



# Far-right Ecology and Geopolitical Resentment at Europe's Periphery: The Case of Romania's "Conservative Revolution"<sup>☆</sup>

Mihaela Mihai<sup>a,1,\*</sup>, Camil Ungureanu<sup>b,1</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Politics and International Relations, School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, Chrystal Macmillan Building, 15a George Square, EH8 9LD Edinburgh, UK*

<sup>b</sup> *Serra Hünter Associate Professor of Political Philosophy, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Jaume I Building (Ciutatella Campus), Ramon Trias Fargas, 25-27, Barcelona, 08005, Spain*

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## ABSTRACT

Building on insights from political geography and the social sciences, this paper illuminates the diversity of European far-right politics in general and far-right ecologism in particular by contextually examining a party at Europe's margins—the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR). Based on a discursive thematic analysis, our objective is to show how AUR challenges existing theoretical accounts, predominantly tethered to the Western and Central European experiences. While most influential scholars emphasize far right's culturalized view of religion and the fixation on immigration, AUR outlines a theological vision of politics and perceives emigration as a critical problem. Moreover, it co-opts the language of anticolonialism to articulate a socio-ecological critique of global extractive capitalism in a semi-peripheral context. These specificities are essential for understanding the party's outlier position within far-right ecologism: AUR places the environment at the very centre of its programme—and not merely as a strategic add-on to attract voters or respond to domestic or external pressures. To substantiate our claims, we reconstruct three dimensions of its hyper-nationalist, Orthodox geographical imaginary: AUR's complex, human, and natural resource nationalism; its focus on food sovereignty and the Romanian peasant as an exemplar of sustainable agriculture; and the protection of "the last virgin forests in Europe" as central to Romania's national identity and prosperity. We conclude that AUR effectively mobilizes historical geopolitical resentment at Europe's margins and addresses it with a promise of recovered plenitude that endangers democratic politics.

## 1. Far-right Ecologism at Europe's Margins: Questioning Received Opinion

Political geographers have linked far-right populism to two interrelated political processes: "first, the historical moment of convergence between a crisis of global capitalism, accelerated migration to the Global North and intensifying distrust in supranational governance. Second, the increasing territorialisation of populist discourse itself as dissatisfaction with globalization's mobilization of people, capital and culture—and

the elites who have benefitted from this mobilization—is expressed through calls to spatially isolate, close off, and withdraw." (Lizotte, 2019, 139) This paper partly supports and partly troubles this diagnosis via the contextual examination of an Eastern European variant that illuminates the diversity of far-right populism in Europe: we investigate the party The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), which has been polling at around 20 % (INSCOP Research, 2023).<sup>2</sup> While, like other European far-right parties, AUR is distrustful of globalization, supranational governance, and the elites who most benefit from

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [mihaela.mihai@ed.ac.uk](mailto:mihaela.mihai@ed.ac.uk) (M. Mihai), [camil.ungureanu@upf.edu](mailto:camil.ungureanu@upf.edu) (C. Ungureanu).

<sup>1</sup> The authors are listed alphabetically. They are equal contributors and share the first authorship of the article.

<sup>2</sup> In the last European elections in June 2024, AUR came second to the alliance between the Social Democratic and the National Liberal parties. It should be noted that an influential AUR senator, Diana Iovanovici Șoșoacă defected to another party, which led to the splitting of the AUR electorate (Commit Global, 2024). Currently, George Simion, AUR's president, is expected to enter the second round of the Romanian presidential elections scheduled for November 2024 (Borcea, 2024).

globalizing processes, its vision is grounded theologically in Christian Orthodoxy and centres on the social and especially the environmental costs of capitalist extraction in a country of emigration. Our objective is therefore to show how AUR challenges established theories of far-right populism in general and far-right ecologism in particular.

To achieve it, we offer an in-depth “thematic analysis” (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Howarth and Torfing 2005) of AUR’s programmes, policies, legislative initiatives, leaders’ publications and public interventions, from its founding in 2019 up to the end of 2023. The paper “unnaturalizes” (Kobayashi and Peake, 1994) AUR’s discursive production of a “nature” and “nation”,<sup>3</sup> as well as its deployment of anti-colonial vocabularies of critique to problematize its construction of a populist form of far-right ecologism. In doing so, we contribute to the existing literature on the European far-right where, notwithstanding notable exceptions,<sup>4</sup> scholars have mostly focused on Western and Central European parties,<sup>5</sup> on the basis of whose experiences they have inductively built a theoretical framework. Despite ongoing debates about the nature of populism,<sup>6</sup> most scholars contributing to this body of knowledge agree that its far-right variant is “a political movement that prioritises national identity and culture and that claims that the ‘pure and homogenous’ people are threatened by a neglectful, contemptuous and corrupt liberal elite on the one hand, and by the mass immigration of culturally different, external ‘others’ on the other.” (Cremer, 2023, 2) Moreover, there is an emerging agreement among researchers that European far-right populists use Christianity instrumentally, as culture, tradition, or heritage, with secularizing effects. (Brubaker, 2017; Roy, 2020; Astor and Mayrl, 2020; Griera et al., 2021; Cremer, 2023).

We challenge this conceptual-theoretical framework by showing that the fixation on immigration does not characterize Romania, an emigration country: AUR’s reactive discourse is concerned with the alleged conversion of Romania into a “colony” that provides human and natural resources to Western Europe via emigration and extraction. Moreover, the party also challenges the culturalization of religion thesis, which posits the secularizing nature of far-right populism. Claiming to counteract the colonization of minds by the secular West, AUR sees Christian Orthodoxy as essential for personal and national salvation and, fundamentally, as the *trans*-political, theological foundation of all politics, herein included environmental politics.

These specificities (regarding emigration, capitalist extractivism and religion) are key to understanding AUR’s position on “the environment”, which encompasses the party’s views on climate change, natural resources use, biodiversity loss and conservation. They modulate the party’s location within “far-right ecologism” (FRE), a broad ideological constellation including different fascist, conservative, and national-populist variants. (Lubarda 2020; 2023)<sup>7</sup> Ranging from extremist

celebrations of deadly violence to more moderate, non-violent variants, FRE is characterized by a turn to organicism, naturalism, nostalgia for an imagined past, economic self-sufficiency, and the restoration of male-centred authoritarian hierarchies.<sup>8</sup> We argue that AUR occupies a peculiar position within this far-right constellation: for them ecology is not merely an addendum or a strategic choice—as it is for most European far-right parties who turn to ecology in response to pressures from the EU, green parties and social movements, to court younger voters, and whitewash new capitalist dynamics (Ruser and Machin 2019; Oswald, Fromm, and Broda 2021; Tosun and Debus 2021; Ungureanu and Popartan 2024). Nor is it merely part of a cynical ploy to compound an existing image of the “enemy” by adding an ecological dimension to them (Kazharski 2019), or a transparent manoeuvre to appear authentic by referencing natural symbols central to national identity. (Kazharski and Makarychev 2020) As we show below, considering the party’s origin and its leader’s political background in environmental and nationalist activism, a theologically laden version of ecology has been a foundational building block of AUR’s political agenda from the outset.

To achieve our objective, we operationalise AUR’s ecological vision of ethnic, gendered, and spiritual wholeness via three geographical narratives. First, a narrative about the integrity and health of the nation within the territory, which presupposes a theologically grounded form of resource nationalism<sup>9</sup> and requires both the repatriation of the diaspora lost to Western Europe and the reunification with the Republic of Moldova. Second, AUR advances a rural discourse proposing a nostalgic return to traditional agricultural practices centred on the male peasant or farmer (*gospodar*),<sup>10</sup> which should be incorporated within local, small “c” capitalist chains of production and distribution to ensure food-sovereignty. Third, “the last virgin forests in Europe” are mobilised as spiritually laden symbols of the nation’s historical endurance and sovereignty over the land, but also as resources to be aesthetically and economically exploited for its health and prosperity.

Based on our analysis, we conclude that AUR offers a new articulation of “authoritarian space–time” (Koch, 2022), namely a univocal, intransigent discourse about Romania’s geopolitical marginality and historical mission at Europe’s Eastern frontier. This is an affectively anchored discourse that mobilizes and amplifies geopolitical resentment. “Place resentment”—the affective response to perceptions of regional socio-economic marginalization within the same polity—has been studied as a factor in the success of far-right populist parties (Cramer 2016; Munis 2022; Huijsmans 2023a; 2023b; Arzheimer and Bernemann 2024). In contrast, “geopolitical resentment” has been used as a term in the context of international “big power” politics, where it tracks a state’s loss of relative power in relation to other major players (Kent and Samokhvalov 2016; Roberts 2017). We argue that AUR fuels a form of *geopolitical resentment*, understood as a location-based form of resentment from a “place that doesn’t matter” (Rodríguez-Pose 2018) at the margins of Europe. Politically thematizing unjust economic and ecological extraction, the party simultaneously activates its audiences’ sense of injustice and promises the restoration of national pride and of a long-lost—yet still recoverable—plenitude: human, economic, cultural, but primarily ecological. Our analysis of these affective-discursive

<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that, whereas not all populisms are nationalist, AUR uses interchangeably “nation” and “people”, fusing populism and nationalism.

<sup>4</sup> For key texts see (Buštková 2018; Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Kovacs 2021; Buzogány and Mohamad-Klotzbach 2021; Fagan and Buzogány 2022; Gherghina 2022; Cotofana and Kuran 2023; Kevicky 2023a).

<sup>5</sup> For some representative texts in social science and political geography, see (Gemenis, Katsanidou, and Vasilopoulou 2012; Forchtner 2020; Vries et al., 2020; Vihma, Reischl, and Nonbo Andersen 2021; Moore and Roberts, 2022; Caiani and Lubarda 2023; Varco 2023; Ungureanu and Popartan 2024; Pietiläinen and Kellokumpu 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Some scholars advance a substantive understanding of populism as ideology or “thin ideology” (Stanley 2008; Mudde 2010; Müller 2016). In contrast, others emphasize the formal aspects of populism, either as style and performance (Moffitt 2016) or as “formal ontology” (Laclau 2005). We draw on Wodak (2020) who sees populism as a contextually variable phenomenon characterized by both substantive and performative-stylistic aspects [see also (Ungureanu 2024)]. Given researchers have already unpacked AUR’s modus operandi (Grapă and Mogoș 2023), we here foreground the content of their ecological position.

<sup>7</sup> See also (Buzogány and Mohamad-Klotzbach, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> We follow Lubarda in understanding the variants of far-right ecologism in terms of family resemblances, including far-right populist ecologism. However, we also modify his understanding, which emphasizes “spiritualism” and a “return to authority” (2023, Chapter 2). The return to authority is not necessarily authoritarian and “spiritualism” does not characterise certain versions of FRE (e.g., Santiago Abascal’s Vox in Spain, Giorgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy or Geert Wilders’s Party for Freedom in the Netherlands).

<sup>9</sup> Resource nationalism is the belief that “that the people of a given country, rather than private corporations or foreign entities, should benefit from the resources of a territorially-defined state” (Koch and Perreault 2019, 612).

<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of far-right discourses about “rurality” in Germany, see (Domann 2024). For an analysis of progressive peasant politics in Romania, see (Velicu and Ogrzeanu, 2022).

manoeuvres thus contributes to the literature on populism in political geography<sup>11</sup> and respond to Lizotte's invitation (2019, 139) to advance the study of the territorial imagery—or spatial ontologies (Pietiläinen and Kellokumpu, 2024, 5)—that populists deploy in constructing the “people”, their grievances and aspirations.

In what follows, we introduce our methodological approach that draws on thematic discourse analysis (2). We then contextualise AUR's rise within the Romanian post-1989 political landscape (3). In section 4, we outline AUR's overall specificity in relation to other European far-right populists. Section 5 reconstructs the party's views on ecology, underscoring its outlier status based on the centrality of the environment within its programme and the deployment of anti-colonial themes in their critique of global capitalist extractivism and its entrepreneurs. We operationalise AUR's ecologism along three dimensions: the protection of natural resources (1); healthy food production according to traditional models (2); and the protection of forests and their fauna (3). The conclusion rehearses the injunction to continuously revisit inductively built theories of far-right populism and ecologism so as to include the social, economic, demographic and ecological contexts at the borders of the European Union.

## 2. Methodological Approach and Data Collection

To achieve our main objective, we analyze how AUR's discourse constructs and frames socio-natural phenomena, power relationships, and identities—in general and with a focus on ecology. Methodologically, we draw on discourse and thematic analysis (Howarth and Torfing 2004; Howarth 2010; Braun and Clarke 2006; Wodak 2020) as an interpretative methodological orientation in social sciences (Schreier, 2012; Bevir and Blakely, 2018). Discourse refers to the ways in which language is used in texts and speech—from party manifestoes and political speeches to policy-making and legislative initiatives—to (re)construct meaning, socio-natural practices, identities, and power relations. Discourse is thus not just about language in abstraction, but about the broader socio-natural relationships and power dynamics that linguistic exchanges help performatively construct, perpetuate, or contest. (Hajer, 1997; Howarth, 2010; Wodak, 2020).

Our methodological approach to discourse seeks to identify and analyze the key themes (e.g., nature, nation, people, elite, religion) that constitute the narrative patterns of the Romanian far right. We started our detailed textual analysis by classifying, examining and grouping codes under several themes. (Braun and Clarke 2006) For instance, “virgin forests”, “divine creation”, “brown bear” are constitutive codes of the theme of “nature”. This process involved collating data relevant to each code and theme. Such codes and themes can, generally speaking, be identified in an inductive (data-driven) or deductive (theory-driven) manner. (Braun and Clarke 2006) In our analysis, we pursued the thematic analysis on the basis of a hybrid approach that combined deductively-derived codes and themes assembled from the existing research literature on AUR and the far-right environmental discourse (Crăciun and Țăranu 2022; Alecu 2023; Grapă and Mogos 2023; Crăciun and Taranu 2023; Soare and Tufiş 2023) with new, inductively-derived ones—e.g., “colony”, “empire”, “divine creation”, “order of being”. We continuously updated our thematic list as more materials became available after the exploratory analysis of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006; Hajer 1997). Following the logic of thematic and discourse analysis, we wrote up our analysis in a coherent and theme-structured narrative, seeking to identify points of convergence and points of friction with the narratives articulated by such parties elsewhere in Europe, as systematized in the secondary literature. Our work is therefore both

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., (Militz and Schurr 2015; Gordon 2018; Hirschhausen et al. 2019; Koch and Perreault 2019; Agnew and Shin 2019; Casaglia et al. 2020; Buzogány and Mohamad-Klotzbach 2021; Lizotte 2021; Koch 2022; Luger 2022; Lizotte and Kallio 2023).

analytical and critical-reflexive: we aimed to uncover implicit meanings, contradictions, and tensions within AUR's discourse, as well as pinpoint the narrative strategies employed to legitimize anti-democratic far-right perspectives.

Concretely, we collected and coded the data using an interpretation-oriented qualitative methodology (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana 2013), which sought to identify: 1) the recurrence and meaning given to key codes, themes, and their proxies (Caiani M. and della Porta, D. 2011); 2) the presence of the antagonistic elements structuring the main discursive patterns, e.g., the nation/elite, colony/empire, normal/abnormal, natural/artificial, free/authoritarian, Christian/Marxist; 3) how these discursive dichotomies got reproduced across sources and over time in discursive patterns.

The materials constituting the corpus of our research were collected from representative sources between 2019 (the year of AUR's foundation) and the end of 2023, including the following: (1) all key programmatic documents (the party manifestoes and electoral programs at the national level); (2) all the relevant newsfeed from the official webpage of the party; (3) key speeches by the party leaders, including on ecological themes, as listed on AUR's official site and other media outlets; (4) all the programmatic books authored by the two party leaders, George Simion and Claudiu Târziu, which provide a broader intellectual grounding of their political discourse; (5) the videos available on the party's official YouTube channel; (6) interviews and statements in the national press and mass media. We also studied the bills they proposed to the parliament and their policy proposals.

We believe this case analysis constitutes a helpful preliminary step towards a broader research agenda that is comparative and includes quantitative methodology, on the basis of which more robust hypotheses concerning far-right environmentalism could be articulated by accounting more systematically for non-Western contexts and a broader set of geographical positionalities within Europe.

## 3. Contextual Background: From Democratic “Great Expectations” to Far-right Anticolonialism

The 1989 Revolution sparked the great expectation that Romania would gradually align with so-called “consolidated” secular democracies in the West. However, as the collapse of communism generated a rearrangement of the world-system (Böröcz 2001; Wallerstein 2004; Ban 2016), Romania transitioned from a semi-peripheral and semi-autonomous position within the Soviet constellation to a semi-peripheral and semi-autonomous one in the global capitalist system. This transformation was fuelled by a new extractivist logic concerning the country's natural and human resources (Boatcă 2013; Ban 2016; Serbanescu 2018). Structural inequality, poverty, and systemic corruption led to political polarization and mass emigration. Alongside low natality, emigration triggered a severe population decline: 5.7 million Romanians currently live and work abroad (D. Popa 2024) and, notwithstanding the high level of remittances, the overall effect of emigration on the national economy has been multiply damaging. (Atoyan et al. 2016).

In response to this protracted existential insecurity, most Romanians became distrustful of the political elite, and the appeal of the EU has declined over time. (Alecu 2023) Decades after communism's demise, nationalist Orthodoxy provides a modicum of solace: 50 % of poll respondents trust the Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR) and its ultra-conservative nationalist version of Orthodoxy. (Chirciu and Terteleac 2019) Given rampant inequality and social anxiety, Romania has also witnessed several waves of socio-political mobilization (Abăseacă and Pleyers, 2019), including the emergence of far-right populist and nationalist trends. (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2018) Both centre-right and centre-left parties regularly deploy nationalist discourses (Doiciar and Creţan, 2021; Gherghina, 2022), while socially conservative and racist themes are naturalised in the political sphere. (Herki, 2022). Against this background, far-right populist parties—most notably Corneliu Vadim

Tudor's The Great Romania Party (GRP) and Gheorghe Funar's Romanian National Unity Party (RNUP)—have played important roles in Romanian post-'89 politics.<sup>12</sup> However, over-dependent on their charismatic leaders, these parties gradually weakened, leaving their ideological niche available to AUR.<sup>13</sup>

Founded in 2019, AUR erupted on the political stage with anti-system rhetoric, describing the entire post-1989 political class as “thieves” belonging to a “mafia system”,<sup>14</sup> allied with “foreign” exploiters of the nation's natural and human resources. (Simion 2020a; 2022a)<sup>15</sup> The party brought together religious conservatives, hardcore nationalists, COVID-19 deniers and anti-vaccination campaigners (Chiruță 2022; Dolea 2022), all posing as defenders of freedom against “the dictatorship of the elite”. AUR voters tend to be urban-dwellers predominantly from the East of the country or from the economic diaspora in Europe, male, young, and economically precarious. (Crăciun and Tăranu 2023; Bortun 2020) In 2020, AUR became the fourth-largest party in Parliament, winning over 500,000 votes (9.3 %).

Two figures have shaped AUR's strong theological and ecological orientation. George Simion, AUR's current president, is a well-known nationalist and environmentalist. A veteran activist with a penchant for the spectacular and the scandalous,<sup>16</sup> Simion has orchestrated direct actions and nationalist marches (2017; 2019), targeting ecologically disastrous extractivism and Romania's unification with the Republic of Moldova. (Gheorghiu and Praisler 2022). His ecological-social vision is anti-capitalist and articulated via “anti-colonial” vocabularies, which resonate with the economically and environmentally aggrieved. In his “country project” book, he championed a “sustainable revolution” founded on “distributivism”, i.e., on building a “human scale economy” centring “family businesses and other small units of production, community, the care for the ecosystem and the quality of food.” (2020b, 46). These commitments ground the party's agenda and, while Simion's nationalism is parochial and historically embedded in old Romanian traditions, he shares with other European populists a sense of belonging to a global conservative crusade.<sup>17</sup>

Working closely with Simion, Claudiu Târziu, AUR's co-president until 2022, is a former journalist and leader of the Coalition for the Family, an association that opposes abortion, gay marriage, and gender equality. It sees LGBT + relationships and “alternative” families/partnerships as “un-godly,” “anti-Romanian,” and “un-natural”,<sup>18</sup> a position reproduced in AUR's religious-nationalist agenda. (2023) He currently leads AUR's think-tank, the Conservative Institute “Mihai Eminescu,” which reunites key nationalist intellectuals. As we demonstrate, alongside Simion, Târziu has fundamentally shaped AUR's political discourse, giving the party's nationalist environmentalism an Orthodox foundation.

Led by these complementary figures, AUR's meteoric success can be read as a response to the growing disillusionment with “global neoliberalism going local” (Ban 2016). Within a semi-peripheral Eastern

European country, AUR capitalizes on the growing resentment and social suffering by a diminished population confronting uncontrollable extractive forces and losses within its short post-communist history.<sup>19</sup> It fuels historical resentments about Romania's marginal geopolitical position and responds with promises to return the country to a state of plenitude (demographic, economic, ecological). It pledges to safeguard national sovereignty and seeks to vindicate a resentful pride against perceived adversaries, primarily capitalist elites, and an “imperial” European Union. AUR thus articulates a culturally legible and emotionally galvanizing solution to the country's traumatic socio-ecological experience of deeper integration into global chains of labour and production, one that—as we show below—sadly reactivates longer traditions of intolerant nationalism.

#### 4. Eastern-European Variations on Far-Right Themes

Having briefly introduced the party's contextual rise, we now turn to our main objective: identifying AUR's points of difference within the far-right family—its outlier positions on religion and migration, which, as we should below, are inextricably linked to their view of ecology. In terms of commonalities with other parties, AUR propagates a strong Manichean message, opposing two camps (Mudde 2010): the authentic people/nation versus the elites (local political elites, the Davos elite, the Brussels establishment, the global Leftist cabbala) (AUR 2019; 2022; Simion 2023). The Romanian nation's main historical enemy is “communism”, incarnated by the USSR and its current “neo-Marxist” avatars (feminism, gay rights, Western environmentalism, ethnic pluralism) promoted by the EU “empire”. These enemy forces are seeking to “colonize” Romanian minds, bodies, labour, lands, and natural resources. AUR invokes “anti-communism”—a floating signifier and structuring theme of post-'89 political discourse in Romania (Popescu and Vesalou 2023)—to describe their orientation and demonise a heterogeneous bundle of actors. The damage inflicted by these actors is thought to be both material (the exploitation of Romanian natural and human resources and severe economic and ecological harms), and ideational (the dissemination of secular Western “progressive” ideas, especially about gender and sexuality). So far, so typical far right.

AUR's first point of distinction is that, unlike other far-right parties, it finds its ultimate foundation in religion, understood as faith and salvation, and not just as a matter of tradition, civilizational heritage, or cultural values. Contradicting an influential thesis about European far-right's culturalization of religion (Brubaker, 2017; Roy, 2020; Cremer, 2023),<sup>20</sup> AUR has mobilized the religious electorate (Gherghina and Mișcoiu, 2022; Crăciun and Tăranu, 2023) and vociferously promoted the return to faith. Its main “enemy” is not Islam—something that sets the party apart from various Western far-right parties, with their passionate advocacy for secularism and hypocritical deployment of feminism and pink-washing against imagined “Muslim threats”. On the contrary, AUR's primary adversary is precisely secularism, deemed to be a Western and “Marxist” elite imposition. Consequently, the party articulates its theologically grounded mission as a “counter-revolution” or

<sup>12</sup> In 2000 Tudor reached the second tour of the presidential elections.

<sup>13</sup> RNUP dissolved in 2006, while GRP has almost completely lost to AUR—it is virtually invisible in the polls for the 2024 local, European, and national elections. One other personalistic populist enterprise—Dan Diaconescu's People's Party, established in 2011—ceased to exist in 2015 when its founder was convicted for extortion. For more information on the Romanian far right in general, see (Cinpoes 2013; Soare and Tufiş 2019; Norocel and Băluță 2023).

<sup>14</sup> For analyses of this discourse across the region, see (Minkenberg 2015).

<sup>15</sup> For analyses of AUR's electoral success, see (Stoica, Krouwel, and Cristea 2021; Alecu 2023).

<sup>16</sup> For Simion's mix of “patriotic violence” and “politainment” see (Grăpă and Mogoș 2023).

<sup>17</sup> In April 2024, AUR's think-tank convoked a large “Make Europe Great Again” congress in Bucharest, gathering European right-wing forces aiming to transform the EU from within. See: <https://institutulconservator.ro/mega2024/>.

<sup>18</sup> In 2016 they sought—unsuccessfully—to constitutionalize heterosexual marriage (Alecu 2023).

<sup>19</sup> Remarkably, AUR has enjoyed strong support in the Romanian diaspora in terms of vote and vote intention (Bortun 2020; Crăciun and Tăranu, 2023). AUR casts Romanian emigration as “forced” by the collusion between foreign capital and the local political caste turning Romania into a colony, a message that resonates with precarious economic migrants.

<sup>20</sup> To quote Cremer, “[...] right-wing populists are using Christian symbols and language as insignia of a culturalized ‘Christianism’—a symbol of whiteness and Western civilisation directed against Islam and immigration that is interchangeable with Viking-veneer, neo-pagan symbols and even secularism, but often increasingly dissociated from Christian beliefs, values and institutions.” (2023, 3). Note that the adepts of the culturalization-of-religion thesis seem to undervalue the fact that far-right populists can also reintroduce a (quasi-)religious and messianic furore into politics, crystallized around renewed myths of the fall, evil, and salvation.



“conservative revolution”<sup>21</sup> to restore Orthodox-Christian principles. To cite Târziu,

“We will start a conservative revolution. So far, we have not had in the Romanian Parliament a conservative party endorsing these four fundamental values: *Family, Nation, Faith, and Freedom*. We are the Church’s natural ally, defender, and promoter, which is increasingly under attack. ... We are with the sovereigntists, against the globalists and whoever wants to destroy our identity and our faith.....” (FLUX 24 2020)

AUR’s conservative revolution will not create a “new man” or a “new society”: they reject the “Leftist” pursuit of a “utopian” society via “unnatural” social engineering. Just like the communists before 1989, the present elite—dominated by the “globalist neo-Marxists”—upsets the “natural order of things” and the Romanian traditional “way of life”. (Simion 2019; 2020; Târziu 2019) By “revolution”, AUR means a return to the “fundaments” of a Christian, hierarchical vision of nature and society, as ordained by God. (Simion 2019; AUR 2019; 2022; 2023; Târziu 2023b). The “conservative revolution” thus conveys a craving for a radical return to “things as they were”: theirs is, in fact, a counter-revolution in the reactionary and anti-modern tradition.<sup>22</sup>

In their anti-secular vision, religion is the *trans*-political foundation of politics and the source of normativity for earthly existence, including personal and national life, gendered relations, sexuality, the family, and, as we show below, ecology. The ultimate goal is “[T]he restored man, that is, man reinscribed in the divine order”. (Târziu 2009) Personal salvation is intrinsically bound with the socio-political domain: “The political, to be at the service of the public good—as it should be—must be nourished by faith.” (Târziu 2009) AUR’s “revolution” refuses external, “colonial” models and aims to re-institutionalise the principles of Romanian Orthodoxy, as articulated by BOR. The party also explicitly rejects ecumenism: there is only one Truth and only one Church.<sup>23</sup>

This theological vision informs the party’s understanding of the Romanian people (understood ethnically) as “nature’s custodians” and the primary beneficiaries of the party’s agenda. A hierarchical, authoritarian vision of reality (both ontological and normative) opposes *the natural* (i.e., godly, normal, good, sovereign, traditional, national, hierarchical, Romanian, sustainable) to *the artificial* (i.e., ungodly, abnormal, evil, colonial, external, egalitarian, neo-Marxist, unsustainable). At the centre of this imaginary sit humans, the apex of divine creation (Târziu 2022), who “naturally” live in organic units: families and nations, two interlocking blocks of AUR’s “normal order of being”.

The 2022 Program thus articulates a far-right populism premised on a biologist-organicism conceptualization of the nation and the family, which presupposes women’s subordination<sup>24</sup>: “Just like a biological organism needs to maintain the health of its cells to survive, a nation’s chance of survival depends on its cultivation of the classic model of the regular family.” (AUR, 2022) LGBTQ+ discourses and feminism violate sovereignty and “colonize” Romanian minds (AUR, 2022; Târziu

2023b), endangering the family and, implicitly, the nation’s very survival by fuelling the divorce rate and decreased natality (Târziu 2023a).<sup>25</sup> The party thus taps into global anti-genderism, i.e., an internally heterogeneous discourse that sees gender equality as a “colonial” imposition by Western liberals (Korolczuk and Graff 2018), but offers an Orthodox articulation thereof. A quest for the creation of a restored patriarchal-authoritarian space (Koch 2022; Luger 2022) thus renders the party hostile to any egalitarian projects foregrounding gender or sexuality.<sup>26</sup>

Built on the heterosexual family, the patriarchal nation has a destiny in the divine order. AUR draws on a Romanian discursive tradition and practice that seeks to reconcile two conflicting logics: the particularism of Romanian nationalism and the universalism of Christian Orthodoxy. This combination relies on BOR’s independence as a national church and an old theological and political practice of fusing exclusivist nationalism and ultra-conservative Orthodoxy. (Gillet 1997; Stan and Turcescu 2010) Thus, the political-national and the spiritual-Orthodox dimensions are organically interwoven: the fundaments of Orthodox Christianity are central to Romanian national identity (AUR 2022). One cannot be fully Romanian without being Orthodox (Târziu 2009). Consequently, the party’s main goal is to nourish and maximize Romanians’ life and well-being, which involves the physical reproduction of the nation, its return to Orthodoxy, and the restoration of its sovereignty, all of which bear ecological implications, as we discuss below.

AUR identifies three problems that threaten Romanians’ flourishing and sovereignty—and this brings us to the second point of difference within the European far-right landscape. While most such parties endorse “eco-bordering” agendas—the instrumentalization of environmental concerns and neo-Malthusian fears to close frontiers against Global South migrants (Turner and Bailey, 2022)—AUR articulates the relationship between borders and ecology in terms of territorial expansion, i.e., the re-incorporation of formerly Romanian territories (including their natural and human resources), and the repatriation of the large economic diaspora as central to the nation’s “health”. A return to demographic plenitude is defended in several moves. First, AUR condemns the national body’s dismemberment by artificial frontiers. The unity of the Romanian people is natural and good, and so AUR demands the unification with the Republic of Moldova, to whose territory Romanians have a historical claim.<sup>27</sup> This focus on national integrity is coupled, second, with a natalist politics that rejects women’s emancipation: AUR demands a return to the Christian, “natural” lifestyle of the heterosexual family within the patriarchal order.<sup>28</sup> Natalism and territorial expansion do not fully solve the problem of population loss: that is why, third, AUR has made the repatriation of the large economic diaspora a key priority—denouncing the political class’s neglect of this issue. The party thus assumed the representation of a *trans*-national people (that includes the diaspora and the Romanians living in neighbouring states), whose support it actively courted and secured in the 2019 elections. (Soare and Tufiş 2023).

This discourse about redrawing borders and repatriating the

<sup>21</sup> The term “conservative revolution” was popularized by German writer and philosopher Armin Mohler to refer to a series of anti-liberal and counter-revolutionary thinkers and writers, such as Carl Schmitt and Ernst Jünger, and events during the Weimar Republic between 1918 and 1932. (Woods 1996). To our knowledge, AUR’s leaders do not clarify the provenance of this phrase, but it is clear from Târziu’s writings that it has explicit anti-liberal connotations and signals the need for a radical change of society.

<sup>22</sup> This vision underpins their (unsuccessful) bills to reform the national curriculum (Despa, 2022).

<sup>23</sup> AUR enlisted Orthodox priests in their campaigns, while BOR promoted AUR’s initiatives. There are philosophical affinities between certain clerics and AUR intellectuals. (Chiruță, 2022; Marincea, 2022; Alecu, 2023).

<sup>24</sup> AUR’s natalism emerges in their bills proposing a National Day of Numerous Families (Andrusceac 2021), the fiscal encouragement of natality (Colesa 2021), and family housing support to prevent emigration. (Boanca 2022).

<sup>25</sup> Invoking sovereignty, AUR repeatedly rejected ECHR’s condemnation of Romania’s infringement of LGBTQ+ rights. (Ionescu 2023).

<sup>26</sup> AUR’s campaign for the 2024 European elections was infused with militaristic rhetoric, systematically invoking the Romanian warrior princes of the Middle Ages who fought off imperialists (mostly Ottomans Hungarians and Russians) from the sacred Romanian land (Alexandrescu, 2024).

<sup>27</sup> The Republic of Moldova was part of Romania from 1918 to 1940. Also known as Bessarabia, it united with Romania following the collapse of the Russian Empire at the end of World War I. In 1940, due to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Bessarabia was annexed by the Soviet Union. This incorporation lasted until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, when Moldova declared its independence.

<sup>28</sup> Thus AUR embraces populist “retrogradism” (Selk and Kemmerzell 2022)—a nostalgic form of politics that can sometimes underpin environmentalism on nationalist grounds.

diaspora is coupled with a one about “colonialism”—a term the party co-opts and liberally uses to denounce capitalist exploitation and environmental damage in a semi-peripheral country.<sup>29</sup> This strategic anti-colonial narrative gives voice to a widely shared sense that, after 1989, global corporate forces enabled by profiteering local elites preyed on the Eastern country’s “cheap” human and natural resources. In describing Romania as a “colony” (Simion 2022a), AUR seeks to criticise predatory capitalism and raise concerns about its status as a second-rate member within the EU, reactivating existing geopolitical resentments about the country’s economic and cultural marginality in Europe.

This discourse differs radically from the progressive invocation of the category of “coloniality” to describe historical and ongoing oppression (economic, political, epistemic) and articulate emancipatory political visions in the context of settler colonial states, where critical scholars have been denouncing racial colonial capitalism and advocating for the recuperation of Indigenous ecological knowledges, practices and spiritualities (Chiro, 2017; Rifkin 2017; Whyte 2017; Yusoff 2018; Kimmerer 2020; Tuana 2023). Instead, AUR pursues a far-right hyper-nationalist agenda built on a *social* and *ecological* critique of predatory capitalism that utilizes an anticolonial vocabulary.

AUR’s co-option of the discourse of anti-colonialism should be understood in the context of recent research in political geography (Kaul 2021; Zhang 2023), which shows how anticolonial populist discourses often flourish outside formerly colonised states, where the term “colonial” is deployed to criticise the experience of living in a global capitalist order marked by historical colonial legacies and unjust hegemonic structures. Users of these vocabularies draw “on historical experiences of subjugation and understandings of asymmetrical power relations in the present” (Zhang 2023, 144) to construct national identities that can underpin both progressive and authoritarian political projects, at a time when empire—understood as the hegemonic racial capitalist formation or “the coloniality of power” (Quijano 2000)—has “metastasized.” (Chaudhary 2024, 180) Thus, “the radical right is against the status quo and sometimes monied elites and thus sees anti-colonialism today as a principled antidote to a capitalist world where profits reign for the benefit of ‘colonizers’ or ‘neo-colonial’ forces.” (Bar-On and López 2022, 13).<sup>30</sup>

AUR thus confirms political geographers’ conclusions that important critiques of the violence of global capitalist exploitation can be detected within instrumentalist appropriations of anticolonial vocabularies (González-Vicente, 2020; Zhang 2023). As we show below, the discursive sources of AUR’s far-right “anticolonialism” are irreducible to either populism or Euro-scepticism. They are both historically embedded in

local experiences and traditions of nationalist anti-imperial thought<sup>31</sup> and internationally aligned with other far-right parties’ discourses—e.g., in the UK, Poland or Hungary (Mihai 2022; Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Narkowicz and Ginelli 2021; Davidson 2024).

In Romania, anticolonial vocabularies are particularly legible because, first, they draw upon 19th-century discourses that defined national identity—centred on Christian Orthodoxy—in opposition to imperial powers: the Habsburg, the Ottoman, and the Tsarist.<sup>32</sup> Following World War I, this opposition extended to Jewish people, (Cotofana 2023) who became the primary targets of inter-war far-right movements. Communists embraced this hyper-nationalism, especially after 1964, criticising past imperial domination going back to Antiquity and pursuing economic autarky in opposition to domination by both the capitalist West and the USSR.<sup>33</sup> (Copilas, 2017) After 1989, in response to the brutal social and environmental costs associated with liberalisation and privatisation, anticolonial tropes emerged in work by intellectuals and researchers from both the left and right, who deployed this language to condemn global extractive capitalism. AUR appropriates some of these historically resilient, local discourses to lament economic exploitation and cultural domination in Romanian post-communist history. It does so by mining and amplifying the social disappointments and resentments accrued since 1989 but centres the ecological consequences of global capitalist extractivism.

AUR’s repertoire also aligns with the utilization of anticolonial tropes by far-right, Eurosceptic parties, including parties from former colonial powers such as United Kingdom, who paradoxically liken the EU to the USSR and denounce the imperialism of the supra-national bureaucracy. (Lorimer 2021; Narkowicz and Ginelli 2021; Mihai 2022) AUR’s critique of the EU reproduces their general concern with the erosion of sovereignty and acknowledges Eastern European far right’s problematisation of the unfair deals these countries have had to accept from the EU. This enables them to build European alliances with other far-right parties. However, nationally, the party garners support mostly because of its tapping into a much longer national history of anti-imperial/anticolonial discourses, which they repurpose to address a *trans*-national people whose ecological, economic and cultural infrastructure has been continuously eroded. In other words, in a country most severely affected by economic polarisation and large-scale emigration, AUR’s anticolonial discourse foregrounds the ecological costs of capitalist extractivism in a way that resonates with a local public for whom ethno-nationalism is “endemic” (Copilas, 2017), while simultaneously integrating itself within the international right-wing crusade against “neo-Marxism”.

This positioning demonstrates that AUR are outliers in relation to the “westernisation” of far-right politics (Buřtková 2018)—roughly understood as Eastern European parties’ mimicry of Western ideological programmes. Instead, we argue that the party serves as a political vehicle for a deeply rooted, cross-ideologically shared experience of geopolitical resentment, which it seeks to address via a theologically grounded promise of restored demographic, economic and ecological plenitude. To flesh out this promise and AUR’s positive vision of far-

<sup>29</sup> Drawing on Wallerstein’s world-system analysis, we characterize semi-peripheral countries as those that engage in trade and have a degree of economic, political, and cultural autonomy, but often remain dependent on core countries for technology, investment, market access, not immune to political domination and cultural appropriation. They frequently serve as providers of natural and human resources for core countries. (Wallerstein 2004; Ban 2016). However, we do not wholeheartedly embrace Wallerstein’s model: we reject his amply criticised rigid economism (Hayden and el-Ojeili 2023) and the neglect of socio-cultural factors. For Wallerstein’s reception in critical analyses in post-communist Romania, see (B. Popa 2023). In analysing this party’s use of this vocabulary, we reject undue equivalences between settler colonial histories (with which the language of coloniality is associated, especially in the current Anglo-Saxon literature) and that of countries with experiences of complex past imperial rule and ongoing capitalist exploitation. We are contributing here to analyses by political geographers who have shown how anti-colonial vocabularies have been deployed globally to criticise capitalism, by both the right and the left. (Kaul 2021; Bar-On and López, 2022) For a recent, nuanced analysis of the categories of colonialism and imperialism, see (Kumar 2021).

<sup>30</sup> Romanian nationalist discourses about the environment have deployed anti-imperial tropes since the 19th C until the present, both on the right and the left of the political spectrum (see Cotofana 2021; 2023). Anticolonialism and anti-imperialism are used interchangeably in AUR’s discourse.

<sup>31</sup> Romanians’ concern with “colonialism” is also reflected in constitutional debates and documents. It is noteworthy that both the 1866 and the 1923 Constitutions stipulated that “The territory of Romania cannot be colonised by foreign populations” (art. 3). We thank Andrei-Dan Sorescu for guidance on this aspect.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Shafir (1985) labels the later stage of Romanian communism “xenophobic communism”.

<sup>33</sup> To illustrate, former left-wing Prime Minister Nicolae Văcăroiu (1992–1996) advocated for economic protectionism to prevent Romania’s becoming an Eastern “colony”. (Delcea and Voinea 2019). Ilie Șerbănescu—a liberal economist who was the Minister of Reform and president of the Reform Council under the right-wing Ciorbea government (1996–1998)—similarly argued that post-communist Romania functioned as a “colony” for Western capitalism (2016; 2018).

right ecology, we now turn to outlining the three geographical imaginaries that constitute it.

## 5. AUR's Geographical Imaginaries and Their Contradictions

A review of the existing literature on far-right environmentalism in Europe highlights the heterogeneity of these parties' attitudes to climate change (ranging from thorough to selective forms of denialism) and on energy (with parties occupying varying positions in relation to nuclear energy and the phasing out of fossil fuel extraction). (Forchtner 2020; Kovacs 2021; Buzogány and Mohamad-Klotzbach 2021; Turner and Bailey 2022; Forchtner and Lubarda 2023; Caiani and Lubarda 2023; Lubarda 2023; Ungureanu and Popartan 2024) Additionally, the mobilization of a nationalist imagery (to frame anything from renewables to food production to biodiversity conservation) and the critique of EU/globalist forms of environmentalism emerge as commonalities among these parties. (Kevicky, 2023).

AUR shares these features, but with two contextual twists.<sup>34</sup> First, due to Simion's long-term commitment to environmentalism (which precedes the founding of the party), ecology is a primary, rather than a reactive or an add-on feature of their ideological agenda, merely addressed in response to increasing pressures by supra-national institutions and local activists or embraced tactically to capitalise on (especially younger) voters' concerns. AUR's appeal to ecology is not "a political or discursive strategy that allows its proponents to falsely appear green" or "a weapon in the hands of climate sceptics and anti-environmentalists" (Lubarda 2023, 3), as it is for many parties subsumable under FRE. From its founding, the image of national decay motivating the party has been thematically couched in environmental terms: the "sustainable revolution" is central to the "conservative revolution." Second, as shown above, AUR's ecology is theologically grounded in a model of human stewardship of God's creation, wherein the divinely ordained nation's interests have primacy: the nation is capable of great virtue and flourishing, and its history provides all the necessary models of environmental sustainability.

This section takes our analysis closest to the empirical ground and operationalises AUR's "sustainable revolution" (Simion 2020b) into three specific geographical imaginaries. First, we discuss AUR's resource nationalism. While scholars have described AUR's position as "economic populist sovereignty" (Popescu and Vesalon 2023), we suggest that an anticolonial resource nationalism filtered theologically through an Orthodox vision of nature and humans as its privileged stewards better describes their position (V.1). Second, an idyllic rural imaginary of small-scale organic food production informs AUR's project of restoring national health, on biopolitical terms incompatible with animal rights (V.2). We discuss food sovereignty, which is meant to ensure the trans-generational reproduction of the Brave Old Nation. Third, we examine the party's fixation with the "last virgin forests in Europe" and their vulnerability to "foreign" exploiters. (V.3) We suggest AUR recovers an appreciation of "wilderness" as a key part of the nation's spiritual and cultural patrimony, only to then compromise it through a programme of capitalist "sustainable" exploitation.

Across these three images and themes, a far-right populist discourse programmatically justifies the natural rootedness of Romanians in their territorial homeland, following clear sovereigntist lines that do not miss any opportunity to criticise capitalist extractivism on ecological grounds. Let us now analyse these images and themes in turn.

### 5.1. Stewarding God's Gift "Sustainably"

AUR's first image of "nature" is coded within an Orthodox-

<sup>34</sup> In this section we examine AUR's ecologism via an integrated analysis of their stances on climate change, biodiversity loss and conservation, which the party itself treats as parts of a unified ecological vision.

nationalist ontology: nature is part of God's creation and nations are its "natural" human custodians. While nations need to protect and steward creation as God's deputies, they can exploit it to their advantage by virtue of their sovereign position. This double discursive production of the themes of "nation" and "nature" as intertwined translates into a theologically-anchored anthropocentric approach to the environment (Târziu 2022), which reduces the latter's value to the spiciest satisfaction of human needs.

AUR's Program primarily seeks to protect Romania's "impressive" natural resources, whose poor management reflects the generalized state of national decadence (AUR 2022). The "resources" AUR focuses on comprise minerals, rich soils, fossil fuels, forests, biodiversity, the beauty of natural landscapes, cultural heritage (including ancestral knowledges and practices), and, most importantly, human resources, all of which should be sustainably exploited to maximise the good of the many (not just of the few). (AUR 2022) The overarching goal is to position Romania as a European leader in the conservation of natural heritage, organic agriculture and the development of green industries. (AUR 2022; YouTube EVZ-Capital 2022) These goals are underpinned by a geographical imaginary of material and aesthetic plenitude, which nurtures pride but also a hope in the possibility of national restoration: "We have oil, we have gas in the Black Sea, we have forests, we have gold, we have mountains, sea and a beautiful country that all nations would want for themselves." (Simion 2020b, 5).

AUR's resource nationalism is informed by geopolitical resentment and social justice concerns about EU's disadvantaging its poorest members. Târziu (2022) criticises the Green Deal and argues for its renegotiation to obtain dispensations for Romanian natural gas and coal exploitation. Similarly, Simion (2019) laments the abusive sale of mineral resources, deforestation, the collapse of mining and agriculture, and the dismal situation of shepherds and peasants due to EU-imposed restrictions—all signs of local corruption<sup>35</sup> and the sovereignty-eroding power of international elites. In opposition to predatory global capitalism, AUR promises the recovery of abundance through the "moderate" exploitation of all natural resources, which can underpin sustainable, "normal", and long-term national development. (Târziu 2022).

This position was already articulated in Simion's 2020 manifesto-book, where the idea of a "civic economy" required both sustainable development and a more egalitarian distribution of wealth. (2020b, 40) Economic equity comes to the fore in relation to energy production and prices, where a fairer and more sustainable use of water and fossil fuels, as well as the building of new energy plants (nuclear and hydrogen)<sup>36</sup> are necessary for improving Romanians' living standards and achieving energy independence. (AUR 2023) AUR also advocates strong state intervention in the energy market (Ionascu 2020; YouTube EVZ-Capital 2022) to protect Romanians from extortionate costs and enable them to produce their own green energy.<sup>37</sup> Along redistributive lines, re-industrialisation is also prioritised—to absorb the country's human resources and tackle mass emigration.

These moves render visible AUR's oscillating between a critique and an embrace of resource exploration, an ambivalence that emerges particularly well in relation to the energy crisis triggered by the war in Ukraine, thought by AUR to be politically "fabricated" (Andone and

<sup>35</sup> AUR generally takes a "tough-on-crime" approach, reflected in their bill on the mis-management of toxic waste. (Serban 2021).

<sup>36</sup> Târziu (2023c), however, questions the safety of "experimental", imported green technologies.

<sup>37</sup> See AUR's bills on protecting consumers from abusive energy pricing (Scripnic and Focsa 2022), mandating state support for homes' insulation (Simion and Târziu 2021) and proposing the merger of key energy producers under state control to attain national energy independence. (Focsa, Simion, and Târziu 2022). They also support fiscal incentives for small-scale solar energy production (Scripnic and Focsa 2022).



Radu., 2022). AUR dismisses the idea of a “transition” to green energy as utopian and supports the extraction of fossil fuels in the name of “pragmatism”, but also of international fairness: the EU is not the largest polluter, and yet it imposes drastic measures that harm members’ national interests. (YouTube EVZ-Capital 2022). The EU’s position on fossil fueled car production is similarly framed as “insanity” and a great “betrayal”. (Târziu, 2023d) Environmental measures engineered in Brussels are therefore seen as “colonial” threats to the Romanians’ traditional, natural way of life and identity—both on material and cultural grounds.

AUR’s fundamentalist resource nationalism does not, however, translate into a complete rejection of EU environmental standards: in their proposals for the ecological regeneration of the Danube Delta—damaged by communist agricultural practices and threatened by Ukraine’s plans for the Bâstroe channel—AUR proposes “the largest ecological regeneration plan in the world”, in alignment with EU’s environmental commitments. (Târziu, 2023e). In this case, as in others discussed below, AUR opportunistically reneges on its anticolonial discourse and invokes European standards to protect the Delta as part of the national patrimony.

Perhaps the most important aspect of AUR’s resource nationalism regards human resources. As discussed above, an imagery of territorial and ethnic wholeness—transposed in the Party’s symbol, a map of Romania that includes the Republic of Moldova—motivates them. The unification with Moldova has been one of Simion’s key objectives throughout his political biography, animated by an idea of demographic flourishing within the “natural” territory of the nation. The population losses of the post-’89 period have compounded AUR’s concern with “Romanians everywhere” and the party is now the main advocate for fiscal measures to encourage the return of the diaspora—for symbolic-identitarian, but also economic reasons: an ethnically-defined labour force can build a better future of great abundance for the Brave Old Nation.

## 5.2. Healthy Food for a Brave Old Nation

In their 2023 statement on public health, AUR specifies that “[T]he biological being of the nation and its genetic patrimony constitutes the guarantee of our worldly continuance into eternity.” (AUR 2023) This hyper-biologist understanding of the nation<sup>38</sup> underpins the party’s orientation at the most basic level: food consumption and production. Thus, food nationalism structures AUR’s second geographical imaginary: that of an idyllic, rural vision of agriculture, which establishes a discursive equivalence between the purity of the human body, of the peasant class (the “authentic” Romanians), of the land, and of the nation, all threatened by exploitative, chemically intensive, “foreign”-led exploitation. AUR’s mission is therefore to restore the “natural order” and secure national health via the autochthonous, traditional production of wholesome, clean food. (Fitu 2023).

A key implication of this vision of food sovereignty is the party’s attempt to legislate on the use of arable land and prevent its sale to non-Romanian entities. According to Simion (2019), due to the pitiable management of land—its sale to “foreigners” and lack of technological investments—and extreme emigration, peasants are an extinct class. Moreover, small and medium producers have no input in the country’s food policy. (AUR 2023) In response, AUR’s second geographical imaginary centres subsistence food production by farmer families and

small-scale production through larger farms.<sup>39</sup>

Genealogically, this position is highly predictable: already in 2020, Simion prioritised food as central to his “country project”, criticising the “unhealthy” eating habits Romanians developed due to exposure to “liberal globalism” after 1989. (2020b, 47) He vituperated against the “poisons” distributed by internationally owned hypermarkets, whose suppliers contributed to soil degradation and biodiversity loss. He supported the taxation of junk food and public education campaigns on healthy nutrition. The health he invokes, however, is not merely bodily: his anti-globalism informs a narrative about unhealthy “foreign” food that leads to consumers’ moral degradation and enslavement to consumption. (2020, 49) Consequently, Romanians must firmly reject the “colonial” influence of transnational corporations who “poison our food, our water, our souls”. (2020b, 54).

Food nationalism is AUR’s biopolitical response to their perceived relentless violation of the nation’s well-being. They aim to raise the percentage of organic food production to 25 % by 2030,<sup>40</sup> restore Romania’s status as Europe’s bread basket and valorise its naturally propitious conditions (the quality of the soil and the climate). (YouTube EVZ-Capital 2022) In this narrative, the high quality of the Romanian soil is matched by the virtues of the peasant class, who have the necessary knowledge and virtues to build an ecological agriculture. The “authentic Romanian peasant” is constructed as the epitome of “naturalness”, “virtue”, and “good management”, juxtaposed to the foreign predatory foreign capitalist.<sup>41</sup> (Târziu 2022) This figure sits at the centre of an ecological programme geared towards the restoration of natural wellbeing for current and future generations of Romanians (AUR 2022) and contrasted to “ecologism,” understood as an aggressive Left-wing “plot” that abnormally “fetishizes” nature and “idolises” animals to the detriment of humans’ supremacy within the divine creation.

AUR’s biopolitical goal is to support peasant, high-value-added production, including home-based and medium food processing, which should be integrated into local, self-sustaining networks, focusing on “clean”, non-chemically treated food, “biologically compatible with the human body”. (AUR 2023). They want to ban wheat exports, despite the risk of a conflict with the EU (Ionascu 2020), but also revise the favourable terms offered to Ukraine for the export of its cereals, which impacted Romanian exports negatively. Invoking the threats Ukrainian cereal poses to the health of the population, AUR again self-servingly refers to EU health standards to protect national interests. (Flucus 2023).

Given the centrality of agriculture in Romania’s way of life and its economy,<sup>42</sup> as well as its vital role in the nation’s biological reproduction, AUR asks that small and medium agricultural producers be supported by the state. Thus, in 2022–2023, the party introduced a Bill to establish a state bank to finance the development of national agriculture (Simion 2022b) and another to limit the role of international intermediaries between small-scale agricultural producers and local consumers (Acatrinei and Puscasu 2022). In parallel, educational, tourist and cultural programs focusing on agriculture are part of a larger plan to rehabilitate the rural infrastructure.

At the nutritional level, the nation’s well-being is also threatened by “neo-Marxist” animal rights activists who advocate veganism in breach of the divine order of nature. Non-human animals are not rights-bearers since they are not made in God’s image. Tellingly, the EU’s and UN’s

<sup>39</sup> Already in 2020 Simion proposed tax exemptions for: subsistence farming; cooperative farming; organic food production and distribution; and returning to deserted villages—as key to securing Romania’s sustainable development. (2020b, 44–45).

<sup>40</sup> Lubarda (2020) sees organic food production as a key focus of conservative FRE nostalgia.

<sup>41</sup> The countryside is a privileged site of sovereignty for nationalist far-right parties. (Forchtner and Kølvråa 2015).

<sup>42</sup> More than half the Romanian population lives in the countryside, the highest percentage in Europe (EU 2021).

<sup>38</sup> Also discernible in the bills they proposed regarding the composition of table salt (Muncaciu 2022) and the quality control of food distributed in schools. (Tanasă 2021).



education campaigns about environmentally sustainable uses of insects in food production were read sensationally by AUR as a “colonial” injunction—by the EU to Romanians—to “eat cockroaches.” (Andone and Radu., 2022) In this context, they submitted a Bill *banning* the consumption of insects (Muncaciu et al. 2022), whose preamble invoked a conspiracy by the European and globalist elites to replace “normal” food with insects and larvae: predictably by now, AUR saw this as nothing but “a horrible, zealous and increasingly aggressive manipulation” that violated the natural “order of things”.

### 5.3. “The Last Virgin Forests in Europe”: From Kin, to Patrimony, to Business Opportunity

Scholars have widely analysed the link between uninhabited geographies and ideas of purity and authenticity, which make virgin forests special symbols of the nation, to be protected against invaders (Cotofana and Kuran 2023). Romanian forests<sup>43</sup> too constitute a central symbol of national identity, institutionalised culturally by intellectuals and artists in the 18th and 19th C (Nicolescu 2014), when the discursive unification of nature and nation helped consolidate Romanians’ claim to the land North of the Danube in typical primordialist style.<sup>44</sup> Within this imaginary, forests were constituted as kin to the nation and as places of refuge against various imperial invaders—the Ottoman, Habsburg and Tsarist Empires, but also Tatar raiders and Jewish people.<sup>45</sup> AUR replicates this defensive logic: virgin woodland must be safeguarded for its aesthetic and spiritual value, but also materially, for their eco-systemic services to human health, and financial gain through moderate exploitation.

According to the party’s programmes, Romania boasts some of the largest virgin forests and the highest number of brown bears in Europe. However, Romanian forests and fauna have experienced significant destruction due to incompetent and corrupt management<sup>46</sup> by subsequent governments and “colonial” capitalist predation. (AUR 2022; 2023). To avoid market speculation with Romanian wood and its ecological depletion, AUR has constantly advocated for strong state intervention and legal restrictions. The state should limit the exploitation of Romanian forests according to a clear plan and pass laws for a “Green Romania, where we and our children can breathe cleaner air” (ROPRESS 2023).

The most radical expression of AUR’s sovereigntism is its support for a controversial bill entitled the “Sovereignty Law”, which sought to forbid deforestation and all exports of unprocessed wood for 100 years, until 2121. (Legea suveranității, 2022) Thus, while AUR generally supports the free market, it grants the state an exceptionally strong protectionist role regarding Romanian forests, similarly to the case of energy production. From their perspective, capitalism is acceptable as long as it serves Romanian—as opposed to foreign—interests, a position that also

<sup>43</sup> While forests could have also been discussed under the first imaginary—resource nationalism—we suggest that, due to their spiritual and symbolic valences, they occupy a special place in AUR’s vision and therefore deserve a separate subsection.

<sup>44</sup> As political geographers argue, “[T]he place-based claims of nationalist homeland narratives are significant because they typically frame the past and present around a spatially-exclusive vision of ownership: members of the nation are taught that a particular territory is ‘theirs’ and theirs alone.” (Koch and Perreault 2019, 618).

<sup>45</sup> Cotofana (2023) characterises the references to nature in Romanian national myth-making as “xenophobic”. While this label applies to several categories of foreigners historically vilified by nationalists, there is also a strong, anti-imperial overtone in the prioritisation of Ottoman, Austrians, Hungarians, Russians as invaders to be defeated through the kinship of the (disadvantaged) Romanians, natural landscape (especially forests) and weather. For a discussion of public perceptions of various imperial powers in the Romanian imaginary, see (Cotofana 2021).

<sup>46</sup> For an analysis of the fiefdom model of forest management in the Romanian Carpathians, see (Vasile 2019).

applies to the protection of brown bears in the Carpathians and of endangered bird species in the Danube Delta for touristic purposes.

Thus, the natural patrimony becomes a business opportunity for Romanian entrepreneurs, both as a tourist attraction and commodity for sale. Romanian virgin forests are to be “branded” in Europe and beyond for their uniqueness and used for profit as part of the country’s tourism strategy. In AUR’s Program, cultural and rural tourism is part of a wider project of identity politics and cultural diplomacy, promoting national pride and the respectability of Romania’s image in the world. (AUR 2022) This stance leads to an unavoidable tension between protecting nature as “virgin” patrimony, central symbol to Romanian’s identity and spirituality, and turning it into a business opportunity to be exploited. Ironically, even for AUR, the restlessness of the capitalist expansive logic “profanes” all that is sacred by turning it into a commodity (Marx 1994).<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, despite its criticism of “colonialism”, AUR has adopted and internalized an Orientalising European discourse regarding Romania’s “virgin forests”. Over the last two decades, European institutions and local elites alike have constructed an exoticizing image of the new green periphery—the Eastern European “wilderness frontier”—representing Romania as the “green heart of Europe” (Romanian Presidency of the EU Council 2018) in the “New Wild East”. (Iordăchescu 2021) Since Eastern Europe’s untouched, peripheral “wilderness” has been “discovered”, exoticizing narratives have proliferated and AUR has swiftly and unreflectively adopted some of them.<sup>48</sup>

As George Iordăchescu shows, EU’s concern with new wildlands underpins “a process of unequal ecological exchange between a wealthier, Western core, and a periphery, where the decision-making processes, hegemonic conservation knowledge and financial mechanisms of the former are concentrated and deployed to fix, restore, reconstruct and sustainably use the ‘nature’ discovered in the latter, which is characterized by backwardness, subsistence, land abandonment and depopulation.” (2021, 2023)<sup>49</sup> This discourse also informs AUR’s position on virgin forests: they endorse the “green periphery” thesis, participating in the colonial exoticization of Eastern European countries, while simultaneously tasking them to lead by example on conservation matters. In short, for all the merits of its criticism of EU-enabled overexploitation, AUR’s far-right populism reproduces a green colonial discourse and advances two contradictory logics: one patrimonial-identitarian (symbolic) and another capitalist-commodifying (material), with ambivalent ecological implications.

## 6. Conclusion

In critical conversation with the literature on far-right populism and ecogism in political geography and social sciences, this article hopes to have enriched existing theoretical frameworks through a detailed empirical examination of AUR’s unique blend of ecology, Orthodoxism and anticolonial nationalism in a non-Western country of emigration. The study provides both conceptual-theoretical and empirical insights into this under-researched semi-peripheral context. Simultaneously, through a thematic qualitative analysis, it reconstructed the fundamental geographical imaginaries underpinning AUR’s environmental vision showing that, while the party embraced an opportunistically ambivalent stand on EU environmental standards, its ecological agenda does not suffer from an “unbearable lightness”, very common in Western

<sup>47</sup> Two other areas of ambivalence emerge from AUR’s encouraging its electorate to oppose EU measures banning the private burning of wood for heating and the prioritization of conservation over industrial development. (Andone 2022).

<sup>48</sup> The very idea of “Romanian virgin forests” is an exoticizing myth, as all forests have long been publicly managed. We thank George Iordăchescu for this point and the “forest group” at Păltiniș for lively discussions.

<sup>49</sup> See also (Petrova 2014).

Europe (Swyngedouw 2022). By exploiting geopolitical resentment and reactive pride, the party has actively supported valid ecological causes, ranging from organic, local food production to the protection of Romanian forests and biodiversity conservation, emphasising the link between socio-economic and ecological injustices. However, its religious-national sovereignty based on an imagery of a patriarchal and ethnic-territorial wholeness provides a parochial and undemocratic basis for a much-needed transnational and inclusive ecological agenda. In practice, its defence of fossil fuel-based energy in the name of energy independence, its lack of a robust problematization of the local capitalist dynamics, as well as its rejection of the European Green Deal shows its limitations when it comes to the global challenges posed by climate change and biodiversity loss.

Different key contradictions emerge from our critical analysis. First, there is a tension between AUR's discursive and practical commitments to sustainability and the prioritisation of the nation's economic interests, leading the party to adopt a mostly opportunistic position on EU ecological standards. Second, while their critique of post-1989 foreign capitalist exploitation of Romanian natural resources and the environmental and economic inequities it generated is partially correct, AUR proposes small "c" capitalist extractivism of the nation's natural resources by Romanian entrepreneurs, including of fossil fuel, on sovereignty and xenophobic grounds. Consequently, their critique of capitalism is severely limited. Third, AUR remains split between the protection of the nation's earthly growth and well-being (which requires a concern with natural degradation, food production, the sustainable resource exploration), and a Christian eschatological optimism, which trivializes earthly environmental concerns and dismisses as "hysterical" the "neo-Marxist" invocations of the "environmental apocalypse." (Târziu 2022).

Our analysis raises vexing questions, for academics, political strategists, and citizens alike. First, scholars of far-right populism need to rethink conceptual-theoretical frameworks in light of the contextual (discursive, material, and positional) underpinnings of such politics at the margins of Europe. Whereas there are cross-border ideological similarities, transfers, and alliances between European far-right populisms, more detailed and comparative hypothesis-driven analyses—for instance, of the countries shaped by Orthodoxy or peripheral geographical and economic positionality—are needed to capture both the nuanced effects of capitalist extractivism and the deep-rooted appeal of specific discourses in places people feel don't matter. Moreover, it is essential that the global co-option of the language and legitimate grievances of anticolonial and anti-capitalist movements by authoritarian parties be critically unpacked, and that the channelling of the geopolitics of resentment and pride via national populism be understood in its complexity and local variety. Good ecological causes can sometimes be defended for the wrong reasons, including xenophobic nationalism and religious fundamentalism. The challenge for democratic forces in Eastern European countries such as Romania is to articulate compelling alternative visions that reject capitalist exploitation and alienation, highlight their socio-ecological costs for local populations and the large Romanian diaspora, but that also insist on renewing democratic practices and carving spaces of inclusive collective action.

#### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Mihaela Mihai:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Camil Ungureanu:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

#### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial

interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

#### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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#### Appendix A. Supplementary material

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