Populism-style and strategy of communication.
The Romanian case

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Abstract: In the actual economic and political globalized context and fast changing *mediascape,* the study of populist political communication has never been more challenging. The purpose of this text is to provide information about the conditions that have given rise to the presence of populist political communication in different European democracies in general, and in Romania in particular.

At the turn of the third millennium, Cas Mudde (Mudde 2004) argued that the growing success of populist parties had triggered the emergence of a "populist Zeitgeist" in Western Europe, a development consisting of an increasing adoption of populist messages by mainstream parties and politicians. In fact, almost all liberal democracies are affected by some sort of populism either in *discursive style and strategy* (Jagers/Walgrave 2007; Moffitt 2016; Wodak 2018 etc.) or as '*thin ideology*' (Mudde 2004).

If populist analysts distinguish several types of populism: i) the ideational one, centered on ideological content (Mudde 2017); ii) a strategic political approach (Weyland 2017) and iii) a socio-cultural approach (Ostiguy 2017), there are also intersectional perspectives that combine ideas and discourse strategies. From this perspective, which is the perspective we adopt also, populism can be understood as the discursive manifestation of a thin ideology focused on a set of basic assumptions about the world expressed by a rhetoric of oppositions, hyperbolas and polarizations (Hawkins, Riding, and Mudde 2012; de Vreese and al. 2018).

In order to explain the increase of populist actors and discourses we propose as basic assumption the correlation media/mediatized content (dramatization, negativization and spectacularization), scrutinized through a quantitative and qualitative approach (i.e.content analysis and discourse analysis) answering the following research questions (in an inductive empirical manner):

RQ1: How is represented quantitatively the dynamics of the antagonist Manichean populist content in a specific context (*Salvați Roșia Montană* FB page)*?*

RQ2: How is thematized verbally and iconically the street movement *Salvați Roșia Montană* on the FB page?

Key words: *populist style, populist strategy, populist content, Social media, Romanian social movements.*

1. Introduction

By presenting itself as a representation ('emanation') of the People and expression of its will, populism is experiencing a dizzying expansion throughout Europe. From the *Independence Party* in Great Britain to *Podemos* in Spain or *Movimento 5 Stelle* in Italy, to name a few, current social parties and movements present themselves as challengers to the current system and the actors who occupy it. Looked condescendingly or anxiously by *status quo* politicians, but hopefully invested by skeptical citizens disappointed by traditional political institutions (which no longer "represent anyone"), populism is changing the balance of power across Europe.

"Identity tensions, partisan rivalries, protest mobilizations" (Ihl et al. 2003, 10) have contributed to promoting populism, even threatening democracy. The effects of exclusion and social fracture cannot be separated from the development of populisms. "Populist virus" (in the language of journalists about the situation in the Netherlands in 2002), "populist temptation" in the title of an academic synthesis, the emphasis on the people, opposed to corrupt elites infrastructures heterogeneous trends and discourses from the Americas and Europe. This is why some prefer to speak of a *populist contagion* (Bale and al. 2010). Mudde (2004, 563; Roventa-Frumusani, Stefanel 2019) affecting the discourse of many political actors who bet on affectivity, the personalization of action (the charismatic leader) and the sacralization of the people.

A long-disputed, "ambivalent concept" (Kaltwasser 2012), populism has been associated in Western Europe especially with far-right parties, and in Latin America with left-wing protest movements, both based on the antagonistic rhetoric of the people/elite (in Europe) and exclusion of outsiders/inclusion of insiders (in Latin America).

The contemporary expansion of populist leaders, parties and discourses as well as "the new populisms" are to be rethought within the cleavages and reconfigurations within nationalisms, the emergence of cultural, ethnic, religious identities, the weakness of the Nation State and the disintegration of the habermasian

public sphere in favor of fragmented public spheres, result of the digital revolution.

The essence of populism in this new context is represented less by fixed ideological content than by a rhetorical modality of recreating collective identities by antagonization (Gherghina and Miscoiu 2010, 66).

The populism of the last quarter century appeared as much in the form of right-wing populism in the countries of the North confronted with the influx of migrants and minorities as in that of left-wing populism in the countries of the South (explainable by the communist roots in the post-communist countries and by a strong communist accent in countries such as Greece, Italy, Spain) finds a powerful electoral support in all Europe, West and East. According to Mudde (Mudde 2004), Western Europe adopts and adapts a populist *Zeitgeist* and given that populist parties win votes, mainstream parties are increasingly using populist rhetoric.

There is already a multitude of analyses devoted to the 'response' of traditional parties to the electoral success of populist parties (Mudde 2007; Rooduijn 2014; Van Spanje 2010, among others), but which focused on Western Europe and the influence of right-wing populism, leaving aside the Eastern European part of the European Union and the growing influence of left-wing populism. We intend to explore this populist dimension in post-communist countries, in this case Romania.

The case of Romania is significant for understanding populism, an expanding phenomenon at European level and elsewhere; the slow modernization of the end of the XIXth century, the rapid industrialization of the tumultuous XXth-century as well as the traumatic transition to democracy of the ex-communist countries in the first decade of the third millennium contributed to the maintenance of a populist discourse sometimes aggressive, visible, sometimes latent, but still present in the Romanian public sphere. Our analysis also tries to see to what extent the new media and the shift from the public sphere to the virtual public sphere contributes to the permanence of populist discourse in Romanian politics. We propose to analyze the way in which the traditional Romanian parties (the Social Democratic Party on the left and the National Liberal Party on the right) modify their electoral discourses under the pressure of actors recently entered in the

political arena – USR (Union Save Romania), and a new player, extremely important in Romania- the street.

2. Conceptualizations of Populism

From Caracas to Budapest via Washington and Rome, understanding of politics must take into account a phenomenon that until recently was studied as a subspecies of fascism (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017, 33) and relegated to the margins of the West, mainly Latin America (Finchelstein and Urbinati 2018). Another novelty is its reception by scholars and citizens. While until the end of the 20th century, interest in populism was most keen among those who saw it as a problem (Taguieff 1997; Taggart 2000; Mény and Surel 2002), researchers and citizens began to see it not only as a symptom of the decline of representative institutions but also as an opportunity to rejuvenate democracy (Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2016).

2.1 Globalization of populism

As populism becomes a global challenge, it is not surprising that scientific literature on populism has been growing (Aalberg et al. 2017; de la Torre 2015; Inglehart and Norris 2016; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012b; Couvrat et Thériault 2014; Moffitt 2016; Rovira-Kaltwasser et al. 2017). The concept has been discussed theoretically (Canovan 1981; Wievorka 1993; Taguieff 1995; Taguieff 1998; Taggart 2000; Hermet 2001; Mény and Surel 2000; Mény and Surel 2002; Mudde 2004) and methodologically empirically (Aalberg et al. 2017; de Vreese et al. 2018; Inglehart and Norris 2016; Rooduijn, De Lange and Van der Brug 2014; Hawkins 2009; Engesser et al. 2017; Gerbaudo 2014; Marinescu 2020; Frumuşani and Stefănel 2019, 2020). The complexity of the relationship between populism and democracy is reflected in theory and practice. In essence, populism is not against democracy; it is rather against liberal democracy (in Mudde's formula "Populism-threat or corrective of democracy").

Populism strongly defends popular sovereignty and the rule of the majority, but opposes minority rights and pluralism. Populism in power has led to processes of de-democratization (for example Orbán in Hungary or Chávez in Venezuela) and, in some extreme cases, even to the collapse of the democratic regime (for example Fujimori in Peru) (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017, 96). For Mudde populism is sometimes a 'corrective of democracy' since it allows the general mobilization of the people, but also a threat to democracy by the supremacy of the charismatic leader (too often authoritarian).

In the current context of growing success of populist parties, the generalization of social media and the phenomenon of personalization of politics, the existing literature has not sought whether the political communication of the leaders of populist and non-populist parties is going through a homogenization or a differentiation process. Significantly, this point seems crucial to assess whether and how a populist *Zeitgeist* really permeates the communication of political leaders, who are undoubtedly the most influential and visible actors in the politics of contemporary parties (Garzia 2014; Zulianello et al. 2018).

2.2 Populism: ambivalence and controversies

Populism is still much more controversial than analytical, often a battle name to mark and stigmatize political movements and leaders (D'Eramo 2013) or a marker of those who use it for the purpose to claim the liberal democratic model as the only valid form that democracy can take (Müller 2016). Finally, especially after the Brexit referendum (June 23, 2016), politicians and media experts call all opposition movements 'populists', from xenophobic nationalists to critics of neoliberal policies. That is why analysts distinguish between nationalistic populism, cyberpopulism, populism as plebeian politics, radical left populism, right wing populism etc. (Mudde 2020).

As a scientific term populism is an extremely contested notion, based on several sciences: political sciences, economic sciences, social sciences, linguistics, covering vast zones and perspectives such as modernization theory, social movement theory, political psychology, political economy, political sociology, de-

mocratic theory (Ionescu & Gellner 1969; Canovan 2002; Hawkins 2009; Marinescu 2020).

In the absence of an academic consensus regarding populism, it seems that the only characteristic on which analysts have come to an agreement have in common the opposition of two antagonistic homogeneous groups: "the pure people" and the corrupt elite (Mudde 2004; Albertazzi, and O'Donnell 2008 *inter alii)*. In this work we adopt the definition of Danielle Albertazzi and Duncan O'-Donnell (Albertazzi and O'Donnell 2008, 3):

> [Populism] *…* pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous 'others' who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice.

2.3 Populism: ideology, style and strategy

Populism is an ambiguous term that escapes uncontested definitions, because "it is neither an ideology nor a political regime and cannot be attributed to a specific programmatic content", but rather a form of collective action aimed at increasing power (Urbinati 2017, 2).

Yet populism is more than a rhetorical style and a political protest. Therefore, a political theory of populism must focus on the populism in power and on the way in which populism interprets, uses and modifies representative democracy.

Cas Mudde has contributed the most to defining the ideological framework within a normative minimalism. He argues that populism is «like a thin ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite" and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (the general will) of the people» (Mudde 2004, 543). Capable of overlapping the left/right division, the movements are populist due to their Manichean moral appreciation of politics.

According to Kurt Weyland (Weyland 2001, 14), populism is "best defined as a political strategy by which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government

power based on direct, unmediated and uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers".

In previous research, populism has been defined as an *ideology* (Mudde 2004), a *political style* (Bos and Brants 2014), or a *communication strategy* (Jagers and Walgrave 2007) and is generally considered a vague and difficult concept to define (Canovan 1999). More recently content and style interfere in order to create a discourse strategy aiming power and legitimacy; in fact populists as well as journalists use dramatization, negativity and emotional tone to highlight the failure of the elite and the necessity of change (Bos and Brants 2014; Wettstein 2018). The strongest predictors for the populist style are the identity of the actor and party and the populist content of statements (Wettstein 2018).

Following the same discursive dimension, Margaret Canovan (Canovan 1981, 4) identifies three discursive elements that characterize any form of populism:

i) exaltation of the people characterized as honest, sincere, courageous, moral and wise;

ii) call for the emancipation, modernization and even revolt of this same people, call launched by populist leaders who are like the "people" and share its values;

iii) anti-elitism as a constituent element which allows radical criticism of the status quo and the definitive positioning of the populist leader on the side of the masses.

By synthesizing populist literature, we can affirm that a populist discourse must be homogeneous, based on two antagonistic entities (the people and the elite) and Manichean dichotomies (virtue/vs/corruption); the tone is emotional, affective and not rational-objective; the solutions proposed are simple, reductionist and utopian, and the accent falls on the myths and structures of the imaginary and not on argumentation and debate.

3. The Romanian Populism

3.1 The first postcommunist decade

Many analyzes (Tismaneanu 1999; Gherghina and Miscoiu 2010 *inter alii*) highlight the fact that the first post-revolutionary years are to be placed under the sign of populism rather than under that of democracy. Besides, the populist elements are found in the manifestos and political speeches of the Romanian Revolution as well as in the speeches of the political formations resulting from the revolution. The name *Front* is preferred to that of Party, transforming a common name into a proper name - "direct evocation of the link with the official, revolutionary genealogy, symbol of a new solidarity" (Soare 2010, 101).

In fact the *National Salvation Front* (FSN) and its charismatic leader Ion Iliescu frequently use populist discourse both to detach themselves from the Romanian Communist Party from which many leaders come, and to maintain themselves in power despite the strong contestation manifested by the traditional (liberal and Christian) parties reappeared in the first months of 1990.The conspiracy myth, the serious accusations against the leaders of the anti-communist parties who had taken refuge in the West, the labeling of the University Square protesters as *golani* (hooligans) and the correction of their "deviance" by citizens characterized by a "high civic spirit" – the miners (armed with batons) are some of the populist nationalist discursive strategies of FSN.

From the center to the periphery the populist discourse becomes more radical; the minor partners of the FSN adopt an aggressive nationalist-populist discourse; that is why they become hardly acceptable partners for the ruling party PDSR engaged in the way towards democracy. The loss of the elections by Ion Iliescu (1996) and the entry of "the red quadrilateral" in the opposition marks a clear dissociation of the PDSR from the nationalist-populist discourse on one side, and on the other the radicalization of the discourse of Corneliu Vadim-Tudor (leader of the populist nationalist party *Greater Romania*); this discourse will propel four years later C. V. Tudor into the position of challenger in the presidential elections.

3.2 The second postcommunist decade

When in 2000 Vadim Tudor lost the presidential elections (against him hav-
ing joined all the democratic forces which supported Ion Iliescu in the second
round) and as the European course of Romania became more and more evident,
the populist discourse loses ground and takes refuge in marginal areas of the po-
litical sphere, from where it reappears in force as Traian Băsescu traces his ascent
to the most important dignity in Romanian politics - the presidency.

Traian Basescu captured Vadim Tudor's electorate by a speech similar to
Vadim Tudor's speech, marked by a strong personalization and self-presentation
as "one among many". At the moment when in his fight against the Parliament
and the Government appear non-democratic dimensions, and and he constantly
appeals to the people, we can talk about the populist Traian Basescu. "Să ne în-
toarcem la Popor" ("Let's go back to the people") requests Traian Băsescu each
time the Parliament takes decisions other than those he wishes - for example
when 322 parliamentarians voted for its suspension (in 2007).

To a populist discourse legitimized by the popular vote it is difficult to an-
swer with a democratic discourse; it is by pragmatic symmetry that populism
slips into the speeches of the allies as well as those of opponents of Basescu:
politicians, journalists, civil society actors. At the end of the two presidential
terms, of Traian Basescu (2005-2014) it can be said that his true heritage is the
enormous popularity of the populist rhetoric: politicians at all levels unreservedly
adopt this rhetoric, the electorate savor it as a grotesque spectacle where we
break taboos and use vulgar, heavy words. But actors in the Romanian political
spectrum do not seem to understand the dangers of this rhetoric for the fragile
Romanian democracy.

3.3 New millennium-new technologies and the new political sphere

During the last decade of the twentieth century, dominated by television, the
public was passive, its involvement in the political media space was reduced to
the vote itself and to the statistics that measure the audience. Politics is the spec-
tacle narrated by the mass media and followed live by audience niches; it is the

spectacle which attracts attention by its ambiguity and the richness of the meanings which can be associated with it (Edelmann 1999, 183).

Aware of the spectacular context (politics on television), political actors seek their legitimacy not within parties, but in television studios. Career paths are not played only within parties. The appearance on television in the spotlight, hoping for rapid notoriety, is preferred to the slow pace of party life.

The value of a politician is no longer automatically associated with his experience; the telegenie becomes the reference value. Political actors play their role by taking less account of the ideology and rather of the constraints of the television studio, knowing that a transgression of the television rules can lead to the disappearance of political life.

The political media space where the need for visibility takes precedence transforms politicians into actors subject to scenographic and staging rules whose underestimation or ignorance lead to marginalization, the political actor must think about his actions events which can be used and transmitted by the media.

If the impact of traditional media and especially television has been the subject of a great deal of research, studies on new technologies and their impact on politics are only at the beginning. What can be said *ab initio* is the fact that ordinary people are more informed and more active through new technologies.

It is not only the media and politicians who set the agenda in the new technology era, anyone who has a telephone with video camera and internet access can become a producer of information.

On the other hand, even if the enthusiasm continues at high ratings, a series of criticisms appear concerning the impact of new technologies. The mobilization capacity of these media can have a detrimental effect on politics. Crowds can be manipulated toward the destruction of democracy in the name of democracy itself. In a proverbial formulation the best (in our case participatory democracy) can be the enemy of the good (the representative democrat).

Some researchers claim that the consumption opportunities created by the internet increase consumerism and favor the market economy, but affect the spirit of tolerance of citizens frustrated by the lack of civic values that they share with others, different culturally; if we support consumer sovereignty and praise the un-

limited power of the internet to filter information, it is possible to think of freedom as the satisfaction of private preferences. It is obvious that the freedom to choose is fundamental but the choice must be made after having gathered a sufficient amount of information and having analyzed a wide and varied set of options. Devoid of formal censorship and informal rules of online behavior, it becomes the space of harsh expression and reductionist-populist divisions between them and US.

4. Research and analysis methodology

The present article has an exploratory character and uses methodological triangulation. More specifically we have used a methodological triangulation: quantitative content analysis and qualitative discourse analysis.

At the very beginning early scientists (especially in the United States) were sympathetic towards populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012), but further developments of the populist research added only negative connotations. Recent cross-cultural investigations (Dwayne Woods 2014; de Vreese 2018) emphasized the multiple openings of this thin ideology, political strategy and rhetoric discourse (de Vreese et al. 2018, 424):

> Populism might broaden the attention for issues that are not in the mainstream news. Populism might mobilize groups of people that have felt on the fringe of the political system. Populism might improve the responsiveness of the political system by making actors and parties align their policies more with the "wishes of the people.

As previuos researches have emphasized (Hawkins 2010; Wettstein et al 2018) populist politics can change the type of political mobilization, increase the development of social movements and reshape party structure and agency.That is why we have choosen to analyze a street protest based on participant observation and the analysis of the Facebook page associated with the *Uniți Salvăm!* (*Unite we save*) movement, broad protest movement from September to December

2013. (*Unite We Save* is the name used on social media networks during the protest).

We propose to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: How is represented quantitatively the dynamics of the antagonist Manichean populist content in a specific context (*Salvați Roșia Montană* FB page)*?*

- RQ2: How is thematized verbally and iconically the street movement *Salvați Roșia Montană* on the FB page?

Starting from the main semantic populist indicators we observed, quantified and analyzed:

- *The Exaltation of the People*

and the sign of equality between the will of the protesters and the will of the People as a whole. At the same time we have tried to highlight the characteristics of this People and the negotiations of the meanings which modify the negative factors (such as lack of civic experience and involvement) in positive attributes.

- *The call for emancipation and revolt against the corrupt elites*

focusing our attention on actions which go beyond the democratic framework and which include all the politicians of the same category homogenized and demonized at the same time In addition, we focused on the discursive structures which accentuate the impetus of the revolt and the importance of the immediate action („now or never").

- *Demonization of politicians*

We highlighted the antagonizing discursive structures, which put the People and the Elites in opposition by denying any possibility of negotiation between the two categories. We also emphasize the negative characteristics of politicians and the modality in which foreign structures (national or super-state also) are associated with evil and corruption.

- *The existence (or necessity) of a Leader*

who incorporates the will of the people and struggles with the corrupt Elites. We start from the premise that a characteristic of populism fueled by socializa-

tion networks is the absence of a leader and even the rejection of any hierarchical structure. The existence of this leader would be a sign of populism; the rejection of this idea of neopopulism. Graphically, the structure that we consider nationalist-populist and that we are trying to deconstruct is the following (Figure 1):

Leader: Embody the people Exceptional Saviour	Crisis situation: Now or never Exceptional	Elite: Corrupt Vicious
People: Pure Virtuous		Others (foreigners): Bastards With their own agenda Corrupt

Figure 1. Graphic representation of the analysis grid

We also consider as populist the discursive elements which have the role of eliciting emotional reactions either positive (adhesion, love etc.) or negative (fury, hatred, contempt etc.) as well as the use of classic political myths and associated imaginary structures.

The analysis corpus consists of posts on the Facebook page *Uniți, Salvam*! and the comments to these posts during the period September 1, 2013 - December 31, 2013 (Tabel 1).

The quantitative results emphasize the fact that from September to December the number of posted texts and photos doubled (57 vs 107 texts and 57 vs 107 photos). As for the FB reactions the shared messages 1000 each month (and this explains the huge mobilization), the maximum number of likes also remains high, but not the number of comments (what counts is action – presence in the street and not discourse).

We must mention the fact that the street movements diminished in size since end November 2013, but the Facebook page remained active, succeeding in coagulating smaller protest movements throughout 2014 and 2015. Anyhow the dynamics is growing during the first three months.

We must also stress the fact that the main contributors to this page are not the same throughout the period. A member of the movement informed us that when the page became radicalized and between the on-line movement and the offline manifestation appeared discrepancies, reciprocal accusations occurred, accusations which went so far as to betray the spirit of the movement.

Corpus		September	October	November	December
Total number of posts	Texte	57	78	64	107
	Photos	57	74	61	104
	Video	12	29	14	18
	Total	57	78	65	113
Like	Average	279	340	491	315
	Maximum	1402	1996	1528	1211
comments	Average	38	103	92	61
	Maximum	107	264	299	132
Share	Average	234	298	174	153
	Maximum	1007	1292	984	1018

Table 1: Synthetic data of the corpus submitted for analysis

4.1 Brief presentation of the protest movement

The protest movement generically named *Salvați Roșia Montană (Save Rosia Montana)* or *Toamna Românească (Romanian Autumn)* sprang from a backdrop of popular discontent with the chaos of the Romanian political scene accentuated by the incapacity of the Social Liberal Union (USL) to develop for the citizens the enormous confidence that they had in 2012: first of all, the street protests led to the fall of the Ungureanu government (January 2013), then in July on the occasion of the referendum on the resignation of the President Basescu the mobilization was enormous and third, in November during the parliamentary

elections the presence at the polls and the majority in favor of the Union was overwhelming.

The issue of preventing the vote in Parliament of a law that would facilitate the mining of Roșia Montană (a village in a traditional area of Transylvania) - was the pretext for the revolt since the subject was present in the Romanian public space for more than 15 years; moreover, a statement of Traian Băsescu in the 2009 electoral campaign when he declared his support for mining in the same area did not trigger the same protests.

Besides, just after the start of the revolt, other themes appeared:, some directly derived from the theme of mining (the anti-capitalist theme), others indirectly (nationalist-extremist demands).

4.2 Results. RQ2. Verbal and iconic actualizations

4.2.1 Exaltation of the People: the myth of the unity and of the Golden Age

From the first posts on the page we can notice the assimilation of the will of the People with the will of those who protest and the discredit of those who do not get involved (*the great majority of Romanians are sheep* comment on 10 December.This association with sheep is limited at the beginning, the non participants should be helped not blamed, in letting the traitors of all parties fight for their own interests and not for an old population incapable to affirm its national identity in the list of The new European values - comment on 4th September).

Image 1. Image suggesting the cleavage of the Romanian society (10 Dec).

As the movement grew those who do not participate are discredited and excluded from the body of citizens (see the post attached to the photo opposite. - Beer is us who pay! - Image 1[1]). In other words the indolence of those who prefer the tranquility of beer to the tumult of the street costs us all, but the protesters bear the cost.

The evolution of this theme can be summarized as follows (Table 2):

Theme: unity of the People	September	October	November	December
Mobilisation	Strong mobilization	Strong mobilization	Moderate mobilization	Very strong mobilization
	„How strong Bucharest people can be when they can all think the same" (comment, Sept 9); „Whoever gets up in the morning saves Roșia Montană and stops the abuse. In Parlament, we are now protesting against the mining law! Come, you too! Together we can defend what belongs to us We are more numerous again than they think!" (post 10 dec).			
Blame	moderate	moderate	strong	strong
	„The Romanians do not seem to know how to protest. We are like a large flock of sheep" (comment, November 29) „If a quarter of the people who were at Bucharest Christmas Market (why not Craciun? Noel in Romanian our note) - without knowing why stopped, the message would have been better heard. But unfortunately sausages and wine remain the priorities of the majority of Romanians" (comment-7 dec).			

Table 2: Summary of the evolution of the theme of People's Unity in the posts and comments of the *Uniți Salvăm* page during the period September-December 2013.

We have used the scale: non-existent, moderated, strong and very strong.It should be noted that from the title of the page the Union appears rather as a desideratum than a reality of current society. So beyond the usual cleavages of populist discourse we notice another antagonization: that between the demon-

strators and the silent majority like a flock of sheep and blameable for the tacit support (indirect-no involvement or direct-vote) of the current political class (Image 2[2]).

Image 2. Image of the population not involved in the protests.

The portrait of the protestors as it results from the analysis of the page is: „young, beautiful and free" (formula consecrated in the Romanian public space to designate the protesters; formula adopted also pejoratively on certain occasions by those who challenged the legitimacy of the movement, especially in traditional media). Young people are mannered, educated and creative (posts grouped in the album *The art of protest*).

Creativity exploses in many fun sequences, assumed by specific gestures such as behaviors associated with childhood (dwarfs - Image 3[3]; riding a bicycle - Image 4).

Young people want to preserve unaltered nature but also emphasize the need for a new era that reconciles people with themselves, the others and the environment.

The original moment we are referring to is the Romanian revolution, the pure moment of the beginnings, corrupted by politicians unable to rise to that level, but recreated by the participants in the movement. This recovery of the revolution is taking place in two directions: demonstrators towards the revolutionaries (the descendants of those who fought in December) and conversely from the revolutionaries towards the demonstrators What again can make it fit into a populist structure is its homogenizing and dichotomous nature: only those who are on the street are the heirs of the demonstrators of 1989; the voice of the 1989 revolution is assumed

Image 3. Demonstration with the slogan "lăsați aurul acolo unde l-au ascuns spiridușii" ("let the gold where the dwarfs have hidden it").

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only by those who support this movement, the others are the traitors of the spirit of the revolution.

Image 4. Panoramic image of the first protests, bicycles in the foreground (personal archive of the authors - FB photo has been removed)

4.2.2 Emancipation by revolt

It is obvious that the dominant theme of the whole period is *the need for change*, a change that can only come from revolt because all the actors - Government, Presidency, Parliament but also Gendarmerie, Advocate of the People and even political parties - are incapable of emancipation.

We consider that this change transcends democratic limits and can be designated as populist insofar as the change is not the result of the vote but of pressures from the street. An example in this sense is the occupation of the headquarters of the People's Advocate by the protesters (10 dec) given their determination to force a decision to attack the Mines Law (Image 5[4].)

Image 5. Occupation of *Avocatul Poporului* (Advocate of the People) headquarters by demonstrators.

This type of populism acts in a mimetic way instead of the more difficult, longer and harder legal and institutional path to follow in all its bureaucratic meandres. In the image alongside, a group of filmmakers associated with the move-

ment and appreciated by the movement occupied the CNC (National Center of Cinematography) to protest against the incorrect and arbitrary allocation of funds (Image 6[5]).

4.2.3 Who are the enemies: the political elite, internal and international institutions, the media

Image 6. Occupation of the CNC by dissatisfied filmmakers.

From the very beginning of the movement, ministers considered guilty of promoting the mining law Victor Ponta, Dan Șova are in the foreground, but dissolved in the collective guilt of the political class in its entirety. What is more, guilt is not limited but widened to the 24 years of government which was the misfortune of the country. The evolution of the theme of guilt is shown in the table below (Table 3):

Theme: guilt of the political class	September	October	November	December
Guilty political figures	moderated	nonexistant	nonexistant	moderated
	Politicians found guilty of situation created *Victor Ponta, Dan Șova, Rovana Plumb, Daniel Barbu et Gheorghe Duțu* Take responsibility and resign. We want you to be investigated (banner posted on September 26).			
Collective culprits	Strong	Very strong	Very strong	Strong
	„Meet this cyanurist clan. It's bigger than it seems, it has infiltrated and pollutes the Special Commission. Their degree of involvement in activities supporting the mining project varies from initiation of laws favorable for the mining company to manipulative partisan and propaganda statements" (posted September 18).			

Table 3. Evolution of the populist theme of corrupt elites in the period analyzed.

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Parliament is the main culprit (including all parties); it represents the main structure which must be destroyed eventually in its own cyanide to secure a future for Romania-banner posted on 13 Décember

- Image 7[6]).

Besides, politicians on the whole are judged and condemned: „Attention leeched politicians There is not only gold and silver, there are also handcuffs "(text of a banner photographed during demonstrations and posted September 20).

Next to the Romanian politicians appears a series of figures associated with conspiratorial Otherness:

Image 7. Octopus Parliament.

Image 8. Symbolic visual structure associated with the myth of the conspiracy.

- at the individual level: George Soros (evil character in the Romanian collective mind, associated with the myth of the Hungarian conspiracy) participates in a secret meeting with Victor Ponta, in London;
- at the national one: Canada globally, considering that the *Gold Corporation*, company which wants to exploit the gold of Roșia Montana is founded in this country; the United States whose interests associated with consumerims are seen as illegitimate (Image 8[7]).
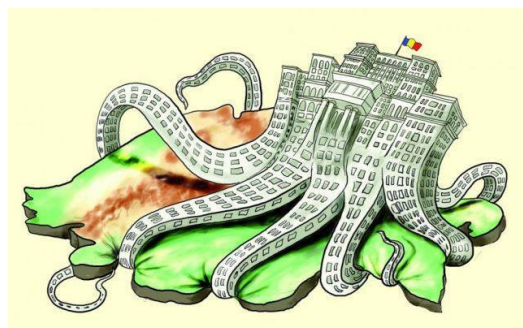- and transnational one: FMI and the European Union seen as traitors and oppressors of the Romanian people.

Developing the populist theme of press moguls used by Traian Băsescu during his two presidential terms, the movement revolts against the traditional press seen as part of the corrupt system, incapable of presenting the situations objectively. The solution is provided by the international press (from the same countries that are part of the Conspiracy, but mythical thought sometimes plays with logic)

and civic journalism. Protest participants are encouraged to present what is happening off line live, online; those who are online are asked to distribute in the real and the virtual („Announce your neighbors, your colleagues, your family and your friends" - banner posted on September 8) .

4.2.4 The rejection of the leader –emblem of neo populism

Image 10. "Mugur Călinescu, the real anonymous".

During the entire period analyzed, we did not distinguish dominant voices either in the online or offline environment. Coordination is collective, everyone is invited to participate, people are mobilized to contribute as they wish, to express themselves freely. What is more, any attempt at individualization or to assume in own name the movement is severely punished (Image 10[8]).

5. Conclusion

In line with numerous recent researches we found that *people-centrism, anti-elitism, collective mobilization are main elements of the populist communication*. Populist actors use populist communication as a means to an end. The important political aims are power, legitimacy and mobilization (easily achieved by direct connection). If in the first televisual era the role played by the charismatic leader was significant, in neo-populism the real people is anonymous, in the street and transmits live the protests, marches, events.

We also consider that "populist content and populist style tend to go together" (Kriesi 2018, 13) by providing "a dynamic mix of substance and style" (Wodak 2015, 3) and plead for a new generation of research on populist political communication, with the aim to push the research agendas and design toward a more interactive, systematic, and in particular, *comparative* approach to

the study of populist political communication infrastructure by polarization (Mudde, Kaltwaser 2018; de Vreese 2018).

Nowadays populist affordances center "the people" to various degrees, and engage in a "technological performance of populism across a variety of platforms, including email, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and campaign-created mobile apps" (Baldwin-Philippi, 2018).

The political transitions of the former Eastern Europe, the emergence of a cyberdemocracy and a public hypersphere (Pierre Levy 2011), the extension of new digital mechanisms in all spheres determine permanent reconfigurations of the social world, ambiguities and challenging hybridizations.

In an era where "time has no patience" (Romanian writer Marin Preda), *populist mobilizations* function as warning signs for out-of-phase rulers (and governed), tending to bypass bureaucratic institutional procedures (given the ineffective action of "democratic" political mediation).

It is not accidental that, in the process of naming and shaming "enemies" from within, the *communication played an important role* (Aalberg et al. 2017; de Vreese et al. 2018) and the discursive strategies analyzed here, with their heavy reliance on emotion, and popular expressions, work in combination "to anchor just such a narrative in people's hearts and minds" (Breeze 2020,16).

This analysis consolidates the conclusions of an important number of recent researches concerning the strong need for a comparative, systematic and global populist communication perspective which takes us beyond the particularity of case studies (de Vreese and al. 2018, 427). When leaders and authoritarian-populist parties gain ground (Trump, Brexit etc), one must study and understand the roots of populist discourse in this global context of cultural backlash (Norris and Inglehart 2019); populism continues to represent a strong alert potential for governments with little responsibility, but also a threat to the institutions of liberal democracy and the political culture that underpins democracy (see also Mudde & Kaltwasser 2012).

It is imperative not to consider social media platforms and populism in isolation, but interrelated, depending on context and connection "as platforms of sharing, disseminating, escalating, and expressing views as part of a larger infor-

mation system (de Vreese 2018, 132). Moreover, like in the 60's ("les structures descendent dans la rue", "the structures take to the streets"), we plead for discourse and action, for information and mobilization.

In line with previous researches we point out the necessity to anchor further analyses on the binaries of populism "us versus them," "the people" versus the "the elite", the moral connotation of a "certain discursive style and form of mobilization" (Woods 2014, 16) in a broader verbal-iconic framework.

Notes

1. *Uniti Salvăm.* Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=10201496369830965&set
2. *Uniti Salvăm.* Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/unitisalvam/photos/584470591594972;
3. *Uniti Salvăm*. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/unitisalvam/photos/588859361156095;
4. *Uniti Salvăm*. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/unitisalvam/photos/626492367392794;
5. *Uniti Salvăm*. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/unitisalvam/photos/627863033922394;
6. *Uniti Salvăm*. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/unitisalvam/photos/627512710624093;
7. *Uniti Salvăm*. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/unitisalvam/photos/584464108262287;
8. *Uniti Salvăm*. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/unitisalvam/photos/587856941256337;

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