

Religious Actors and Their Political Agenda in Romania

From the Family Referendum to the Rise of the AUR

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Introduction

Political and religious freedom returned to Romania after the bloody revolution in 1989 that put an end to the communist dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu. Following the adoption of a new constitution in 1991, the country became a parliamentary republic with a semi-presidential regime and features a multi-party system, now dominated by the social democratic and liberal parties.

The Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat; PSD) and the National Liberal Party (Partidul Național Liberal; PNL), together with the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România; UDMR), form the current grand coalition government. In the general elections of 2020, the center-left Social Democratic Party secured 28.9% of the vote, followed by the center-right National Liberal Party with 25.1% and the centrist Save Romania Union (Uniunea Salvați România; USR)–The Party of Liberty, Unity and Solidarity (Partidul Libertate, Unitate și Solidaritate; PLUS) Alliance with 15.3%. While extremist parties remained for a long time at the fringe of the Romanian political scene, following the last elections, a new anti-system party called the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor; AUR), featuring a conservative and nationalist agenda, offered a great surprise, becoming the fourth-largest party in the country's parliament.

Religion returned to the public sphere in Romania after 1989, when, counting on the support of the overwhelming majority of Romanians (86.81% declaring themselves Orthodox, according to a 1992 census), the Romanian Ortho-

dox Church (Biserica Ortodoxă Română; BOR) tried to impose itself as a new key actor, with refreshed ambitions to influence the political process. One of these ambitions concerned the reinstatement of religious education in public schools. This request was supported by all the denominations in post-communist Romania, resulting in the introduction of such classes in 1995.

Romania is a secular state, with no state religion but 18 recognized religious denominations, funded by the state according to their number of believers. This gives a fully privileged position to the BOR, given its 86.45% share of believers according to the last census from 2011, followed by Roman Catholics (4.62%), Reformed (3.19%), Pentecostals (1.92%), and others (National Institute for Statistics 2013).

Politics and religion have often intermingled during post-communist Romania, with implied mutual benefits for both (Bîgu 2018, 89). Beside the subsidies granted by the state, political positions are offered to members of the Church hierarchy in the Romanian parliament, while the Church acts as an electoral agent promoting certain political parties' agendas.

Family referendum

Against this rather complex background, in 2018, a broad-based coalition of NGOs and various religious groups (using the name Coalition for the Family [Coaliția pentru Familie; CpF]), counting on the full support of several denominations in Romania (most notably the Evangelical and Orthodox churches), was soundly defeated in its attempt to change, by referendum, the neutral definition of family in the Romanian Constitution, based on an agenda "aiming for a *de facto* constitutional ban on same-sex marriage" (Cinpoș 2021, 420).

It is important to note that the main churches in Romania, such as the Orthodox and Catholic churches, were not formally part of the Coalition for the Family, but, as noted by (Cinpoș 2022, 215–238), "members of the clergy declared publicly their support for the initiative, assisted in the collection of signatures and subsequently encouraged people to participate in the referendum." The Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church publicly declared its support for the initiative of the Coalition for the Family to amend the Constitution: "The Synod has taken note with appreciation of the citizens' initiative to amend Article 48 of the Romanian Constitution in order to specify that the family is constituted by the freely consented marriage between a man and a woman." This initiative of lay people belonging to several denominations was

supported by the Romanian Orthodox Church, as, according to a statement of the BOR (Ionescu 2016), "it expresses its teaching on the family and its constant legal position." On the Catholic side, the Catholic bishops of Romania, reunited in a plenary assembly, stressed that "we welcome with hope the decision to launch the referendum to be held on 6 and 7 October 2018 to revise the Constitution" (Dancă 2018), while also recalling that the Association of Catholic Families Vladimir Ghika and the Catholic Action in Romania were part of the Coalition for the Family.

This initiative marked a first in this overwhelmingly Orthodox country, where the vast majority declare themselves Orthodox and where the Orthodox faith has usually been considered an essential part of the *Romanian identity* throughout the centuries, with 74% of Romanians stating that being Orthodox is important for truly being a national of the country (Pew Research Center 2017). For the first time, otherwise competing denominations stood together for the same cause, actively participating in collecting signatures and encouraging people to vote in favor of amending the Constitution.

On October 6 and 7, 2018, at the Coalition for the Family's initiative, Romania organized a referendum on whether to narrow the constitutional gender-neutral definition of family. The referendum failed to attract the threshold required for its validation, and, since then, the Coalition for the Family's influence has begun to gradually fade—and, along with it, its initial post-referendum plans to reposition itself as a prospective pan-Christian conservative party.

A legislative proposal for the organization of a referendum on the definition of family was proposed by the CpF in October 2015. Under Romanian law, the Constitution can be changed after a proposal is made by either the president, the government, a quarter of the members of parliament, or at least 500,000 citizens. Parliament must then vote in favor of the revision, which must then pass a nationwide referendum. In less than a year, the Coalition succeeded in collecting over three million signatures (although only 500,000 were needed) and submitted them to the parliament along with the initiative. After an evaluation by the Romanian Constitutional Court, the process was allowed to go on, and the parliament then voted in favor of the referendum. Voters were called to answer the following question with "Yes" or "No": "Do you agree with the Law for the revision of Romania's Constitution in the form adopted by Parliament?" In its current form, the Romanian Constitution defines family as "the free-willed marriage between spouses," using a gender-neutral formula (Art. 48), while the proposal to be voted on in the referendum was that family

is based on marriage “between a man and a woman, and on the parents’ right to ensure the growth, education and upbringing of their offspring.”

The turnout was far below 30%, the threshold for a referendum to be binding, despite a decision by the government, which had largely backed the referendum, to allow two days of voting rather than one. Just 21.1% of the voting population took part (with 91.56% agreeing with the proposed change to the Constitution), so the referendum failed, leaving the existing definition of family in place. While factors such as opposition to the topic of the referendum and personal opposition against its initiators were cited as the main reasons for absenteeism by researchers who conducted interviews on the subject, other reasons, more of a political than a religious nature, were also invoked. One such reason concerned the limited involvement of parties in the campaign for the referendum (although they were active at the collecting signatures stage) (Stănescu 2020), while others viewed the referendum as an attempt by the government party to divert public opinion from the real problems that the country was facing (Gherghina et al. 2019, 14).

The Coalition for the Family appeared to the Romanian public as an umbrella organization bringing under the same flag dozens of NGOs, foundations, associations, and federations fighting for similar causes: anti-abortion, anti-LGBTIQA+, anti-sex education, pro-traditional family, pro-natalism, and anti-vaccination. While founded in 2013, it has only become visible in the Romanian public space since 2016. The coalition billed itself as an “independent civic initiative,” unaffiliated to any specific religion or denomination, counting among its members predominantly Evangelical—but also Orthodox and Catholic—NGOs, some of them established (with premises and public actions) and some of them small (with few public apparitions). These member organizations enjoyed within the CpF a certain degree of autonomy, pursuing sometimes different agendas and organizing separate events.

More importantly, the Coalition secured the support of both right- and left-wing parties, signing electoral protocols with three political forces: the Social Democratic Party, the National Liberal Party, and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats. However, the referendum was opposed internationally by, among others, Amnesty International and the advocacy group ILGA Europe (Norocel and Băluță 2021).

At the conceptual level, the Coalition featured a multi-layered discourse championing traditional family and values, while at the same time displaying a powerful rhetoric focused intensively on subjects such as the so-called *gender ideology*, from which the natural family and children should be protected, and

inventing straw men by invoking the danger of *Christianophobia*. Its marketing strategy (an aggressive social media presence, a savvy flexibility in accommodating different denominations, a competitive and bold approach in public debates, and a strong TV coverage), while mirroring similar strategies professed by Evangelical movements, in particular, in recent years, set a new standard in marketing religion for a post-socialist audience and imposed a new type of competitor in the otherwise overwhelmingly Orthodox country's religious services market.

While the CpF's rhetoric echoed that of similar religious anti-gender movements in other Central European countries (e.g., Croatia, Slovakia, and Slovenia), its member organizations would at first glance suggest a grassroots Romanian Christian-Right movement. However, as analyzed by (Paternotte and Kuhar (2017), given that very similar organizations with similar agendas have tried to modify the constitutions in other European countries, specifically in the vicinity of Romania, a more cautious answer on the national and international dimensions of the Coalition for the Family is required.

One of these countries is Croatia, where in 2013 a similarly named organization, On Behalf of the Family, succeeded in gathering over 700,000 signatures for a proposed amendment to the Constitution that would regard marriage as a union between a man and a woman, thus creating a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage. The initiative succeeded, with the support of the Catholic Church, conservative parties, and other denominations. Another country with a similar scenario is Slovakia, where in February 2015, a referendum on banning same-sex marriage, proposed by the Alliance for Family, failed to attract the threshold required. A few months later, in December 2015, Slovenia organized a referendum on a bill that would legalize same-sex marriage, and a majority of voters voted against. The referendum was pushed by opponents of the bill, such as the Children Are at Stake group backed by the Catholic Church.¹

While these similar scenarios, names of organizations, and agendas may not be sufficient to seriously question the labelling of the Coalition for the Family as a grassroots initiative, the Coalition's supporting organizations certainly tilt the balance toward regarding it as just one example, among several, of a more general push to alter the constitutions of several Central and Eastern Eu-

1 For the presentation of similar situations in relation to Romania, I am particularly indebted to Paternotte and Kuhar (2017).

ropean states (as well as elsewhere) in order to impose a conservative and religiously oriented agenda.

Among the supporting organizations that offered legal counseling and lobbied for the CpF's agenda an important place is occupied by the World Congress of Families (WCF), a US coalition established in 1997 that promotes Christian-Right values and is active worldwide, regularly organizing large international *pro-family* conventions (e.g., at Verona and Chişinău) with the support of local right-wing politicians. Its relation with the CpF is by no means non-transparent, being officially branded as a *supporter*, as proven by the WCF's submission of a petition supporting the CpF referendum, signed by 100 conservative activists from 22 countries (Barthélemy 2018). Other supporting organizations include the Alliance Defending Freedom, an American conservative NGO advocating for religious freedom, marriage, and family; the Liberty Counsel,² a religious liberty NGO that offered support to a similar organization in Croatia; and the European Center for Law and Justice (ECLJ), an international NGO dedicated to the protection of human rights worldwide (Barthélemy 2018).³

While the result of the referendum undoubtedly disappointed the CpF's supporters, the Coalition did not abandon its political ambitions but instead tried to better its position along the lines of the Christian conservative World Congress of Families. This strategy did not prove successful, and gradually, as the COVID-19 pandemic began to take over the public sphere, the Coalition for the Family remained only a media presence, mainly preaching along pan-Christian lines.

2 According to (Ciobanu 2017), "Romania's Coalition received legal assistance from the international chapters of several U.S.-based conservative Christian groups, including the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) and Liberty Counsel. In the U.S., both have been designated as anti-LGBTQ hate groups by the Southern Poverty Law Center. The international chapters of both organizations submitted pro-referendum legal opinions to Romania's Constitutional Court while the body assessed whether the civic initiative could be considered by parliament."

3 The actions of US-funded organizations trying to influence the social agenda in Romania are by no means limited to the support offered to the CpF. A recent investigation looked into how a growing number of US-funded *pregnancy crisis centers* (PCCs), many established by Evangelicals, are fueling the anti-choice movement in Romania (Strzyżyńska 2022). These PCCs offer support for women with unplanned pregnancies and are mistakenly taken for abortion clinics. The investigation states that "among 22 PCCs identified in Transylvania [a historical province of Romania], at least 14 were receiving funds from US charities" (Strzyżyńska 2022).

When analyzing the Coalition for the Family's post-referendum behavior, two levels of discussion might prove useful. At the level of the entire organization, one of the first moves of the CpF was to give up its website but to remain active on social media, while in the meantime dramatically cutting back on its TV appearances. A second, bolder approach was to announce plans to enter Romanian politics as a prospective pan-Christian conservative party, while blaming the mainstream political parties for failing to support the Coalition's plea at the referendum. The Coalition felt betrayed, and its leaders strongly blamed the mainstream political milieu.

Promoting the Civic Platform Together was the main new project begun by the Coalition after its referendum failure. Created in 2017, the Civic Platform Together, a platform consisting of over 500 NGOs and 130,000 supporting members, was promoted heavily only after the referendum, most probably because the CpF's name may have been associated with its recent failure. Not surprisingly, the president of the CpF, Mihai Gheorghiu, became president of Civic Platform Together, and the Platform remains central to its public presence today.

A more interesting development can be seen at the level of the organizations and NGOs gathered by the Civic Platform Together. A list once available online featured, besides several organizations from the Coalition for the Family, many new ones, overwhelmingly Orthodox rather than Evangelical. This hints at a possible identity change and a visible shift toward a more Orthodox stance. One striking feature of the new members is the lack of information concerning them. A brief analysis into the content that they share online suggests that they are very small organizations or associations. No details about their domains of activity are provided, besides the information suggested by their names. While these new members remain surrounded in mystery, more can definitely be said about the organizations and associations inherited from the ill-fated Coalition for the Family.

Most returned to their traditional themes (pro-life, anti- LGBTIQ+ and anti-vaccination) or added new additions to their old themes of interest, such as COVID 19-skepticism. Others displayed mimetic and opportunistic behaviors, shifting almost entirely from their traditional themes to new ones (overwhelmingly COVID 19-skepticism and anti-COVID 19 vaccination) when realizing that an anti-COVID 19 vaccination stance was a great opportunity to make themselves heard once again, given its more polarizing nature. However, more importantly, some began to display messages of support for the AUR, the new anti-system party founded in September 2019, some of whose founding

leaders came from the CpF's ranks, thus giving the Coalition for the Family one more chance to manifest its pan-Christian ambitions at the political level.

The AUR: A sudden success on the political scene

Bringing together radical religious conservatives, anti-vaccination activists, COVID-19 deniers, and hardcore nationalists, this new party, echoing Poland's populist and nationalist Law and Justice Party, secured a surprise result in Romania's 2020 parliamentary elections. It became the fourth-largest party in the country's parliament (with over 500,000 votes, over 9% of the total), with an agenda mirroring the Coalition for the Family's anti-gender and religious agenda, albeit with a more pronounced nationalist and pandemic-oriented twist.

With a savvy political campaign focused on social networks, combined with numerous meetings with the diaspora, echoing the ones used for marketing the CpF's initiative to amend the Constitution, the AUR secured 47 seats in the Romanian parliament out of a total of 466 and placed some of its leaders as senators and deputies. The AUR's president is currently George Simion, a self-declared admirer of the Hungarian leader Viktor Orbán but also a well-known unionist, supporting the unification of Romania with the Republic of Moldova. Other leaders include the journalist Claudiu Târziu, a member of the National Coordination Council of the Coalition for the Family at the time of the signature collection for the referendum, and the strategist Sorin Lavric, now a member of the Senate, who instantly became famous among the Romanian public after declaring that "no man seeks in a woman cleverness, depth or lucidity" and that "the Roma people are a *social plague*" (Adevărul 2020).

The party hails itself as "the only opposition party" in Romania having as its goal the unity of Romanians and featuring four main values: *family*, *nation* (and love of nation, defined as the community of all those who share a common language, culture, and history, whether or not they are within the borders of the Romanian state, and who live in harmony with other nations), *the Christian faith* (there is no direct reference to Orthodoxy, despite the accent placed on the importance of the BOR in building the nation), and *freedom* (defined as God's most precious gift to man). According to the AUR's Claudiu Târziu (4 Media 2022), "AUR is speaking to all Romanian citizens, regardless of ethnicity and denomination. It is not by chance that the AUR has two national vice-presidents of Roman Catholic denomination, Marius Lulea and Robert Alecu, as

well as leaders of local organizations and parliamentarians from all denominations and all minorities recognized in Romania.” While not missing a chance to boast of having members from denominations other than Orthodox (mainly Catholics), the AUR has retained a very special relationship with the BOR that can be traced back to long before its electoral success in 2020. That special relationship has included moments when AUR leaders campaigned with Orthodox priests at their side (sometimes in the courtyards of Orthodox churches in the diaspora), the promotion by the BOR of AUR leaders’ initiatives (e.g., books and civic projects), and, most importantly, a strong connection with some neo-Legionary Orthodox associations tolerated by the Romanian Orthodox Church.

Gradually, as the shock surrounding the exceptional election results for the AUR began to fade, the party’s descriptions both in the mainstream press and by political actors have shifted from being an *anti-system* party, which succeeded in securing the support of a Romanian diaspora disenchanted with the political milieu at home, to being a *far-right* party with similarities to the Iron Guard (the fascist party from the inter-war period) at the local level and the Polish PiS (Law and Justice) and the Hungarian Fidesz at the international level. The latter claims were supported by several articles documenting the strong support given to the AUR by several *neo-Legionary and Orthodox brotherhoods*, such as the Gogu Puiu Association, the Ion Gavrilă Ogoranu Foundation, and the Sfântul Mare Mucenic Gheorghe Orthodox Brotherhood, which organized youth camps and commemorations of important Iron Guard leaders, attended by high-profile members of the BOR’s clergy (e.g., Înalț Preasfințitul Teodosie, Archbishop of Tomis in southeastern Romania), along with AUR leaders such as Călin Georgescu.⁴ All of this was with the unofficial blessing of the Romanian Orthodox Church, although there was a firm public condemnation of the AUR by a BOR spokesperson (Bobei 2022): “Populist seizing of noble Christian–conservative themes xenophobically and philistinically detached from Europe’s spiritual context only undermines these fundamental themes, which is why the Church disavows any form of excess that arises around them.”

Is the AUR the party that the CpF would have wanted for itself but failed to create? A preliminary answer would be positive. If, in particular, doctrinal points of view are taken into account, both the AUR and the CpF can be (and

4 A fully documented investigation into this topic can be found in (Marincea 2022a and 2022b). Similar views are expressed in Grădinaru (2020), an interview with the historian Oliver Jens Schmitt.

have been) described as populist, nationalist, pro-life, pro-family, and anti-LGBTIQA+. The answer would still be yes if we recall that some CpF leaders (e.g., Claudiu Târziu) became leaders of the new party, so shifting to the AUR did not seem to be problematic, at least for some CpF members. Moreover, the AUR is the kind of new party, with a surprisingly large support and success, that the CpF would want for once more pushing its initiative to amend the Constitution.

But can the AUR offer a new chance for the Coalition for the Family's supporters to promote their conservative religious agenda? Although no research has been carried out on how many CpF supporters voted for the AUR in the last elections, we can safely assume that since some of the CpF leaders migrated to the AUR, some of their supporters followed. If so, these CpF supporters might get a chance to see their agendas promoted by the AUR, as two surveys on Romanians' voting intentions (INSCOP and AVANGARDE) in February 2022 placed the AUR in second position after the Social Democrats (Hotnews 2022s and 2022b). Nevertheless, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine and AUR's equivocal position on Russia and the invasion, the party descended to third place in the Romanian electorate's voting preferences and maintained that position throughout early 2023. This serves as evidence that in a country where numerous individuals believe that Russia is attempting to interfere in its internal affairs through media platforms, espousing such contentious views remains a risky business. Additionally more recently, the party has seen its stability and credibility affected by a scandal leading to several very public resignations, with critics pinpointing the blame at the party's leader, George Simion. Still, according to the most recent surveys of Romanian voting intentions at the future general elections in 2024 (CURS, INSCOP, INSOMAR), the prospects look again rosy for AUR, as two surveys (CURS and INSCOP) place AUR on the second place, in one case together with the Liberals, at 19%, and in other case alone on the second position with 20% (Hotnews 2023, Digi 24 2023), while the third (INSOMAR) sees AUR in poll position, with 27% (Evenimentul Zilei 2023).

While the failed attempt to change the Constitution and the sudden shift from being a very visible religiously oriented agenda setter to an organization now condemned to semi-obscurity will undoubtedly be seen as an end of the road by some, the merits of this attempt, as well as the Coalition for the Family's attempt to become new religious actors in Romania's public scene, should not be overlooked. The Coalition for the Family succeeded for the first time in the country's modern history in bringing under the same umbrella dozens of NGOs, foundations, associations, and federations fighting for similar causes,

thus being broadly representative and accommodating multiple specific agendas.

Moreover, the Coalition succeeded in securing support from otherwise competing denominations, and this was the first time when all the main religious denominations in Romania acted together for a common goal. It also secured the support not only of political parties (both right wing and left wing) but also of international organizations, and, more importantly, it secured substantial public support.

Moreover, the Coalition for the Family set the stage for the emergence of the AUR, introducing to the public debate themes that were later developed in the latter's political doctrine.⁵ From this perspective, the AUR can be seen as absorbing the lessons offered by the failure of the more religiously diverse and anti-LGBTIQA+ oriented Coalition for the Family and wisely adapting its otherwise strongly nationalist and pro-family agenda to better suit the new social and political context, dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic. While the Coalition for the Family challenged the assumed separation of church and state in present-day Romania by trying to amend the Constitution, the AUR now legitimizes, from the benches of Parliament, a discourse targeting gender, migration, and minorities, to a level that echoes more and more the radical anti-gender religious campaigns in Central European countries such as Poland and Hungary.

Setting the AUR aside, is there likely to be an opportunity for the Coalition for the Family to return to the public eye with a new initiative in the not-so-distant future? The answer is, depending on the aspects considered, both positive and negative. A short answer would be yes, if the Coalition for the Family were to continue to profess its mistrust in the capacity of modern science, mainly expressed in its anti-vaccination stances. Such an approach, enforced by the pandemic but professed even before it, would have a high likelihood of gathering supporters for its cause. On the negative side, the denominations and the political parties are unlikely to rally behind the Coalition for the Family

5 As noted by Mărgărit (2019), the Coalition for the Family's attempt also played an important role for the LGBTIQA+ community "by forcing the supportive groups to coagulate their energy, formulate pertinent and efficient strategies, and persuade other groups of the civil society, including academia, that indifference to the LGBTQ rights may be dangerous for the future of human rights and democracy."

one more time after its first failure.⁶ Finally, as some of its leaders have already migrated to the AUR, some of its supporters may have gone with them.

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6 Nevertheless, some of its ideas have taken on roots in the Romanian political scene: since November 2019, Romania has had a ministry devoted to families (the Ministry for Family, Youth, and Equal Opportunities), run by one of the most important figures in the PSD.

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