Defining the Far Right in South-East Europe: A Comparative Study of Three Countries.
Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania

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Abstract. This study explores the Far Right in Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria through a comparative framework, analyzing its ideological foundations, mobilization strategies, and electoral trajectories. Utilizing a combination of Most Different Systems Design (MDSD), Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD), Comparative Area Studies (CAS), and historical institutionalism, the research examines how historical legacies, political institutions, and socio-economic conditions shape far-right movements and parties in Southeastern Europe. The study distinguishes radical and extreme right actors, highlighting their adaptability to different political landscapes. Key drivers of far-right success, including nationalist revivalism, economic discontent, and distrust in democratic governance – are assessed alongside variations in ideological narratives and electoral strategies. By contextualizing these national cases within broader European trends, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of far-right politics in post-communist and crisis-prone environments.

Keywords: Far-right politics, Populist radical right vs. extreme right, Nationalism and nativism, Authoritarianism and illiberalism, Comparative political analysis, post-communist transition, Historical institutionalism,

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Electoral volatility, Party system fragmentation, Southeastern Europe, Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Crisis-driven radicalization, European political systems, Democratic backsliding

Introduction

This study employs a comparative qualitative methodology, integrating historical institutionalism, electoral analysis, and political process tracing to examine far-right mobilization in Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria. The research design follows a focused comparison, enabling an in-depth exploration of the political, institutional, and socio-economic factors shaping far-right trajectories in these three countries.

The selection of cases follows a comparativist logic, drawing from multiple case selection strategies to ensure a robust analytical framework. The study applies a Most Different Systems Design (MDSD), as Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria differ historically, institutionally, and politically – Greece lacks a communist past, while Romania and Bulgaria experienced post-communist transitions. Despite these systemic divergences, all three cases exhibit strong far-right mobilization, allowing for an investigation of common explanatory variables, such as economic instability and austerity-induced discontent, nationalist revivalism and historical memory politics, and institutional weaknesses alongside public distrust in democratic governance. The objective is to identify structural and contextual factors that transcend systemic differences in shaping far-right mobilization.

Simultaneously, Romania and Bulgaria are analyzed using a Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD), as they share key characteristics, including post-communist transitions and legacies of one-party rule, economic restructuring and EU

integration, and the presence of large ethnic minority groups (Turks, Roma, Hungarians). Despite these similarities, their far-right trajectories have diverged, with Romania's far-right politics being more influenced by interwar fascist legacies (e.g., the Iron Guard), whereas Bulgaria's far-right mobilization has centered around ethno-nationalism and anti-Turkish sentiment. The objective in this case is to explain variation in far-right electoral success and ideological framing within comparable political and historical settings.

Given that all three cases are situated in Southeastern Europe, the study also adopts a Comparative Area Studies (CAS) framework, recognizing the regional specificity of far-right mobilization in post-authoritarian and post-communist contexts. Unlike in Western Europe – where the emergence of contemporary far-right parties during the 1980s and 1990s, often described as a "second wave," has been interpreted as a backlash to post-materialist value shifts and cultural liberalization that began in the 1970s (Inglehart, 1977; Betz, 1994) – far-right mobilization in Southeastern Europe has been more directly shaped by nationalist revivalism, historical revisionism, and disillusionment with the outcomes of post-communist transitions.[2] The objective here is to assess how regional political,

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[2] Scholars commonly distinguish between successive "waves" of far-right mobilization in postwar Europe. The *first wave* (1940s-1970s) consisted of marginal neo-fascist and nationalist parties that remained politically isolated due to the legacy of WWII. The *second wave*, beginning in the *1980s and 1990s*, marked the rise of electorally successful *populist radical right* parties such as the Front National in France and the FPÖ in Austria, often interpreted as a backlash to post-materialist cultural change and the crisis of mainstream party systems (Ignazi, 1992; Betz, 1994). A *third wave* in the 2000s saw the mainstreaming of far-right discourse and increased professionalization, while recent developments in the 2010s have led some to propose a *fourth wave*, characterized by illiberal governance, digital mobilization, and the blurring

economic, and historical factors shape far-right developments beyond national idiosyncrasies.

The study further draws on historical institutionalism to analyze how long-term historical trajectories shape contemporary political developments (Thelen, 1999; Pierson, 2004). The concept of *path dependence* is particularly salient in explaining the distinct forms of far-right mobilization in the region: Romania's far-right revivalism can be traced to interwar fascist traditions and the ideological imprint of national communism during the Ceaușescu era;[3] Bulgaria's nationalist radicalization is rooted in post-Ottoman ethno-political hierarchies and

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of boundaries between far-right and traditional conservative actors (Mudde, 2007; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

[3] In Romania, national communism emerged prominently under Nicolae Ceaușescu after 1965 and peaked during the 1970s-1980s. It represented a unique synthesis of Marxist-Leninist rule and nationalist mythology, strategically adopted to assert ideological independence from the Soviet Union and consolidate internal regime legitimacy. Ceaușescu distanced Romania from Moscow's influence, notably after the 1968 refusal to participate in the invasion of Czechoslovakia and constructed a distinct path to socialism rooted in Romanian historical identity. National communism served to replace class-based Marxism with a unifying ethno-nationalist vision that mobilized loyalty through myths of historical continuity and external threat. Key features included: the rehabilitation of pre-communist nationalist figures (such as Mihai Eminescu and Avram Iancu); the construction of a state cult around Ceaușescu as a "father of the nation"; and the heavy promotion of Dacian-Roman continuity theories to emphasize ethnic purity and historical sovereignty. The 1971 "July Theses" reintroduced ideological rigidity, national pride, and cultural censorship, reinforcing Ceaușescu's authoritarian control. The regime also reframed the Iron Guard's legacy – not through direct rehabilitation, but via selective memory politics that emphasized anti-Sovietism and Romanian exceptionalism. This ideological framework normalized nationalist tropes that would later resurface in post-1989 far-right discourse, including anti-Hungarian rhetoric in Transylvania, ethnocentric victimhood narratives, and the valorization of authoritarian leadership.

entrenched anti-minority sentiments;[4] while Greece's far-right evolution has been shaped by the legacies of military authoritarianism and recurring economic crises.[5] By highlighting how

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[4] In Bulgaria, far-right radicalization is deeply rooted in the long-term legacy of post-Ottoman nation-building and entrenched patterns of ethnic majoritarianism. Following independence in 1878, the Bulgarian state was constructed on the ideological foundations of Orthodox Christianity, linguistic unity, and ethnic homogeneity. These ethno-political frameworks were reinforced through both monarchical and later communist rule, shaping a political culture that marginalized minority groups – particularly Turks, Roma, and Pomaks. The communist regime under Todor Zhivkov continued these dynamics by implementing aggressive assimilationist campaigns, most notably the "Revival Process" (1984-1989), which involved forced name changes and the suppression of Turkish cultural identity. These policies institutionalized anti-minority sentiment and redefined Bulgarian national identity in exclusionary terms. The persistence of this ethno-nationalist framework in state narratives and education systems created fertile ground for the reemergence of far-right actors in the post-communist period, often framing minorities as threats to national cohesion and sovereignty.

[5] In Greece, the trajectory of far-right politics has been profoundly shaped by a layered legacy of authoritarianism and recurring national crises. While the military junta of 1967–1974 institutionalized a nationalist, anti-communist, and socially conservative framework, this was not an isolated episode. Earlier authoritarian regimes – most notably the Metaxas dictatorship (1936–1941) – established foundational tropes that continue to resonate in contemporary far-right discourse: glorification of the nation-state, cult of the leader, Orthodox traditionalism, and fear of internal enemies. The Metaxas regime, influenced by fascist models, promoted a vision of Greekness rooted in cultural purity and militarized unity, while suppressing political pluralism and leftist ideology. Post-civil war state formation (1949 onward) further entrenched a national identity built on anti-communism and loyalty to a centralized ethno-religious ideal. These ideological continuities were carried into the junta period and, despite democratization in 1974, elements persisted within key institutions such as the police, judiciary, and education system. These authoritarian residues reactivated during the post-2009 debt

institutional persistence and historical legacies condition the trajectories of far-right movements, this methodological lens underscores the importance of temporality in comparative analysis.

Additionally, the study situates Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria within the broader European context by aligning their far-right trajectories with wider transformations in European party systems. These include increasing electoral volatility and the erosion of traditional partisan alignments (Bartolini & Mair, 1990), as well as crisis-driven radicalization and the mainstreaming of far-right rhetoric (Mudde, 2007). By employing a cross-regional comparative design, the analysis links national and regional developments to broader European trends, positioning Southeastern Europe within the wider continuum of far-right party evolution across the continent.

The study relies on a triangulated analytical framework combining electoral performance analysis, institutional responses, and historical-political developments to offer a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of far-right dynamics. It investigates patterns of voter support, shifts in party competition, and evolving political alignments across cases. In parallel, it examines legal and institutional mechanisms used to regulate or suppress far-right actors, including party bans, judicial rulings, and the role of state and EU-level instruments. Special attention is paid to the strategies of mainstream political actors – whether they seek to co-opt, legitimize,

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crisis, as economic collapse and political delegitimation enabled the resurgence of far-right narratives emphasizing moral decline, national humiliation, and border insecurity. In this context, actors like Golden Dawn were able to capitalize on both contemporary grievances and long-standing ideological patterns rooted in Greece's authoritarian past.

or contain far-right forces – and the effects of these strategies on democratic institutions.

Methodologically, the study integrates Most Different Systems Design (MDSD), Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD), Comparative Area Studies (CAS), and Historical Institutionalism to capture both structural convergence and national particularities. This multidimensional framework allows for the identification of shared drivers – such as historical legacies, institutional persistence, and socio-economic discontent – while also tracing country-specific variations in far-right mobilization and resilience.

Ultimately, the research contributes to the theoretical and empirical understanding of how historical continuities, crisis conditions, and party system transformations interact to shape far-right trajectories in Southeastern Europe. It highlights how the region, often perceived as peripheral, is in fact integral to the evolving landscape of European far-right politics and offers critical insight into the complex interplay between legacy, structure, and agency in democratic backsliding.

1. *The Complexity of Defining the Far Right*

The term *far right* has gained significant traction in contemporary political and scholarly discourse, yet its conceptual boundaries remain contested and fluid, appearing regularly in public debates, media narratives, and scholarly literature. Despite its widespread use, the concept remains analytically ambiguous, and efforts to delineate its boundaries continue to challenge both scholars and practitioners. While there is broad agreement that the far right encompasses a heterogeneous spectrum of ideologies, parties, and movements situated at the outermost edge of the right-wing continuum, the category itself is

neither monolithic nor static. Rather, it includes a diverse array of actors whose ideological profiles and organizational forms evolve in response to shifting historical, economic, and social contexts (Minkenberg, 2013; Mudde, 2019).

The definitional challenge is well documented in political theory. As Cohen and Nagel (1934, p. 231) observed, definitions aim to extract the essential features of a concept; yet in the case of the far right, no universally accepted definition has been established. This difficulty arises from both ontological and epistemological complexities, as Grippo (2023) has recently emphasized. Far-right actors may operate within democratic institutions, engage in extra-institutional activism, or adopt an explicitly anti-democratic stance (Pirro & Castelli Gattinara, 2018). Such ideological and organizational fluidity complicates attempts to impose rigid categorical boundaries on far-right movements.

One of the most debated distinctions within the field is that between the *radical right* and the *extreme right.* Traditional typologies often struggle to accommodate the hybrid nature of far-right formations, many of which simultaneously participate in electoral politics while mobilizing against liberal democratic norms. According to Mudde (2007), the far right includes both the populist radical right – actors that formally accept democratic procedures while undermining liberal democratic values – and the extreme right, which categorically rejects democracy and often promotes authoritarian or neo-fascist principles. Nevertheless, even within these subcategories, significant conceptual ambiguities persist, reflecting deeper tensions within far-right scholarship.

This fragmentation is clearly illustrated in Kai Arzheimer's (2022) bibliometric analysis of far-right studies in Western Europe. His review identifies no fewer than 227 instances of the term "Radical Right," 171 of "Extreme Right," 88 of "Far
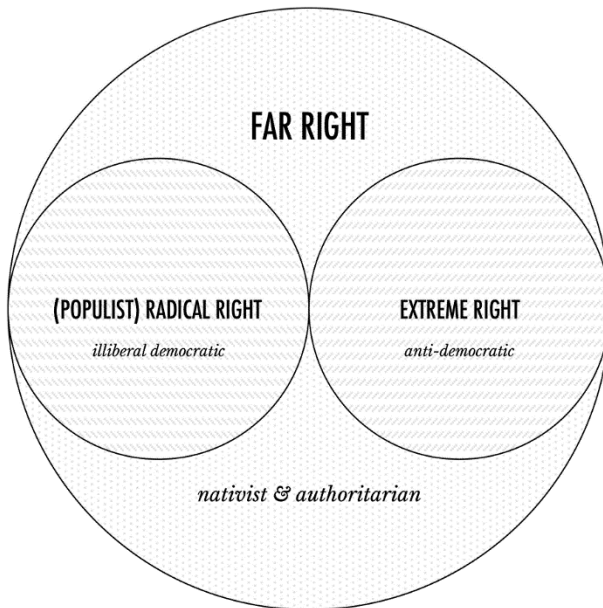
Right," 72 of "Right-Wing Extremism," 71 of "Right-Wing Populism," 54 of "Populist Radical Right," and 25 of "Radical Right-Wing Populism." This terminological proliferation not only reflects the diversity of far-right phenomena but also underscores the ongoing struggle to establish a coherent conceptual framework for their analysis. As Eatwell (2004) and Hainsworth (2008) point out, these terms are often used interchangeably – even within the same text – leading to further analytical vagueness.

The difficulty of defining the far right is compounded by the absence of agreed-upon ideological criteria. As Mudde (2007) notes, scholars often fall into a circular trap: attempting to identify ideological traits based on parties already assumed to be far right, rather than developing a set of pre-existing criteria to guide classification. Carter (2005) similarly critiques the term "far right" for its spatial vagueness, arguing that such designations should be grounded in substantive ideological analysis. Others, such as Charalambous (2015a) and Art (2011), advocate using the term as an umbrella for all actors situated to the right of mainstream conservatism, while still acknowledging its conceptual imprecision.

Despite the lack of terminological consensus, most scholars agree on a core set of ideological attributes. Mudde (2007, 2019) identifies nativism, authoritarianism, and populism as the foundational pillars of the contemporary far right. Nativism is defined as the belief that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group, with non-native people and ideas viewed as existential threats. Authoritarianism, in this context, denotes a strong preference for order, hierarchy, and punitive enforcement of social norms. Populism, as applied to the far right, frames society as a binary conflict between a virtuous and homogeneous people and a corrupt and detached elite.

Anne Quinchon-Chaudel expands this framework by identifying five core traits that recur – albeit in varying degrees – across far-right movements: (1) rejection of the principle of human equality, often articulated through racial, ethnic, or cultural hierarchies; (2) an essentialist and homogeneous conception of the national "people"; (3) a Manichean worldview that separates society into antagonistic camps of "us" and "them"; (4) advocacy for an authoritarian state led by a strong protector figure; and (5) dual protectionism, combining economic nationalism and cultural conservatism.

Visualisation of the 'far right' set, its constituent subsets, and their defining characteristics

FAR RIGHT

(POPULIST) RADICAL RIGHT

illiberal democratic

EXTREME RIGHT

anti-democratic

nativist & authoritarian

Source: Pirro (2023), p. 106

Pirro (2023) further enhances this analytical landscape by proposing a typological model that maps far-right actors along two axes: democratic versus anti-democratic orientation, and programmatic moderation versus ideological extremity. Within the broader 'far-right' set, he identifies two constituent subsets, the (populist) radical right and the extreme right – whose principal distinction lies in their stance toward democracy. The (populist) radical right, while rejecting the liberal-democratic order, remains formally committed to democratic competition and tends to operate within electoral systems. These actors qualify as "illiberal democratic," opposing pluralism and minority rights but not necessarily seeking to overthrow democratic structures. In contrast, the extreme right is categorically anti-democratic, aiming to dismantle constitutional norms and liberal institutions. Here, the political conflict between 'natives' and 'non-natives' is conceived not just as ideological, but existential, justifying the elevation of struggle beyond the political into outright antagonism. Drawing inspiration from the German Federal Constitutional Court's interpretation of the Basic Law, Pirro argues that this distinction travels well across systems and is vital for identifying those actors who participate in democratic politics to subvert it from within, versus those who reject it altogether.[6]

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[6] While Pirro's typology offers a valuable framework for distinguishing between the populist radical right and the extreme right, it is not without limitations. Its foundation in German constitutional jurisprudence raises questions of transferability beyond liberal-democratic contexts. In post-communist or hybrid regimes, the binary between illiberal-democratic and anti-democratic actors may obscure ideological fluidity and strategic ambiguity. Moreover, it is a descriptive tool that does not account for transformation over time. Finally, the role of populism – present in many but not all radical-right formations – deserves more explicit theorization within the typology.

The conceptual instability surrounding far-right classifications has consequences for comparative research. As Mudde (2007) emphasizes, the inconsistent and overlapping use of different labels undermines cumulative knowledge production. It is not uncommon for individual studies to employ multiple terms interchangeably, even when describing the same political actor. This "conceptual confusion" (Mudde, 2007, p. 23) limits the field's ability to establish generalizable findings.

Moreover, as Zulianello (2018) argues, the distinction between systemic and anti-system actors remains a crucial dimension for understanding far-right behavior. Anti-system parties are defined not merely by opposition to incumbents but by their rejection of the foundational values, norms, and institutional logics of democratic governance. Accordingly, while radical right parties may function within electoral systems, they challenge the liberal-democratic consensus from within; in contrast, the extreme right situates itself outside and often against the democratic polity entirely.

In the context of post-communist countries, definitional ambiguity becomes even more pronounced. As several scholars have noted (Minkenberg, 2002; Vachudova, 2020), far-right politics in Central and Southeastern Europe often emerge from distinct ideological genealogies, such as authoritarian nationalism, anti-communism, and ethno-populist state-building rather than Western Europe's post-materialist backlash. In

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Additionally, the typology is primarily descriptive rather than explanatory or predictive; it outlines where actors are located but does not address how or why they shift between categories over time. This is especially relevant in an era where mainstream parties may adopt far-right narratives, and far-right actors increasingly engage in normalization strategies. Finally, while Pirro distinguishes between populist and non-populist radical-right actors, the role of populism as a mediating or amplifying variable within the far right could benefit from deeper theoretical integration.

these settings, the boundaries between nationalist conservatism, authoritarian populism, and radical right extremism are frequently blurred, due to institutional discontinuities, weak party systems, and contested historical narratives. For example, actors espousing revisionist views of interwar fascism or rehabilitating communist-era ethno-nationalism may resist classification under conventional Western typologies. Moreover, the legacy of transitional justice and the weakness of liberal democratic norms in post-communist democracies often allow far-right actors to adopt ambiguous ideological positions, combining nominal democratic participation with authoritarian, exclusionary, or revisionist agendas. As a result, comparative typologies must remain sensitive to these regional specificities when analyzing the far right in post-authoritarian and post-totalitarian contexts.

Ultimately, the definitional enterprise surrounding the far right must be approached not as a search for rigid boundaries, but as a theoretically grounded and empirically responsive analytical undertaking. This is especially crucial in the study of post-communist and post-authoritarian contexts, where conventional taxonomies often fall short in capturing the ideological hybridity, institutional ambiguity, and historical legacies that shape far-right formations. Rather than impose universalist categories, this analysis adopts a flexible yet conceptually coherent framework that identifies the far right as a dynamic political constellation spanning from illiberal democratic to overtly anti-democratic actors. By foregrounding both typological clarity and contextual nuance, the subsequent examination of Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria aims to elucidate the ways in which far-right movements are shaped by, and in turn reshape, the political and institutional landscapes in which they operate.

2. *The Far Right in Southern Europe: Greece, Portugal, and Spain*

The far right in Southern Europe has followed a distinct trajectory compared to its counterparts in Western and Northern Europe. The legacy of authoritarian regimes in Spain under Franco, Portugal under Salazar, and the Greek military junta (1967-1974) initially impeded the development of far-right parties after the democratic transitions in the 1970s. Unlike in Western Europe, where far-right parties emerged as challengers to post-war liberal democracy, the collapse of right-wing authoritarianism in Southern Europe created an environment in which far-right movements struggled for legitimacy (Mudde, 2007; Mammone et al., 2012).

For many years, these countries lacked strong far-right movements, as mainstream conservative parties absorbed nationalist elements and authoritarian legacies remained discredited (Mammone, 2015; Mudde, 2007). However, economic crises, immigration, and growing Euroscepticism have provided fertile ground for the resurgence of far-right politics in the region (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2015). In Greece, the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn gained significant electoral support in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, capitalizing on anti-austerity sentiments and nationalist rhetoric before its eventual criminalization (Ellinas, 2013). More recently, Greek Solution and other nationalist movements have sought to rebrand far-right politics in the country (Lazaridis & Campani, 2016).

Similarly, Spain's far-right remained dormant for decades, with Francoist nostalgia confined to fringe movements (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019). However, the rise of Vox in the 2010s marked a shift, as the party positioned itself as a defender of national unity against Catalan separatism and illegal

immigration. Portugal, which had long resisted far-right elec-
toral breakthroughs, saw the emergence of Chega, a party
that blends nationalism with anti-elitist populism (Marchi,
2021). Unlike their Western European counterparts, which fo-
cus heavily on Islamophobia and cultural grievances, far-right
parties in Southern Europe often emphasize national sover-
eignty, historical revisionism, and opposition to left-wing polit-
ical forces (Mudde, 2019).

   These developments demonstrate that while the far right
in Southern Europe shares ideological similarities with move-
ments elsewhere, its historical and political context has shaped
unique trajectories. The interplay between authoritarian lega-
cies, economic instability, and regional political dynamics con-
tinues to influence how these parties evolve and position them-
selves within their respective political landscapes.

3. *The Far Right in Postcommunist Countries: Distinctive Characteristics*

Much of the academic discourse on the far right has tradition-
ally focused on Western Europe, where radical right-wing
movements emerged in response to post-war democratic con-
solidation, immigration, and European integration. However,
far-right movements in post-communist countries constitute a
distinct political phenomenon, shaped by the legacies of au-
thoritarian rule, economic transformations, and unresolved
ethno-national tensions. Unlike their Western counterparts,
these movements did not develop within stable democratic en-
vironments but rather in transitional societies, navigating the
institutional void left by the collapse of communism. The
unique interplay between historical revisionism, nation-

building processes, and economic disenchantment has profoundly influenced the evolution of the postcommunist far right.

Despite these contextual differences, there are notable ideological and strategic parallels between postcommunist and Western far-right movements. In both cases, these parties oppose globalization, supranational governance structures, and liberal democratic norms while promoting exclusionary nationalism (Bustikova, 2019). However, the postcommunist far right has been particularly shaped by historical grievances, positioning itself as the guardian of national identity against both external Western liberalism and domestic post-communist elites. Ralf Melzer and Sebastian Serafin (2013) highlight how these parties frequently engage in historical revisionism, seeking to rehabilitate authoritarian nationalist figures who predated communist rule while simultaneously demonizing leftist legacies.

Economic transformations following the fall of communism provided additional structural opportunities for the far right. The disruptive impact of neoliberal reforms, the privatization of state assets, and the emergence of social inequalities created widespread disillusionment with the transition to democracy. Far-right parties effectively capitalized on socio-economic grievances, presenting themselves as defenders of national sovereignty, economic protectionism, and social conservatism (Pirro, 2015). This socio-economic appeal differentiates postcommunist far-right movements from many of their Western European counterparts, where economic neoliberalism is often integrated into far-right platforms.

Another defining characteristic of the postcommunist far right is its deep entanglement with ethno-nationalism and state-building processes. Unlike in Western Europe, where far-right movements primarily construct anti-immigration and

anti-Islam narratives, postcommunist far-right actors often focus on territorial disputes, historical irredentism, and minority politics (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017). The Hungarian party Jobbik, for instance, has consistently mobilized irredentist rhetoric, advocating for the protection of ethnic Hungarian minorities in neighboring states. Similarly, far-right movements in Slovakia, Romania, and the Balkans instrumentalize ethnic divisions and nationalist grievances to consolidate support.

Additionally, religion plays a more prominent role in shaping far-right narratives in postcommunist states. Unlike the secularized far right in much of Western Europe, far-right movements in Eastern and Southeastern Europe frequently maintain alliances with nationalist religious institutions, particularly Orthodox and Catholic churches. This ideological fusion of Christian nationalism, anti-globalization, and anti-liberalism reinforces a civilizational discourse, wherein Western secularism is framed as a threat to national identity and moral values (Minkenberg, 2017). This divergence further differentiates Eastern European far-right parties from their Western counterparts, which often construct Islamophobic narratives rather than religiously inspired nationalism.

Far-right movements in post-communist countries also differ in their relations with the European Union (EU). While Western European far-right parties are largely Euroskeptic, opposing supranational integration and advocating for national sovereignty, post-communist far-right movements display a more ambivalent relationship with the EU. On one hand, they reject Brussels' liberal norms, multiculturalism, and economic policies; on the other, they instrumentalize EU membership to gain economic and political leverage (Vachudova, 2020). This strategic dual approach is particularly evident in Hungary and Poland, where ruling far-right parties leverage EU funding while simultaneously opposing EU governance on

issues such as judicial independence, migration, and minority rights.

Understanding the post-communist far right requires a comparative approach that situates these movements within broader patterns of democratic backsliding and populist radicalization. While Western European far-right parties have followed a trajectory of normalization and de-demonization, integrating into mainstream politics, the Eastern European far right remains deeply rooted in nationalist revisionism, ethnoreligious grievances, and anti-liberal political struggles. In Southern Europe, far-right movements such as Vox in Spain, Chega in Portugal, and Greek Solution in Greece engage in memory politics, emphasizing their authoritarian legacies in different ways. In contrast, far-right actors in Eastern Europe – Jobbik in Hungary, VMRO in Bulgaria, and AUR in Romania – mobilize nationalist narratives centered on historical revisionism and opposition to external influences.

As these movements continue to evolve, they challenge traditional political taxonomies that distinguish between radical and extreme right formations. The growing hybridization of radical and extreme right actors, their strategic adaptation to democratic constraints, and their increasing influence on mainstream conservative parties underscore the fluidity of contemporary far-right politics. A holistic analytical framework that considers both institutional and grassroots dimensions is necessary to fully grasp the complexity and adaptability of far-right movements in post-communist Europe.

I. Greece

In 2023, three far-right parties gained seats in the Greek Parliament, signaling a renewed presence of far-right ideologies in mainstream politics. However, this was not the first time

since 1974 that far-right groups entered Parliament. In 2012, Golden Dawn achieved significant electoral success, and before that, the Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS) secured parliamentary representation in the 2000s, even participating in a coalition government in 2011.

The fall of the military dictatorship (1967-1974) and the subsequent prosecution of its leaders initially marginalized far-right movements. During the transition to democracy, political power was reclaimed primarily by center-right forces (New Democracy) and the center-left (PASOK), which sought to reestablish democratic institutions and distance Greece from authoritarian legacies. As a result, far-right ideologies were pushed to the political fringes for several decades.

Nevertheless, while far-right influence in mainstream politics was limited after 1974, nationalist networks, authoritarian nostalgia, and fringe groups persisted in Greek society. These elements later found political expression in parties like LAOS and, more aggressively, in Golden Dawn, which capitalized on economic crises and social anxieties to gain electoral traction. The far-right's resurgence in 2023 reflects both a continuation of this trajectory and a new phase of radicalization, as multiple parties now compete for influence within this ideological space.

Immediately after the fall of the dictatorship, several minor far-right groups broke away from the conservative New Democracy (ND) party, advocating for more radical right-wing ideas and seeking to capitalize on the disillusionment of ultraconservatives and nostalgic supporters of the authoritarian regime. These groups emerged in reaction to the abolition of the monarchy and the perceived moderation of the traditional right under Konstantinos Karamanlis, who led Greece's democratic transition.

The first significant party of this period was Éthniki Parátaxis (National Alignment), which, while not contesting the 1974 elections, quickly positioned itself as a political vehicle for disaffected royalists and junta sympathizers. In the 1977 legislative elections, the party secured 350,000 votes, significantly weakening New Democracy by attracting former junta supporters and hardline monarchists. However, Karamanlis – followed by his successor, Georgios Rallis – pursued a strategy of gradual reintegration, absorbing members of National Alignment without adopting its ideological positions. This approach ultimately led to the party's decline by the early 1980s.

In the wake of National Alignment's dissolution, other radical right-wing formations attempted to gain political ground. Among them was the Progressive Party, which sought to unite ultraconservative factions rejecting New Democracy's dominance. However, it failed to secure a large enough electorate and remained politically marginal.

More significant, however, was the establishment of the National Political Union (EPEN) in 1984, a party founded under the direct influence of former dictator Georgios Papadopoulos. From his prison cell, Papadopoulos actively encouraged the creation of a political force explicitly nostalgic for the junta, advocating for the release of the imprisoned colonels. Although EPEN's parliamentary impact remained minimal, its role in ideologically structuring the Greek far-right was crucial. The party provided a platform for nationalist and authoritarian elements, fostering a radical political culture that would later influence even more extreme formations.

Notably, Golden Dawn, which would emerge as Greece's most notorious far-right organization, drew some of its early members from EPEN's youth wing, including its first secretary-general. Despite their ephemeral or limited electoral success, these early far-right parties established the ideological and

militant groundwork that enabled the reconfiguration and re-surgence of the Greek far-right in the following decades.

In the early 2000s, after nearly three decades without a far-right parliamentary presence, the rise of LAOS (Popular Orthodox Rally) marked a significant reconfiguration of the Greek political landscape. This shift was facilitated by New Democracy's strategic decision to abandon its longstanding approach of absorbing far-right elements within its ranks. Instead, the party pursued a clearer distinction between the center-right and the far-right, creating an ideological void that Giorgos Karatzaferis – a former New Democracy deputy expelled for his opposition to centrism and his radical rhetoric – swiftly exploited. In response, he founded LAOS, an ethno-populist and nationalist party, which represented what could be considered a third wave of right-wing extremism in Greece.

From its establishment in 2000, LAOS successfully attract ed a conservative electorate by promoting a platform that combined aggressive nationalism, centered on the principle of "national priority," with a hardline stance against immigration, globalization, and the influence of international finance. While presenting itself as a defender of national sovereignty, LAOS also maintained a degree of commitment to freemarket principles, allowing it to appeal to a diverse spectrum of voters. The party thus managed to mobilize both those nostalgic for a strong interventionist state and those drawn to a protectionist discourse that framed economic and political elites as adversaries.

Recognizing the central role of religion in Greek society, LAOS actively sought to strengthen its ties with the Orthodox Church, particularly by cultivating relationships with influential clergy, including Archbishop Christodoulos of Athens. This religious alignment reinforced its legitimacy among voters who prioritized traditional values.

This multi-pronged strategy proved highly effective. In the 2007 legislative elections, LAOS crossed the parliamentary threshold for the first time, securing 3.8% of the vote and ten seats. Its momentum continued in the 2009 elections, where it increased its share to 5.6% and won 15 seats. In the 2009 European elections, LAOS achieved its best historical result, garnering 7.15% of the vote, marking a pivotal moment in the far-right's institutional consolidation within the Greek political system.

However, despite its fluctuating rhetoric, which oscillated between a veneer of respectability and more radical positions, particularly on identity and immigration, LAOS gradually sought to moderate its discourse. This effort involved softening its stance on certain social issues, such as homosexuality and minority rights, while simultaneously attempting to distance itself from its past anti-Semitic rhetoric and historical revisionism.

As a result, LAOS positioned itself as an ideological crossroads, where different strands of the far-right converged – from nationalist populists to more radical elements, as well as figures from the conservative right who retained some degree of mainstream acceptability among voters. By filling the political void left by New Democracy, the party presented itself as both a protest vehicle and a structured alternative, offering disenchanted right-wing voters a platform for opposition without fully detaching from institutional politics.

LAOS's rise and consolidation not only reconfigured the Greek far-right landscape but also laid the groundwork for the emergence of even more radical formations, most notably Golden Dawn, which capitalized on the shifting political dynamics to establish an openly extremist presence in the years that followed.

The origins of Golden Dawn (GD) trace back to 1983, when Nikos Michaloliakos launched a national-socialist, pro-Nazi, xenophobic magazine under the same name. However, it was not until 1993 that GD was formally established as a political party, positioning itself as a defender of European civilization against perceived threats such as Marxism, liberalism, and egalitarianism.

Michaloliakos, who had been imprisoned in the late 1970s for far-right extremist activity, was later appointed by former dictator Georgios Papadopoulos as the leader of the youth wing of EPEN, a party founded by the imprisoned junta leader. However, in 1983, he distanced himself from EPEN and launched Golden Dawn, initially as a fringe neo-Nazi group with an emphasis on militant nationalism.

During its early years, GD remained marginal and politically insignificant, focusing on foreign policy issues. It actively supported Serbian nationalist forces in the Balkans and maintained ties with Greek ultranationalist volunteers who fought alongside Bosnian Serbs during the Yugoslav Wars. It also took strong positions on the Macedonia name dispute, using it as a rallying point for nationalist mobilization.

From the early 2000s, GD increasingly shifted its focus to domestic issues, particularly immigration, security, and ethnic nationalism. While initially lacking electoral influence, the 2009 economic crisis and subsequent social unrest provided fertile ground for its expansion. With Athens experiencing significant waves of immigration and deteriorating living conditions, GD capitalized on local fears by promoting an anti-immigration and pro-security agenda. It embedded itself within specific neighborhoods, organizing "Greeks-only" food distributions and presenting itself as a protector of native residents. This strategic repositioning allowed GD to build local strongholds and expand its influence, ultimately culminating in its

national breakthrough in 2012, when it entered Parliament with 6.97% of the vote.

The 2008 economic crisis and the subsequent austerity measures imposed by the IMF, the European Commission, and the ECB led to wage cuts, rising unemployment, and increasing crime rates, creating a climate of social unrest and deep political disillusionment. Against this backdrop, Golden Dawn (GD) gained visibility in the public debate, capitalizing on widespread distrust of traditional parties, which were perceived as corrupt, ineffective, and incapable of protecting Greek citizens from the crisis and its consequences.

Golden Dawn portrayed itself as a force of order, discipline, and national resistance, exploiting public frustration by scapegoating immigrants, whom it blamed for rising crime rates and job losses. However, its strategy extended beyond rhetoric. Unlike conventional far-right parties, GD fused electoral politics with street-level intimidation, deploying paramilitary-style squads that targeted immigrants, left-wing activists, and political opponents. These violent tactics reinforced its image as a militant nationalist movement, appealing to individuals who sought a more radical alternative to the mainstream political system.

This approach echoed historical precedents seen in Nazi Germany during the rise of the National Socialist movement. Much like the Sturmabteilung (SA) – the Nazi Brownshirts who operated as a street-fighting force to intimidate opponents and enforce party ideology – Golden Dawn cultivated a culture of paramilitary violence, conducting organized attacks on political dissidents, migrants, and activists. Additionally, just as the SA and early SS gained support by embedding themselves within disenfranchised communities, Golden Dawn followed a similar pattern in Greece, targeting working-class districts,

presenting itself as the sole defender of the nation against perceived threats.

Beyond its anti-immigration discourse, GD embedded itself in local communities, particularly in working-class districts of Athens, where the effects of the crisis were most severe. The party organized "Greeks-only" food distributions, patrolled neighborhoods under the pretense of providing security, and presented itself as a provider of basic services in areas where the state was perceived to be absent. This hyper-local strategy allowed GD to build strongholds in specific neighborhoods, particularly in Athens, Piraeus, and Thessaloniki, before expanding its influence to the national stage.

Despite its extremist origins, Golden Dawn skillfully leveraged media attention – whether through controversial statements, provocative actions, or its confrontational stance against political elites – to reinforce its anti-establishment narrative. Even when criticized, the party used media exposure to its advantage, positioning itself as the only force willing to challenge the political status quo.

By blending electoral politics, local activism, and street militancy, Golden Dawn transitioned from a fringe neo-Nazi movement to a parliamentary force. This strategy culminated in its historic 2012 election breakthrough, when it entered Parliament with 6.97% of the vote and secured 18 seats. The party's success not only reconfigured the Greek far-right landscape but also signaled a broader shift in European politics, where radical right-wing forces increasingly adopted hybrid strategies of electoral legitimacy and extra-institutional activism to expand their influence.

The vote for Golden Dawn (GD) in Greece can be understood through a dual protest dynamic, where a visceral rejection of traditional parties, seen as the guarantors of a stagnant and corrupt political system, was combined with a fierce

opposition to austerity policies imposed by the memorandum agreements with the "troika" (IMF, European Commission, and ECB). These agreements, in the eyes of many voters, symbolized a humiliating submission to the demands of international financial institutions, reinforcing nationalist resentment and a desire to reclaim national sovereignty.

This popular anger was not confined to the far-right electorate but spread across the entire Greek political spectrum, leading to a deep divide within the electorate. On one side were those who, despite their criticism of austerity, accepted the necessity of maintaining government stability to carry out the required reforms. On the other were Golden Dawn voters, who rejected both austerity and the very legitimacy of any government formed by established parties. This sentiment reflected a radicalized mistrust of political elites and a desire to break completely from the existing system.

Motives of *Golden Dawn* voters and the entire electorate   Table 4

Motives	Golden Dawn voters	Entire electorate
Desire for a one-party government	8 %	39 %
Desire for a coalition government	14 %	35 %
Desire for a strong opposition	38 %	11 %
Desire to punish mainstream parties	40 %	14 %
Controversies involving the Memorandum	71 %	53 %
Controversies involving the €	47 %	29 %

Source: Exit poll, Metron Analysis.

The sociological profile of Golden Dawn's electorate in 2012 reflects a complex interplay of economic insecurity, political disillusionment, and nationalist sentiment, marking a profound departure from traditional far-right voting patterns in Greece. While the party's ideology was deeply rooted in authoritarian nationalism and xenophobia, its ability to attract a

broad and diverse voter base speaks to its success in capitalizing on systemic crises and reconfiguring political allegiances beyond ideological extremism.

A key characteristic of Golden Dawn's support was its overwhelmingly male electorate, with men accounting for more than three-quarters of its voters. This gender imbalance is consistent with broader far-right voting trends across Europe, where men are significantly more inclined to support nationalist and authoritarian movements. Economic precariousness and perceived threats to social status played a pivotal role in this dynamic, as many male voters, particularly from working-class backgrounds, were drawn to Golden Dawn's hyper-masculine image, its emphasis on law and order, and its promise to restore national sovereignty. In many ways, this mirrored the role of paramilitary organizations in interwar Europe, where mass male political mobilization under far-right movements was fueled by anxieties over economic displacement and national decline. The party's violent street activism, militarized aesthetics, and claims to be a vanguard force reclaiming Greece from both internal and external enemies reinforced its appeal among men who felt abandoned by the political establishment.

The party's strength among younger voters, particularly those aged 35 to 44, further underscores how Golden Dawn positioned itself as a revolutionary alternative to mainstream politics. Unlike older generations, who often retained party loyalties to New Democracy or PASOK despite frustrations, younger voters had come of age during a period of deepening economic instability, witnessing firsthand the collapse of Greece's post-dictatorship political order. For many, Golden Dawn represented a complete rupture with the status quo, a party that not only rejected the economic and political establishment but actively sought to overthrow it. While radical left

movements also sought to mobilize these disaffected voters, Golden Dawn's combination of nationalist populism, antiausterity rhetoric, and direct community engagement allowed it to attract a segment of the population that felt equally alienated from the far-left's globalist discourse.

Education levels among Golden Dawn's electorate further complicate traditional assumptions about far-right voting behavior. Unlike in many Western European countries, where far-right parties tend to attract disproportionately lower-educated voters, Golden Dawn's electorate was largely composed of individuals with intermediate levels of education, particularly those holding high school diplomas or vocational training. This reflects the phenomenon of "status anxiety" – where individuals who are neither among the most economically disadvantaged nor fully integrated into elite professional spheres experience a profound fear of downward mobility. These voters, often self-employed, small business owners, or lower-tier public sector employees, found themselves particularly vulnerable in the aftermath of the economic crisis, caught between economic precarity and a deepening resentment toward globalization, immigration, and political corruption. The party's messaging, which fused economic protectionism, nationalist rhetoric, and a promise to restore order, resonated deeply with this demographic, offering both a sense of political agency and a vision of national rejuvenation.

Beyond socio-economic factors, Golden Dawn's direct engagement with local communities played a crucial role in expanding its influence beyond traditional far-right circles. Unlike previous far-right movements in Greece, which largely remained confined to ideological fringes, Golden Dawn embedded itself within working-class neighborhoods, organizing food distributions exclusively for Greeks, patrolling areas where crime was a major concern, and presenting itself as an

alternative to the failing state. This strategy bore strong histor-ical echoes of the social programs implemented by fascist movements in interwar Europe, where the provision of social services was used as both a recruitment tool and a means of legitimizing the movement among the population. By position-ing itself not merely as a protest party but as an organization actively protecting Greek citizens, Golden Dawn gained a foot-hold among disaffected communities that had lost faith in the ability of the state to provide for them.

However, what truly set Golden Dawn apart from other Greek far-right movements was its fusion of electoral politics with paramilitary violence, a tactic that had historically been employed by fascist and ultra-nationalist movements during moments of systemic crisis. Much like the Sturmabteilung (SA) in Weimar Germany, Golden Dawn's violent street presence was not an incidental aspect of its political strategy but a core component of its appeal. The party's militant wing actively en-gaged in coordinated attacks on immigrants, leftist activists, and political opponents, reinforcing its image as a movement willing to take direct action where the state had supposedly failed. This element of street-level intimidation, combined with its parliamentary presence, allowed GD to function both as a political party and as a semi-paramilitary organization, blend-ing the realms of legality and extra-institutional power in a way that few other European far-right movements have done in re-cent decades.

Demographic characteristics of *Golden Dawn* voters Table 5

Demograhics	% of total Golden Dawn voters	% of entire sample
GENDER		
Men	76	58
Women	24	42
AGE GROUP		
18–24	15	8
25–34	25	16
35–44	24	19
45–54	18	21
55–64	11	16
65+	7	20
EDUCATION		
Lower	15	21
Intermediate	58	46
Higher	27	33
OCCUPATION		
Employer /Independent Contractor	18	14
Farmers	7	6
Public Servants	14	12
White-Collar Workers	22	21
Unemployed	16	11
Students	7	5
Pensioners	9	23
Housewives	4	7

Source: Exit poll, June 2012, Metron Analysis.

Golden Dawn's electoral rise, therefore, was not simply the product of a crisis-driven far-right resurgence but rather a deliberate recalibration of nationalist politics in Greece, one that built upon historical precedents while adapting to contemporary social and economic conditions. The party's ability to expand its base beyond ideological extremists, incorporate anti-austerity grievances into its platform, and construct an alternative infrastructure of social services and paramilitary violence

marked a significant transformation of the Greek far-right. In this sense, Golden Dawn was not just another far-right party but a movement that actively sought to reshape the political order, drawing on both historical fascist strategies and the unique socio-political vulnerabilities of the Greek crisis. Its rise underscored not only the fragility of post-crisis democratic institutions but also the potential for radical political movements to thrive when mainstream parties fail to address the structural anxieties of their citizens.

Amplified by increasing media exposure and capitalizing on public disillusionment, Golden Dawn rapidly expanded its support base by drawing voters from mainstream center-right formations and the collapsing LAOS party. What had once been a fringe movement – garnering only 0.29% of the vote in 2009 – transformed into a formidable political force, achieving 6.92% in the 2012 parliamentary elections and securing 18 seats in the Hellenic Parliament. This marked a watershed moment in post-dictatorial Greek politics, signaling the institutional entry of an avowedly neo-Nazi organization.

By 2015, Golden Dawn had risen to become the third-largest political party in the country. Yet its parliamentary presence did not temper its militant character. The party remained closely linked to street-level violence, particularly directed against migrants, left-wing activists, and other perceived enemies. These acts were often carried out with alarming impunity, as state authorities and law enforcement agencies were frequently accused of passive complicity or outright inaction.

Golden Dawn's populist rhetoric revolved around the idea that legitimate politics must originate from the grassroots, portraying itself as the guardian of the Greek nation and the champion of a national mission against external and internal enemies. The party framed refugees and migrants as existential threats to Greek identity, security, and sovereignty, embedding

xenophobia within a broader narrative of national resistance. However, unlike far-right parties in Western Europe that have strategically moderated their rhetoric to expand their electoral appeal, Golden Dawn fully embraced political violence and openly fascist imagery, making confrontation – both rhetorical and physical – a defining feature of its identity.

This aggressive posture ultimately led to its downfall. In 2020, Golden Dawn was officially designated a criminal organization and held legally accountable for orchestrating and executing violent attacks on migrants, refugees, trade unionists, and political opponents. The party's paramilitary structure, which had previously contributed to its image as a militant force fighting for the Greek nation, became the legal basis for its criminal prosecution. The murder of Pavlos Fyssas, an antifascist rapper, in 2013 was the turning point, sparking mass protests and intensifying political and judicial scrutiny. The Greek judiciary ultimately outlawed Golden Dawn from political activity, and several of its key leaders, including Nikos Michaloliakos, were sentenced to prison, marking one of the most significant legal defeats for a far-right party in contemporary Europe.

Golden Dawn's reliance on extremist rhetoric, direct violence, and organized attacks distinguished it from its far-right counterparts in Western Europe, such as the French National Rally, the Dutch Party for Freedom, and the German Alternative for Germany. Unlike these parties, which have sought to distance themselves from explicit extremism to gain broader electoral legitimacy, Golden Dawn never attempted to soften its ideological stance. Instead, it remained deeply embedded in neo-Nazi aesthetics, paramilitary organization, and street-level violence, embracing a tactical fusion of electoral and extra-institutional power reminiscent of interwar fascist movements.

While its radicalism and militancy initially contributed to its rapid electoral rise, allowing it to attract disillusioned, nationalistic, and anti-austerity voters, this same extremism ultimately sealed its political downfall. Golden Dawn's refusal to adapt to the evolving strategies of the European far-right, combined with its overtly violent nature, made it impossible for the party to survive once judicial and political pressure intensified. The party's collapse not only reshaped the Greek far-right landscape but also served as a warning for other extreme-right movements across Europe, demonstrating that while militancy and radical rhetoric can be mobilizing forces in times of crisis, they also carry the risk of outright criminalization and political marginalization when pushed beyond certain limits.

The decline of Golden Dawn initially appeared to mark a turning point for the Greek far-right, yet rather than signaling its demise, it revitalized the far-right milieu, leading to new party formations that swiftly filled the vacuum left by GD's collapse. The 2023 elections reflected this transformation, as three explicitly far-right parties – The Spartans (a successor to Golden Dawn), Greek Solution, and Niki – secured seats in the Greek Parliament, collectively garnering over 12% of the vote and 34 seats out of 300. This marked the first time since the fall of the military dictatorship that multiple distinct far-right parties simultaneously entered Parliament, demonstrating not a consolidation but a fragmentation of the far-right political space in Greece.

Six months after their historic entry into Parliament, The Spartans and Niki have faced a decline in polling, reflecting both internal organizational struggles and shifts in voter alignment. Meanwhile, New Democracy (ND), the dominant center-right party, has responded to far-right electoral pressure by adopting more nationalist and conservative rhetoric, particularly on migration and family values, in an attempt to retain

right-wing voters while maintaining its mainstream appeal. However, despite its strategic positioning on divisive social issues, ND has struggled to fully contain voter defection, as evidenced by the results of the local elections in the fall and recent polls conducted in January.

The three far-right parties have so far shown relatively weak opposition to ND's government, despite political initiatives on contentious issues such as migration and national identity. However, the political landscape has begun to shift, particularly following recent debates on same-sex marriage and the mobilization of rural voters over economic grievances. In this evolving climate, Hellenic Solution has emerged as the primary beneficiary, recording significant gains in voter intentions for the European elections. Unlike its far-right counterparts, The Spartans and Niki have struggled to maintain momentum, a decline that must be understood in relation to internal party processes rather than solely external political dynamics.

While these three parties compete for influence within the far-right political spectrum, their ideological and strategic differences reflect the fragmentation of nationalist politics in Greece, with each appealing to distinct voter segments – The Spartans to former Golden Dawn supporters, Hellenic Solution to national-populist conservatives, and Niki to religious traditionalists. Their role in reshaping the Greek political landscape remains uncertain, as they navigate internal divisions and shifting voter preferences ahead of the European elections.

The Spartans, Hellenic Solution, and Niki all have roots in national-populist ideologies, positioning themselves as alternatives to what they perceive as corrupt elites and a flawed party system. While each party has distinct ideological priorities, they all advocate for national priorities, stringent migration policies, and a rejection of perceived foreign influence on Greek sovereignty. They also share a narrative built on nostalgia for

an idealized past, national traditions, and historical and religious identity.

In varying degrees, the three parties have expressed skepticism toward COVID-19 policies, particularly regarding state-enforced vaccination and Western medical narratives. While Niki has been the most openly anti-vaccine, Hellenic Solution originally opposed strict pandemic measures but later softened its stance. The Spartans, though not explicitly focused on vaccine opposition, align with broader anti-systemic distrust toward government control and global institutions.

On foreign policy, all three parties share elements of Euroskepticism and nationalism, opposing the Prespa Agreement and advocating for a stronger national stance in international affairs. Niki and The Spartans are more explicitly pro-Russia, frequently criticizing NATO and the European Union as threats to Greek sovereignty. Hellenic Solution, however, maintains a more ambiguous stance, at times critiquing Russia while simultaneously opposing Western policies perceived as undermining Greek interests.

The Spartans (Spartiates) party, founded by Vassilis Stigas in 2017, is a far-right political movement that draws symbolic inspiration from the militaristic and disciplined ethos of ancient Sparta, though in practice, its ideology is more aligned with nationalist populism and ultra-conservatism. The party advocates for stringent measures against illegal immigration, a robust national defense, and a return to traditional Greek values in opposition to modern lifestyles. While The Spartans embrace Greek Orthodox Christianity as a cultural corner-stone, they do not prioritize religious conservatism in policy-making to the extent that Niki does, which positions itself as an overtly religious-political movement.

Economically, The Spartans promote nationalist economic self-sufficiency, though their platform remains vague on

specific economic policies, focusing primarily on sovereignty and national defense rather than free-market principles. Unlike mainstream right-wing economic parties, their stance does not explicitly align with entrepreneurial or neoliberal market policies but rather reflects a broader anti-globalist framework. A significant factor in The Spartans' rise was the endorsement of Ilias Kasidiaris, the former Golden Dawn MP and spokesperson, who supported the party from prison after his own political movement was banned from elections. This endorsement positioned The Spartans as the unofficial successor to Golden Dawn, attracting former GD voters while maintaining formal political distance from neo-Nazi imagery. The party frequently criticizes the European Union, international financial institutions, and progressive social policies, framing them as threats to Greek national identity and sovereignty.

Hellenic Solution emerged in 2016 as a nationalist-populist alternative to both the traditional right and the extremist farright, later benefiting from Golden Dawn's electoral collapse in 2019. While distancing itself from Golden Dawn's overtly neo-Nazi ideology and violent methods, the party has questioned the judicial process that led to the criminalization of Golden Dawn, framing it as a politically motivated attack on nationalist forces. However, it has deliberately avoided direct association with GD, positioning itself as a more respectable nationalist option for disillusioned right-wing voters.

The party gained parliamentary representation in July 2019, securing ten seats, after first winning a single seat in the European Parliament elections earlier that year. Hellenic Solution is known for its affinity for conspiracy theories, which its leader, Kyriakos Velopoulos, propagates through his frequent television appearances on smaller, right-wing media outlets. The party primarily targets voters who feel alienated from the

political system, presenting an image of Greece under siege by corrupt elites, external influences, and migration pressures.

Hellenic Solution places a strong emphasis on Greek Orthodox identity, using it as a cultural and nationalist marker rather than a strict religious doctrine. It frequently promotes traditional values, particularly in relation to family structures, national heritage, and education, as part of its broader antiprogressive, anti-globalist narrative. The party has also advocated for stronger ties with Russia, opposing what it sees as Western dominance over Greek foreign policy, and has strongly criticized EU sanctions on Russia, arguing that they harm Greek economic interests more than they weaken Russia itself.

Positioning itself as a populist force against the political establishment, Hellenic Solution often frames parliamentary democracy as serving entrenched interests, contrasting it with its own vision of a more responsive and patriotic leadership. This rhetorical stance allows it to appeal to voters disillusioned with traditional governance without explicitly calling for democratic restructuring.

Economically, the party supports a protectionist-nationalist economic model, favoring state intervention to support Greek businesses and industries while opposing foreign economic influence. It promotes selective economic nationalism, advocating for policies that prioritize Greek citizens in social benefits and business opportunities, a stance that reveals its ethnocentric approach to economic policy.

Hellenic Solution continues to consolidate its role as the dominant nationalist-populist force in Greece, particularly as far-right rivals like The Spartans and Niki struggle with internal challenges. Its ability to blend nationalist rhetoric, economic protectionism, and media-driven populism has allowed it to remain a stable player in Greece's evolving right-wing landscape.

Founded in 2017, Niki is an ultra-conservative, Orthodox nationalist party that envisions a Greece where Orthodox Christianity serves as the cornerstone of national identity and public life, shaping laws, education, and cultural policies. While not advocating for a formal theocracy, Niki promotes a deep integration of religious principles into governance, positioning itself as a defender of faith, family, and national heritage against the perceived moral decay of modern society.

The party enjoys strong backing from segments of the Orthodox clergy, particularly from ultra-conservative religious circles and networks associated with Mount Athos, as well as lay religious movements that reject secularism. This network has allowed Niki to mobilize devout Orthodox voters, particularly among traditionalist families, rural communities, and religious intellectuals.

Socially, Niki staunchly opposes liberal values and modern lifestyles, engaging in cultural battles over abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, gender roles, and religious education. It calls for a return to Greece's "moral and spiritual roots", advocating for a stricter religious presence in schools, the protection of traditional family structures, and the rollback of progressive social policies. The party vehemently opposes gender ideology, sex education reforms, and the Westernization of Greek cultural norms, framing these issues as attacks on the nation's spiritual and moral foundation.

Politically, Niki rejects the traditional left-right framework, arguing that modern partisan politics are corrupt and morally bankrupt. Instead, it seeks to establish a governance model based on Orthodox Christian morality, positioning itself as a force that transcends ideological divisions in favor of faith-based leadership. While it does not advocate for the abolition of democracy, it views mainstream parties as agents of foreign

interests, disconnected from the spiritual and cultural essence of the Greek people.

On foreign policy, Niki is deeply nationalist and Euroskeptic, advocating for Greek political and cultural autonomy over deeper integration with Western institutions. The party opposes globalization, NATO's influence, and perceived Western encroachments on Greek sovereignty, framing the European Union as a secularist force undermining national identity. It has also expressed sympathies toward Russia, viewing it as a traditional ally and a counterbalance to Western liberalism.

Niki's rise reflects the growing influence of religious nationalism in Greek politics, attracting voters who feel alienated by secularization, progressivism, and globalization. By combining religious revivalism, nationalist rhetoric, and cultural conservatism, the party has carved out a unique position in the Greek far-right landscape, distinct from both the ultra-nationalism of The Spartans and the populist pragmatism of Hellenic Solution. As it continues to build its base, Niki represents a reactionary force against modernity, positioning itself as the last line of defense for Greece's spiritual and historical legacy.

II. Bulgaria

Historically, Bulgaria's political identity has been profoundly shaped by its post-communist legacy, where affiliations with the right were often perceived as more prestigious and less contentious than those with the left. During the tumultuous transition years, the Bulgarian right initially coalesced around anti-communism, liberal economic policies, and pro-European reforms, serving as a unifying force. However, over time, the Bulgarian right fragmented, with different factions emphasizing liberal democracy, national conservatism, or populist governance.

This fragmentation produced three main strands of right-wing politics in Bulgaria. The first category can be labeled as the "authentic" or "liberal" right, represented by traditional UDF members and later by groups like Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria (DSB) and the Bulgarian People's Union. These factions were characterized by shifting alliances and ideological divisions, reflecting the difficulties of maintaining a unified vision. The populist right also emerged, initially wielding limited electoral influence but later gaining momentum with the National Movement Simeon II and Borisov's GERB party, which transitioned from a centrist orientation to the center-right.

The far right, while present in nationalist movements and minor parties of the 1990s, gained major electoral success in 2005 with the rise of Ataka, a coalition of four nationalist organizations united by their rejection of Western influence, minorities, and liberal democracy. Unlike the radical right movements that surged in Western Europe during the 1980s, Bulgaria experienced a delayed far-right emergence due to its integration into EU accession negotiations, political repression of extremist groups, and the historic dominance of the BSP in nationalist discourse. However, nationalism in Bulgaria was not monopolized solely by the left – it was also present in monarchist, conservative, and populist movements.

Bulgaria's ability to avoid violent ethnic conflict – despite its significant Turkish and Roma minorities – was not merely due to a "unique ethnic model of tolerance," but also to state policies that controlled ethnic tensions. The "Revival Process" in the 1980s, during which tens of thousands of ethnic Turks were forced to adopt Bulgarian names or flee the country, remains a dark chapter of state repression. Later, Bulgaria's EU integration efforts encouraged minority protections, helping to prevent large-scale ethnic unrest.

In this context, Ataka, founded in 2005 by Volen Siderov, became one of Bulgaria's most influential far-right parties. Its ideology was built on radical nationalism, sovereignty, and exclusionary populism, combining left-wing economic protectionism with right-wing ultranationalism. The party's rhetoric was fiercely anti-minority, targeting Roma and Turks as existential threats to Bulgarian identity and sovereignty. Additionally, Ataka has promoted anti-Western conspiracy theories, portraying the EU and NATO as tools of foreign domination over Bulgaria. While antisemitic narratives have occasionally appeared in Ataka's discourse, its primary ideological focus remained anti-Turkish, anti-Roma, and anti-globalist nationalism. Ataka's electoral success in the mid-2000s and early 2010s paved the way for further radicalization in Bulgarian politics, influencing later nationalist movements and contributing to the mainstreaming of xenophobic rhetoric. However, with shifts in political alliances and the rise of new far-right actors, Ataka's influence has waned in recent years, reflecting the evolving nature of the Bulgarian far-right landscape. Ataka's rejection of the political elite was accompanied by a fierce critique of international institutions, which it accuses of stripping Bulgaria of its sovereignty. Opposed to NATO, the European Union's reforms, and the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) economic policies, Ataka advocates for an interventionist state, promoting economic protectionism and strong state involvement in national industries.

The party's platform also calls for a return to conservative Orthodox values, seeking to strengthen the role of the Church and restore a powerful state as the guarantor of social order. By capitalizing on anti-elite sentiment, economic frustrations, and ethnic tensions, Ataka has constructed a vision of Bulgaria as a betrayed nation, one that must reclaim its independence and integrity from foreign influence and internal adversaries,

particularly ethnic minorities. In the 2005 parliamentary elections, Ataka shocked the political establishment, securing 8.14% of the vote and 21 seats in Parliament, making it the fourth-largest political force in the country. Ataka's emergence can be explained by two key factors. Firstly, it reflects a deep crisis of confidence in Bulgaria's post-communist political system. Despite undeniable institutional progress, Bulgaria's successive governments – whether composed of former communist elites or pro-Western liberals – failed to meet public expectations for social justice and tangible economic improvements. Since the early 1990s, a succession of governments from across the political spectrum has done little to change the widespread perception of power being monopolized by self-serving elites. This has fostered a growing distrust of institutions, eroding faith in electoral politics, which are increasingly seen not as genuine political shifts, but as superficial rotations within an entrenched oligarchy. Ataka skillfully exploited this widespread disillusionment, presenting itself as a radical force of rupture, one that rejects compromise and fiercely denounces the corruption of the ruling class.

Secondly, Bulgaria's integration into NATO (2004) and the European Union (2007), while widely supported in principle, generated significant frustrations, particularly due to the economic and political sacrifices it entailed. Structural reforms demanded by the IMF and the World Bank, particularly in privatization and market liberalization, exacerbated social inequalities and weakened certain sectors of the population. These developments fueled growing resentment toward international institutions, which Ataka skillfully leveraged. While the party did not outright oppose Bulgaria's EU membership, it strongly criticized the way it was implemented, accusing the country's elites of selling off national sovereignty to foreign interests.

The issue of ethnic minorities, particularly Turks and Roma, has been central to Ataka's discourse. The party has built much of its political identity on the narrative of ethnic Bulgarians as victims, arguing that state policies unfairly favor minorities at their expense. It has repeatedly attacked the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MDL), the political party representing Bulgaria's Turkish minority, claiming that its participation in successive governments has marginalized ethnic Bulgarians – particularly in the allocation of public resources and administrative positions. At the same time, growing social tensions linked to the economic marginalization of Roma communities, often concentrated in urban ghettos and associated in public discourse with crime, provided fertile ground for Ataka's propaganda, which scapegoated these minorities as responsible for Bulgaria's social problems.

Another crucial factor in Ataka's rise was its mastery of media influence, which allowed it to spread its nationalist, anti-elite, and xenophobic messaging directly to the public. The party's leader, Volen Siderov, a former journalist, used nationalist media outlets – most notably Skat TV and later Alfa TV – to cultivate a siege mentality among his audience. Through sensationalist programming, these platforms portrayed Roma, Turkish minorities, and Western institutions as existential threats to Bulgaria, reinforcing a narrative that the country was being exploited by foreign powers and betrayed by its own corrupt elites. This media-driven strategy enabled Ataka to bypass traditional party structures and appeal directly to disillusioned voters, much like Silvio Berlusconi's use of Italian television networks or Donald Trump's reliance on social media in the U.S.

Thus, Ataka's success cannot be reduced simply to a resurgence of extreme nationalism. It must be understood as a

manifestation of deep public distrust in democratic institutions, disillusionment with the promises of European integration, and heightened ethnic tensions in a country still grappling with the contradictions of its post-communist transition, favored by an easily manipulable media environment. By exploiting these fractures and advantages, Volen Siderov and his party positioned themselves as a radical alternative to a stagnant political system, paving the way for a broader reconfiguration of Bulgaria's political landscape along populist and nationalist lines. Ataka's electorate in Bulgaria consisted of individuals from diverse social backgrounds, yet they were united by a shared sense of abandonment in the face of the country's economic and political transformations. While one might have expected support for this radical nationalist party to come primarily from the most economically precarious rural populations, its strongest base of support was actually in urban centers, particularly Sofia and major regional cities. In these areas, daily interactions with minority groups – especially Roma – were more pronounced, and resentment toward political elites was amplified by the perception of endemic corruption and clientelist favoritism. Moreover, Ataka's voter base was not confined to the economically disadvantaged working class. A significant proportion of its supporters held university degrees or at least a secondary education, indicating that discontent with the system extended beyond economic inequality and reflected a deeper crisis of confidence in institutions. This protest vote particularly appealed to voters aged 40 to 50, a generation that had once believed it would benefit from the post-communist transition but had instead become disillusioned with a political system perceived as unresponsive and entrenched in self-interest.

Ataka's voter profile shared several characteristics with farright movements across Europe but also displayed notable

differences. Like France's National Rally (Rassemblement National, RN), the party attracted both working-class and middle-class voters who felt abandoned by mainstream parties. Similar to Germany's AfD, Ataka combined economic nationalism with Euroskepticism, positioning itself against Western-imposed economic liberalization and foreign financial influence. Its rhetoric also resembled Italy's Lega, particularly in its scapegoating of minorities, portraying Roma communities as a burden on national resources. However, unlike Western European far-right parties, which increasingly sought electoral legitimacy by moderating their rhetoric, Ataka remained openly radical, refusing to soften its anti-minority and anti-Western stance. Unlike parties such as French's RN, which shifted away from overt extremism, or Hungary's Fidesz, which captured state institutions, Ataka never managed to fully consolidate its influence within the Bulgarian political system, remaining an outsider force rather than a ruling nationalist party.

Despite its initial success, Ataka's influence began to decline over time due to internal conflicts, leadership struggles, and the rise of newer nationalist movements. The emergence of Vazrazhdane (Revival), a party that embraced a similar Euroskeptic, anti-liberal, and anti-globalist discourse, gradually absorbed much of Ataka's voter base. Furthermore, mainstream parties such as GERB and even the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) began co-opting elements of Ataka's nationalist rhetoric, reducing its distinct appeal. As nationalist narratives became more mainstream, Ataka lost its position as the primary vehicle for Bulgaria's far-right discontent.

Thus, by the late 2010s, newer nationalist forces like Vazrazhdane had overtaken Ataka as the dominant far-right force, proving that Bulgaria's nationalist movement was not a static phenomenon but a constantly shifting political force shaped by broader social, economic, and geopolitical factors. Since the

advent of Ataka in 2005, the radical right has progressively exerted influence on the Bulgarian government, with Ataka consistently ranking as the fourth-strongest party in the parliamentary elections of 2005, 2009, and 2013. However, despite these successive electoral successes, Ataka has since declined and failed to secure a single seat in the 2021 parliamentary elections. Indeed, it never managed to establish itself permanently in the national and European political landscape, largely due to its ideological and strategic isolation, its inability to forge strong alliances, and its radical stance, which ultimately distanced it both from other parties and its own electorate. Indeed, while its violently xenophobic rhetoric, open rejection of minorities and globalization, and glorification of Orthodox values allowed it to attract a significant segment of the nationalist electorate, this extreme discourse, combined with a lack of strategy for integration into an influential European parliamentary group, contributed to its isolation and, consequently, to its inability to influence political decisions, whether within European institutions or on the national stage. This isolation, which manifested in Ataka's inability to align itself durably with any European political group other than the short-lived *Identity, Tradition, Sovereignty*, combined with its opportunistic support for a centrist minority government in Bulgaria, led to a massive loss of credibility among an electorate initially drawn to its uncompromising and protest-oriented stance.

However, while Ataka's electoral decline seemed to mark a retreat of the radical right in Bulgaria, it is evident that its nationalist and radical discourse has gradually permeated the corridors of power, to the point of influencing the policies implemented by successive governing coalitions and paving the way for the rise of political formations more adept at constructing a respectable image while pursuing a comparable agenda. Thus, although Ataka never officially joined a government

coalition as a full-fledged partner, its role as parliamentary support was crucial for several governments, allowing it to exert influence far beyond its electoral weight and to shape certain major strategic decisions.

As early as 2009, its support for the minority government led by GERB (*Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria*) granted Volen Siderov and his close associates a privileged position, offering them access to strategic parliamentary committee roles and, more broadly, a significant capacity to pressure the government's political direction. Similarly, when the coalition led by socialist Plamen Oresharski took power in 2013, Ataka once again played a pivotal role, particularly in votes concerning energy policy and diplomatic relations with Russia, reaffirming the party's status as a key intermediary in promoting Russian interests in Bulgaria – a recurring theme that, beyond ideological alignment, underscores the structural ties many European far-right parties maintain with the Kremlin.

Nevertheless, the most striking development in recent years is not merely Ataka's indirect influence but rather the way its discourse, initially perceived as radical and isolated, has gradually been normalized to the point of being adopted and reformulated by politically more respectable formations, such as the *Patriotic Front* (PF). Established in 2014 through an alliance between the *Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Bulgarian National Movement* (IMRO-BNM) and the *National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria* (NFSB), this coalition quickly emerged as a key player in Bulgarian politics. Unlike Ataka, it successfully integrated into a governing coalition, securing several deputy minister positions and thus wielding a much more concrete influence over the country's policies. The rapid integration of the *Patriotic Front* into the executive power can largely be attributed to its ability to tone down its rhetoric, avoiding Ataka's most outrageous excesses while maintaining a

firm nationalist stance, particularly on identity and migration issues. While Ataka cultivated a rhetoric of open xenophobia and conspiracy theories, the PF adopted a pragmatic political approach, which enabled it not only to ally with GERB but also to steer certain government decisions in its favor. The most emblematic example of this growing influence is undoubtedly the electoral law reform spearheaded by the PF, aimed at drastically restricting ethnic minorities' participation in elections – a measure that, although softened in public discourse, clearly aligns with a strategy of exclusion and marginalization of certain segments of the population. Thus, while Ataka's electoral collapse might be interpreted as a sign of a decline in radical nationalism in Bulgaria, a deeper analysis reveals that its ideas, far from disappearing, have been gradually repackaged and reintegrated into the mainstream political landscape – under a more acceptable yet equally problematic guise.

Moreover, in recent years, new openly far-right and ultranationalist parties have gained increasing electoral influence. This is the case, for example, of Revival, which entered the Bulgarian National Assembly during the 2021 elections, securing 13 seats out of 240. Founded in 2014, the party capitalized on Bulgarian citizens' discontent towards the established elites by campaigning against COVID-19 restrictions and vaccines. In the subsequent elections in November 2022, it experienced further success, securing 27 MPs in Parliament. With the pandemic subsiding, the party has shifted its focus to propagating an anti-EU, anti-NATO, and pro-Russia discourse. It advocates for a referendum on Bulgaria's EU membership and NATO affiliation, accuses the US of exerting influence in Sofia, and calls for closer ties with Russia, citing economic benefits. However, the party is currently grappling with internal turmoil, including recent expulsions of three out of the 36 party members in parliament, and a decline in public support. According to

the Market Links polling agency, support has dropped to 9.9% in February 2024, compared to 14.3% in the last parliamentary elections in 2023, indicating signs of crisis ahead of the EU elections.

	2 April 2023	2 October 2022	14 November 2021	11 July 2021	4 April 2021
Turnout %	40.69	39.41	40.50	42.19	50.61
Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria / GERB-SDS	26.49	25.33	22.74	23.51	26.18
Coalition: We Continue the Change + Democratic Bulgaria / PP-DB	24.56				
We Continue the Change / PP		20.20	25.67	24.08	
Coalition: Democratic Bulgaria / DB		7.45	6.37	12.64	9.45
Vazrazdane / Revival	14.16	10.18	4.86	3.01	2.45
Movement for Rights and Freedoms / DPS	13.75	13.75	13.00	10.71	10.51
Bulgarian Socialist Party / BSP	8.93	9.30	10.21	13.39	15.01
Bulgarian Rise / BV	3.06	4.63			
There is Such a People / ITN	4.11	3.83	9.52	24.08	17.66
Rise Up! Oust the Thugs!				5.01	4.72
Not supporting anyone (votes)	109,095	87,635	33,745	35,201	47,749

Election	Leader	Votes	%	Seats	+/–	Status
2017	Kostadin Kostadinov	37,896	1.11	0/240	New	Extra-parliamentary
Apr 2021		78,395	2.41	0/240	Steady 0	Extra-parliamentary
Jul 2021		82,147	2.97	0/240	Steady 0	Extra-parliamentary
Nov 2021		127,568	4.86	13/240	Increase 13	Opposition
2022		254,952	9.83	27/240	Increase 14	Snap election
2023		358,174	13.58	37/240	Increase 10	Opposition

The Bulgarian right-wing is characterized by several distinct features that set it apart from its counterparts in Western Europe. Firstly, there's a notable trend of demonizing internal enemies, exemplified by parties like ATAKA and the Patriotic

Front that primarily target national minorities such as Turks and Roma. Even amidst the migration crisis, the focus remained on internal minorities rather than external "threats". Secondly, socialist nostalgia is still present within the Bulgarian right. Eastern European right-wing populists like those in Bulgaria gained success by responding to the complexities of democratic transitions and disillusionment with democracy rather than traditional cleavages, globalization, or multiculturalism like it's the case for their Western European counterparts. By amalgaming left and right-wing ideologies with a mixture of nationalism, clericalism, and irredentism, intertwined with elements of neo-totalitarianism and welfare chauvinism, Bulgarian's far right often draws support from both the left and right ends of the political spectrum.

As already mentioned, the rise of far-right parties in Bulgaria is mainly attributed to the escalating distrust among Bulgarian citizens towards conventional institutions and political parties, stemming from widespread corruption, inequalities, and the failure of successive governments to address the tangible issues facing the population. Consequently, a growing number of voters are seeking alternative parties that offer pragmatic solutions to the immediate and pressing needs of the people, distance themselves from traditional political methods and prioritize a comprehensive fight against corruption. Far-right parties in Bulgaria have therefore tapped into this disillusionment by presenting themselves as alternatives to the entrenched political elite, offering a narrative of change and renewal, promising to address the concerns of ordinary citizens and restore faith in the political process. By strategically mobilizing dissatisfied voters through anti-establishment rhetoric, populist and far-right parties effectively harness the so called "protest vote". Additionally, economic factors, including high unemployment and perceived mismanagement by traditional parties, have

rendered populist and far-right narratives particularly attractive to the electorate. The loss of social status, especially among the middle class, further reinforces perceptions of economic crisis and mismanagement, fostering reluctance to support traditional parties. Populist parties messaging often revolves around common themes such as nationalism, anti-establishment rhetoric, and emphasis on the need for economic stability, resonating with voters who feel marginalized or disenfranchised by mainstream parties, regardless of their specific grievances or ideological leanings. At the same time, far-right parties like Ataka have carved out a niche by exploiting ethnonationalist sentiments and tapping into concerns about immigration and minority rights.

III. Romania

Far right and ultra-nationalism, embodied by the League of the Archangel Michael party, initially emerged in Romania during the interwar period. Founded by Zela-Codreanu, this party benefited from the rise of xenophobia in the 1920s, partly due to the adoption of the 1923 Constitution, which granted minorities of Magyar, German, Jewish, Ukrainian, Russian, Turkish, Roma, and Greek descent – representing 28% of the total population – the same rights as the majority. Concurrently, the 1929 economic crisis and corruption seriously undermined public confidence in parliamentary democracy, thus paving the way for extremist ideas. Initially marginal, this political formation created in 1927 achieved remarkable success, garnering 16% of the votes in the December 1937 elections, six times more than its score in the 1932 elections, making it the only European fascist movement to enter Parliament without external assistance. Its ideals, centered around traditionalism, nationalism, and xenophobia, closely reflected the principles of

fascism and Nazism. However, what distinguished this party from its German and Italian counterparts was the emphasis on Orthodox Christianity, presented as a fundamental value justifying its extremism and anti-Semitism. By exploiting religious sentiment in rural communities, where illiteracy was widespread and religion held significant importance, the League of the Archangel Michael succeeded in gaining voter support, spreading fascist and xenophobic discourse within Parliament. Its leader Codreanu was eventually executed under Carol II's reign after the establishment of a royal dictatorship.

After the 1989 revolution and the fall of the communist regime in Romania, the far right gradually re-emerged in the country's political landscape, capitalizing on uncertainties and frustrations during the transition to democracy and growing distrust towards mainstream parties perceived as corrupt and still marked by communist legacies. The nationalist-extremist party Romania Mare, led by Corneliu Vadim Tudor, thus became the second most important political party in the early 2000s. This ultra-nationalist group voiced anti-Western sentiments in a context of European integration, as well as militarism and political dictatorship. Its name, referring to the nation-state of all Romanian speakers formed after World War I, illustrates its ultra-nationalist and anti-minority axis.

The ideology of the Greater Romania Party (PRM) was based on an exacerbated nationalism that, far from being limited to a mere glorification of the past, translated into a revanchist and ethnocentric vision of Romanian history and politics. Structured around a discourse blending nostalgia for the communist regime, openly xenophobic rhetoric, and rejection of the post-revolutionary political elites, this ideology was embedded in a narrative where Romania's territorial integrity was sacralized. This justified both the denunciation of minority claims, particularly those of the Hungarians, and the aspiration

to restore the unity of a national space that the party considered to have been amputated by historical contingencies. This territorial obsession went hand in hand with an uncompromising sovereigntism that, under the guise of defending the country's independence, was fueled by conspiracy theories in which the West, liberal elites, and secret groups – often associated with Zionist or Freemasonic networks – were blamed for Romania's economic and moral decline.

This ideological framework cannot be fully understood without considering the centrality of Orthodox Christianity in the PRM's vision, which elevated this religious tradition as a fundamental pillar of national identity and a bulwark against the corruption and presumed decadence of the modern world. Thus, the denunciation of the immorality of political elites was closely linked to diatribes against certain minorities, particularly the Roma and homosexuals, who were held responsible for the erosion of traditional values. Within this dynamic, the PRM, while sometimes adopting a populist discourse against social injustices, positioned itself less as a party of rupture and more as a reactionary force aspiring to a return to an old order, where a homogeneous and proud Romanian nation would no longer be subject to foreign influences and the liberal reforms imposed by the European Union.

The PRM's electorate reflected the fractures of a Romanian society in transition, where certain segments of the population – particularly affected by the economic and political upheavals of the post-communist era – saw in this party an alternative to marginalization and uncertainty. Composed largely of elderly individuals, members of the working class, and often less-educated citizens, this electorate was marked by a deep resentment toward the transformations following the fall of the communist regime, which they perceived not as a liberation but as a dispossession orchestrated by a corrupt elite and malevolent foreign influences.

Thus, the PRM managed to capture the discontent of former communist party officials, retired military personnel, and members of the Securitate, for whom the dissolution of the pre-1989 system resulted in a loss of status and influence. It also appealed to a broader segment of citizens disoriented by economic changes, who found in the party's nationalist rhetoric a form of refuge against the uncertainties of modernity.

By reaching out to this disillusioned electorate, the party went from 4-5% of the votes in 1992 and 1996 to a peak of 21% in 2000, then 14% in 2004. The factors behind this success are manifold. Firstly, it benefited from a fragmented political landscape in the 2000 elections, with weak center-right parties and an increasingly unpopular PDSR due to integration policies in the Euro-Atlantic space involving the closure of industries employing a large part of its traditional electorate. Additionally, the socio-economic situation and the disappointment of citizens with conventional parties unable to positively change their lives despite post-transition promises and hopes, as well as the charisma of its leader Tudor, also enabled Romania Mare to achieve this success. As a talented orator and provocative polemicist, Tudor had established himself as the embodiment of an anti-system stance that combined exacerbated nationalism, nostalgia for a mystified past, and the relentless denunciation of an elitist conspiracy allegedly responsible for Romania's moral and economic decline. However, it was precisely this personification of the party that, while ensuring its electoral rise, also precipitated its downfall. The organizational structure of the PRM, entirely shaped around the unquestioned authority of its leader, lacked any credible succession plan and proved incapable of surviving the authoritarian excesses and erratic decisions of its founder. Far from relying on a coherent ideological program or a sustainable institutional strategy, the PRM functioned essentially as a court orbiting around its leader,

where internal dissent was brutally suppressed and the successive departures of key figures gradually hollowed out the party.

Moreover, its electorate, far from being homogeneous or ideologically structured, was primarily driven by a sense of exclusion and social decline rather than genuine adherence to the party's doctrines. This is why, as the PRM sank into internal instability and its leader faced growing challenges to his authority from within, a significant portion of its voter base gradually shifted toward other populist formations. These new parties, such as the People's Party – Dan Diaconescu (PP – DD), were able to capitalize on the same rejection of the elites and a renewed anti-system rhetoric. Thus, despite its initial rise to prominence, the influence and success of the far-right PRM were transient. Following its failure to secure any seats in the 2012 national elections, as well as in the 2014 EU elections, and with the passing of its leader, Vadim Tudor, the PRM gradually receded from the Romanian political sphere.

The electoral performance of the Greater Romania Party (PRM) in the Senate elections from 1992 to 2020

Year	Election	PRM's Percentage of Votes
1992	Senate	3.86%
1996	Senate	4.54%
2000	Senate	21.01%
2004	Senate	13.63%
2008	Senate	3.57%
2012	Senate	1.47%
2016	Senate	2.95%
2020	Senate	0.65%

AUR's electoral performance in terms of both the percentage of votes it received and the number of seats it won in each electoral body

Electoral Body	Percentage of Votes	Seats Won
Chamber of Deputies	9.17%	33
Senate	8.89%	14

However, the demise of this party did not signify the end of nationalist themes in the Romanian political landscape. Other secondary movements, with varying degrees of influence and electoral success, have emerged with nationalist, populist, xenophobic and far-right ideas.

The New Generation Party-Christian Democratic (PNG-CD) emerged on the Romanian political scene in a context marked by the decline of traditional nationalist parties, attracting an electorate in search of an alternative to the wornout figures of the far right. Initially founded by former Bucharest mayor Viorel Lis, the party generated little enthusiasm until George Becali took over its leadership in 2004, radically transforming its ideological stance and public impact. Under his direction, the PNG-CD swiftly shifted toward a rhetoric combining extreme nationalism, open intolerance toward any form of diversity, and a blatant instrumentalization of Orthodox Christian values, which served less as a doctrinal foundation than as a populist tool to rally those discontented with the system. Indeed, while the party's rise was largely driven by Becali's demagogic personality, he did not hesitate to draw upon the imagery of the Legionary Movement to give his political project a more distinct identity, using symbols and slogans directly inspired by the legacy of the Iron Guard while adapting them to his own opportunistic vision of power. The party's official motto – "Serving the Cross and the Romanian Nation!" – reflected this fusion of mythologized ultranationalism and

dogmatic religious conservatism, which justified an exclusionary rhetoric targeting ethnic and sexual minorities, corrupt political elites, and Western influences as existential threats to national identity.

However, while the PNG-CD managed to attract a segment of nationalist voters disappointed by the PRM's decline, it struggled to establish itself as a lasting political force due to its lack of internal structure and extreme dependence on Becali's personality. This structural weakness, coupled with disappointing electoral results and the rise of new populist formations such as the People's Party – Dan Diaconescu (PP – DD), gradually relegated the PNG-CD to the political margins, until Becali decided to join the National Liberal Party (PNL), effectively abandoning his own party and precipitating its inevitable collapse.

The Everything for the Country Party (TPȚ), on the other hand, represents the ideological lineage of Legionarism, claiming a heritage defined by extreme nationalism, the exaltation of Orthodox Christian values, and a pronounced hostility toward all forms of diversity perceived as threats to Romanian identity. Although originally founded in 1993 under the name Party for the Homeland (PPP), it only gained significant political recognition in 2012, when it obtained the legal right to reclaim the historical name of the political wing of the Iron Guard, the fascist and ultranationalist movement of the interwar period. However, this attempt at legitimization was soon met with opposition from judicial authorities, who initiated proceedings to dissolve the party due to its fascist and racist nature, thereby calling its institutional viability into question.

The TPȚ's ideology, firmly rooted in Legionary traditions, synthesizes ultranationalist principles, a deep attachment to popular and religious traditions, and a systematic rejection of perceived foreign influences – whether ethnic and sexual

minorities, international organizations, or Western sociopolitical trends associated with globalist conspiracies. Through this ideological stance, the TPȚ sought to position itself as an alternative to traditional nationalist parties, relying on a radical approach and a political identity shaped by symbols and rituals borrowed from the Iron Guard to attract voters seeking strong nationalistic markers. Although electorally marginal, the TPȚ's presence in Romanian public life reveals a deeper trend of Legionary discourse rehabilitation, which resonates with a segment of the population – particularly among educated young people drawn to the movement's mystical and anti-establishment dimension.

By adopting strategies inspired by the Iron Guard – such as organizing marches, nationalist commemorations, and spiritual retreats in Orthodox monasteries – the party has aimed to transcend conventional political frameworks, transforming itself into both a political and cultural movement that seeks to reactivate collective memory based on the myth of a pure and authentic Romania, allegedly threatened by internal and external forces. In this sense, the rise of the TPȚ does not so much signal the emergence of a major political actor as it does the persistent underground presence of an ultranationalist current in Romania, whose manifestations, though fluctuating, demonstrate a historical resilience despite institutional attempts to marginalize it.

The Noua Dreaptă (ND) movement, which emerged in 2000 and is often compared to the TPȚ, also aligns ideologically with the Iron Guard's legacy. However, it distinguishes itself through a structured network of activists both in Romania and abroad, particularly in Germany, Italy, and Moldova. This transnational reach, bolstered by a highly active digital presence – through websites, blogs, and even a dedicated YouTube channel for spreading its propaganda – reflects a deliberate

strategy to expand its influence beyond traditional party politics and establish a lasting ultranationalist discourse among educated youth, who are often drawn to its exaltation of a mythologized past and an ethno-religious identity perceived as being under threat.

ND also differentiates itself from the TPȚ by its explicit territorial claims, inspired by the borders of Greater Romania before 1940. This territorial obsession is evident both in the symbolic maps displayed in its propaganda materials and in the existence of an active Bessarabian branch in Moldova, reflecting a political project where the past is used as a central argument to legitimize an expansionist vision that is deeply hostile to national minorities, particularly Hungarians.

Although ND attempted to translate its militant activism into electoral engagement in 2011 by seeking official registration as the Nationalist Party, this effort was blocked by judicial authorities, highlighting the limits of its institutionalization. This rejection confirmed that ND's primary strength lies not in participating in electoral politics but in structuring grassroots actions – through work camps, demonstrations, and commemorative events. By leveraging such symbolic mobilizations and cultivating an imagery directly inspired by interwar Legionary ideology, ND aims to compensate for its lack of institutional representation with a strong and enduring social and cultural presence. This strategy is designed to foster an ideological climate in which radical far-right ideas continue to thrive, despite repeated electoral failures.

But nationalist ideas in Romania are not limited to these few fringe movements. For example, in 2016, Dragnea's Social Democratic Party already reactivated such subjects, with a hint of Euroscepticism. In 2018, it also adopted particularly conservative positions, proposing a referendum to define the family as a union between a man and a woman only – which failed.

While Dragnea was not able to create a solid conservative and nationalist alternative to the dominant pro-EU discourse, this dynamic could be altered by the rise of AUR, which emerged as the primary far-right party in Romania in 2020.

The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) was founded in 2019 by George Simion, a former leader of an organization advocating for the unification of Romania and Moldova, and Claudiu Târziu, a close ally of ultraconservative circles who had mobilized strongly against abortion. Initially absent from traditional media, AUR gained prominence primarily on social media, using shocking and populist rhetoric, especially to criticize health measures during the pandemic crisis. Meanwhile, the party made its presence felt on the ground by organizing protests across the country. Thanks to this strategy, in 2020, AUR made a notable entry into Parliament with 10% of the votes.

Candidat	Voturi	Procent(~)
PARTIDUL SOCIAL DEMOCRAT	1.732.289	29,31 %
PARTIDUL NAȚIONAL LIBERAL	1.511.227	25,57 %
ALIANȚA USR PLUS	936.864	15,85 %
ALIANȚA PENTRU UNIREA ROMÂNILOR	541.938	9,17 %
UNIUNEA DEMOCRATĂ MAGHIARĂ DIN ROMÂNIA	348.262	5,89 %
PARTIDUL MIȘCAREA POPULARĂ	291.485	4,93 %
PARTIDUL PRO ROMÂNIA	244.227	4,13 %

table representing the electoral score of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) in the December 2020 Romanian legislative elections. *Official Results. Data table: Permanent Electoral Authority.*

The AUR embodies an ideology rooted in traditional and conservative values, positioning itself as a staunch opponent of Marxism, multiculturalism, materialism, and diversity. The

party advocates for the defense of the traditional family, rejects gender studies, and exclusively supports marriage between a man and a woman. This approach is deeply rooted in a theocratic worldview where the Christian faith is seen as the pillar of European civilization, and AUR presents itself as the guardian and promoter of Christian values.

On the nationalist front, AUR advocates for the unification of Romania and Moldova, evoking a nostalgic and idealized image of "Greater Romania." This romanticized vision of history proposes the reunification of all Romanians beyond current borders, aiming to create a culturally and linguistically homogeneous nation-state. AUR uses this utopian vision to bolster its call for strong nationalism, firmly opposing immigration and ethnic minorities, which it views as threats to the nation. Historically, this victimization discourse targeted Jews and Roma, but it has increasingly focused on the Hungarian minority.

AUR vigorously criticizes the European Union, opposing military aid to Ukraine, which it perceives as an external conflict not directly concerning Romania. However, the party maintains its commitment to the Western bloc, notably supporting Romania's role in NATO. Additionally, it categorically rejects any ties with Russia, aligning with widespread Romanian skepticism towards Moscow, and has called for the closure of Russian diplomatic missions in Romania and the expulsion of the Russian ambassador.

AUR's discourse is also heavily influenced by conspiracy theories, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, reinforcing its image as an anti-establishment party. Presenting itself as an alternative to a corrupt elite, AUR rejects alliances with traditional parties, positioning itself as a force for political renewal. Their positions are largely inspired by the Legionnaires, an influential far-right organization of the interwar period in Romania, which advocated for an ultranationalist and theocratic

vision based on the superiority of the Christian faith. However, unlike the Legionnaires, antisemitism has disappeared from AUR's discourse, likely due to the almost total absence of Jewish minorities in Romania. Today, AUR directs its hateful rhetoric against Roma, Hungarians, and the LGBTQ+ community. These groups are portrayed as scapegoats, accused of threatening the integrity and values of Romanian society, allowing AUR to channel popular frustrations and mobilize growing electoral support.

The AUR has seen growing success attributed to several converging factors that have exacerbated discontent and frustration among Romanian citizens. Firstly, Romania's political system is marked by significant volatility, fragmentation of traditional parties, and widespread corruption. Only 20% of Romanians trust their government, compared to a European average of 34%, placing the country fifth from the bottom in the European Union rankings. Additionally, only 30% of the population is satisfied with how democracy functions. These figures highlight a general disillusionment and growing frustration with political practices dominated by corruption, nepotism, and abuse of power. Repeated corruption scandals, political interference in judicial institutions, and attempts by political elites to manipulate laws have eroded public trust and fueled a sense of powerlessness among citizens. Efforts by authorities to reform these institutions have failed to restore public faith, aggravating feelings of disconnection and alienation between Romanians and those who are supposed to represent and defend their interests. AUR has capitalized on this discontent to present itself as an alternative to traditional parties, attracting votes from many disillusioned and disappointed voters.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided AUR with an opportunity to amplify its voice, amid fatigue and dissatisfaction with health measures. The party notably exploited conflicts between

churches and the state, portraying health restrictions on religious activities during lockdowns as persecution by a globalist elite, continuing a populist anti-establishment narrative. This period allowed AUR to gain visibility and lay the groundwork for introducing its other ideas into public discourse. Now that the pandemic has subsided, AUR is focusing on nationalism and scapegoating minorities.

"Visibility" and number of impressions for party social media communicators between Nov. 23rd and Dec 9th. Top 15 communicators in our sample. Data by Pulsar.

Facebook Page	Affiliation	Visibility Score	Impressions
George Simion	AUR	3,608	3,001,042
Partidul Naţional Liberal	PNL (institutional)	3,340	754,776
Rares Bogdan	PNL	2,844	631,180
Victor Ponta	PRO	1,655	321,486
Gabriela Firea	PSD	1,439	313,324
Alianţa Pentru Unirea Românilor	AUR (institutional)	1,403	309,760
Partidul Social Democrat	PSD (institutional)	1,325	233,596
Raluca Turcan	PNL	1,317	137,500
Marcel Ciolacu	PSD	1,127	216,766
Vlad Voiculescu	USR PLUS	984	208,274
Klaus Iohannis	current President	799	405,746
Ludovic Orban	PM, PNL	740	112,112
Eugen Tomac	PMP	733	42,966
Dacian Cioloş	USR PLUS	724	166,870
Violeta Alexandru	PNL	605	109,406

AUR has also succeeded through an effective social media campaign, bypassing the lack of television presence and limited access to traditional media. Using Facebook, the party reached an electorate often neglected by traditional parties, especially poorer rural populations. George Simion was more present in Facebook debates than the official PNL account, demonstrating the party's influence on social media. AUR has also launched an innovative app to enhance political engagement,

membership management, and local mobilization, contrib-
uting to the party's growing influence.

Media interest for AUR exploded near the elections.
Data and graph: Newswhip
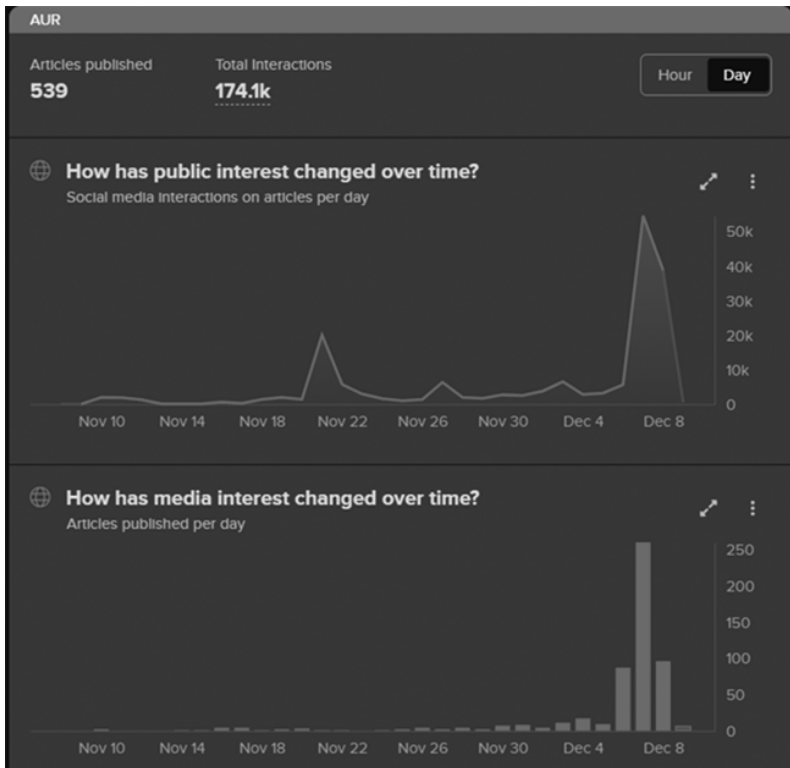
Finally, the major parties in power have also contributed to cre-
ating the conditions that facilitated the rise of extremism in
Romania. Since the 2016 legislative elections, they have been
accused of attempting to silence reformist parties and voices,

such as USR, which gained popularity as an alternative to traditional parties perceived as corrupt. To this end, the strategy employed is, on the one hand, to make the liberal opposition invisible – such as the USD, boycotted by most media controlled by the ruling elite – and on the other hand, to favor opposition from the far right, to build a "front" opposition, presented as potentially as destructive as possible, by giving media space to populist leaders like George Simion (AUR) or Diana Sosoaca (SOS Romania). At the same time, the ruling coalition regularly emphasizes the dangers of extremist parties, portrayed as having more weight than they do, with the consent and for the benefit of those who control the media space. The strategy appears aimed at reinforcing the status quo – that is, the maintenance of power by the conservative-socialist system – to be perceived as the only reasonable choice for voters faced with extremism, by making another alternative, that of liberal and democratic opposition, invisible.

AUR's electorate is primarily composed of men aged 18 to 30, often with lower levels of education. The party has managed to capture the votes of voters disillusioned with traditional politics or concerned about the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, thanks to its populist and antiestablishment rhetoric. In 2020, 30% of voters were disillusioned with politics and had not voted for several years. AUR has also mobilized populist and conspiracy currents, including those opposed to masks, vaccines, LGBTQ+ rights, etc. Its supporters include ultra-conservative, nationalist, religious activists close to the Orthodox Church, from neo-Legionnaire and sovereigntist movements. Geographically, AUR has particularly mobilized voters in Transylvania, Moldavia, and Dobruja, especially in regions with a significant Hungarian population, attracting votes from Romanians who feel marginalized there. Furthermore, with a quarter of Romanians abroad casting their votes for the party,

AUR's rhetoric resonates strongly within the Romanian diaspora, which has been forced to migrate due to economic difficulties, low wages, and limited job opportunities.

Demographic	Percentage
Gender (Men)	61%
Age (18-30 years old)	36%
Education (High School Graduates)	62%
Employment Status (Employed)	40%
Attitude towards Green Pass (Opposed)	80%
Attitude towards COVID-19 Vaccination (Opposed)	65%

In the wake of its ascent in 2020, AUR's popularity has continued to surge, solidifying its position as the dominant force on the far-right spectrum in Romania. Attempts by the far-right party Sosoaca to court AUR's voters have yielded minimal impact, given Sosoaca's overt pro-Russian stance in a country where a substantial majority – 60-70% – express apprehension about a potential Russian invasion. Having established its dominance, AUR is now pivoting towards the center and is on a path to normalization. While it already commands strong appeal among far-right voters, who find few alternatives, it is now crafting a centrist discourse tailored to individuals discontented with social issues but wary of overt far-right nationalism. This demographic is increasingly radicalized due to factors such as soaring inflation, apprehensions about a possible Russian incursion, government ineptitude, and pervasive corruption. Furthermore, even while in the minority in Parliament, AUR is gaining increasing influence on Romanian politics: in a context of extreme political

polarization, mainstream parties are now willing to collaborate with AUR to achieve certain majorities, as evidenced by AUR's role in the November 2021 no-confidence vote against Florin Cîțu's cabinet, partnering with the traditional PSD party. The extreme electoral volatility that has characterized Romania for several years, hindering progress and decision-making, is thus being used to AUR's advantage, making it a party mainstream parties are willing to engage with and collaborate with despite its extreme positions.

Although far-right groups in Romania currently appear marginalized on the electoral scene and struggle to surpass the thresholds imposed by the proportional representation system – despite the rise of AUR – it would be a mistake to conclude that their ideas have lost all political relevance or that they no longer resonate within Romanian society. In fact, several underlying dynamics indicate that, even if these political formations fail to establish themselves directly, their rhetoric, themes, and worldview still permeate a significant part of public debate and the country's political culture.

First, it is important to emphasize that the relative stability of the Romanian political landscape, marked by the dominance of large coalitions such as the USL in the 2012 elections, does not imply the absence of ideological tensions or underlying currents capable of fueling a resurgence of radical nationalism. The inability of far-right parties to capitalize on recent political crises, while it may be interpreted as a sign of their structural weakness, should not obscure the fact that their traditional electorate does not disappear but rather tends to shift towards other populist forces, such as PP-DD. Although not explicitly claiming far-right affiliations, these parties do not hesitate to draw from a similar rhetorical repertoire, playing on identity fears, rejection of elites, and denunciation of foreign influences.

Moreover, it is undeniable that the general climate in Romania remains conducive to the dissemination of discriminatory and xenophobic ideas, particularly through a vast network of media and digital platforms. Under the guise of patriotism or the defense of national traditions, these platforms propagate openly racist, homophobic, and ultranationalist discourse. The importance of this media space should not be underestimated, as it plays a fundamental role in legitimizing ideas that would otherwise remain on the fringes of society. By providing supporters of these movements with a sense of belonging and community, enabling them to mobilize their base rapidly for coordinated actions, and offering them a platform where their views can be shared without restriction, these digital spaces contribute to the gradual normalization of an exclusionary worldview that fosters mistrust of democratic institutions.

Furthermore, Romanian society's attitude towards certain minorities reveals a strong predisposition to accept exclusionary rhetoric. Public opinion studies indicate a worrying level of prejudice against LGBT+ and Roma communities, reflecting a relative societal tolerance for discriminatory discourse. This situation is all the more concerning given that the indifference – or even complacency – of authorities in the face of openly racist or revisionist statements by certain public figures contributes to the normalization of such discourse. When prominent politicians, including former ministers and senators, make statements denying the Holocaust or stigmatizing entire segments of the population without facing significant consequences, it sends a clear signal about the degree of acceptability of such positions in the public sphere.

Finally, a phenomenon specific to the Romanian political landscape – known as *traseism politic* (political opportunism) – fosters a blurring of ideological boundaries and allows former far-right figures to integrate into more mainstream political

parties without renouncing their past convictions. This transfer of individuals, far from leading to the disappearance of extremist ideas, often results in their dissemination within moderate parties, contributing to a latent radicalization of their platforms and rhetoric. Furthermore, in a context of economic crisis and growing distrust towards European and international institutions, sovereigntist and anti-globalization themes – historically championed by the far right – are increasingly resonating with a population seeking clear-cut solutions to complex structural problems.

Thus, while the Romanian far right, as an autonomous political force, may not yet mirror the scale or consolidation seen in other European contexts, this absence of a dominant far-right party should not be mistaken for democratic resilience or ideological immunity. Romania's political culture remains deeply shaped by a combination of authoritarian legacies, fragmented party systems, and public disillusionment with democratic institutions. Unlike in Western Europe, where the far right typically rises through long-standing anti-immigrant discourses and structured party-building, the Romanian case reveals a more subterranean pattern of radicalization – one that draws from pre- and post-communist nationalist currents, the legacy of national communism under Ceaușescu, and the residual valorization of interwar figures such as Corneliu Zelea Codreanu and Ion Antonescu.

This latent ideological terrain has enabled the surprising ascent of actors such as Călin Georgescu, a former UN official who in recent years has made overtly sympathetic references to Romania's fascist past while positioning himself as a spiritual and political alternative to the existing party establishment. Though not formally affiliated with any mainstream party, Georgescu's rising visibility in public discourse – particularly within nationalist and conspiratorial circles – reflects the

ongoing rehabilitation of authoritarian historical figures and the porous boundary between anti-system populism and fascist nostalgia.

More structurally significant has been the rise of AUR (Alliance for the Union of Romanians), which stunned observers in the 2020 parliamentary elections by winning nearly 9% of the vote despite minimal campaign infrastructure and exclusion from mainstream media. AUR represents a new configuration of Romanian far-right politics: combining anti-system populism, aggressive cultural conservatism, and Orthodox religious nationalism with Euroscepticism and historical revisionism. The party has built a support base among disenfranchised youth, rural voters, and members of the Romanian diaspora – particularly in Italy and Spain – who feel disconnected from domestic political developments but remain emotionally invested in national identity and Orthodox values. AUR's discourse relies heavily on anti-elitist sentiment, the defense of "traditional values", and opposition to "gender ideology", globalism, and Western liberal norms.

Crucially, the Romanian far right differs from cases like Hungary or Poland in that it has not (yet) consolidated power through executive capture or systematic party-state fusion. Instead, it operates more diffusely: through populist parties like AUR, independent figures like Georgescu, and online ecosystems that amplify nationalist, conspiratorial, and anti-modern rhetoric. Romania's weak party system, low trust in institutions, and a judiciary that remains susceptible to political pressure create an environment where radical actors can gain influence even without institutional dominance.

In this light, Romania's vulnerability to far-right resurgence is less about immediate electoral conquest and more about ideological normalization. The increasing mainstreaming of exclusionary nationalism, authoritarian nostalgia, and clericalism

in public discourse suggests that far-right ideas are not simply external threats to the democratic order but internalized features of a post-transition political culture still grappling with its historical legacies. If left unchallenged, these dynamics may pave the way for deeper illiberal transformations, not through a single dominant movement, but through the gradual erosion of liberal-democratic norms from within.

5. *Conclusion*

The comparative analysis of far-right mobilization in Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria demonstrates that despite variations in historical trajectories, institutional frameworks, and political cultures, these countries share structural conditions that have facilitated the rise and persistence of far-right actors. By employing a comparative methodology that integrates Most Different Systems Design (MDSD), Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD), Comparative Area Studies (CAS), and historical institutionalism, this study has identified the mechanisms through which far-right parties emerge, consolidate, and interact with broader political systems in Southeastern Europe. The findings highlight that while far-right movements in these three countries exhibit core ideological elements of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, their distinct national contexts shape divergent electoral strategies, ideological orientations, and patterns of political influence.

The study confirms that far-right actors in Southeastern Europe capitalize on crises – economic, political, and identity-based – to mobilize support. Economic instability, austerity-induced discontent, and socio-political grievances have created fertile ground for populist radical right parties, which present themselves as the sole defenders of the "pure" people against

corrupt elites and external threats. While in Western Europe, far-right mobilization is frequently associated with anxieties over migration, multiculturalism, and post-materialist value shifts – such as debates around identity, climate policy, and gender – these factors often intersect with concerns about national sovereignty and political alienation in the East as well. In Southeastern Europe, however, far-right politics have been more deeply embedded in nationalist revivalism, historical revisionism, and widespread distrust of post-communist democratic governance. This regional specificity underscores the importance of historical path dependence in shaping contemporary far-right politics, as seen in Romania's legacy of interwar fascism and national communism, Bulgaria's ethno-nationalist discourse rooted in post-Ottoman structures and communist-era authoritarianism, and Greece's far-right resurgence informed not only by the legacy of the military junta (1967-1974), but also by the interwar authoritarian regime of Ioannis Metaxas and long-standing ethno-religious nationalism embedded in post-war political culture.

While all three countries have experienced significant far-right electoral breakthroughs in recent years, the ideological positioning of these movements differs. The Greek far right has historically exhibited both radical and extreme right elements, as illustrated by the now-banned Golden Dawn, whose violent extra-parliamentary activities and overt embrace of neo-Nazi symbols and rhetoric positioned it closer to National Socialist and fascist movements than to conventional populist radical right parties. In contrast, Romania and Bulgaria's far-right movements, while explicitly nationalist and exclusionary, have remained within the radical right spectrum, operating within the democratic framework while simultaneously seeking to erode liberal democratic norms from within. Nonetheless, fluid boundaries between the radical and extreme right persist,

as certain factions within these parties oscillate between electoral politics and extra-parliamentary activism, a phenomenon observed in the ideological hybridization of radical right populism and authoritarian ethno-nationalism.

Despite cross-national ideological similarities, the far right in these countries remains only partially integrated at the transnational level, with nationalist movements frequently prioritizing domestic agendas. However, recent developments suggest a growing degree of cross-border coordination, particularly around shared Eurosceptic, anti-globalist, and anti-migration platforms. Far-right actors in Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria have engaged in symbolic alliances, mutual public endorsements, and joint appearances at international far-right forums such as the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), the World Congress of Families, and events affiliated with the Identity and Democracy Foundation. AUR, for example, has increasingly cultivated ties with Poland's PiS, Hungary's Fidesz, and American MAGA-aligned actors, including participation in CPAC Budapest and collaborative declarations on 'Christian Europe.' These interactions signal a willingness to align on select narratives. Yet, they still fall short of the institutionalized coalitions seen in Western Europe – such as Identity and Democracy (ID) or the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) in the European Parliament – highlighting a strategic but still uneven attempt at transnational far-right alignment in Southeastern Europe.

While Bulgarian and Greek far-right actors often adopt pro-Russian stances – particularly in relation to foreign policy and critiques of NATO – Romania presents a more ambivalent position. Although Romanian far-right formations like AUR occasionally invoke nationalist rhetoric that aligns with Russian interests, they typically refrain from openly endorsing pro-Kremlin positions due to deep-seated historical antagonisms and

public sensitivities related to regional sovereignty and Russian influence. This complex stance limits the potential for a cohesive regional far-right alliance and underscores the importance of national context in shaping ideological alignments.

The study also demonstrates that far-right movements in Southeastern Europe engage in strategic scapegoating, with different minority groups serving as primary targets of nationalist exclusionary rhetoric. While Greek far-right parties focus primarily on external migration, portraying Middle Eastern and African refugees as existential threats to national sovereignty, the Bulgarian far right centers its discourse on internal minorities, particularly Turks and Roma, constructing them as demographic and cultural enemies of the nation. In Romania, the far right mobilizes against Roma and the Hungarian minority, reinforcing historical territorial anxieties and ethno-nationalist narratives. These variations illustrate how national contexts condition far-right rhetorical strategies, reinforcing the adaptability of far-right actors to specific socio-political landscapes.

Furthermore, the study highlights that while the far right in all three countries operates within a populist framework, its relationship with religion varies. Niki in Greece represents one of the most religiously motivated far-right parties, advocating for Orthodox Christian supremacy, whereas Bulgarian and Romanian far-right movements incorporate Christian conservatism within broader nationalist discourse but do not prioritize clerical authority to the same extent. This divergence reflects national variations in church-state relations and the degree to which religious identity is weaponized for political purposes.

Ultimately, the findings of this study contribute to broader debates on the far right's role in democratic backsliding, political radicalization, and party system transformation in Europe. The case studies of Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria illustrate
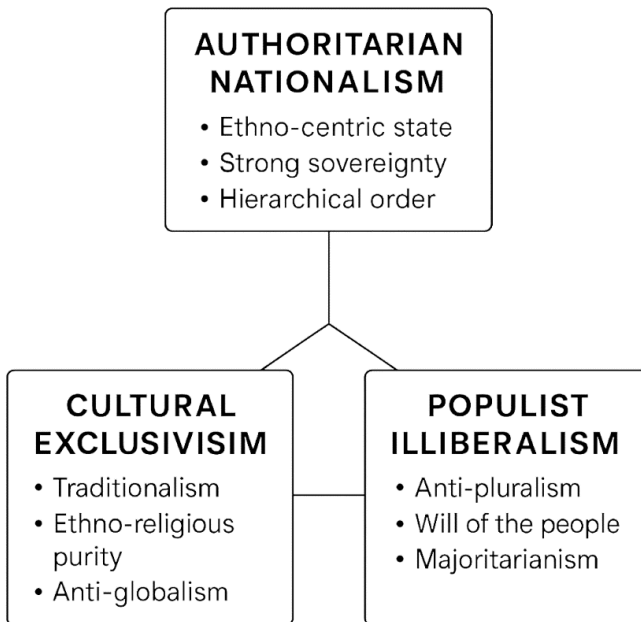
how historical legacies, economic instability, and institutional weaknesses create opportunities for far-right actors to enter the political mainstream, leveraging crisis-driven discontent and nationalist nostalgia to erode democratic norms. However, the study also underscores the limits of far-right consolidation, as factionalism, ideological extremism, and internal contradictions often prevent these movements from sustaining long-term electoral dominance. While far-right parties in Southeastern Europe continue to reshape political discourse and influence mainstream political agendas, their capacity to fully institutionalize and dominate political systems remains contingent on broader structural and historical factors.

This comparative approach reinforces the necessity of analyzing far-right mobilization beyond Western-centric frameworks, recognizing regional specificities and historical contingencies in shaping contemporary radical right trajectories. The findings suggest that while far-right actors in Southeastern Europe are part of a broader European trend of radical right-wing resurgence, their evolution remains deeply embedded in national and regional political dynamics, shaped by historical path dependencies, institutional legacies, and socio-economic grievances. As far-right movements continue to adapt to shifting political landscapes, understanding their interplay with mainstream politics, electoral volatility, and governance challenges will remain essential for assessing the future of democracy in Southeastern Europe and beyond.

Building upon the insights generated by this comparative study, the far right in Southeastern Europe can be more accurately conceptualized not as a static or uniform ideological bloc, but as a dynamic field of political actors situated at the intersection of three interrelated pillars: *authoritarian nationalism*, *populist illiberalism*, and *cultural exclusivism*. To capture the ideological dynamics specific to the far right in Southeastern

Europe, this study proposes an alternative to Western-centric definitional models. Rather than relying solely on nativism and populism, the far right in this region is more accurately conceptualized as operating through a triadic structure of authoritarian nationalism, populist illiberalism, and cultural exclusivism. These elements do not function independently, but interact as mutually reinforcing pillars of political mobilization, grounded in legacies of authoritarianism and post-communist disillusionment.

The Ideological Triad of the Southeastern European Far Right

AUTHORITARIAN NATIONALISM
- Ethno-centric state
- Strong sovereignty
- Hierarchical order

CULTURAL EXCLUSIVISIM
- Traditionalism
- Ethno-religious purity
- Anti-globalism

POPULIST ILLIBERALISM
- Anti-pluralism
- Will of the people
- Majoritarianism

This scheme illustrates the interplay between authoritarian nationalism, populist illiberalism, and cultural exclusivism – the three constitutive logics that structure far-right mobilization in Southeastern Europe. These dimensions, while analytically distinct, operate in dynamic synergy, shaping strategies of exclusion, state power, and national identity across the region.

- *Authoritarian nationalism* refers to a vision of political order in which the state derives its legitimacy from an ethnically homogeneous national community, typically tied to historical myths and sovereignty claims. It privileges a hierarchical conception of citizenship and views pluralism as a threat to the coherence of the nation.
- *Populist illiberalism* combines the rhetoric of majoritarian democracy with the rejection of liberal norms such as minority rights, judicial independence, and press freedom. It constructs a moral binary between the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite" and often seeks to delegitimize opposition voices by framing them as enemies of the nation.
- *Cultural exclusivism* entails a defense of a rigid and essentialized national identity, rooted in language, religion, and traditional values, that excludes perceived outsiders – immigrants, ethnic minorities, or cosmopolitan elites – from full membership in the national community.

Rather than existing as discrete categories, these dimensions function as mutually reinforcing logics of political mobilization, adapted to national contexts. As such, a revised definition of the far right must account not only for ideological content but also for political function, strategic flexibility, and the capacity to colonize mainstream political space without necessarily overtaking it. This model offers a more empirically grounded and regionally sensitive framework than rigid taxonomies, highlighting how the far right simultaneously exploits

crises, reshapes democratic discourse, and reconfigures the normative boundaries of legitimacy.

While Cas Mudde's influential definition – centered on nativism, authoritarianism, and populism – remains foundational for Western European analysis, it requires contextual adaptation for Southeastern Europe. In this region, far-right actors function not only through exclusionary ideologies, but also through post-authoritarian continuities and legacies, under-institutionalized democratic systems, and unhealed collective memories.

Given the region's intricate historical legacies and institutional arrangements, the far right in Southeastern Europe can be analytically defined as a constellation of political actors whose strategies and discursive practices are shaped by authoritarian nationalism, populist illiberalism, and a commitment to cultural exclusivism. These movements draw on legacies of authoritarian rule, ethno-nationalist mythologies, and collective memories of national victimhood, exploiting crises of democratic legitimacy, post-communist disillusionment, and geopolitical anxieties. Unlike their Western European counterparts – where far-right politics tend to emerge in relatively consolidated democracies and stable party systems – far-right actors in Southeastern Europe often operate within fluid or semi-consolidated systems, employing a hybrid repertoire of formal political participation and extra-institutional mobilization. As such, they blur the line between democratic engagement and systemic subversion, positioning themselves as both critics and contenders within fragile liberal orders.

This revised definition is most applicable to post-communist democracies characterized by:
- Delayed democratic consolidation (e.g., Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia), where democratic norms are either not fully institutionalized or are vulnerable to executive overreach, weak

judicial autonomy, and politicized media landscapes. In such environments, far-right actors thrive not only by challenging liberal democratic values but also by exploiting the ambiguities and loopholes within transitional political systems. These countries often exhibit hybrid regime features, including volatile party systems, weak civil society oversight, and fragile rule-of-law mechanisms that allow illiberal political strategies to gain traction under a democratic veneer.

- Hybrid regimes or fragile liberal institutions, where formal democratic procedures coexist with authoritarian practices, such as politically subordinated judiciaries, selective law enforcement, curtailed media independence, and blurred boundaries between state and party interests. In such contexts, democratic legitimacy is maintained through elections and constitutional facades, yet the substance of liberal democracy – pluralism, accountability, and rights protection – is systematically undermined. These fragile institutional ecosystems are fertile ground for far-right actors, who exploit legal ambiguity and institutional weakness to advance exclusionary, nationalist agendas while presenting themselves as legitimate contenders within ostensibly democratic frameworks.

- High degrees of politicized state captured defined as the systematic appropriation of public institutions, legal frameworks, and regulatory authorities by partisan or clientelist interests – alongside enduring legacies of authoritarian rule that continue to influence political behavior, bureaucratic culture, and public expectations of governance. These structural features not only constrain democratic accountability but also provide fertile ground for far-right actors who present themselves as corrective forces against corrupt elites, while often perpetuating illiberal practices through populist rhetoric and institutional manipulation.

Specifically, we refer to the constellation of post-1989 EU entrants and neighboring Southeastern European states such as Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Serbia, and arguably Hungary, where democratic consolidation has been uneven, party systems remain volatile, and historical experiences of authoritarianism continue to shape political imaginaries. These systems often exhibit hybrid institutional characteristics, neither fully liberal nor explicitly autocratic, within which far-right actors are able to thrive by exploiting ambivalences in legal and political frameworks, reshaping cultural narratives, and aligning opportunistically with both domestic grievances and transnational illiberal currents. The applicability of this model lies in its ability to account for the fluid and adaptive nature of far-right politics in societies marked by contested statehood, identity-based cleavages, and weak safeguards against democratic erosion.

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