Country Profile Romania. Polarisation and Right-wing Extremism - the situation in Romania

Florina Neagu, Mihai Tatomir

In recent years, Romania has not witnessed any major reported violent incidents stemming from radical or extremist movements; however, social polarisation is present, as can be observed through attitudes and behaviours of discrimination and intolerance. There are numerous manifestations of anti-multicultural, anti-"minority", and anti-European or anti-"modernity" (taken to be an acceptance of 'western', 'liberal' values and ideas) narratives among different political actors, right-wing movements and mass-media outlets.

As in other European countries, Romania has in place instruments and measures to combat discriminatory and hate-based discourses, starting from the creation of the National Council for Combating Discriminationin 2000, and continuing with legal prohibition of all forms of discrimination (Law no nr. 48/2002). In addition, Law no. 217/2015 regarding "banning fascist, racist or xenophobic organizations and symbols and promoting the cult of individuals guilty of committing crimes against peace and humanity" was adopted. Nevertheless, the implementation of these laws and measures to combat discrimination faces challenges. Discrimination is still prominent and widespread. A factor contributing to this is the insufficient synchronization of efforts at the institutional level; insufficient efforts for both school-based and public education and awareness raising efforts to both combat discrimination and promote the values of respect and social inclusion; the absence of an effective monitoring system; the lack of enforcement of sanctions in this field; and the continued and active promotion of discriminatory values, messages and ideas by some actors across media, academia, political, religious and other spheres.

In 2013, more than half of Romanians identified discrimination as a common phenomenon, while only 11% of the population see it as rare or nonexistent (CNCD/IRES 2013). In the Special Eurobarometer 493 of the European Union in 2019, of the 1.041 Romanians interviewed, 61% of respondents identified discrimination against Roma as a problem in the country; 59% saw evidence of discrimination based on ethnic origin, skin colour (59%), and sexual orientation (53%) (European Commission 2019).

A diverse population: According to the last census from 2011 (Census 2011), out of 20,121,641 inhabitants, 88,9% declared themselves as ethnic Romanians. The rest of the population is made up of 6,5% Hungarians and 3,3% Roma as the second and third largest communities in the country, followed by Ukrainians (50,900), Germans (36,000), Turks (27,700), Russians-Lipovanians (23,500), Tartars (20,300), and Serbs, Slovaks, Bulgarians, Croats, Greeks, Italians, Jews, Czechs, Poles, Armenians, Csangos, Macedonians, accounting for at least 1,000 people each. In addition, through 2017-2018, a

total of 237.231 immigrants were registered on Romanian territory. Of these 10.357 were Syrians, according to data provided by the General Inspectorate for Immigration. The same census revealed that approximately 86.5% of the population belonged to the Romanian Orthodox Church, while 5% were Roman Catholics, followed by Greek Catholics, Protestants, Baptists, Jews, Muslims and other affiliations.

Based on a national opinion survey (Center for Insights in Survey Research 2018), 36% of respondents believe that the "Romanian identity" is under threat and mostly fear the loss of values, culture and traditions (10% of the 36%). While 60% agree that a democratic regime is good, 47% believe that non-governmental organizations have too much power in today's societies and need to be forced to respect the sovereignty of the nation. In this context, racist and intolerant hate speech continue to be a widespread problem in public discourse and on the internet (ECRI 2019). The main targeted groups are currently the Roma, the Hungarian minority, the LGBTQI+ community, and the Jewish population.

Political polarisation by parties: The Romanian political spectrum is principally dominated by centre-right and liberal and/or conservative parties – at least according to their official programmes. The exception is Romania's purportedly 'leftist' Social Democrats (PSD) (Pranzl 2017) - though in practice their agenda often does not reflect that of a social democratic party. There are a very small number of parties officially belonging to the far right and left of the political spectrum, including radical or extremist groups. Usually these do not meet the requirements required for gaining seats in the Parliament, or are not part of the electoral competition. Also missing in the Romanian political context are formal right-wing populist parties (which have recently become successful in Europe and beyond). However, new groups — organised right-wing movements — embracing hate-based and extremist views have emerged in recent years. Intolerance towards different groups, including Roma, ethnic Hungarians and sexual minorities, is also increasing outside the political system (Cinpoeş 2012).

Right-wing groups: Romania does not at the moment appear to be facing the same scale of growth in extremist movements experienced in some other European countries, though the increased organisation and engagement of 'hate-based movements' in recent years is a concern. Despite the current lack of representation in Parliament, right-wing parties spousing extremist and demonising or hate messages are emerging together with a growing number of organisations and 'opinion generators' outside the formal political space (including bloggers, academics and analysts espousing racism, hate messaging and fake news to demonise or foster conspiracy ideas against different ethnic, identity or population groups).

In 2000, the Greater Romania Party (Partidul România Mare) was the largest party in the opposition. Its doctrine consisted of nationalist goals, an authoritarian organisational hierarchy and the

predisposition to use hate speech against ethnic and sexual minorities in its public discourse. The New Right Movement (Partidul Noua Dreaptă) is another ethnocentric extremist group which mainly targets different minorities on the internet, including the Hungarian and Roma communities, but also organises counter-marches against sexual minorities and LGBTQI+/PRIDE events (Cinpoeș 2012). Other parties espousing right-wing ideologies and promoting hate messages towards one or more identity groups include The United Romania Party (Partidul România Unită), constantly targeting the Hungarian and Roma communities, and The New Generation Party – Christian Democratic (Partidul Noua Generație-Creștin Democrat), which frequently uses legionary symbols and discriminatory statements against women, the Roma, and other ethnic minorities.

It is important to address the influence of the Romanian Orthodox Church on the evolution of the extreme right in Romania, especially through the Coalition for the Family (Coaliția pentru Familie) movement. In October 2018, they initiated a referendum for a constitutional amendment regarding Article 48 (1), which defines family as a freely consented marriage of the spouses, and sought to define family as a union between a man and a woman. The referendum was publicly supported by several political parties, including the Social Democratic Party, which had the majority in the Parliament, but also The Christian Democratic National Peasants' Party or The New Right. In addition to their initiative, which failed due to a massive national boycott campaign of the referendum and resulting low turnout which prevented the referendum from meeting the minimum number of voters required to be official, the Coalition for the Family constantly rails against the Romanian LGBTQI+ community and 'liberals', through the internet, counter-marches and mass-media.

Anti-democratic and right-wing extremist attitudes among the population: Overall, since the transition from the former regime in 1989 Romanians have maintained a high degree of lack of confidence and trust in political institutions (Hosu/Stoica 2017; Pranzl 2017), as protests and low political turnouts at elections indicate dissatisfaction of the Romanian population towards the political system and political parties, mainly due to a "crisis of representation", a rather closed political system, and perceptions of corruption (Pranzl 2017). A survey from 2016 by the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy (IRES) shows that 24% of the respondents identify themselves as"right-wing". and 17% as "left-wing" (IRES 2016). Another public opinion survey (Center for Insights in Survey Research 2018) revealed in 2018 that 26% of the Romanian respondents find more polarization in politics in Romania in recent years. Approximately 20% perceive this as a good thing, while 35% see it as negative.

To a large extent, intolerance towards diversity is significant in Romania (IRES/CNCD 2018). A recent opinion poll (IRES/ CNCD 2018) revealed high levels of intolerance towards the LGBTQI+ community, with 59% of respondents saying they would not accept an LGBTQI+ member in their family, and 52% would not want to be friends with them.The percentage for immigrants is 39% (not in the family), and

30% (wouldn't want to be friends). Intolerance was also observed towards ethnic minorities. 29% of respondents would not accept someone from the Roma community in their family. The percentage for the Hungarian community was 24%. Overall, the survey revealed that there is a fear of "the other", especially towards LGBTQI+ (74%), Roma (72%), immigrants (69%), Muslims (68%), other religions (58%), Hungarians (53%) and the Jewish community (46%) (IRES/CNCD 2018).

Opposition and resistance to discrimination and hate-based movements and ideologies: Romania has in place a normative system that prohibits a number of extremist acts including fascist, communist, racist or xenophobic activities, organisations and symbols as well as discrimination based on race, gender, disability, ethnicity, nationality, language, religion, social status, beliefs, sexual orientation, age and other categories (Cinpoeş 2012). The current normative instruments, however, have proven to be insufficient to overcome discrimination in at least core 'pockets' in society — sometimes very large pockets. Their implementation faces multiple challenges. At the same time, however, there is a vibrant and active engagement to combat radicalisation and xenophobia carried out by the civil society, often supported by national (from the national government, local authorities, and CSR funding from companies) and international (primarily from the European Commission) funding. The main political parties and public institutions, despite their commitment to creating an inclusive society and combat discrimination, often set a poor example in terms of tolerant views and the promotion of diversity. There are even cases of their using media outlets to spread hate speech in electoral competitions. Cooperation between public authorities and civil society in many parts of the country is limited, however this is beginning to change. In cities such as Cluj-Napoca (Kolozsvar in Hungarian, Klausenburg in German) there is increasing cooperation across local government, law enforcement agencies, the school inspectorate and schools, and civil society, to promote inclusive education and challenge all forms of hate speech and discrimination. The coalition of actos working for a more inclusive identity and celebrating the diversity of Romanian citizens, is growing.

Literature

Census (2011): Privind rezultatele preliminare ale Recensământului Populaţiei şi al Locuinţelor.

Center for Insights in Survey Research (2018): Public Opinion in Romania.

Cinpoeş, Radu (2012): The Extreme Right in Contemporary Romania. Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

CNDC/ IRES (2013): Perceptii si atitudini Privind Discriminarea 2013: Raport de Cercetare.

ECRI (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance) (2019): ECRI Report on Romania (fifth monitoring cycle).

European Commission (2019): Special Eurobarometer 493: Discrimination in the EU (including LGBTI), available on the European Union Open Data Portal.

Hosu, Ioan/ Stoica, Mihnea (2017): Selective Trust in Institutions Amidst Romania's Political Protests, paper presented to Transylvania International Conference in Public Administration, November 2017. Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

IRES (2016): Political Parties in Romania - Perceptions and Representations.

Pranzl Joachim (2017): Political Participation in Romania: Low Turnout, Protests and Anti-Establishment Party (2012-2017). Master thesis at the Karl-Franzens-University of Graz, Centre for Southeast European Studies.

About the Authors

Florina Neagu is possessing a Bachelor's Degree in Law and a Master's Degree in European Studies, from the "Alexandru Ioan Cuza'' University in Iaşi. She is currently a researcher at the Multicultural Business Institute of Romania, and a Communications & PR Specialist at the Peace Action, Training and Research Institute of Romania (PATRIR), where she is also conducting research on the spread of hate speech and its impact on Euroscepticism and xenophobia. Her work is mainly focused on Legal Sciences, Human Rights, Women's Rights Protection and International Relations, while also engaging with non-governmental organisations in the field of youth activism and social equity.

Mihai Tatomir is possessing a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science and currently doing a Master in International Relations at Bábes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Mihai Tatomir conducts research in the field of social radicalization and polarization. He is also working on implementing the Champions and Brave roundtables on bullying prevention, inclusive education and youth wellbeing. Other areas of interest are Middle East studies and EU foreign policy.