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# *Promoting Anti-EU Attitudes in the Romanian Digital Space*

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**Abstract:** *In Romania, the accession to the European Union was received with great enthusiasm, because it was seen as a good opportunity for the development and modernization of the country. Most Romanians supported and still support EU membership, and appreciate the EU's democratic values, economic benefits and freedom of movement. However, there is also a certain reluctance to certain measures coming from Brussels. Anti-EU attitudes are fuelled by a variety of factors, including consecutive economic crises, social crises, the Covid-19 crisis, concerns about national sovereignty and identity, and the perception of certain European policies as ineffective or unfair. Online platforms play a crucial role in shaping these perceptions, due to the simple and fast way in which information flows, the way it is presented and interpreted by the public, and the real feedback followers can provide. In this digital environment, almost anyone can become a content creator, whether amateur or professional, and that is why misinformation and fake news are quite common. This paper aims to identify the main digital channels through which anti-EU attitudes are promoted in Romania, analyse the content and strategies used in online anti-EU campaigns, describe the*

*profile of those who promote such messages and propose recommendations to reduce the promotion of anti-EU attitudes online and in general.*

**Keywords:** *anti-EU content, EU, Romania, George Simion, social-media, posts*

## **1. Introduction**

The public perception of the European Union varies considerably, both among the member states and within the population of each country, being influenced by economic and political factors, the media and certain personal experiences. In general, EU citizens share common EU values such as peace, stability and freedom of movement, but there are also certain concerns related to national sovereignty, European bureaucracy and the impact of population migration from Asia and Africa. Also, the successive economic crises, the pandemic crisis (Covid-19), the social crisis (immigration), followed by the geopolitical instability caused by the war in Ukraine, have provided the most favourable grounds for the development of anti-European trends. As a result, several nationalist parties have emerged across Europe, promoting populist, sovereignist and Eurosceptic narratives.

In Romania, this perception of an outside influence (from Brussels) on domestic politics, as well as concerns about the loss of national identity to a certain extent, have led to the rise of increasingly more anti-EU trends. As a result, parties with a conservative, anti-globalization and therefore anti-EU profile have been founded, such as the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) and S.O.S. Romania. Some of the main reasons for the decrease in enthusiasm among Romanians regarding the European Union are: the inefficient management of the economic crises by the ruling parties, the increasingly acute lack of qualified labour due to the social crisis, the high number of Romanians working abroad, the influx of migrants who have invaded the labour market, and the instability on the border with Ukraine, due to the war. All these reasons have provided fertile ground for the promotion of populist and anti-European messages.

Over the past decade, social media has become a ubiquitous component of the media landscape, radically transforming the way information is conceived, shared and consumed, as well as the way opinions are formed and expressed. This transformation has laid the foundation for a new communication paradigm, where social media plays a central role in shaping public discourse as well as individual and collective opinions. Social networks are certainly one of the main means of information and of shaping public opinion in the digital age. As they facilitate the very rapid dissemination of information and opinions, these online platforms have a major impact on how events, ideas and public figures are perceived.

"If, in the last century, the worldwide spread of opinion polls gave a voice to the silent crowd, nowadays the "new media" (online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, etc.) have exponentially amplified this voice. Unfortunately, the new media, by "filtering" information, can influence our opinions, attitudes and behaviour, without us realizing that a force is being exerted on us; more directly, they can manipulate us by controlling perception" (Chelcea, 2019).

Official data show that the population of Romania is 19.7 million in 2024, 54.8% of which live in urban areas, and respectively, 45.2% in rural areas. According to an analysis by DataReportal, there were 18.06 million internet users in our country in January 2024 (Redacția, 2024). This analysis also points to a percentage of 91.6% in terms of internet access. Of the 18.06 million users, 13.3 million are social media users (January 2024), which means 67.4% of the total population. However, it should be emphasised that these social media users may not be unique users. It is known that one can create countless accounts on social media, not only on different platforms, but also on the same platform. According to DataReportal, Facebook ranks first when it comes to preferred social media platforms in Romania (31.7%), followed by WhatsApp (24.7%), and Tik Tok (13.9%) (Redacția, 2024).

## 2. Research methods

A content analysis was performed to investigate anti-EU narratives on social media in Romania. More precisely, the content analysis was conducted between November 1, 2023 and April 30, 2024, and focused on George Simion's Facebook posts.

George Simion is the leader of the AUR party (Alliance for the Union of Romanians), and also a member of the Romanian Parliament (a deputy) from the same party. Prior to his career in politics, he was an active football supporter, being the co-founder of ultras groups such as "Honor et Patria" and "Uniți sub Tricolor" ("United under the Romanian Flag"). George Simion is also connected to the "Unionist Platform Action 2012" coalition, which campaigns for the unification of Romania and the Republic of Moldova. During the Covid-19 pandemic, George Simion stood out for promoting content against vaccination, against the vaccination certificate, against government restrictions, etc. Also, he has often stood out in the Romanian Parliament for his violent, anti-EU, anti-Western, sovereigntist and populist language.



Fig. 1. George Simion (Facebook)

The analysis grid focused on the following aspects:

- Concrete elements:
  - thematic content;
  - type of argumentation;
  - reactions (likes, shares, comments, etc.);
  
- Abstract elements:
  - amount of information (frequency of anti-EU content);
  - quality of information relative to the sender (the sender's positive or negative actions in society, as perceived by the receivers);
  
- Metacommunication:
  - social channel
  - sender's attitude
    - sender's presence on other communication channels than their own
  - sender's preference for a certain means of communication

### 3. Results

Table 1- Anti-EU posts on George Simion's Facebook page

Month	Number of posts	Most impactful post	Number of likes	Number of comments	Number of shares
November	2 posts	Video (live) "Who is lying to you, AUR or Ciolacu?"	27 K	20,1 K	10 K
December	6 posts	"Nein Schengen" Live from Charleroi airport	18 K	9385	2,3 K
January	5 posts	The bilateral security treaty signed by	13 K	2770	5,8 K

		Romania and Ukraine in Davos			
February	2 posts	"For our children, we have a duty not to kneel down either to the Empire in the East or to the new Soviet Union in Brussels." Excerpt from George Simion's speech at the presentation of AUR candidates in Timișoara	5,9 K	1303	2,1 K
March	9 posts	George Simion live on Facebook from the protest organised by AUR against Ursula von der Leyen and against the Romanian leaders, described as "slaves to the EU"	33 K	11354	11 K
April	2 posts	"We say NO to migrants in Romania, to LGBT education in schools, and to other topics imposed at European level"	6,3 K	1258	2,1 K

### Findings:

- Concrete elements:
  - thematic content: political, social and economic content
  - type of argumentation

- the most common type of argumentation is persuasion, with the sender relying on pathos in his messages, in an attempt to stir emotion in the receiver;

- pathemisation is also used as a discursive argumentation strategy;

- appeals to logos are also present, including both inductive and deductive reasoning;

- the use of signature speech elements, by applying the slogan-definition as an argument (along with the words: Romanians, for Romania, for the country, for Romanians, etc.);

- reactions: likes, shares and comments

-the posts received many likes and shares, as well as many mostly positive comments (supportive, congratulatory);

➤ Abstract elements:

- amount of information (frequency of anti-EU content)

- the communication flow was high; there was an average of 3-4 anti-EU posts per month;

- quality of information relative to the sender (the sender's positive or negative actions in society, as perceived by the receivers)

- through his actions in recent years (both positive and negative actions), George Simion has managed to consolidate his and AUR party's image and position in the Romanian political landscape;

➤ Metacommunication:

- social channel (Facebook platform)

- sender's attitude

- the attitude of the sender (George Simion) is positive when he refers to his country (Romania), to the Romanian citizens and traditions, to everything related to ancestral values, with the aim of building a strong connection with the receivers (e.g. his followers, his fans, the party), and of attracting as much political capital as possible (votes, new members, new sympathisers)

- the attitude of the sender (George Simion) is negative (e.g. violent, accusatory, discriminatory language) when he refers to both Romanian and foreign political opponents, to opponents in the mass media, to the measures he considers against the country and the Romanian people. This negative attitude also attracts political capital and notoriety

- sender's presence on other communication channels than their own

- George Simion is a highly publicised public figure, he participates in many radio and TV shows, as well as in the digital space, in online shows and podcasts, on platforms such as Facebook, Tik-Tok and Twitter

- sender's preference for a certain means of communication

- social media lives are George Simion's favourite means of communication

#### **4. Conclusions**

In conclusion, George Simion, the leader of the AUR party (Alliance for the Union of Romanians), is a very skilled politician, who, in recent years, has grown a lot in the polls, has accumulated a lot of political capital, both for himself and for his party, and is, at the moment, the engine of the party. The niche audience that he has managed to attract is built on former PRM (the Greater Romania Party) sympathizers, who are very receptive to the nationalist, populist, sovereignist and, of course, anti-globalisation, anti-Western and anti-EU rhetoric.

George Simion's strategy is to convey his opinions on as many media channels as possible, being very active online, on digital platforms such as blogs, social networks (Facebook, Tik Tok, LinkedIn, Twitter, etc.), mobile applications and podcasts. George Simion is a highly publicized figure, in general; he also appears in the mainstream media, on TV, on the radio and in newspapers, and hence, his supporters are of all ages and from all backgrounds.

This anti-EU, anti-Western, anti-globalisation rhetoric of his is highly appreciated by the receivers. George Simion identifies with the



receivers; he tells them he is just as dissatisfied as they are, and that he is fighting for the good of the Romanian people, and for the good the country in general, not only with the EU leaders, but also with the political leaders in our country, who are portrayed as vassals to those in Brussels. "Persuasion is more likely to succeed if you can establish some ideological similarities between yourself and the audience" (Newsom, D&Carrell, B, 2004).

According to the experts, opinions are temporary and unstable, but over time some of them may become attitudes, which are more stable, and then they become beliefs, which are the hardest to change. Indeed, this is a complex process that takes time and depends on several factors. The same is true about these anti-EU messages constantly promoted on all media channels, especially in the digital space. For some receivers, they turn from simple opinions into attitudes and then, into beliefs even. As explained by Newsom and Carrel (2004), "[w]hen we accumulate information and experiences, we form opinions. Some of these opinions tend to cluster, being particularly significant for a particular attitude. Then clusters of attitudes tend to cluster together, supporting a particular belief."

On the other hand, it is true that the European Union has also made a series of communication mistakes, in the sense that the information in the EU's promotion campaigns is generally rather rational; they rely a lot on "logos". Hence, for some of the recipients of EU messages, the final impression is that some measures are only being imposed on us from Brussels, and we are forced to adopt them, without anyone taking our opinion, rights and traditions into account. Such gaps in communication from the EU are immediately exploited by the promoters of anti-EU, anti-Western and anti-globalisation attitudes.

Today, the information about the European Union coming from the EU is no longer so visible to Romanians. An equally big fault lies with our governors, who, like their counterparts in Brussels, have remained rather practical in communication, and hence, the generations after

Romania's accession have no longer been as well informed about the EU values, about the benefits of being an EU citizen, etc.

In my opinion, due to such a defective communication strategy, both from Brussels and from Bucharest, all kinds of fake information (fake news), disinformation and conspiracy theories have emerged in the digital space, which have all had a negative impact on Romanians' perception of the European Union.

Following the conclusions presented above, a series of proposals can be made, which, in my opinion, can be seen as viable solutions to significantly improve the image and the perception of the European Union among Romanians. Implementing a new communication strategy could lead to combating Euroscepticism and reducing anti-EU attitudes, in general:

- more effective communication strategies are needed at EU level, which should include an appeal to emotion (pathos) among EU citizens, besides the appeal to reason (logos). This way, the EU leaders together with the MEPs and the rest of the apparatus in Brussels would be perceived as more humane, closer to the citizens, not just as officials who do not understand them and who do not identify with the community;
- these new communication strategies should be in line not only with the European values, but also with the values specific to each nation. Because we are all European citizens, we do have and support a set of common values; however, national values should also be considered;
- there is a need for a more effective EU promotion strategy at national level, which should be carried out jointly by Brussels and Bucharest, and which should take into account, as previously stated, both common European values and Romanian national values. Such a strategy could counter the anti-globalization rhetoric focused on the loss of national identity;
- at national level, more specific communication is needed about what it means to love one's country, traditions and ancestral

customs, or to be a patriot. There is nothing wrong with that and it has nothing to do with hatred of other nations, with discrimination of any kind, or with the common values we share at a European level - they should not be in contradiction;

- there is also a need for a greater awareness of the fake-news phenomenon and everything it encompasses. This can be achieved by presenting more accurate information about the EU in the mass media, and by imposing sanctions on the guilty, which the EU and some member countries have already started to;
- this information on the European Union should also be circulated in education institutions, so that the young generations learn about the values of the EU and thus, be proud to be both Romanian and European citizens.

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