

CONSPIRACY AND POPULIST NARRATIVES IN ROMANIAN-LANGUAGE CONTEXTS: ROMANIA AND THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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Abstract. *This paper investigates the discursive interconnections between conspiracy theories and populism in Romanian-language contexts, encompassing both right-wing and left-wing ideologies. Employing interdiscursive analysis, it explores how these narratives converge to shape and reinforce shared identity discourses from Romanian literary culture to Romanian language mainstream media. While the relationship between right-wing populism and conspiracy theories has been extensively documented, the interplay between left-wing populism and conspiratorial thinking in Romania and the Republic of Moldova remains understudied. This qualitative analysis builds on the concept of cultural populism to examine the long-term synchronisation of literary culture and media discourse, particularly in relation to national self-identification. This case study demonstrates how the dissemination of conspiracy theories and populist narratives in Romanian-speaking cultures perpetuates an ethnocentric collective identity, mainly through right-wing ideological tropes. By giving a glimpse into interdiscursive dynamics, the paper contributes to understanding the use value of literary culture in mainstream political discourse across Romanian-speaking societies.*

Keywords: *populism, conspiracism, culture, Romania, the Republic of Moldova.*

Rezumat: *Articolul examinează suprapunerea discursivă dintre teoriile conspirației și populismul de limbă română, atât de dreapta, cât și de stânga, oferind o analiză interdiscursivă a exprimării identitare normative. Modul în care populismul de dreapta folosește teoriile conspirației a fost adesea evidențiat în literatura de specialitate recentă, însă relația*

dintre populismul de stânga și gândirea conspirativă în România și Republica Moldova este insuficient cercetată. Analiza mea calitativă utilizează conceptul de populism cultural pentru a aborda procesul prin care discursivitatea publică, asociată politic retoricii de auto-identificare națională, sincronizează pe termen lung cultura literară cu discursul mediatic. Acest studiu de caz indică faptul că, în culturile de limbă română, tropii teoriilor conspirației și populismului memorializează o identitate colectivă etnocentrică, subîntinsă de retorica ideologiilor politice de dreapta.

INTRODUCTION

A comparative focus¹ places Romanian populism in the context of post-communist politics,² or discursive³ and cultural practices.⁴ Yet, the emphasis on Romanian-language populism, rather than on Romanian politics, is somewhat new in that it aims to give insight into the inner workings of populism as a means of political mobilization already embedded in literary cultures. Whereas right-wing populism is known to employ conspiracy theories,⁵ the attempt to bring together varieties of media populism and conspiracism in the Romanian language, rather than

¹ Sergiu Miscoiu, *Balkan Populisms: The Cases of Bulgaria and Romania*, in "Southeastern Europe", vol. 38, 2014, no. 1, pp. 1–24; Sergiu Gherghina, Jean-Benoit Pilet, *Do Populist Parties Support Referendums? A Comparative Analysis of Election Manifestos in Europe*, in "Electoral Studies", 2021, no. 74, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102419>.

² Paul Blokker, *Constitutional Politics and Populist Conservatism: The Contrasting Cases of Poland and Romania*, in "European Politics and Society", vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 1–18.

³ Ov Cristian Norocel, *Heteronormative Constructions of Romanianness: A Genealogy of Gendered Metaphors in Romanian Radical-Right Populism 2000–2009*, in "Debatte: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe", vol. 19, 2011, no. 1–2, pp. 453–70.

⁴ Radu Cinpoș, Ov Cristian Norocel, *Nostalgic Nationalism, Welfare Chauvinism, and Migration Anxieties in Central and Eastern Europe*, in Ov Cristian Norocel, Anders Hellström, Martin Bak Jørgensen (Eds.), *Nostalgia and Hope: Intersections between Politics of Culture, Welfare, and Migration in Europe*, IMISCOE Research Series, Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020, pp. 51–65, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-41694-2_4; Sorina Soare, Claudiu D. Tufis, *No Populism's Land? Religion and Gender in Romanian Politics*, in "Identities", 2021, pp. 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2021.1953784>; Maria Alina Asavei, *Radical Right Populist Entrepreneurs and the Use of Religious Representations through Popular Culture: George Becali as the 'Saviour of Romania'*, in "European Journal of Cultural Studies", vol. 25, 2022, no. 1 pp. 43–60.

⁵ Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*, London, Sage, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446270073>.

politics per se, suggests that the left can also rely on conspiracy-related messages. Building on the argument that conspiracy thinking is often formalized in mainstream Romanian discourses on religious faith⁶ or literary culture,⁷ the longstanding erasure of the left tradition in Romania⁸ reveals the extent to which conspiracism is baked into the very nature of both right and left-wing populism in Romanian-language contexts. The attempted erasure of left-wing political traditions is a key factor in how conspiracism and populism are contextually associated more with right-wing ideologies in both Romania and the Republic of Moldova (RM). Examining the dynamics of Romanian language conspiracism and populism reveals cultural practices stretching beyond party politics. This, in turn, facilitates insights that transcend existing research on the interconnection of conspiracy theorising and populism through low political trust⁹, emotive narratives¹⁰, distrust of elites¹¹, and the use of conspiracy theories to delegitimize opponents and rally support.¹²

In the RM, the distinction between left and right-wing ideologies is obscured by debates on national self-identification and pro-EU versus pro-Kremlin policies. Romanian populism, on the other hand, is influenced by ethno-nationalist narratives and a rejection of pluralism in the appraisal of history. The linguistic heritage and historical experiences of Romania and the RM shape the dynamics between their societies. Further reinforced by the Russian war in Ukraine, a shared cultural landscape that transcends borders reveals the prevalence of the

⁶ Giuseppe Tateo, *When Conspiracy Meets Faith: Making Sense of Tragic Events in Bucharest, Romania*, in Francesco Piraino, Marco Pasi, Egil Asprem (Eds.), *Religious Dimensions of Conspiracy Theories. Comparing and Connecting Old and New Trends*, London, Routledge, 2022, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003120940-13/conspiracy-meets-faith-giuseppe-tateo> (Accessed on 11.09.2023).

⁷ Onoriu Colăcel, *Romanian-language Conspiracy Narratives: Safeguarding the Nation and the People*, in "Journal of Romanian Studies", vol. 3, 2021, no. 2, pp. 81-110.

⁸ Anca Maria Mândru, 'Nationalism as a National Danger?' *Early Romanian Socialists and the Paradoxes of the National Question (1880–1914)*, in "Nationalities Papers", vol. 43, 2015, no. 2, p. 320.

⁹ Cengiz Erisen et al., *Psychological Correlates of Populist Attitudes*, in "Political Psychology", vol. 42, 2021, no. 1, pp. 149–71, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12768>.

¹⁰ Thorsten Wojczewski, *Conspiracy Theories, Right-Wing Populism and Foreign Policy: The Case of the Alternative for Germany*, in "Journal of International Relations and Development", vol. 25, 2022, no. 1, pp. 130–58.

¹¹ Jeffrey Friedman, *Populists as Technocrats*, in "Critical Review", vol. 31, 2019, no. 3–4, pp. 315–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08913811.2019.1788804>.

¹² Andrea LP Pirro, Paul Taggart, *Populists in Power and Conspiracy Theories*, in "Party Politics", vol. 29, 2023, no. 3, pp. 413–23.

Romanian language in both countries, underpinning a common literary tradition. However, while the Moldovan literary culture (for the most part literary, linguistic and historical studies) in the Romanian language is fundamentally derivative, it has increasingly developed distinct characteristics that reflect a standalone regional identity. The perception of a shared history is thus simultaneously reinforced and complicated by evolving Romanian and Moldovan identities that are invested in conspiracy and populist-related discourses leveraging on historical grievances. Lately, Romanian leftist voices have gained some popularity essentially by debunking conspiracy theories (CTs) pushed by right-wing populists. This is the mainstream understanding of populism in Romanian politics that “treats it as a *pathology* inherent to democratic transitions [...]. A second strategy treats populism rather as a *symptom*, that is, a marker for other democratic difficulties and complexity.”¹³ The purpose of this research is to investigate the interdiscursivity between populism and conspiracy theories in Romanian-language contexts, particularly in literary culture narratives and mainstream media. The study examines how these discourses shape representations of national identity and influence political action. The methods used involve analysing texts, news, and opinion pieces that discuss populism and CTs, as well as examining historical and literary narratives that contribute to these discourses. Additionally, the analysis considers the role of language in advancing self-awareness and agency in resisting historical neighbours and elites.

As “contemporary populisms [...] appear to be primarily focused – at least on the face of it – on questions of national sovereignty”,¹⁴ media reporting on and about national self-identification in Romanian-speaking countries is steeped in conspiratorial and populist narratives. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic waves of 2021 and early 2022, Romanian-language media discourses have essentially brought together left and right-wing populism in their use of CTs. Simultaneously, the populist rhetoric exposes the gap between the way they use conspiracy theorising against the backdrop of “a great deal of contemporary political debate [that] consists in attempts by conservatives to portray those on the Left as conspiracy theorists and efforts by those on the Left to refute the charge”.¹⁵

Populist rhetoric and conspiracy theorising intertwine to form a narrative

¹³ Michal Kopeček, Piotr Wciślik (Eds.), *Thinking Through Transition: Liberal Democracy, Authoritarian Pasts, and Intellectual History in East Central Europe After 1989*, Budapest, Central European University Press, 2015, p. 263.

¹⁴ Marie Moran, Jo Littler, *Cultural Populism in New Populist Times*, in “European Journal of Cultural Studies”, vol. 23, 2020, no. 6, p. 863.

¹⁵ David Coady, *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*, London, Routledge, 2019, p. 5.

logic manifest across many historical accounts, literary works, and media representations of Romanian distinctiveness. At its core, populism paints a stark conflict between the will of the Romanian people and a conspiring elite.

ROMANIAN-LANGUAGE CONSPIRACISM AND POPULISM: ACTORS AND MOVEMENTS

The ideational approach to populism¹⁶ shows that there is “a common, minimal core [of populism], seeing it as a political discourse that posits a cosmic struggle between a reified ‘will of the people’ and a conspiring elite. Populism [...] exists as part of a larger typology of discursive frameworks, including pluralism (in which people reject a Manichaeian outlook and see the good in their political opponents) and elitism (which inverts populism’s outlook by celebrating the virtues of the elite and the fallibility of the masses)”.¹⁷ As a “thin centred ideology”¹⁸, populism comes across through immediate political action and speech. Yet, key concepts can be used to analyse Romanian-language populism beyond actual party-political practice and more along the lines of cultures as identity structures.¹⁹ From a discursive perspective, they entail identity-making processes through the “appropriation of text-external generic resources across professional genres and professional practices”.²⁰ The Romanian language is invested with the power to safeguard not only identity but also political action. Essentially, it proposes that Romanian is “more than merely a bearer or vehicle: [...] the embodiment or substance of values, itself a form of symbolic meaning stand-

¹⁶ Cas Mudde, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Studying Populism in Comparative Perspective: Reflections on the Contemporary and Future Research Agenda*, “Comparative Political Studies”, vol. 51, 2018, no. 13, pp. 1667–93; Kirk A. Hawkins, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *The Ideational Approach to Populism: Concept, Theory, and Analysis*, New York, Routledge, 2018.

¹⁷ Kirk A. Hawkins, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *The Ideational Approach to Populism*, in “Latin American Research Review”, vol. 52, 2017, no. 4, p. 514.

¹⁸ Cas Mudde, *The Populist Zeitgeist*, in “Government and Opposition”, vol. 39, 2004, no. 4, p. 543.

¹⁹ Fritjof Capra, Pier Luigi Luisi, *The Systems View of Life: A Unifying Vision*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511895555>.

²⁰ Vijay K. Bhatia, *Interdiscursivity in Professional Communication*, in “Discourse & Communication”, vol. 4, 2010, no. 1, pp. 32–50, p. 35.

ing for all manner of desires, associations, beliefs, conscious and unconscious”.²¹ Ultimately, the Romanian language itself is deemed a people’s accomplishment that signals evidence of self-awareness and agency. Language is supposed to advance their will to resist historical neighbours and (foreign) elites.²² Against this backdrop, conspiracy theorising is very much bound up in narratives of identity that hinge on betrayal and fighting off enemies. Consequently, notions of agents and movements can delineate an influential storyline that blends the rhetoric of conspiracism and populism.

The conspiratorial dimension of populism is enhanced by the focus on driving forces and individuals taking active steps to frame the narrative representation of one’s (and other’s) community in history, literature, and media. Bourdieu’s concept of habitus defines agency as decision-making and action-taking that arise from “schemes enabling agents to generate an infinity of practices adapted to endlessly changing situations”.²³ The outcomes suggest “larger dynamics whereby shared narratives are produced and reproduced [...] touch[ing] on fundamental issues regarding collective identity”.²⁴ In Romanian-language contexts, they function as movements bringing together several driving forces across borders and narrative media. These circumstances classify competing actors either into manipulative (self-aware and self-serving) or unquestioning (naïve and eager) agents of Romanian-language populism that push CTs to help audiences make sense of the world they live in. The many grey zones between the two of them are easy to spot against the historical legacies of early nation-building that span modern Romanian history. Most of them come across as smoking guns of populist rhetoric underpinned by conspiracy theorising on and about the nation. The cultural studies perspective on identity-making addresses the (attempted) erasure of mainstream left-wing rhetoric in Romanian-language contexts. Left-wing populism often positions itself as a debunker of conspiracy theories, attempting to revive forgotten leftist traditions while emphasizing anti-capitalist sentiments and social justice issues. It promotes concepts of equality and welfare, centring its discourse on social and economic justice concerns. In

²¹ Patrick Joyce, *Dialect and the Making of Social Identity*, in Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, c. 1848–1914*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 279.

²² Onoriu Colăcel, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

²³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 16.

²⁴ Ann Rigney, *Literature and Cultural Memory*, in Ann Rigney, Kiene Brillenburg Wurth (Eds.), *Life of Texts: An Introduction to Literary Studies*, Amsterdam University Press, 2019, p. 382, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9789048551903.012>.

contrast, right-wing populism more frequently employs conspiracy theories, presenting a narrow, nationalist interpretation of history. It tends to be exclusionary and anti-pluralist, placing less emphasis on civic equality and welfare. Instead, right-wing populist rhetoric in Romania emphasizes nationalist themes, often incorporating religious elements and conspiratorial narratives. While both forms of populism share a critique of existing power structures, their approaches and core themes differ significantly. Left-wing populism generally adopts a more inclusive stance, advocating for broad social and economic reforms, whereas right-wing populism promotes a more exclusive vision of national identity, frequently intertwining this with conspiracy theories and traditional religious values. This is manifest in news and opinion pieces calling for populism on the left while debunking right-wing populism. The study sample is restricted to notions of correspondence between populist politics and conspiracy thinking in literary culture narratives (i.e., history and literature) and mainstream media. The primary sources were selected because they fulfil two criteria: importance and directness. The scope of sources used in this study may be inherently limited due to the constraints imposed by the academic journal format. The (perceived) prominence of primary sources was critical in assembling the corpus. Chosen sources inevitably reflect the selection process that, in turn, impacts findings and conclusions, ultimately influencing the analysis. This limitation also points to opportunities for future research to explore additional perspectives, particularly those outside the mainstream discourses of literary culture and popular media. Against a conspiracist background, “political strategies [that] interrelate populist rhetoric with memory issues”²⁵ are foundational for identity maintenance in the mainstream of Romanian life.

CONSPIRACIST AND POPULIST INTERDISCURSIVITY IN LITERARY CULTURE NARRATIVES

Literary culture is “a historically situated practice [revealing] how people have done things with texts”.²⁶ Narrative structures of historical and fictional writing become helpful when exploring notions of populist and conspiratorial rhetoric “by drawing on an understanding of narrative theory and narrative fic-

²⁵ Ionut Valentin Chiruta, *Using the Past in Populist Communicational Strategies: How the Memory of Securitate Is Instrumentalised in Romanian Politics?*, in “Populism”, vol. 3, 2020, no. 2, p. 223, <https://doi.org/10.1163/25888072-BJA10013>.

²⁶ Sheldon Pollock, *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003, p. 18.

tion in its historical and cultural context".²⁷ Ultimately, references to conspiracy-related and populist rhetoric are "coherent narratives that shape people's representations of history"²⁸. The interaction between such discursive practices is *interdiscursive*, to be found across various literary genres and media. They help reveal notions of authority, ulterior motives, and grand conflicts, which are commonly presented in influential instances of Romanian literary culture. Together, they paint a narrative landscape populated by essentially benevolent colonizers (for instance at the time of the Roman conquest of the Dacian kingdom) and clandestine organizations (like the freemasonry that facilitated the birth of the Romanian national state), not to mention malevolent close and distant historical neighbours (nearly all). Such culture-specific meanings enable the average Romanian with a public-school education to interpret or construct interdiscursive relationships, to reflect broader meaning-making practices that outline public understandings of being Romanian by leaning towards conspiracy theorising and/or populist conceptualizations of the past. Both are based on and reinterpret concepts akin to notions of scandal, moral outrage, anxiety, and scapegoating. Conspiracy narratives in Romanian-language media and cultures are in a dialectic relation with populist statements pertaining to Romanian distinctiveness.

Narratives of betrayal and enemy-fighting illustrate how populism and conspiracy theories intertwine, depicting an ages-old conflict between the people and a malevolent foreign elite. Interdiscursive markers outline mainstream public discourses, where conspiracy theorising and populist rhetoric intersect to achieve political mobilization, not limited to right-wing populism, but also manifest in left-wing politics as a reaction to and attempt to debunk the claims of the right. Both populist discourses draw on conspiracy theories, presenting the nation as under threat from plotting enemies, be they internal or external. Ultimately, recurring linguistic, rhetorical, or narrative elements serve as interdiscursive markers of conspiracy and populist-related significance. They are sense-making devices, enabling the construction and interpretation of complex socio-political realities through familiar narrative lenses. Such interdiscursivity is conducive to the conspiratorial sense of being that is captured by the rhetoric of national self-identification. The master narrative of the nation is

²⁷ Katharina Rennhak, *Learning from Best Practice. Reality, Truth, and the Novel as a Vehicle of the 'Liberal Narrative'*, in Antonius Weixler, Matei Chihaiia, Matías Martínez et al. (Eds.), *Postfaktisches Erzählen?: Post-Truth – Fake News – Narration*, Berlin – Boston, De Gruyter, 2021, p. 217. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110693065-012>.

²⁸ Jan-Willem van Prooijen, Karen M. Douglas, *Conspiracy Theories as Part of History: The Role of Societal Crisis Situations*, in "Memory Studies", vol. 10, 2017, no. 3, p. 323.

passed on in Romanian public schools as the study of history and language is deemed foundational for identity maintenance in 21st-century Romania. For instance, holding nationwide competitions in other disciplines (while History and Romanian language “school Olympiads” were cancelled in 2022) is deemed proof of “an anti-Romanian conspiracy planned by the government to force the youth into forgetting their national roots”.²⁹ Meant to back up key claims of distinctiveness for nation-building purposes, “primers came to contribute to the construction of national cultural identity”.³⁰ Literature and history textbooks foster national identity through conspiracy narratives, advancing national interests. However, Romanian schoolbooks fail to recognise their own use of conspiratorial rhetoric in constructing national self-images. This other instance of erasure conceals the use such meanings have in interdiscursive overlapping that frames ideas of nationhood as “different discourses ‘within’ a particular heterogeneous product”,³¹ often within literary culture narratives.

HISTORY

“Two centuries of Romanian populism”³² show that the rejection of pluralism has often accompanied modern state and culture building. As far as public opinion is concerned, the kind of nationalism traditionally promoted by Romanian history is univocal in its appraisal of the past. This reading of history is believed to be prevalent in public schools: “most Romanian historians are partial to the nationalist ideology”³³. The sequence of events leading to the current state of affairs is long. Recently, it ties with “the fall of communism [which] was followed

²⁹ “alarme de conspirație antiromânească: guvernul vrea să ne deznaționalizeze forțat tineretul”. Alexandrescu Raluca, *Școală, Naționalism, Isterie Și Niciun Vaccin* [School, Nationalism, Hysteria, and No Vaccine], in “Revista 22”. January 11, 2022, <https://revista22.ro/opinii/raluca-alexandrescu/scoala-nationalism-isterie-si-niciun-vaccin>.

All Romanian-language texts are translated by the author.

³⁰ Wendelin Sroka, Simona Szakacs-Behling, *Introduction: Reading Primers and Political Change in European Countries around 1945*, in “Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society”, vol. 11, 2019, no. 1, p. 6.

³¹ Martin Reisigl, Ruth Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination: Rhetorics of Racism and Antisemitism*, London, Routledge, 2005, p. 37.

³² Robert Adam, *Două veacuri de populism românesc* [Two centuries of Romanian Populism], București, Humanitas, 2018.

³³ Sabina Fati, “AUR: dosarul penal ca hârtie de turnesol pentru viitorul României” [AUR: the criminal case as a litmus test for Romania’s future], DW.COM, <https://www.dw.com/ro/aur-dosarul-penal-ca-h%C3%A2rtie-de-turnesol-pentru-viitorul-rom%C3%A2niei/a-60395769> (Accessed on 02.01.2023).

by a rebirth of ethno nationalism”.³⁴ Simultaneously, “Western media began to realize that the revolution ‘was not really a revolution’ (the popular uprising being hijacked by communist decision makers)”.³⁵ The challenges of recent history are plain to see in the concern with textbooks now in use across Romanian public schools. The misgivings of the past are central to media debates over the future of the country: “the [1989] Romanian Revolution is either briefly treated or entirely overlooked in history textbooks [...]. The reason has to do with historical controversy”.³⁶ While countering the plots of historical neighbours in order to observe, allegedly, the will of the Romanian people only, the local elites are portrayed as totally in tune with national aspirations. The history taught in public schools draws heavily on conceptual frames that promote a teleological purpose. Despite being less innovative than expected³⁷, the post-communist historiography increasingly contests the validity of this unidimensional framing of national identity.³⁸ Basically, it is embracing a more incidental perspective on history.³⁹ Con-

³⁴ Petre Breazu, Göran Eriksson, *Romaphobia in Romanian Press: The Lifting of Work Restrictions for Romanian Migrants in the European Union*, in “Discourse & Communication”, vol. 15, 2021, no. 2, p. 141.

³⁵ “mass-media occidentale au început să-și dea seama că revoluția «nu era chiar o revoluție» (peste manifestarea spontană a populației suprapunându-se o suită de acțiuni de cucerire a puterii de către linia a doua a Partidului Comunist)”. Anișoara Budici et al., *Istorie: Manual pentru clasa a XI-a* [History: Manual for 11th Grade], București, Sigma, 2006, p. 24.

³⁶ “subiectul Revoluției române este tratat pe scurt sau deloc în manualele de Istorie din România, [...]. Motivul? Controversele istorice legate încă de eveniment”. See *Ce învață copiii la ora de istorie despre Revoluția din 1989: În 9 manuale de clasa a IV-a există maximum două paragrafe dedicate subiectului – Analiză Europa Liberă* [What Children Learn in History Class about the 1989 Revolution: In 9th grade textbooks, there are at most two paragraphs dedicated to the subject - Analysis by Europa Liberă], <https://www.g4media.ro/ceata-copiii-la-ora-de-istorie-despre-revolutia-din-1989-in-9-manuale-de-clasa-a-iv-a-exista-maximum-doua-paragrafe-dedicate-subiectului-analiza-europa-libera.html> (Accessed on 09.06.2023).

³⁷ Cristina Petrescu, Dragos Petrescu, *Mastering vs. Coming to Terms with the Past: A Critical Analysis of Post-Communist Romanian Historiography*, in B. Trencsényi, P. Apor, Sorin Antohi (Eds.), *Narratives Unbound: Historical Studies in Post-Communist Eastern Europe*, pp. 311–408, Budapest, Central European University Press, 2007.

³⁸ Răzvan Pârâianu, *National Prejudices, Mass Media and History Textbooks: The Mitu Controversy*, in B. Trencsényi, D. Petrescu, C. Petrescu, C. Iordachi (Eds.), *Nation-Building and Contested Identities: Romanian and Hungarian Case Studies*, Budapest, Regio Books, 2001, pp. 93–117.

³⁹ Anamaria Dutceac Segesten, *Myth, Identity, and Conflict: A Comparative Analysis of Romanian and Serbian Textbooks*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2011.

spiracy theorising and the rhetoric of (right-wing) populism account for influential patterns of national remembrance that read history “in a mythological key with regard to Romanian language, origins and ancestry, continuity over the territory, and Christian Orthodox tradition”.⁴⁰ On the other hand, there is a so-called “European perspective on the past [that] becomes dependent on denying some of the tenets of classic historiography, which have already seeped into the popular culture”.⁴¹ The latter is at odds with the customary profiling of iconic historical figures (ancient kings, medieval princes and the German-born kings of modern Romania) in textbooks. Such heroes of the nation are portrayed in sweeping statements: “The Romanian political elite was working towards improving the political and social climate⁴²; the Romanian authorities were interested in overcoming the consequences of the war, in building a renewed sense of national unity and in resuming development across the country”.⁴³

Secret societies that sought to mobilize the people already had a history in both Wallachia and Moldova: members of the Wallachian elite conceivably pursued “conspiratorial purpose[s] involving links to Italian secret societies”,⁴⁴ while advocating for social critique on behalf of the lower classes. Most of the revolutionaries of 1848 are known for being “progressive boyar conspirators”.⁴⁵ Ultimately, “the fate of the Romanian people was tied to their ability to be skilled conspirators; the ultimate proof of success is pulling off the conspiracy that

⁴⁰ Radu Cinpoș, Ov Cristian Norocel, *Nostalgic Nationalism, Welfare Chauvinism, and Migration Anxieties in Central and Eastern Europe*, in Ov Cristian Norocel, Anders Hellström, Martin Bak Jørgensen (Eds.), *Nostalgia and Hope: Intersections between Politics of Culture, Welfare, and Migration in Europe*, Cham, Springer International Publishing, 2020, p. 59, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-41694-2_4.

⁴¹ Onoriu Colăcel, *A Bandwagon Effect Following the Lead of ‘New’ History in Romanian Textbooks*, in János M. Bak, Robert Maier (eds.), *Mutual Images – Textbook Representations of Historical Neighbours in the East of Europe*, Eckert. Dossiers 10, 2017, p. 66.

⁴² “Elita politică românească era preocupată de îmbunătățirea sistemului politic și progresul societății”. See Magda Stan et al., *Istorie. Manual pentru clasa a XI-a* [History: Manual for 11th Grade], București, Editura Niculescu ABC, 2006, p. 11.

⁴³ “Autoritățile românești erau interesate în lichidarea urmărilor războiului, în consolidarea unității naționale și în reluarea dezvoltării normale”. See Ioan Ciupercă et al., *Istorie: manual pentru clasa a XI-a* [History: Manual for 11th Grade], Corint, 2014, p. 35.

⁴⁴ Wendy Bracewell, Alex Drace-Francis, *Balkan Departures: Travel Writing from South-eastern Europe*, Berghahn Books, 2009, p. 53.

⁴⁵ Andrei Dan Sorescu, *National History as a History of Compacts: Jus Publicum Europaeum and Suzerainty in Romania in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, in “East Central Europe”, vol. 45, 2018, no. 1, p. 84, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763308-04501004>.

made possible the union of the Romanian principalities in 1859”.⁴⁶ Alexandru Ioan Cuza, the first prince of Romania (1859-1866), is often presented both as a likely populist responsible⁴⁷ for a coup d’état against the Parliament in 1864 – and the victim of a conspiracy that finally deposed him from the throne. He effectively clashed with the landed gentry on behalf of the people. In response, the former successfully conspired to replace him with the first German-born king of Romania, Carol I, although “Cuza [...] undertook economic and social reforms [...] more than 460000 peasant families gained land rights and personal freedom”.⁴⁸ The political agency of Cuza stems from progressive social policies that can be construed as left-wing.

The interwar period showed that the same issues, “agrarianism and rural transformation in Romania (1918-1947)”⁴⁹, continued to shape political debates. Conforming to the will of the people meant empowering farm labourers. This has always been an emancipatory movement that connected with populist politics: “The Romanian agrarian movement was preceded and influenced by populist ideas [...]. The first [...] was of a literary character—Sămănătorism (from sămănător, or sower)—at the end of the nineteenth century and in the first decade of the twentieth century.”⁵⁰

The national communism of socialist Romania is possibly the best-known example of stifling the voice of left-wing populism in the name of (ethno)nationalism: “Ceaușescu introduced major modifications into Marxist-Leninist theorising about the Nation under socialism and the possible place of national values within Romanian socialist society”.⁵¹ Even though Ceaușescu refrained from appealing to the people (as much as to the nation) and pointing fingers at corrupt elites, his national communism reflected interwar right-wing populism. He used

⁴⁶ Onoriu Colăcel, *Romanian-language Conspiracy Narratives...*, p. 108.

⁴⁷ Robert Adam, *Doua Veacuri de Populism Romanesc...*

⁴⁸ “Cuza [...] a inițiat reformele economice și sociale [...] erau împrăștiate peste 460000 de familii de țărani”. Brezeanu Stelian et al., *Istoria României* [The History of Romania]. Manual pentru clasa a XII-a [Manual for 12th Grade], București, Rao Educațional, 1999, p. 83.

⁴⁹ Daniel Charles Brett, *Peasants and Politics: Agrarianism and Rural Transformation in Romania 1918–1947*. (Unpublished PhD dissertation, University College London, 2014).

⁵⁰ Roumen Daskalov, *Agrarian Ideologies and Peasant Movements in the Balkans*, in Roumen Daskalov and Diana Mishkova (Eds.), *Entangled Histories of the Balkans*, Vol. Two, *Transfers of Political Ideologies and Institutions*, Leiden, Brill, 2014, p. 308.

⁵¹ Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu’s Romania*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995, p. 118.

populist and conspiratorial rhetoric to portray Romanians as historical victims before the communist takeover of Romania.

The overlap between left and right politics is plain to see in post-communist populism, which, essentially, reveals, “the shared identity representation [of the nation] once Al. I. Cuza set in motion educational reforms that entailed [...] teaching Romanian language and history in public schools”.⁵² With the Orthodox Church in the background, language as proof of identity is placed in various contexts: “numerous archaeological artefacts, the many Dacian martyrs as well as the Christian terminology of the Romanian language, all prove that the church life of the Romanian people has always been developed”.⁵³ By instrumentalizing CTs within a frame of reference that favours nativism, ethnic identity is positioned against Slavic and Finno-Ugric neighbours “the continuously expansionist tendency of their neighbours meant that the Romanian principalities had to resort to both effective diplomacy and bold military manoeuvres”.⁵⁴ The framing of 20th-century events commonly suggests the conspiratorial skills of decision-makers who furthered the Romanian cause. At the same time, it makes sure to pathologize conspiracy thinking. For example, in “a world full of anti-Romanian conspiracies”,⁵⁵ Romanian pupils are asked by history textbooks to answer such questions: “How come it is often more convenient to cry ‘conspiracy theory’ rather than admit your own mistakes?”⁵⁶ Ultimately, conspiracy theorising is deemed both detrimental and beneficial to Romanian nation-building processes.

⁵² “reprezentărilor identitare comune, [...] predarea limbii române și a istoriei naționale în școlile organizate odată cu reformele inițiate de Al. I. Cuza”. See Zoe Petre et al., *Istorie: ma-nual pentru clasa a XII-a* [History: Manual for 12th Grade], București, Corint, 2008, p. 9.

⁵³ “Dovezile arheologice numeroase, marele număr al martirilor dacoromani, precum și terminologia creștină din limba română probează existența unei vieți bisericești dezvoltate”. Alexandru Barnea et al., *Istorie. Manual pentru clasa a XI-a* [History. Manual for 11th Grade], București, Corint Educațional, 2014, p. 122.

⁵⁴ “Tendențele expansioniste manifestate de vecinii Țărilor Române s-au manifestat permanent, ceea ce a determinat o diplomatie eficientă îmbinată cu o luptă îndrăzneță din partea conducătorilor acestora.” Maria Mariana Gheorghe et al., *Istorie: manual pentru clasa a VIIIa* [History: Manual for 8th Grade], București, Litera, 2020, p. 57.

⁵⁵ Tom Gallagher, *Modern Romania: The End of Communism, the Failure of Democratic Reform, and the Theft of a Nation*, New York, NYU Press, 2008, p. 275.

⁵⁶ “Explicați cum se face că în multe împrejurări ale vieții este mai la îndemână să denunțăm «teoria conspirației» decât să ne recunoaștem propriile erori.” Alexandru Barnea et al., *Istorie. Manual pentru clasa a XI-a...*, p. 99.

LITERATURE

If history textbooks provide plenty of insight into conspiratorial settings and agents, literature has often dramatized such concerns. Although literary historians seldom engage head-on with the topic of conspiracy narratives, notions of “literary form and conspiracy culture”⁵⁷ are inescapably linked with both genre and national questions. They underlie the use that Romanian-language populists make of the conspiratorial rhetoric. Together with the genre of “spy novels in which lies issued by the state are dramatized”,⁵⁸ the conspiratorial stance of authors and narrative voices in other literary plots (i.e., historical novels) is unmistakable. Post-communism even brought about “a revival of celebrated myths (the evil conspiracy, the besieged fortress, the saviour), rather successfully used by Nicolae Ceaușescu as well”.⁵⁹ However, “Romanian fictions tend to propose high conspiracies”,⁶⁰ which are significantly different from the explicit historical underpinnings of the mainstream conspiratorial rhetoric. Even more than other literary discourses, the use value of Romanian national epics points to the way populists instrumentalize conspiracy theorising. “In contrast with the works of literature which are static, stable, closed entities, conspiracy theories can be conceived of [...] as latent invariants producing an open series of manifest variants in different genres and media”.⁶¹ This is the case with *The Ewe Lamb* (Mioritza), the Romanian folk ballad par excellence: the story of a conspiracy to kill an innocent shepherd. “Ballads like Mioritza (“The Ewe Lamb”) and Meșterul Manole (“Manole the Master Builder”), which in fact treat universal folk themes and motifs, have always been touchstones in debates over a Romanian identity, interpreted in the light of Romantic theories of passivity and pastoralism, or, respectively, creativity and sacrifice.”⁶² *The Ewe Lamb* can be read as one of the original conspir-

⁵⁷ Ben Carver et al., *Plots: Literary Form and Conspiracy Culture*, London, Routledge, 2021.

⁵⁸ Luc Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies*, Hoboken, John Wiley & Sons, 2014, p. 21.

⁵⁹ Eugen Negrici, *Iluziile literaturii române* [The Illusions of Romanian Literature], București, Cartea Românească, 2016, p. 7.

⁶⁰ Mihai Iovănel, *Teorii ale conspirației în literatura română postcomunistă* [Conspiracy Theories in Post-Communist Romanian Literature], in “Transilvania”, 2015, vol. 8, p. 63.

⁶¹ Todor Hristov, *Introduction*, in Ben Carver, Dana Craciun, Todor Hristov (Eds.), *Plots: Literary Form and Conspiracy Culture*, London, Routledge, 2021, p. 13.

⁶² Alex Drace-Francis, *Aleksandri, Vasile 1818-1890. Romanian poet, dramatist, folklorist, and politician*, in Christopher J. Murray (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Romantic Era, 1760-1850*, London, Routledge, 2013, p. 9.

acy narratives of Romanian language cultures as it spans across Romania and the present-day RM. Its many afterlives in Romanian-language cultures suggest it can reveal conspiracy theorising patterns in both countries.

The one that brought *The Ewe Lamb* to the Romanian reading public was Vasile Alecsandri (1818-1890), the national-minded Moldovan nobleman, whose Romantic writings can be linked with notions of “gender and populism in Romantic fiction [...] as the early exponents of what would later become systematized in the form of crowd psychology”.⁶³ The very currency of the folk ballad across the cultural spectrum of Romanian-speaking communities comes to prove once again that *The Ewe Lamb* functions as a latent invariant, resulting in countless media variants with “an extraordinary impact [...] on the Romanian psyche”.⁶⁴ The very importance attached to *The Ewe Lamb* is nearly conspiratorial. Explicitly, the willingness of the Moldovan victim to play along with the Wallachian and Transylvanian shepherds’ plot has prompted some to cry internalized racism and self-stereotyping: “tying a central piece of Romanian literary culture to some inherently negative traits (cowardice and laziness) does not travel far from racism”.⁶⁵

ACROSS BORDERS: ROMANIAN-LANGUAGE CONSPIRACISM

The empirical exploration of conspiracy theorising in mainstream media suggests that such narratives work together with conspiratorial tropes and trends in Romanian literary culture. Their cultural currency helps conspiratorial discourses cross the border into populist politics by lumping together anti-elitist and conspiratorial themes.⁶⁶ Ultimately, this shows the gap between right- and left-wing populism, with pandemic-related CTs in the background. The conceptual distinction between CTs and their use value in populist rhetoric ties in with

⁶³ James Patrick Carson, *Populism, Gender, and Sympathy in the Romantic Novel*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 17.

⁶⁴ Nicolae Babuts, ‘Miorița’: A Romanian Ballad in a Homeric Perspective, in “Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures”, vol. 54, 2000, no. 1, p. 3.

⁶⁵ Radu Silaghi-Dumitrescu, *Fatalism and Inaction Associations with the Romanian Ballad of the Little Ewe*, in “Venets: The Belogradchik Journal for Local History, Cultural Heritage and Folk Studies”, vol. 7, 2016, no. 3, p. 336, <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3091495>.

Mihnea Simion Stoica, *Populist Political Advertising in Times of Pandemic: Framing Elites as Anti-Religious*, in “Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies”, vol. 20, 2021, no. 60, pp. 115–27. □

known “differences between supposed ‘Left’ and ‘Right’ forms of populism [...], with the former preoccupied with plutocratic elites who are understood to have engineered extreme forms of social inequality in their favour, and the latter by ‘liberal’ and ‘expert’ elites who are positioned as undermining the prosperity of the national people through pro-migrant and other anti-nationalist policies”.⁶⁷

Left-wing populist rhetoric in both Romanian-speaking countries pertains to emancipatory projects commonly interwoven with nation-building processes carried out by Bucharest (in both Romania and the RM) and the Kremlin (in the RM). With national communist or Soviet nostalgia in the background, the notions of anti-capitalism, social justice and pacifism are known to local audiences as cornerstones of political populism with a left-wing agenda. To some extent, local left-wing populism aims to incorporate tropes of the right wing, mostly anti-corruption.⁶⁸ Conspiratorial ideas spoken in Romanian are at home in the so-called “two Moldovas, animated by divergent pro-West and pro-Russia fundamental options”.⁶⁹ They shape most populist ideas, with the left-right political divide mirroring popular (mis)conceptions about the clash between East and West. “Nationalist populism seems to be weakly developed”⁷⁰ and the defeat in the last elections of the former president Igor Dodon, “a Trumpian populist”,⁷¹ suggests that Moldovan voters are not keen on supporting populist, pro-Kremlin, politicians (any more). Most Moldovan political parties resort to populist rhetoric to mobilise support.⁷² Romanian language populism brings a twist to classic distinctions between political ideologies, with disinformation and propaganda in the background. Much like Ukrainian CTs, the framework of Moldovan conspiracy ideation in the media “draw[s] on inherited Soviet political culture and political technology imported

⁶⁷ Marie Moran, Jo Littler, *Cultural Populism in New Populist Times...* p. 864.

⁶⁸ Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, *Romania’s Italian-Style Anticorruption Populism*, in “Journal of Democracy”, 2018, no. 29(3), pp. 104–16. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0048>.

⁶⁹ Valentin Naumescu, *The ‘New Eastern Europe’: Between the Deepening Crisis of the European Union and the Growing Tensions with Russia*, in “Romanian Journal of Society and Politics”, vol. 11, 2016, no. 2, p. 86.

⁷⁰ Denis Cenuşa et al., *Right-wing populism in Associated countries: A Challenge for Democracy*, in “Policy Paper”, 2021, no. 24, Georgian Institute of Politics, p. 5.

⁷¹ Borzou Daragahi, *Defeat for ‘Trumpian’ Populist as Moldova Leader Loses Election*, in “The Independent”, November 16, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/moldova-election-result-trump-maia-sandu-b1723657.html>.

⁷² Kamil Całus, *The Unfinished State. 25 Years of Independent Moldova*, in “OSW Centre for Eastern Studies”, December 14, 2016, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-studies/2016-12-14/unfinished-state-25-years-independent-moldova>.

from Russia".⁷³ Conversely, the Romanian media (and literary culture) and English-language news are a counterpart to Russian influence.

Historically, the division between left and right on the political spectrum in the RM is very muddy. It has never actually worked throughout the 30 years of Moldovan independence. Instead, questions of national self-identification and geopolitical rivalries have shaped the political landscape, with heated debates on language and ethnic identity at the forefront of public consciousness. Broadly speaking, right-wing ideologies are associated with pro-EU parties that often advocate the re-union with Romania, while the left argues for pro-Kremlin policies and the place of the RM in the Russian World (Russkiy Mir). The Romanian-language culture of the RM has a complex dynamic with its origin point, Romanian culture. While fundamentally rooted in Romanian traditions, it has increasingly developed distinct regional characteristics that reflect a Moldovan identity and has created a nuanced interdiscursivity between Moldovan and Romanian contexts as well. However, analysing Romanian language Moldovan primary sources in isolation from the broader Romanian context is problematic.

Romanian populism itself has been consistently perceived as deficient in relation to other Western or Eastern European varieties. As a matter of fact, it used to be branded as populism "without teeth".⁷⁴ There is consensus that the newcomer in Romanian mainstream politics, the right-wing Populist Party, the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR), gained their seats in the Romanian parliament because of online political marketing, while the Romanian social democrats, often labelled populists and a self-proclaimed left-wing party, have long made use of it.⁷⁵ Among the forerunners of Romanian-language populism with a focus on left-wing ideologies, two refugees from the Tsarist Empire⁷⁶ – from the present-day RM, Constantin Stere (1865-1936), and Ukraine, Constantin Dobrogeanu Gherea (1855-1920) – rank prominently. Stere, who coined the name 'poporanism' (likely having in mind the Russian counterpart 'narodnik') was "one of the

⁷³ Taras Kuzio, *Soviet Conspiracy Theories and Political Culture in Ukraine: Understanding Viktor Yanukovich and the Party of Regions*, in "Communist and Post-Communist Studies", vol. 44, 2011, no. 3, p. 221, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2011.07.006>.

⁷⁴ Nicoleta Corbu et al., *Romania: Populist Ideology Without Teeth*, in Toril Aalberg, Frank Esser, Carsten Reinemann et al. (Eds.), *Populist Political Communication in Europe*, London, Routledge, 2017, pp. 326-338.

⁷⁵ Marius Grad, Claudiu Marian, *Explaining Change: The Online Political Marketing of the Romanian Social Democrats*, in "European Review", vol. 28, 2020, no. 5, pp. 778-92, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S106279872000023X>.

⁷⁶ Ghița Ionescu, *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics*, London, Macmillan, 1969, p. 101.

first theoreticians of agrarian populism that took by storm eastern and central Europe in the interwar".⁷⁷ Although familiar to most Romanians, 'poporanism', much like the Russian "narodnichestvo", and 'sămănătorism' is increasingly equated with the beginnings of left-wing populism in the Romanian language.⁷⁸ Both of them are a case in point of the political and aesthetic sense that the representation of the lower classes has always had in Romanian culture. Stere and Dobrogeanu Gherea come across as a tried standard for left-wing popular and nationalist fervour. Their lack of interest (to say the least) in conservative institutions (such as the Orthodox Church) and, importantly, their focus on literary aesthetics meant that left-wing populism was essentially marginalized to begin with. Often, the Romanian mainstream media paints the picture of real and imaginary plots essentially unfavourable to the political left, which is commonly associated with the pejoratively connoted term of 'communism': "the anti-communist propaganda over the last decades [...] attempts to portray the communists as fanatics of class struggle".⁷⁹

On the one hand, the right-wing variants of exclusionary populism are being pushed mostly by political actors. On the other hand, certain experts and journalists assign responsibility to and blame the political/economic elites for social violence against the people in ways that can be construed as inclusionary left-wing populism. The populist rhetoric essentially juxtaposes itself to host-ideologies⁸⁰ that should add to the popular appeal of political parties. In the mainstream of Romanian and Moldovan politics, "populists [...] are also necessarily anti-pluralist".⁸¹ "The vilifying of the left"⁸² resulted in rebuffs from left-leaning journalists. They argue for a more welfare-oriented state and state interventionism. Ques-

⁷⁷ Robert Adam, *Doua Veacuri de Populism ...* p. 64.

⁷⁸ Ghița Ionescu, *Populism: Its Meaning ...* p. 100.

⁷⁹ Ion Cristoiu, *Comuniștii erau și ei niște politicieni. Dovada: Nu-și țineau făgăduielile!* [The Communists Were Also Politicians. Proof: They Didn't Keep Their Promises!], in "Mediafax.ro", <https://www.mediafax.ro/editorialistii/ion-cristoiu-comunistii-erai-si-ei-niste-politicieni-dovada-nu-si-tineau-fagaduielile-20437693>. (Accessed 29 Sept. 2023).

⁸⁰ Kirk A. Hawkins, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *What the (Ideational) Study of Populism Can Teach Us, and What It Can't*, in "Swiss Political Science Review", vol. 23, 2017, no. 4, pp. 526–42, <https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12281>.

⁸¹ Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016, p. 85.

⁸² Costi Rogozanu, *Altfel despre AUR. Sau ce se întâmplă când explodează facturile, demonizezi ani în șir stânga și presari niște BOR tip vechi* [Different Perspectives on AUR. Or What Happens When Bills Explode, You Demonize Left for Years, and Sprinkle Some Old-Type Church], in "Libertatea", 8 februarie 2022, <https://www.libertatea.ro/opinii/altfel-despre-aur-sau-ce-se-intampla-cand-explodeaza-facturile-demonizezi-ani-in-sir-stanga-si-presari-niste-bor-de-tip-vechi-3965589>.

tions like “Why are the liberal left intellectuals trading on barefaced lies?”⁸³ generate responses showing the nationalist undertones of Romanian-language leftism, which regards the well-being of the nation as central to the welfare of individuals and social classes. Among the above-mentioned intellectuals, Costi Rogozanu, Vasile Ernu, Dragoș Pătraru or Mihai Radu are the most prominent voices that argue for progressive policies. Their media populism based on left-wing ideologies can be construed as “civic populism”⁸⁴, i.e., “the combination of the populist impetus of expanding representation (through the appeal to ‘the people’ against the elites) and higher participation of the left’s tradition to promote equality and social justice”.⁸⁵

The many strands of left-wing ideologies within the complexity of media discourses show the very weaknesses of the Romanian left as it struggles with the legacy of the past (mostly, Ceaușescu’s national communism). However, notions of people’s mobilization, solidarity, welfare, and inclusiveness are their main concerns. Most of the progressive left activists often engage with the so-called conspiracies of the Romanian political elites, who either self-identify as (centre-) right politicians or share the kind of anti-globalist opinions peculiar to far-right nationalists. Furthermore, the social democrats have repeatedly been labelled the “liberal-conservative left”⁸⁶ of Romania, a far cry from the socialist credentials they insistently claim for themselves by constantly failing to “tax big business”.⁸⁷ Pre-empting criticism of their historical background is of great concern to left-wing politicians as the denial of the left tradition has come with the

⁸³ Petre M. Iancu, *Iarna dictatorilor și tăcerea intelectualilor de stânga* [Winter of the Dictators and the Silence of the Left-Wing Intellectuals], in “Adevărul”, 21 februarie 2022, <https://adevarul/blogurile-adevarul/iarna-dictatorilor-si-tacerea-intelectualilor-de-2151050.html>.

⁸⁴ Sorin Ionița, *În numele poporului. Scurtă analiză a populismului, ieri și azi* [In the Name of the People. A Brief Analysis of Populism, Past and Present], in Alina Mungiu-Pippidi (ed.), *Doctrină politică: Concepte universale și realități românești* [Political Doctrines: Universal Concepts and Romanian Realities], Iași, Polirom, 1998, p. 206.

⁸⁵ Óscar García Agustín, *Left-Wing Populism: The Politics of the People*, Bingley, Emerald Group Publishing, 2020, p. 10.

⁸⁶ Alexis Vannier, *In Romania, the Liberal-Conservative Right Unseats the Liberal-Conservative Left*, in “The New Federalist”, 2020, <https://www.thenewfederalist.eu/in-romania-the-liberal-conservative-right-unseats-the-liberal-conservative> (Accessed on 07.09.2023).

⁸⁷ Radu Mihai, *Flacăra speranței și-un pipi-n grup* [The Flame of Hope and Urinating Together], in “Cațavencii.ro”, February 9, 2022. <https://www.catavencii.ro/flacara-sperantei-si-un-pipi-n-grup/> (Accessed on 14.11.2023).

territory of post-communist politics. The same concern for the well-being of the nation led to charges of leftist populism against whoever demanded “the rise of the minimum wage and capital taxation”.⁸⁸ Their answer is that decision-makers must face growing social inequality.

Imports from English language media have found their way into Romanian language news throughout the post-communist era and increasingly so today.⁸⁹ The translation and adaptation into Romanian effectively helped legitimate media discourses based on both right and, as a backlash, left-wing ideologies. “Distrust in the official history of textbooks”⁹⁰ is what drives forward the plot of right-wing populism, while most leftist political stands in the media draw on the conspiratorial elements of rightist politics; they are mentioned by the left-leaning commentariat to debunk the claims of the right. While at it, history textbooks are deemed proof of a conspiracy since the Romanian elites have allegedly used history against the people. The conspiracist rhetoric is shared by some of the left-leaning commentators who blame the spike in energy prices on “the short-sightedness of neoliberal governments and particularly the European Commission [...] that favoured private interests at odds with the greater good of society”.⁹¹ Somewhat paradoxically, journalists who acknowledge their leftist bias suggest that the European Union (EU) or the International Monetary Fund (IMF)

⁸⁸ Costi Rogozanu, *Cum au ajuns Renate Weber și George Simion la aceleași concluzii în lupta cu statul și de ce amândoi greșesc* [How Renate Weber and George Simion Reached the Same Conclusions in the Fight Against the State. Why They Both Are Wrong], in “Libertatea”, January 7, 2022. <https://www.libertatea.ro/opinii/cum-au-ajuns-renate-weber-si-george-simion-la-aceleasi-concluzii-in-lupta-cu-statul-si-de-ce-amandoi-gresesc-3915536> (Accessed on 28.10.2023).

⁸⁹ Răzvan Filip, *Cu ce se mai ocupă zilele astea liderii Coaliției pentru familie* [What the Leaders of the Coalition for the Family Are Occupying Themselves with These Days], in “PressOne”, 13 februarie 2022, <https://pressone.ro/cu-ce-se-mai-ocupa-zilele-astea-liderii-coalitieii-pentru-familie> (Accessed on 01.12.2023).

⁹⁰ Ioana Ene Dogioiu, *Butoiul cu pulbere. A fost dat semnalul pentru un filon subteran filolegionar?* [The Powder Keg. Has the Signal Been Given for an Underground Filolegionary Vein?], in “Spotmedia.ro”, February 3, 2022, <https://spotmedia.ro/stiri/opinii-si-analize/butoiul-cu-pulbere-a-fost-dat-semnalul-pentru-un-filon-subteran-filolegionar> (Accessed on 05.03.2024).

⁹¹ Andrei Mocearov, *Ideologia bate mintea. De ce prețurile la electricitate și gaz au crescut așa de mult?* [Ideology Trumps Reasoning. Why have Electricity and Gas Prices Increased so Much?], in “CriticAtac.ro”, 2021, <https://www.criticatac.ro/ideologia-bate-mintea-de-ce-preturile-la-electricitate-si-gaz-au-crescut-asa-de-mult/> (Accessed on 26.09.2023).

are conspiracies that have worked towards increasing social inequality in post-communist Romania.

CONCLUSIONS

As the national idea permeates the Romanian public sphere, the left-leaning commentariat strives to meet widespread nation-centric expectations. Commonly, they engage in a campaign for the re-conceptualization of the national rhetoric. As such, the local tropes of left-wing populism argue for 1) a break from the communist/soviet past and 2) emancipatory projects hindered by conservative power elites and rightist populism.

The interplay between conspiracy theorising and populism in the Romanian language spoken by the people of Romania and the RM is easy to spot, although a distinct Moldovan dynamic is manifest. The RM, while complex and significant within the broader Romanian-language conspiratorial populism, is largely following the lead of Romanian literary culture as the paradigm for Romanian nationalism. For instance, the reading of national identity in Romanian public-school textbooks is exclusionary and univocal, with a focus on countering the plots of historical neighbours and portraying the local elites as in tune with millennia-old national aspirations. The portrayal of national identity in Romanian-language Moldovan history textbooks is virtually identical: the very same literary culture provides examples of a populist rhetoric that operationalises conspiracy narratives to bolster Romanian mobilisation during historical upheavals. Essentially, such interdiscursivity patterns largely appropriate influential tropes circulated by mainstream Romanian narratives of self-identification, which are historically positioned as a counterweight to the Russian presence in the RM. The debate concerning Moldovan and/or Romanian national self-identification consistently underpins mainstream politics in the RM. The focus on the Romanian-language interdiscursivity between conspiracism and populism provides an incomplete picture, as it fails to adequately examine the role of the Russian language and culture in shaping Moldovan self-identification. The interplay between populist and conspiratorial rhetoric in the Russian language likely plays a significant role in this respect. Further research that considers the multilingual/cultural dynamics at play in the RM is needed. Ultimately, the Romanian-language interdiscursivity between conspiracism and populism provides a framework for the Romanian nation-(re-)building processes in the RM, even as the Moldovan context is shaped by its increasingly distinct historical experience caused by Russian rule.

Nevertheless, parallels likely stemming from shared Romanian literary culture persist: notably, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, both countries' mainstream political landscapes lacked robust left-wing populist narratives, despite the complaints from the left regarding the perceived and actual conspiratorial nature of right-wing populism. Consequently, denying left-wing populism in Romanian-language contexts aligns with minimising conspiracism, reinforcing a normative sense of national identity by linking conspiracy theorising mainly to right-wing ideologies.

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