

# POPULISM 2.0, DIGITAL DEMOCRACY AND THE NEW 'ENEMIES OF THE PEOPLE'

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## ABSTRACT:

Like in many other Central and Eastern European countries, in 2016, Romanian populist parties were voted by the 'silent' citizens, by those feeling deprived and not represented properly. Shortly before that, in 2015, the tragic Colectiv nightclub fire had given birth to a new party: *Save Romania Union (USR)* that promotes a populist discourse on the 'corrupt elite' versus the 'pure people'. At the beginning, however, the new party did not disseminate messages specific to the nationalist or radical right-wing populists. Another party, endorsed by a news television channel *Romania TV*, almost succeeded at overpassing the electoral threshold in the 2016 parliamentary election: *United Romania Party (PRU)* used xenophobic and anti-EU messages during the 2016 general election campaign. My hypothesis is that the extremist electoral messages, the expressions of hatred towards foreigners and Western businessmen or the EU institutions were spread through social networks. Using a content analysis, I shall verify the extent to which the official *Facebook* pages of the *Social Democratic Party (PSD)*, the direct successor of the *Romanian Communist Party*, the *United Romania Party (PRU)* and the *Save Romania Union (USR)* reflected the antagonism of the 'pure' people versus the 'corrupt' elite and I shall reveal who these parties identified as the so-called 'people's enemies'.

## KEY WORDS:

democratic theory, digital democracy, etymological democracy, new media, online political communication, people's enemies, political marketing, populism 2.0, populist discourse

## Introduction

When Donald Trump won in the US and in the BREXIT voting Leave (the European Union) defeated Remain (a member of the EU), the winning elements were actually the populist speeches of leaders like Boris Johnson or Nigel Farage, as well as the participation of marginalised categories of voters who had previously refused to vote due to being ignored by the political elite. In 2016, Western representative democracy in Europe and North America and its fundamental institutions – political parties and Parliaments – seemed to be dominated by euro-sceptical, isolationist or nationalist trends.

According to Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser,<sup>1</sup> populism appears to be in conflict with liberal democracy. Similar to the two researchers, I believe that in order to comprehend this conflict between

<sup>1</sup> MUDDE, C. et al.: *Populismul în Europa și în cele două Americi. Amenințare sau remediu pentru democrație?* Iași: Institutul European, 2015, p. 329.



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populism and democracy, it is necessary to shift from the theoretical dimension of the debate to empirical studies able to prove – through practical examples – the ways in which populism and the populists stand as a threat for contemporary democracy.

For Mudde,<sup>2</sup> populism is “a rarefied ideology, considering that society can be divided into two antagonistic groups: the virtuous people versus the corrupt elite, arguing that politics should express the general will of the people”. This Manichaeism between the good and the evil – the ‘virtuous’ people versus the ‘corrupt’ elite – does not leave any room for the idea of political pluralism.<sup>3</sup> As per this conception, populism is an ideology based on three fundamental concepts – the people, the leader, and the general will – and there are also two notions that it completely opposes to: elitism and pluralism.

Over the last few years, like many other countries in the region, Romania has experienced a sharpening of the political polarisation and an escalation of the populist discourse. The Political Power and the Opposition parties have blamed each other for seeing the efforts to make their ‘clientele’ rich as their only goal. However, once they got the power, the parties from the two antagonist blocks applied the same methods: they politicised all public institutions. They assigned public representatives based on nepotism and political subordination; they aimed to limit the autonomy of institutions like the Ombudsman or the Constitutional Court, which damaged justice by reducing these institutions’ power.

Experiencing serious consequences of the 2008 international financial crisis combined with a Parliament legitimacy crisis, Romania, as many other countries in the Eastern Europe, was going through a process of increasing personalisation of the political power. The citizens were gradually losing their trust in representative democracy, as well as in the political class stained by continuous corruption scandals. The citizens were asking the political leaders to solve the economic issues instead of urging their democratically elected institutions (the Government or the Parliament) to do so. This generated many populist actions, which was in the best interest of the populist leaders who usually posed themselves into ‘Saviour’ leaders.

As has previously been showed,<sup>4</sup> the ‘presidentialisation’ of democracy always leads to polarising the society and media political-wise.<sup>5</sup> In Romania, the ‘presidentialisation’ of the parliamentary regime occurred during President Traian Basescu’s two mandates in 2004-2014. The Opposition unsuccessfully tried to remove him from office twice, through the 2007 and 2012 referendums. After the second referendum aimed at suspending President Basescu which took place on the 29<sup>th</sup> of July 2012, the Romanian society seemingly divided into two antagonistic sides: those who still supported Basescu and those who wanted him to resign. Certainly, there were also those who acted indifferent or neutral regarding this dispute. The public space polarisation was visible through the process of concentrating media in the hands of the two sides: ‘pro’ and ‘against’ the President. The audiences (especially people who usually consume political information) were reallocated between the two antagonistic sides.

After Basescu’s second term ended, Romanians voted as President a German ethnic liberal Klaus Iohannis, a pro-European politician, the leader of the *National Liberal Party*, a member of the Protestant minority in this predominantly Orthodox country. However, the newly elected President was supported by the *Social Democratic Party* – the direct successor of the *Romanian Communist Party*; a left-wing formation with nationalist accents. Thus, the polarisation continued even after the 2014 presidential election: the nationalist left-wing political forces gathered around the social-democratic Government, while the pro-European right-wing forces supported the liberal President. Starting with the 2014 euro parliamentary and presidential elections,<sup>6</sup> when Victor Ponta ran from the *Social Democratic Party (PSD)* and Klaus Iohannis from the *National Liberal Party (PNL)*,<sup>7</sup> and then also during the 2016 local and general elections, the *Social Democratic Party (PSD)* developed a nationalist and autochthonism rhetoric<sup>8</sup> and collaborated with other euro-sceptical parties: they partnered with the *United Romania Party (PRU)* for electoral reasons. While the *Liberals (PNL)* promoted European Union values (such as solidarity, subsidiarity, independence of justice, supremacy of the communitarian law over the national law), the *Socialists (PSD)* supported nationalist values (autochthonism, isolationism, ethnic or religious exclusivism).

The political polarisation sharpened after the tragic Colectiv nightclub fire, having as consequence the fall of the *PSD* government led by Victor Ponta. For a year, in November 2015 – December 2016, Romania had a technocratic government led by Dacian Cioloș, an ex-EU Agriculture Commissioner. Although the *PSD* government had gone down because of a corruption scandal and of the Colectiv nightclub fire, where 64 young people died, one year later, in December 2016, the Romanians voted again for the *Social Democrats*, bringing them back to power. In January – February 2017, members of the civil society active on social networks occupied the streets again, protesting against the authorities’ negligence and corruption. Up to 300,000 people gathered in front of the Government building in Bucharest, in Piața Victoriei, while hundreds of thousands of others marched in other cities across the whole country. The new *PSD* government issued OUG 13 with amendments brought to the Pardon Law. The protesters accused the Socialist Government of attempting to modify the Penal Code with the intention to cancel the corruption trials and to cease any investigations on accusations of abuse of office.<sup>9</sup> The Romanian society was again divided.

The protesters in front of Piața Victoriei manifested against the Laws of Amnesty and Pardon of the penal convicts. Everything turned into a huge wave of counter-corruption protests in January 2017. On the other side, the *PSD* supporters gathered in front of the Presidential Palace at Cotroceni. Most of them elderly or retired people, the Cotroceni protesters claimed they went out on the street to defend their legitimate vote, expressed only a few months ago. On the one hand, the protesters gathered around Piața Victoriei – asking for the resignation of the Government – accused the ones at Cotroceni of being manipulated or even paid by *PSD*. In parallel, the people shouting in front of the Cotroceni Palace were blaming the ones standing in front of Piața Victoriei of being manipulated and paid by foreign occult influencers, planning to cancel their democratic vote. Each side accused the other of populism and demagoguery via traditional media, especially TV.

Revisiting Hanspeter Kriesi’s theoretical paradigm, we assume that “the processes of increasing economic (sectorial and international) competition, of increasing cultural competition (which is, among other things, linked to massive immigration of ethnic groups who are rather distinct from the European populations) and of increasing political competition (between nation-states and supra- or international political actors) create new groups of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’. The winners include entrepreneurs and qualified employees in sectors open to international competition as well as all kinds of cosmopolitan citizens. The losers, by contrast, include entrepreneurs and qualified employees in traditionally budgetary and protected sectors, all unqualified employees and citizens who strongly identify themselves with their national community.”<sup>10</sup>

In 2016, the electoral message of *PSD* targeted broad demographic categories, those neglected by the parties on the right of the political spectrum.<sup>11</sup> The Romanians who came out as winners from the post-communist transition period participate less in elections,<sup>12</sup> opting for the actors who endorse liberal policies.<sup>13</sup>

2 MUDDE, C.: The Populist Zeitgeist. In *Government and Opposition*, 2004, Vol. 39, No. 4, p. 543-544.

3 MUDDE, C. et al.: *Populismul în Europa și în cele două Americi. Amenințare sau remediu pentru democrație?* Iași : Institutul European, 2015, p. 27, 332.

4 MOMOC, A.: Romania, țara userilor fericiți. In ȘANDRU, D., BOCANCEA, S.: *Mass-media și democrația în România postcomunistă*. Iași : Institutul European, 2013, p. 436.

5 For more information, see: POGUNTKE, T. et al.: *The Presidentialization of Politics: A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 1-25.

6 MOMOC, A.: Populist and Neo-populist Candidates in the 2009 and 2014 Presidential Elections in Romania. A Media Coverage Analysis. In KRISHNA-HENSEL, S. F. (ed.): *Authoritarian and Populist Influences in the New Media*. London, New York : Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018, p. 73.

7 MOMOC, A.: The First Digital President in Romania – The First European Politician Who Reached One Million Likes on Facebook. In LIENARD, F., ZLITNI, S. (eds.): *Medias Numerique et Communication Electronique*. Le Havre : Normandie Universite, Universite du Havre, 2016, p. 163.

8 MOMOC, A.: Proud to be Romanian. National vs. European Messages on Facebook during the 2014 EP Election. In CMECIU, C. (ed.): *E-Connecting Europe*. București : Ars Docendi, 2017, p. 105.

9 MOMOC, A.: Particracy against Democracy. In ADI, A., LILLEKER, D. (eds.): *Romania's 2017 Anti Corruption Protests: Causes, Development and Implications*. Berlin : Quadriga, 2017, p. 12.

10 KRIESI, H. et al.: Globalization and the Transformation of the National Political Space: Six European Countries Compared. In *European Journal of Political Research*, 2006, Vol. 45, No. 6, p. 922.

11 MOMOC, A.: Particracy against Democracy. In ADI, A., LILLEKER, D. (eds.): *Romania's 2017 Anti-Corruption Protests: Causes, Development and Implications*. Berlin : Quadriga, 2017, p. 12-16.

12 MATEESCU, B.: *Observații despre parlamentare și despre anii următori*. Released on 16<sup>th</sup> December 2016. [online]. [2016-12-16]. Available at: <http://sociologica.blogspot.ro/2016/12/observatii-despre-parlamentare-si.html>.

13 GURAN, M.: *Cine sunt și unde s-au pitulat misterioșii români „de dreapta”*. Released on 7<sup>th</sup> June 2016. [online]. [2016-06-07]. Available at: <https://www.moise.ro/2016/06/07/cine-misterioșii-romani-dreapta/>.

However, the citizens who came out as losers from the transition are disciplined when it comes to voter turnout and prefer social, interventionist policies, relevant for the assisted ones.<sup>14</sup> In the societies with an insufficiently mature civic culture, getting favours from the powerful ones and having ‘connections’ and ‘relations’ are essential for survival.<sup>15</sup> The interaction that works best for the wide social categories that are assisted by and dependent on the state is rather a ‘clientele-based’ one, in which the communities are dependent on and dominated by the local and central authorities; the community members are not solidary and do not cooperate for common good purposes.

During the December 2016 parliamentary election, the political polarisation translated into the clattering of one group around *PSD* – Liviu Dragnea (and the *PRU*) versus the right-wing representatives from *PNL* and *USR* grouping around Prime Minister Dacian Ciolos. In another study,<sup>16</sup> I have noticed that the strategy behind the online electoral messages of the two antagonistic blocks was founded on the values of their target audiences: *PSD* promoted national and economic values such as supporting the state employees and the disadvantaged social categories, while the *Liberals* tackled the independence of justice and the fight against corruption.

The right-wing parties (*PNL*, *USR*) endorsed the same candidate for the Prime Minister position – the technocrat Ciolos, politically independent – with the same anti-corruption message. This was not a winning strategy, because it led to the fragmentation of votes of the right-wing electors. This resulted into the reduction of the *PNL* voters’ mass down to 20% in December 2016, compared to the 32% political score obtained nationally at the local election in June 2016. In turn, the newly founded party, *USR*, scored over 8% at the parliamentary election in December 2016. *PSD* increased from 38% obtained at the local election up to 45% at the parliamentary election, which allowed the party to build a majority with ALDE that gained 6%. *PRU*, the other satellite party orbiting *PSD*, did not trespass the electoral threshold of 5% and remained outside the Parliament.

In the present study, I am trying to establish the particularities of the populist ideology and the extent in which the Romanian political parties assumed the populist ideology. To identify the political actors and parties having a populist ideology in contemporary Romania, I have researched the online speeches and the values promoted via social networks (on *Facebook*) by the political parties’ discourses in the 2016 parliamentary election. I have started by building a theoretical frame that has allowed me to analyse from an empirical perspective the impact of populism and of the populist parties on democracy and on the Romanian elections.

## Media-related Origin of Romanian Political Parties

Taking into account Maurice Duverger’s theory<sup>17</sup> on the origin of political parties, I observed that in Romania there were political parties born in the online environment (social media) or on television (traditional media), having their origin outside the Parliament.<sup>18</sup> Duverger distinguishes between the political parties which originate outside the Parliament (the exterior origin) and the political parties which originate inside the Parliament (the interior origin); these are the parties formed by splitting of the parliamentary political parties and via the emergence of new parliamentary groups. These Romanian parties with the exterior origin can be identified:

**a) The party with the non-governmental origin:** *Save Romania Union (USR)*, until 2016 known as the *Save Bucharest Union (USB)*. The *Save Bucharest Union* was founded in 2015 by *Save Bucharest Association* president and civic activist Nicușor Dan.

**b) The party with its origin in a think-thank group:** the *Civic Alliance Party (PAC)*, founded by the

*Group for Social Dialogue*. The *PAC* was assimilated by the *National Liberal Party (PNL)*, a historic party re-established in 1990, as the ‘official protector’ of the businesspeople and entrepreneurs. However, when it did govern, it supported social policies and salary increases for the state employees.

**c) The party with its origin in the press:** the *Great Romania Party (PRM)*, founded in the early ‘90s, based on the *Romania Mare* journal. Corneliu Vadim Tudor, the founder of the *Great Romania Party*, can be regarded as a nationalist who combined the ethnic speech with left-wing social justice messages. In 2000, Vadim Tudor made it to the second ballot of the presidential election, but eventually lost in favour of the ex-communist Ion Iliescu, the chairman of *PSD*. Tudor was a good orator: his discourse mixed symbols inspired by the national-communist rhetoric with messages from the inter-war Legionary Movement.<sup>19</sup> This nationalist party disappeared after its founder’s death in 2015. *PRM* did not overpass the electoral threshold in the 2016 parliamentary election, but the most significant leaders of the party joined *PSD*, holding leadership positions and, later on, being appointed ministers.

**d) The party with its origin in a media institution:** *Oglinda TV (Mirror TV)* is the media organisation that generated the *People’s Party – Dan Diaconescu (PP-DD)*. *Mirror TV* (abbr. *OTV*), a TV station launched in 2001, later on associated with *DDTV* (Dan Diaconescu TV), lost its license in 2013, after having its license time reduced for a while in 2012 for doing political propaganda.<sup>20</sup> Diaconescu managed to transform a private TV station into a political party practically ‘overnight’: the *People’s Party* was founded on the 19<sup>th</sup> of September 2011 under the name of *PP-DD*. From drivers and secretaries, through technicians and cameramen to TV journalists and presenters, all *OTV* employees became party members. The *People’s Party (PP-DD)* was an all-catch party, with Diaconescu being the owner of a TV station named *People’s Television*. The leader of the party was a good speaker and was always present on TV in prime-time.<sup>21</sup> The party collapsed after its leader was arrested and condemned for blackmail in 2015.

**e) The party with its origin in social media or in blogs:** similarly to *5 Stars Movement* in Italy (*Beppe Grillo’s Movimento 5 stelle*), in Romania a former leader of a non-governmental organisation (the *Romanian Humanist Association*) started his own party on the basis of his blog and *Facebook* account: Remus Cernea founded the *Green Movement*, which merged with the *Romanian Green Party*.<sup>22</sup>

On the contrary, Romanian political parties with the interior origin (inside the Parliament) are:

a) The *Social Democratic Party (PSD)*, coming from the party *National Salvation Front (FSN)*, a political organisation that was the governing body of Romania in the first weeks after the Romanian Revolution in 1989. In fact, *FSN* was constructed based on the ruins of the *Communist Romanian Party*, by many of the party’s communist members claiming in December 1989 that they were, in fact, revolutionaries.

b) The *United Romania Party (PRU)*, founded in 2015 by the former *Social Democratic Party* member Bogdan Diaconu. He announced the party’s creation in 2014. Diaconu had been elected on the *PSD* lists and active in the Romanian Parliament during 2012-2016. After his resignation in 2014 and creating *PRU* in 2015, he kept good relations with the *PSD* leader, Victor Ponta. Diaconu was able to convince Sebastian Ghiță, the former social-democrat deputy, the owner and founder of the news television *Romania TV*, to join the *United Romania Party*. According to a resolution adopted in 2015, the *United Romania Party* opposed migrant quotas, same-sex marriages, joining the ‘Euro-zone’ or accepting any other official language in Romania except the current official language. *Romania TV*

14 MATEESCU, B.: *Câte voturi va primi PSD la parlamentare?* Released on 17<sup>th</sup> October 2016. [online]. [2016-10-17]. Available at: <<http://sociologica.blogspot.ro/2016/10/cate-voturi-va-primi-psd-la-parlamentare.html>>.

15 PUTNAM, R. D. et al.: *Cum functioneaza democratia*. Iași: Polirom, 2001, p. 125.

16 MOMOC, A.: Populist and Neo-populist Candidates in the 2009 and 2014 Presidential Elections in Romania. A Media Coverage Analysis. In KRISHNA-HENSEL, S. F. (ed.): *Authoritarian and Populist Influences in the New Media*. London, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018, p. 79.

17 For more information, see: DUVERGER, M.: *Les Partis Politiques*. Paris: Armand Collin, 1976.

18 MOMOC, A.: *Comunicarea 2.0. New Media, Participare, Populism*. Iași: Adenium, 2014, p. 191-193.

19 MOMOC, A.: Populist and Neo-populist Candidates in the 2009 and 2014 Presidential Elections in Romania. A Media Coverage Analysis. In KRISHNA-HENSEL, S. F. (ed.): *Authoritarian and Populist Influences in the New Media*. London, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018, p. 71.

20 MOMOC, A.: *Berlusconization of the Romanian Mass-Media? When Journalists Become Politicians*. Study presented at the CEECOM 2014: Changing Media and Democracy: 25 Years of Media Freedom and Public Sphere in Central and East Europe. Wrocław, presented on 12<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> June 2014.

21 MOMOC, A.: Populist and Neo-populist Candidates in the 2009 and 2014 Presidential Elections in Romania. A Media Coverage Analysis. In KRISHNA-HENSEL, S. F. (ed.): *Authoritarian and Populist Influences in the New Media*. London, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018, p. 65-66.

22 MOMOC, A.: Religious Messages and Symbols in the Neo-populist Speech: The Blogs of the 2009 Election Candidates. In *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 2012, Vol. 8, No. 4, p. 199.

journalists and *PRU* officially endorse the initiative to revise the Constitution (ignited by the Coalition for the Family), demanding for the Fundamental Law to establish that “*marriage is the union between a man and a woman*”.<sup>23</sup>

Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser notice that the ascent of populist parties goes hand in hand with the emergence of a new political scenario, marked by the appearance of a cartel-party cumulated with the increasing influence of mass media, particularly of television.<sup>24</sup> Populism does not believe in a politically independent media. Rather, it perceives the media landscape through a Manichaeic lens, making the distinction between the ‘pure’ people and the ‘corrupt’ elite. Populists claim there are honest and legitimate mass media, expressing the will of the people, as well as fraudulent ones, meant to defend the interests of the ‘corrupt’ elite.<sup>25</sup> As Umberto Eco notices in his essay titled *Eternal Fascism*, “*a TV or online populism is drafted, meant to convey the emotional response of a selected group of citizens, presented and accepted as the voice of the people*”.<sup>26</sup> In Romania, there are several televisions that engage in the populist discourse and act as populist actors – *Oglinda TV*, *Romania TV* and *Antena 3* – that have either given birth to certain parties (*PP-DD* from *Oglinda TV*), or are openly standing behind political parties (*Romania TV* for *PRU*, *Antena 3* for *PSD*).<sup>27</sup>

## Etymological Definition of Democracy

The theoretical frame of this article is based on Giovanni Sartori’s conceptual approach from his book *A Theory of Democracy Revisited*, initially published in 1987, complemented by the studies of Robert Dahl (1971, 2000, 2002 and 2003) and Arendt Lijphart (2000). “*The wrong ideas about democracy make democracy work wrong*” is the phrasing used by Giovanni Sartori<sup>28</sup> to underline the need to redefine democracy, a topical need in the context of the rise of populism. And populism reclaims itself from the ‘people’.

According to the Italian scientist, there are big differences between the literal sense of democracy and the reality, which make it difficult for the supporters of democracy. Following Sartori’s footsteps in search of an “*operational theory of democracy*”, I have started from the etymological definition. But the democracy etymologically defined as *demos* and *kratos* – “the power of the people” – is an “*imprecise definition founded on a hazy premise*”;<sup>29</sup> the etymological definition does not make it clear enough what the ‘people’ is. Even in Greek, *demos* was an ambiguous term, probably referring to the many and poor, which determined Aristotle to prefer the notion of *politeia* (a well-built city) instead of democracy. Sartori added that the term “people” allows numerous interpretations, making it hard to understand who holds the power upon whom. “People” can stand for the entire world, a big part of individuals, the lower classes, an organic whole, an absolute majority or a limited majority. To embrace the etymological definition of “democracy” and to define “the people” as everybody points out that the literal definition is practically inoperable.

Sartori argues that democracy implies mechanisms and procedures by which the majority “*governs limited by the respect for the rights of the minority*” and defines it as “*constitutional democracy*”.<sup>30</sup> Modern democracy is based on governing of the limited majority, on electoral procedures and on exerting the power via representatives, i.e. via “*representative democracy*”. The so-called ‘general will’ actually means consent.<sup>31</sup>

“*Etymologic democracy*” has to be abandoned because if we were to literally apply it “*all the existing democracies would be rejected as being fake democracies*”.<sup>32</sup> To define democracy as ‘the power of the people’ raises practical risks for the democracy to be contested by its rivals, since the reality proves that the power has never effectively belonged to the people.

Procedural-wise, Cas Mudde argues that democracy refers to the combination between “*the popular sovereignty and the rule of the majority*”.<sup>33</sup> Hence, democracy can be direct or indirect, liberal or neoliberal. Modern democracy stands for a system of juridical norms (constitutional democracy with constitutional guarantees) and representative institutions (parties and national parliaments, which have recently become unpopular). As Yves Mény and Yves Surel explain, populism should be understood in opposition to constitutionalism.<sup>34</sup> The ideal definition of democracy would be “*an institutional ensemble able to lead to political decisions which bring the common good*”, while *polyarchies* – working democracies – are relative democracies, never complete.<sup>35</sup> Democracy as a “*matter of fact is, from a descriptive perspective, an elective polyarchy*”.<sup>36</sup> Liberal democracies are founded on the principles of contesting power, political participation and equality, which cannot admit that the majority could deprive the minorities of any political rights.<sup>37</sup>

Consensual democracy defined as the mechanism by which a majority is exerting power serving the general interest and respecting the rights of the minorities is the “*cons-associative democracy*” in which “*the governing of the majority is replaced by the common consensual rule*”.<sup>38</sup> Consensual or inclusive democracy, based on proportional representation and parliamentary governing system, is translated into a better representation of the minority groups and women, a bigger political equality for the ethnical, religious and linguistic minorities, a wider participation in the elections, a deeper orientation towards the community, a bigger tolerance for what is different from the majority political or ethnical group in the society.<sup>39</sup>

A consolidated civic society is needed for the constitutional, representative and multi-party democracy to function. According to Robert D. Putnam, the low level of education and the non-civic habits strengthen the feelings of exploitation and helplessness. Unlike the civic community, which is cooperative and egalitarian, life in the vertically structured communities creates daily reasons for the emergence of sentiments like exploitation, dependence and frustration.<sup>40</sup> Honesty, trust and respect for the law are at the core of a civic community. The citizens of a civic community are responsible and correct to each other and expect the same correctness from the others. Democracy and open society are founded on the value of political moderation, defined by Aurelia Crăiuțu as “*respect for the law, limited power, avoiding excesses and restricting the political arbitrariness (in all forms), as moderation cannot be separated from a certain form of solidarity and respect for the common good and for the opinions of the others*”.<sup>41</sup> Robert Dahl lists at least five criteria for a regime to function democratically:

1. effective participation (all members of the political community need to have equal opportunities to let the other members know about their opinions on what policies should be adopted);
2. equality at the poll (when it comes to taking decisions, each member to have an equal and effective opportunity to vote and all the votes to be considered equal);
3. enlightened understanding (each member should have equal and effective opportunities to get informed about the alternative policies and about the probable consequences);

23 LĂZĂROIU, A., ANGELACHE, C.: *Congresul Partidului România Unită*. Released on 24<sup>th</sup> January 2016. [online]. [2016-02-10]. Available at: <<https://www.agerpres.ro/flux-documentare/2016/01/24/congresul-partidului-romania-unita-14-16-40>>.

24 MUDDE, C. et al.: *Populismul în Europa și în cele două Americi. Amenințare sau remediu pentru democrație?* Iași: Institutul European, 2015, p. 351.

25 WAISBORD, S.: Between Support and Confrontation: Civic Society, Media Reform, and Populism in Latin America. In *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 2011, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 100.

26 ECO, U.: *Cinci scrieri morale*. București: Humanitas, 2005, p. 45.

27 MOMOC, A.: *Comunicarea 2.0. New Media, Participare, Populism*. Iași: Adenium, 2014, p. 184.

28 SARTORI, G.: *Teoria democrației reinterpretată*. Iași: Polirom, 1999, p. 31.

29 SARTORI, G.: *Teoria democrației reinterpretată*. Iași: Polirom, 1999, p. 45.

30 SARTORI, G.: *Teoria democrației reinterpretată*. Iași: Polirom, 1999, p. 47-48, 55-55, 223.

31 SARTORI, G.: *Teoria democrației reinterpretată*. Iași: Polirom, 1999, p. 52, 162.

32 SARTORI, G.: *Teoria democrației reinterpretată*. Iași: Polirom, 1999, p. 55.

33 MUDDE, C. et al.: *Populismul în Europa și în cele două Americi. Amenințare sau remediu pentru democrație?* Iași: Institutul European, 2015, p. 30.

34 MÉNY, Y., SUREL Y.: The Constitutive Ambiguity of Populism. In MÉNY, Y., SUREL Y. (eds.): *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*. New York, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002, p. 21-24.

35 DAHL, R.: *Polyarchy. Participation and Opposition*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971, p. 8.

36 SARTORI, G.: *Teoria democrației reinterpretată*. Iași: Polirom, 1999, p. 162.

37 MUDDE, C. et al.: *Populismul în Europa și în cele două Americi. Amenințare sau remediu pentru democrație?* Iași: Institutul European, 2015, p. 34.

38 SARTORI, G.: *Teoria democrației reinterpretată*. Iași: Polirom, 1999, p. 222.

39 LIJPHART, A.: *Modele ale democrației. Forme de guvernare și funcționare în treizeci și șase de țări*. Iași: Polirom, 2000, p. 252-268, 275.

40 PUTNAM, R. D. et al.: *Cum funcționează democrația*. Iași: Polirom, 2001, p. 126.

41 For more information, see: CRĂIUȚU, A.: O virtute paradoxală: moderația. În *Dilema veche*, 2006, Vol. 3, No. 135. [online]. [2017-08-25]. Available at: <<http://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/tema-saptamanii/articol/o-virtute-paradoxala-moderatia>>.

4. controlling the political agenda (the members to have the chance to decide if they wish for an issue to be on the agenda, and which one);
5. adults inclusion (all or, in any case, most of the resident adults to have the citizen rights specified in the previous criteria).<sup>42</sup>

To Robert Dahl, *polyarchy* or democracy in practice represents a “*public order distinguished by two essential features: the quality of citizen to be extended to a great number of adults, and the citizen rights to include the possibility to oppose the highest state dignitaries and to dismiss them from governance by voting*”.<sup>43</sup> Despite the fact that *polyarchy* is criticised even by the inhabitants of the democratic states and “*many express their disgust about it*”, *polyarchy* provides an entire series of rights and freedoms that cannot be matched by any other real alternative. Compared to its past and current alternatives, *polyarchy* signifies one of the most amazing human achievements.<sup>44</sup>

## Populism versus Democracy

Populism, as well as democracy, starts from the idea of ‘popular sovereignty’; however, only the democratic logic admits that ‘the will of the people’ has to be a continuous construction. The democratic logic refers to the place that is unoccupied by power, and to the diversity of late modern society. The populist logic promotes the fiction of a ‘homogenous identity’ and of the people’s will, aiming to suppress diversity and cancel the fight for power, as power should not be disputed anymore.

Authors like Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens suggest that, since populism mainly focuses on concepts such as ‘the people’ or ‘democracy’, “*populism provides a thin-centred ideology concerning the structure of power in society*”.<sup>45</sup> The populist ideology is based on three elements: 1) a central antagonistic relationship between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, meaning that “*politics has escaped popular control*”;<sup>46</sup> 2) ‘popular sovereignty’ – populism tries to give the power back to ‘the people’. The populists speak as if “*democracy meant the power of the people and only the power of the people*”;<sup>47</sup> 3) the transparency of the people’s will is possible because populism conceptualises the people as a “*homogeneous unity*”.<sup>48</sup> The people are neither seen neither as a heterogeneous collective of social groups, nor they are perceived as individual subjects with diverse values, needs and opinions.

The holistic concept of “people” defined as a whole or as an “*amorphous aggregate*” is contested by Giovanni Sartori based on the argument that it enables the justification of any political regime, “*allowing to legitimate a tyrannical leadership*”, because “*each individual can be crushed at a time in the name of the whole*”. The Italian political scientist draws the attention to the risk that resides in “*transforming the ideal of people into a fetish*”.<sup>49</sup> To Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens, populism is “proto-totalitarian”.<sup>50</sup> The populists’ need to ‘protect’ the fictive unity and homogeneity of the people can eventually lead to totalitarianism.<sup>51</sup> Nadia Urbinati concludes that populism represents “*a dangerous threat to the constitutional democracy*”.<sup>52</sup>

‘Popular sovereignty’ stands, from a procedural perspective, for functional Opposition,<sup>53</sup> because the majority and minority can express it only by consulting and respecting the Opposition, in order to apply the limited governance of the Majority. But since populism supports the ‘popular sovereignty’ and the ‘majority rule’, the populist leaders and parties are inclined to challenge the legitimacy of the liberal institutions, such as the rule of law or the respect for individual freedoms.<sup>54</sup> According to Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, this is where the tensions occur in the liberal democracies between the promise of the majority rule and the reality of the constitutional protection of the minorities’ rights. Obviously, all populists are hostile towards pluralism and the protection of the minorities. Nevertheless, the same authors underline the so-called ‘positive effects’ of populism over democracy: it encourages the social groups that do not feel represented by the elite to participate politically and it highlights topics that are relevant for the ‘silent majority’ (like immigration in Europe and USA) and can, thus, mobilise the lower classes to be politically included. However, “*the most negative effect of populism is social polarisation*”.<sup>55</sup>

Populists tend to claim that the democratic procedures, the rule of law and the constitutional mechanisms of checks and balances limit the people’s ability to exert collective power and, moreover, they fuel the increase of the popular dissatisfaction towards the political system. This explains why populists agree with plebiscite and other forms of direct democracy, exerted without intermediary or representative institutions, like the Parliament. Insisting on the notion of popular sovereignty, populists pretend that ‘the people’ is the only authority entitled to assess and legitimate the political system.<sup>56</sup>

Populism is characterised by a series of ‘anti’-: anti-elites, anti-political parties, anti-political institutions, anti-mainstream parties, anti-parliament, anti-system, anti-corruption, anti-establishment or anti-leadership. Some key elements of populism are derived from the literature emphasising the sovereignty of the people, advocating for the people, attacking the elite, ostracising others and invoking the ‘heartland’.<sup>57</sup>

In Central and Eastern Europe, “*populism has been maintained primarily by the frequently used ‘theory’ of the conspiracy of the corrupt political elite against ordinary citizens, a scheme permanently used both by politicians and by mass-media*”.<sup>58</sup> according to which the West is morally corrupt and the foreigners’ economic interests aim to subordinate the Eastern European countries. This is how Ivan Krastev sums up the populist manifestations in Eastern Europe; contempt and even hatred of political elites; a strong anti-corruption rhetoric; an anti-system discourse based on the appeal to the people as a whole; cultural (or religious) conservatism; economic egalitarianism; rhetorical anti-capitalism; declared nationalism; xenophobic behaviour and discourses; conflicting public policies (when they arrive into power); anti-system foreign policy and alliances. “*Populism is the most seductive ideology when the institutional system is unable to resolve the imbalances caused by the change or crisis in the political, economic or social spheres*”.<sup>59</sup> Unsatisfied demands and expectations grow in times of crisis and populist parties provide an explanation for problems in the figure of ‘the Other’, and a solution to this problem by truly restoring the ‘popular sovereignty’.<sup>60</sup>

Populist actors tend to define the word “people” in ethnical terms and to suggest that only the native population should participate politically.<sup>61</sup> As Umberto Eco illustrates, the “*qualitative populism*” is at the

42 See: DAHL, R.: *Despre democrație*. Iași : Institutul European, 2003.

43 DAHL, R.: *Democrația și criticii ei*. Iași : Polirom, 2002, p. 306.

44 DAHL, R.: *Democrația și criticii ei*. Iași : Polirom, 2002, p. 309.

45 ABTS, K., RUMMENS, S.: Populism versus Democracy. In *Political Studies*, 2007, Vol. 55, No. 2, p. 408.

46 CANOVAN, M.: Taking Politics to the People: Populism as the Ideology of Democracy. In MÈNY, Y., SUREL, Y. (eds.): *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*. New York : Palgrave, 2002, p. 27, 32.

47 MÈNY, Y., SUREL Y.: The Constitutive Ambiguity of Populism. In MÈNY, Y., SUREL Y. (eds.): *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*. New York : Palgrave, 2002, p. 9.

48 CANOVAN, M.: Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy. In *Political Studies*, 1999, Vol. 47, No. 1, p. 5-16.

49 SARTORI, G.: *Teoria democrației reinterpretată*. Iași : Polirom, 1999, p. 47-49.

50 ABTS, K., RUMMENS, S.: Populism versus Democracy. In *Political Studies*, 2007, Vol. 55, No. 2, p. 414.

51 PANIZZA, F.: Introduction: Populism and the Mirror of Democracy. In PANIZZA, F. (ed.): *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*. London : Verso, 2005, p. 29

52 URBINATI, N.: Democracy and Populism. In *Constellations*, 1998, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 10-24.

53 SARTORI, G.: *Teoria democrației reinterpretată*. Iași : Polirom, 1999, p. 53.

54 MUDDE, C. et al.: *Populismul în Europa și în cele două Americi. Amenințare sau remediu pentru democrație?* Iași : Institutul European, 2015, p. 35-45.

55 MUDDE, C. et al.: *Populismul în Europa și în cele două Americi. Amenințare sau remediu pentru democrație?* Iași : Institutul European, 2015, p. 51.

56 MUDDE, C. et al.: *Populismul în Europa și în cele două Americi. Amenințare sau remediu pentru democrație?* Iași : Institutul European, 2015, p. 333.

57 ENGESSER, S. et al.: Populism and Social Media: How Politicians Spread a Fragmented Ideology. In *Information, Communication & Society*, 2017, Vol. 20, No. 8, p. 1109-1126.

58 PÎRVULESCU, C., ȚĂRANU, A.: *The Populist Confusion. Populism, Nationalism, Extremism: Expressions of Anti-politics in Europe?* Paper presented at the Conference 22 IPSA World Congress. Madrid, presented on 8<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> July 2012.

59 KRASTEV, I.: *The New Europe: Respectable Populism and Clockwork Liberalism*. Paper presented at the Centre for Liberal Strategies. Sofia, presented on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2006.

60 PÎRVULESCU, C., ȚĂRANU, A.: *The Populist Confusion. Populism, Nationalism, Extremism: Expressions of Anti-politics in Europe?* Paper presented at the Conference 22 IPSA World Congress. Madrid, presented on 8<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> July 2012.

61 MUDDE, C. et al.: *Populismul în Europa și în cele două Americi. Amenințare sau remediu pentru democrație?* Iași : Institutul European, 2015, p. 332.

bottom of fascism. In the “eternal fascism”, the individuals do not have individual rights as citizens and ‘the people’ is conceived as a qualitative, monolithic entity expressing the ‘common will’. The leader claims to be the voice and translator of the individuals. Losing the power to delegate, the individuals do not act, but are summoned to play the part of people. “Thus, *‘the people’ is just a theatrical fiction and the eternal fascism has to oppose the ‘rotten’ parliamentary governments*”.<sup>62</sup>

In their study *Populism versus Democracy*, Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens<sup>63</sup> show that populism is described both as a strategy of political mobilisation using a typical style of political rhetoric and a style of politics. On the one hand, populist parties appeal to the power of the common people and the frustrated lower middle class in order to challenge the legitimacy of the current political establishment; on the other hand, populism refers to a mobilization characterised by the politics of personality that is centred on a charismatic leader who is said to embody the will of the common people.

However, we agree with Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser who conclude that populism is an ideology with a few common and general features.<sup>64</sup> The regressive or progressive character of populism depends to a large extent on ‘the Others’ against whom the people are united, regardless of whether they are migrants and ethnic minorities (as in the case of right-wing populism) or economic elites and corrupt politicians (as in the case of progressive populism).<sup>65</sup> The reactionary populism conserves social traditions and practices set against ‘the foreigners’, ‘the immigrants’ or the ‘ethnic minorities’, while progressive populism intends to change national values and traditional institutions that are corrupt or anti-liberal.<sup>66</sup> In this article, I do not define populism only based on its political discourse or style, but I also analyse the ideas promoted online by Romanian political parties as values of the populist ideology.

# Populism 2.0 and Digital Democracy

Online political participation or users’ interaction with the public topics has been described either as “digital democracy”<sup>67</sup> and “electronic democracy”<sup>68</sup> or as “cyber-balkanization”, a fragmentation of the public interest into private interests, intolerant and exclusivist, as a consequence of the citizens’ polarisation and isolation in online “islands” refusing to dialogue with the “inhabitants” of other “online islands”.<sup>69</sup>

Digital democracy is essentially a form of the so-called direct democracy, possible especially in the online environment thanks to new technologies that offer the chance for all the users to express, participate, interact and get involved. Interactive technology is expected to produce active citizens.<sup>70</sup> In this paradigm, the direct democracy represents the new agora, possible due to the access to the Internet and new networked technologies.<sup>71</sup>

The institutions of mediation and their representatives, i.e. ‘traditional’ media and their gatekeepers or the political parties and the parliament, become useless in an age when people can express and make sovereign decisions in the digital environment. In this context, the lack of web regulation proved to be a “*particularly fertile ground for the populist movements*”,<sup>72</sup> considering that social networks are influenced by trolling and the online environment favours fake news; the post-truths or the ‘alternative truths’ proliferate on the Web, be-

cause news is not filtered by gatekeepers anymore.<sup>73</sup> The common people have turned into the generic Internet users, and the direct democracy has become democracy 2.0. Democracy 2.0 designates a democratic project that makes use of the interactive features of Web 2.0, such as liking, commenting and sharing. These features are adopted as the means of a permanent consultation, of a plebiscitary cyber-democracy; they are based on the principle of ‘one like, one vote’.<sup>74</sup> The so-called digital democracy has made populism 2.0 possible.

For the activists of the popular wave, social media have been appropriated and turned into an expansive medium of mass mobilisation.<sup>75</sup> As Paulo Gerbaudo notices, social networks constitute the tools for an emerging anti-establishment digital mass politics: “*Populism 2.0 designates an ideology or more precisely an ideological orientation that sees social media as means to address ‘the people’, in the sense of the totality or near-totality of the political community. Contemporary social media activism comes to reflect some rhetorical features traditionally associated with populism, but updated in a way that fits the dynamics proper to the communicative architecture of Web 2.0, with its valuing of interactivity and participation. In this context, traditional features of populism (appeal to unity, anti-establishment and anti-institutional rhetoric, strive for direct democracy, suspicion of intermediaries) come to be matched with a set of tropes that make up what we could call the ‘ideology of social media’ (interactivity, openness, directness). Emerging movements and parties in the popular wave utilise these social media features as means to appeal to a heterogeneous mass of Internet users and to address the ideal subject of ‘the generic Internet user’ in opposition to economic and political elites. The product of this adaptation is the rise of an interactive and participatory populism: a populism 2.0.*”<sup>76</sup>

# The Research Method

The content analysis method was applied to establish what ideas and values the candidates promoted in the online environment. As of the encoding scheme, the variation value codes apply to all the counted items: the elements of the analysed communication process vary. They represent the **recording** units. The recording unit stands for the significance unit that has to be encoded. The used recording unit is the key word.<sup>77</sup> The **context** unit (superior as dimension to the recording unit) is represented by each post and sets the topic through the encoding. The context unit has the role of an understanding unit that helps encoding the recording unit. The chosen **numbering** unit stands for the topic or theme of the post. The **analysis** unit refers, in this case, to the monitored *Facebook* account. The analysed sample is formed of the total number of posts made on the official *Facebook* accounts of the political parties during the electoral campaign period. The pragmatic analysis aims to identify either the intentions of the communicator of a text, or the effects that these texts can have upon a recipient. The frequency analysis endeavours to answer the question: How many posts tackled the topic X, Y, Z? (versus the total number of posts from the analysed period).

Whenever the message was self-centred and self-promoting, the attitude of the author was labelled as positive. When the message was attacking the competitors, criticising the counter-candidates, the post was labelled as negative. If the *Facebook* post was announcing events or other actions that were not connected to the political party or to the candidates, and the author did not intervene in the message, its tone was labelled as neutral.

To assess the measure in which the digital rhetoric of the political parties was populist, I introduced an analysis grid that established the extent in which the *Facebook* posts referred to the following subjects, as well as the manner in which the political parties tackled them: People; Nation (National Sovereignty); Charismatic leader (playing the role of the ‘Saviour’ Hero); Foreigners; Refugees; European Union; EU Institutions; State

62 ECO, U.: *Cinci scrieri morale*. București : Humanitas, 2005, p. 45-46.

63 ABTS, K., RUMMENS, S.: Populism versus Democracy. In *Political Studies*, 2007, Vol. 55, No. 2, p. 407.

64 MUDDE, C. et al.: *Populismul în Europa și în cele două Americi. Amenințare sau remediu pentru democrație?* Iași : Institutul European, 2015, p. 28-29.

65 GERBAUDO, P.: Populism 2.0: Social Media Activism, the Generic Internet User and Interactive Direct Democracy. In TROTTIER, D., FUCHS, C. (eds.): *Social media, Politics and the State: Protests, Revolutions, Riots, Crime and Policing in the Age of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube*. Abingdon : Routledge, 2014, p. 73-74.

66 MOMOC, A.: *Comunicarea 2.0. New Media, Participare, Populism*. Iași : Adenium, 2014, p. 188.

67 VAN SELM, M., JANKOWSKI, N., TSALIKI, L.: Political Parties Online: Digital Democracy as Reflected in Three Dutch Political Party Web Sites. In *Communications*, 2002, Vol. 27, No. 2, p. 190.

68 TSAGAROUSIANOU, R.: Electronic Democracy: Rhetoric and Reality. In *Communications. The European Journal of Communication Research*, 1999, Vol. 24, No. 2, p. 189-208.

69 SUNSTEIN, C.: *Republic.com 2.0*. Princeton, Oxford : Princeton University Press, 2007, p. 60-65.

70 BARRY, A.: On Interactivity. In HASSAN, R., THOMAS, J. (eds.): *The New Media Theory Reader*. Maidenhead, Berkshire : Open University Press, 2006, p. 163-164.

71 MOMOC, A.: *Comunicarea 2.0. New Media, Participare, Populism*. Iași : Adenium, 2014, p. 151-157.

72 STANYER, J.: *Comunicarea politică modernă. Politici mediatice în vremuri nesigure*. Cluj : CA Publishing, 2010, p. 152

73 MOMOC, A.: *Comunicarea 2.0. New Media, Participare, Populism*. Iași : Adenium, 2014, p. 153, 156.

74 GERBAUDO, P.: Populism 2.0: Social Media Activism, the Generic Internet User and Interactive Direct Democracy. In TROTTIER, D., FUCHS, C. (eds.): *Social Media, Politics and the State: Protests, Revolutions, Riots, Crime and Policing in the Age of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube*. Abingdon : Routledge, 2014, p. 70.

75 For more information, see: GERBAUDO, P.: *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism*. London : Pluto Press, 2012.

76 GERBAUDO, P.: Populism 2.0: Social Media Activism, the Generic Internet User and Interactive Direct Democracy. In TROTTIER, D., FUCHS, C. (eds.): *Social Media, Politics and the State: Protests, Revolutions, Riots, Crime and Policing in the Age of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube*. Abingdon : Routledge, 2014, p. 69.

77 MARINESCU, V.: *Metode de studiu în comunicare*. București : Niculescu, 2005, p. 113-117.

Institutions (political or economic, being an intermediary between the people and the elites); High Living Level (from economic, social or cultural perspective).

I analysed the digital rhetoric of the political parties during the electoral campaign for the 2016 parliamentary election. Since the populist ideology is rooted in the belief that the people is a ‘homogenous’ entity and in the ‘popular sovereignty’, our objective was to analyse how the Romanian political actors define ‘the people’ and ‘the new enemies of the people’ in the online speech of the political parties that participated in the 2016 parliamentary election. I analysed the posts displayed from the 11<sup>th</sup> of November to the 10<sup>th</sup> of December 2016 on the official *Facebook* accounts of three political parties:

1. *Social Democratic Party (PSD)*,<sup>78</sup>
2. *Save Romania Union (USR)*,<sup>79</sup>
3. *United Romania Party (PRU)*.<sup>80</sup>

In Romania, *Facebook* is the online platform with the biggest number of users, counting 8,800,000 accounts (according to *Facebrands.ro*, data is from October 2016); these accounts represent – more or less – half of the citizens eligible to vote. The reason why *USR* and *PRU* were monitored is that, according to my assumption, they convey a strong populist anti-system message. Both are newcomer parties, with a low number of members, but they both achieved good results at the latest parliamentary election: *USR* passed the electoral threshold and *PRU* was very close to doing the same. Both parties, although small in numbers, influenced the media agenda: *USR* by achieving significant media coverage due to its online communication via blogs and social networks, especially on *Facebook*, while *PRU* benefiting from the endorsement of the news television *Romania TV*, owned by Sebastian Ghiță, one of the party’s leaders. However, their anti-establishment and anti-parties messages were based on different grounds: while *USR* blamed the dominant parliamentary parties of being corrupt, *PRU* accused the big parties of being anti-Romanian, of executing what the West commands, and of being ‘sold’ to the foreigners.

Nevertheless, the dominant party on the Romanian political scene is the *Social Democratic Party*, a direct successor of the *Romanian Communist Party* bruised by corruption scandals. *PSD* has won all the parliamentary elections after 1989, always obtaining the biggest number of members of the Parliament. Agreeing to take part in coalitions is the only context that has ever allowed other parties to govern. My hypothesis is that in 2016, the dominant party embedded the rhetoric and style of the nationalist and populist parties into its online speech, in order to secure its electoral success.<sup>81</sup>

## Findings and Data Interpretation

The analysis of the online communication of the *Social Democratic Party* related to the 2016 parliamentary election revealed that *PSD* displayed a total of 103 posts (numbering units) on their official *Facebook* page. Topics (context unit):

31 posts about “high living level”:

- more Romanians should be in the middle class – 5;
- economic growth transposed into well-paid workplaces – 5;
- Salary Law – 4;
- salary increases – 2;
- *PSD* removes 102 non-fiscal taxes – 4;
- supporting Bucharest City Hall and the PSD Mayor – 4;

78 *Partidul Social Democrat*. [online]. [2017-12-15]. Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/psdbiroupresa/>>.

79 *Uniunea Salvați România – USR*. [online]. [2017-12-15]. Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/USRNational>>.

80 *Partidul România Unită*. [online]. [2017-12-15]. Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/pruoficial>>.

81 MOMOC, A.: *What is the Rhetoric of the Dominant Romanian Party? The PSD Online Discourse on the Ordinances Decriminalizing Official Misconduct*. Study presented at Conference Journalism, Society and Politics in the Digital Media Era. Cyprus, presented on 1<sup>st</sup> September 2017.

- founding FSDI – 1;
- PSD proposes 2017 budget – 1;
- increasing pensions – 1;
- agricultural subsidies – 1;
- education and building nurseries – 1;
- investing in youth future – 1;
- increasing the State Defence budget – 1.

13 of *PSD* posts were about the “Romanian nation”:

- The 1<sup>st</sup> of December, the National Day – 5;
- Romanians must return from abroad – 2;
- young people should return home from abroad – 2;
- confidence in Romania – 1;
- the values of the “Romanian homeland” – 1;
- religious Christian values: St. Nicholas anniversary – 1;
- PSD did not organise a protest on the National Day – 1.

13 posted topics were related to the party leader, “PSD Chairman” and his TV appearances – 13.

12 posts focused on “PSD supporting the European socialist politicians” – 12.

7 posts about “health” were identified:

- increasing salaries and building hospitals – 3;
- National Programme for Treating People Suffering from Hepatitis C – 1;
- reopening hospitals – 1;
- opening new hospitals – 1;
- ‘unlocking’ Health programmes – 1.

7 posts were about “economic growth”:

- investments – 4;
- developing the business environment – 2;
- building highways – 1.

7 posts about the “Government” were included:

- anti-technocrat government – 7.

3 posts about the “People” regarding vote mobilization.

2 posts about “ecology”:

- ‘re-forestation’ – 2.

1 topic related to the “anti-parties” attitude:

- Anti-PNL which filed a complaint to CCR on Salary Law – 1.

1 “anti-President” topic:

- Anti-Klaus Iohannis who sent to CCR the PSD Law on Removing 102 taxes – 1.

1 topic about “foreigners”:

- criticising the collaboration with foreign companies – 1.

1 topic about “PSD’s support for the candidates” – 1.

Other topics:

- entrepreneurs endorse PSD – 2;
- teachers endorse PSD – 1;
- medics endorse PSD – 1.

**Attitude: 92 positive and self-centred posts; 11 negative contributions attacking the President and the Liberal Opposition; 0 neutral.**

The *Save Romania Union* had an official *Facebook* page with a total of 185 posts during the electoral campaign. Topics:

67 messages aiming to support *USR* candidates.

37 posts about the “people”:

- vote mobilisation – 34;
- USR financing sources – 3.

27 posts associates with “anti-establishment”:

- anti-political class – 13;
- anti-system – 7;
- anti-traditional parties – 7.

19 posts about “anti-political parties”:

- anti-government – 11;
- anti-PSD – 7;
- anti-alliance with PSD – 1.

11 posts were related to *USR* candidates’ TV appearances.

7 posts were calling for a correct electoral process.

5 posts were about “Romania”:

- “Romania of facts, not statements” – 3;
- the 1<sup>st</sup> of December message on National Day – 1;
- saving the Roşia Montana patrimony – 1.

Other topics:

- artists endorse USR candidates – 5;
- financial transparency – 1;
- election in the Republic of Moldavia – 1;
- administration – rehabilitation of buildings with seismic risk – 1;
- better living/reducing school dropout – 1;
- USR government programme – 1;
- Dacian Cioloş, the technocrat Prime Minister endorses USR – 1;
- USR resignation – 1.

**Attitude: 130 positive posts; 55 negative; 0 neutral.**

The official *Facebook* account of the *United Romania Party* displayed a total of only 33 posts. Topics:

9 posts about “Romanian nation”:

- patriotism (“Proud to be Romanians”) – 1;
- homeland values (the composer of Romanian Rhapsody, George Enescu) – 1;
- anti-independence for Transylvania – 1;
- Romanian state sovereignty – 1;
- the 1<sup>st</sup> of December – 1;
- PRU will not organise a counter-manifestation on the 1<sup>st</sup> of December – 1;
- nostalgic visions of the past – 3.

5 posts about “people”:

- voters mobilisation – 5.

2 posts about “foreigners”:

- Soros’s people divide Romania – 1;
- foreign companies damage Romania (illegal wood trade) – 1.

2 posts were about “anti-political power”:

- anti-technocratic government – 2.

1 post aimed to refuse “traditional parties”:

- anti-old parties – 1.

1 post was about the leader of the party, the *PRU* Chairman “Bogdan Diaconu”:

- his message for the Romanians living abroad – 1.

Other topics:

- *PRU-PRP* fusion – 1;
- *PRU-PSRO* fusion – 1;
- *PRU*’s fusion with the “*Vatra Romaneasca*” *Union* – 1;
- *PMP* leader moved to *PRU* – 1;
- a *PRU* candidate passed away – 1.
- a post with hypertext link to a *PRU* blog, not functional on the 20<sup>th</sup> of April 2017 – 1.

7 posts about the popular support for *PRU* candidates.

**Attitude: 28 positive; 5 negative; 0 neutral.**

## Conclusions

The financial crisis of the sovereign debts (Greece / Euro-zone), Vladimir Putin annexing the Crimean Peninsula to Russia, the civil war in Syria and the refugees’ crisis, Europe being affected by the scandal of the refugees’ quotas and the controversial position of the states of the Visegrád Group, the EU population concerned by the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels, and the tipping point marked by Brexit in UK have fuelled the fears that nationalism, extremism and populism can dismember the European Union Institutions. In this context, the political parties in Romania have reacted: the electoral discourse and messages did not become terribly euro-sceptical, but sound more and more critical regarding the West.



The presidential candidate of the *Social Democratic Party*, Victor Ponta, positioned himself at the 2014 presidential election as the defender of the traditional religious Orthodox values of the majority population.<sup>82</sup> Following a trend in political communication style launched during the 2014 Euro-parliamentary election, *PSD* strategically used the campaign slogan “Proud to be Romanian”.<sup>83</sup> When Klaus Iohannis, a German ethnic, was elected the President of Romania, it opened the option of having a civic nation and an open society. It was a vote for democracy, in which the word “the people” is not defined as homogenous from an ethnic or religious perspective.

The analysis of the topics posted on *Facebook* during the parliamentary campaign in November 2016 – December 2016 by the selected Romanian political parties revealed their propensity and attraction towards the populist ideology. The *Social Democratic Party* used its official *Facebook* page to continue its social and nationalist-conservative messages. The *Social Democratic Party* proclaimed itself as the Christian values defender against the ‘foreign’ threats and as the ‘Saviour’ of the Romanian people and their moral traditions. *PSD*’s online rhetoric insisted on the medics’ and teachers’ endorsement for the *Social Democratic Party*, underlining the threats posed by foreign multinational companies versus the autochthonous capital and the conspiracies of bankers and international financial elite against the common people. Still, *PSD* showed support for the European socialists, and did not discredit the EU institutions via their official *Facebook* channels.

The *United Romania Party* took over and repeated the electoral message of *PSD*: “Proud to be Romanian”. For *PRU*/leaders, the Romanian people’s enemies were the foreigners, the EU institutions and Hungarian businessmen like George Soros. In line with the ideology of the conservatory populism, *PRU* insisted that Romania was not supposed to be led from Brussels, as the legitimate deliberative authority was the national Parliament and no foreigners were to interfere with it – a message also conveyed by *PSD*. As other regional studies upon online nationalism discourse show, the Internet has become the key technology for keeping nations and other abstract communities together and more than this, in the ‘global era’ of de-territorialisation, the Internet is used to strengthen, rather than weaken, national identities and values.<sup>84</sup>

The *Save Romania Union* used a pro-European discourse. The group was built around its leader, Nicușor Dan, lacking a clear ideology. *USR* positioned itself as anti-system, anti-main political parties and anti-corruption. Their online messages were largely against traditional parties and corruption. For *USR*, the new people’s enemies were the corrupt politicians. Being deprived of the support of a TV news station that would ensure its coverage in traditional media, *USR* managed to mobilise its voters with anti-system messages sent via social media. The Internet was described by *USR* as a new agora where the digital democracy was possible. The autarchic nationalism emblematic for the reactionary populism and the pro-Europe trend specific to the ideology of the progressive populism were able to cohabitate in the same catch-all *USR* speech as long as the rhetoric binder was the anti-corruption message.

The study examined how three Romanian political parties employed social networks as a tool for enhancing “populism 2.0”. These parties used the online environment as a public space where they displayed and cultivated their anti-system and anti-liberal political values. Using social networks, particularly their official *Facebook* accounts, the three mentioned parties disseminated their populist political values. All three parties invoked in their online discourse the ‘pure’ people and claimed they were talking in the name of the people against the ‘corrupt’ elites. Two of them, *USR* and *PRU*, conveyed in a clear manner messages against the national establishment and against the whole political system. However, there were considerable differences when it came to the role that EU institutions should play at the national level: *USR* considered that the corrupt Romanian political parties should have been eliminated with European Union’s help, while *PSD* did not officially attack the EU institutions. However, *PRU* claimed that Brussels and the European Union leaders and bureaucrats were among ‘the new enemies of the people’.

82 MOMOC, A.: *Ponta și românii buni*. Released on 24<sup>th</sup> February 2015. [online]. [2015-02-24]. Available at: <<http://www.revistatimpul.ro/view-article/2082>>.

83 MOMOC, A.: Proud to be Romanian. National vs European Messages on Facebook during the 2014 EP Election. In CMECIU, C. (ed.): *E-Connecting Europe*. București : Ars Docendi, 2017, p. 102-105.

84 GÜNDÜZ, U., ERDEM, B. K.: The Concept of Virtual Nationalism in the Digital Age: Social Media Perspectives of Turkey. In *Communication Today*, 2017, Vol. 8, No. 2, p. 18.

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