In this case, the restriction of access to information came as an oversight due to the negligence of the initiators, a group of USR and PSD parliamentarians.

- ✦ Introduce a series of amendments to the implementing norms of Law 544 of 2001, which stipulated that public institutions would provide information of public interest “in the form in which they are identified and held by the public authority or institution”, which would have excluded any processing of data in the form of tables, statistics, etc. The initiator in this case was the Government of Romania.

The first initiative lost its support after the publication of the petition initiated by the CIJ and its dissemination in the press, and the second initiative was modified to allow online applications. The Government decree was published for public consultations, the deadline of which expired in September 2020.

Although these initiatives were stopped or changed in time, the fact that the right to information was targeted by members of the three strongest parties in Romania at this time, during a crisis of immense proportions and in an electoral year, shows us that there is a concern for access to information among the Romanian politicians, which is not always a reasonable or opportune concern. The vigilance of members of the civil society, the media and the public is necessary to preserve the integrity of fundamental rights.

¹³⁷ <https://cji.ro/politicienii-de-toate-orientarile-se-inversuneaza-impotriva-accesului-la-informatii/>

Conclusion: The press and illiberal discourse

From deeply anti-Roma or anti-Hungarian sentiments to homo- and transphobia, hate speech is habitual in the Romanian public space, and in the exceptional conditions of 2020, during the states of emergency or alert, it was a major integral part of the illiberal discourse. We recall here the definition of illiberal discourse used in this report: a neo-conservative ideology, which emphasizes patriotism, religion, traditional values, often with tendencies of ethnocentrism, racism and homophobia. We have added authoritarianism and classism to these elements, because those who adhere to these illiberal values often support a strong police state and a weak social state. It is a discourse that is already internalized and, very often, even declared publicly, both by politicians and by the audience. One of the very visible consequences of this internalization is the discreditation of gender, race or ethnic minorities in the electoral race. If in the first part of the year, when the new coronavirus spread panic among the population, the scapegoats were Roma and Romanian workers returning from abroad, during the election campaigns LGBTQ minorities and Hungarians became the preferred target of the illiberal attacks. Nationalism gained momentum during the campaign for the parliamentary elections, and with the popularization of AUR's ideology, we also witnessed a promotion of unionism and isolationism.

AUR's ascent shocked observers of the Romanian political life. For those who only watched the mainstream press and the flow of money, their electoral success was hard to predict. Although it is a cluster for the spread of illiberal discourse, AUR drew attention to it only when it became impossible to ignore. But the illiberal discourse promoted by factions like AUR is not a novelty in the Romanian public space. Politicians, media personalities, journalists, stars and athletes are always quoted in the mainstream press spreading this type of speech. Often, simply quoting or spreading messages in public is enough to legitimize that discourse. Ignoring the existence and spread of this discourse can have consequences on the state of democracy in Romania, as seen in the case of the mainstream press having ignored AUR. Given that mass communication is less and less centralized, in the sense that the transmission of the message is decentralized, because more and more producers have free access to mass media through social media platforms, the traditional press loses some of its power in the public space.

But the responsibility to present balanced messages remains and is even more vital now. Giving voice to individuals from diverse groups can create a more complex picture of reality. Diversifying sources of information is another way to ensure a complex presentation of reality. Unfortunately, the press participates in the spread of this hate speech, sometimes through the inability or refusal to frame it in a critical and educational dimension, other times, probably, out of a desire for impartiality.

What remains certain is that the crisis showed more than ever the need for a well-prepared press that deciphers public discourse, politicians' intentions and social tensions. At a time when disorientation and insecurity rule society, the press needs to step in against discursive abuse in order to combat the way in which it gives rise to discriminatory institutional and interpersonal behaviors.

Conclusion: Recommendations

Hate speech, illiberal and discriminatory speech obviously affect the democratic balance in Romania. In order to combat them and limit their effects, coordinated measures are needed to address a whole range of actors in society.

Media recommendations

✦ **Diversifying topics and points of view in news and information programs** is essential to provide a fair representation of minority or disadvantaged groups in society. These groups have the right to be represented in the media and to not be defined by the majority / dominant groups. Racism, classism, sexism, homophobia and hatred of minorities find their way into the media if their promoters are not confronted with an editorial approach that sincerely supports the human rights agenda and fulfills the public mandate entrusted to the media. These trends must be urgently counteracted within the profession.

✦ **Diversifying sources** by including the voices of groups who are voided of power or appropriate representation: the voices of workers, retired people, Roma, women, people with disabilities, sexual minorities and others must be included in all coverage dealing with issues that affect them.

✦ **Diversification of human resources in newsrooms** by including ethnic, racial, gender minorities, people with disabilities among journalists and editors. Non-discriminatory and inclusive employment practices are essential to achieve this result. This measure does not have to be a symbolic one. Newsrooms can take active measures to encourage applications and recruitment within these categories. People who have a different life experience and perspective than most are essential to ensure the plurality of voices in any newsroom and to present the simultaneous realities of our society.

✦ **Sincere and consistent implementation of professional codes** in newsrooms, which sanction racist, discriminatory and hate speech. Although hate speech and violence are regulated by the Civil Code and the Criminal Code, an internal culture in newsrooms and a code of ethics that discourages this type of discourse are needed. Punitive measures are not enough and do not change values. The role of publishers and decision-makers in this regard is crucial.

✦ Emphasizing and updating, within **the ethics and deontology courses** in journalism faculties, the modules that deal with the problems of intolerant, discriminatory, illiberal discourses, etc. in a fair balance with the protection of the right to freedom of expression.

✦ Creating **guidelines for recognizing** the elements of illiberal discourse, organizing courses or workshops for journalists where they are introduced to positive practices of documentation and responsible coverage of illiberal topics in the press.

Recommendations for civil society

✦ **Monitoring illiberal discourse** done by civil society organizations, as a current practice, not only as singular projects. Such reports could serve as benchmarks for the press, but also as a resource or inventory of positive and negative practices.

✦ **Consistent use**, whenever necessary, of reporting and advocacy tools by relevant institutions, to highlight, investigate and sanction flagrant cases of hate speech or discrimination.

✦ Initiating **strategic litigation** in cases of hate speech or discrimination, to create consistent jurisprudence in the field.

Conclusion: Recommendations

Recommendations for the political class

- ✘ **Public denial and sanction**, firmly and promptly, of any racist, sexist, homophobic or other forms of illiberal discourse, especially those committed by its own members. As a rule, the higher the rank in the party of the offender, the faster and more vigorous the reaction of the party should be.
- ✘ Opening **internal debates** that address the issue of illiberal values within each political party, organizing courses or workshops that discuss the importance of fundamental rights, respect for all minorities and democratic principles.
- ✘ **Training future party members** through the youth chapters, in the spirit of respect for human rights, transparency and inclusion.
- ✘ Including in the party programs **specific provisions to effectively combat hate speech or discrimination**, avoiding nationalism and incitement to hatred.

Recommendations for authorities

- ✘ Development of **comprehensive media education programs**, essential at all levels of society. The introduction of media education in formal education is a necessary first step in this direction, but it is certainly not the only necessary one.
- ✘ **Rapid and effective sanctioning** by the National Audiovisual Council (CNA) and the National Council for Combating Discrimination (CNCD) of speech that incites hatred and discrimination, in its manifestations provided by law, with respect for the forms covered by freedom of expression, even whether they bother, offend or are not favorably received by society.

- ✘ **Training of law enforcement agencies**, starting with the community police, the gendarmerie, the Ministry of Interior, to distinguish between hate speech and other types of speech. The importance of the right to expression must be communicated practically through workshops and discussions with law enforcement experts and by creating a culture of acceptance and openness among these institutions.

International recommendations

- ✘ **Facilitating access to a collection of resources** - documents, experts, case studies, legislation, case law - for all those interested in eliminating illiberal discourse, studying it and its effects on societies and developing effective practices to increase public resilience to this type of speech.

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The health crisis and the electoral campaigns, vectors of hatred in public discourse.

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