POST-ELECTION REPORT
7ᵗʰ-9ᵗʰ of December

Executive Summary

This report covers the three days following the 2020 Romanian Parliamentary Elections (7 – 9 December).

The surprising success of the far-right Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) party in the parliamentary elections has generated a remarkable wave of interest, since their political programme as well as many of the figures behind the AUR were virtually unknown to most of the Romanian public.

Articles promoted by mainstream outlets in this period tended to be critical, extensively presenting the extremist discourse of AUR members: ranging from the sexist and racist declarations of regional AUR leader Sorin Lavric, to the homophobic remarks of AUR co-chair Claudiu Târziu, former co-leader of the anti-LGBT organisation "The Coalition for Family".

The relative impact of AUR's Facebook posts decreased slightly as media coverage spiked after the elections. It fell to third position of relative influence in the "visibility" indicator behind both mainstream parties (PNL and PSD).

AUR remained the party with second most visible Facebook communication with its posts appearing on 72.2 thousand timelines.

AUR leader George Simion has overtaken Rareș Bogdan as the most impactful communicator. The PNL influencer fell to a distant fourth with PSD leader Marcel Ciolacu taking second.

George Simion's rise as the political influencer with the most shares, with an enormous gap between him and any other competing political communicator has been one of the most remarkable aspects of the elections.
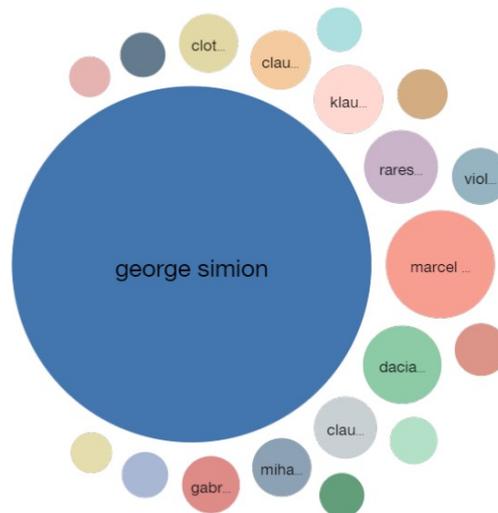

The values of the "impressions" metric for the top 20 political communicators within the analysed sample

With 716 thousand impressions, AUR leader George Simion has a Facebook reach that is about 11 times larger than that of the next political communicator, PSD leader Marcel Ciolacu. It would take the combined impression scores of all the other 19 influencers presented in the infographic above to amount to half of George Simion's reach on the social network.

1. <u>GENERAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE</u>

- In terms of overall reach and impact, the general media landscape has remained largely unchanged. Considering both the "visibility" and "impressions" indicators (left and right below, respectively), it appears that the most popular news websites after the parliamentary election continued to be the mainstream ones (Digi24.ro, Adevarul,ro, Ziare.com, Libertatea.ro, Mediafax.ro, hotnews.ro, zf.ro). Mainstream outlets in general dominate the online media environment: the top seven according to the "visibility" metric (see graph below) conduct fact-based reporting. Within the category of mainstream media, the highest position occupied by an outlet routinely distributing misleading information (according to the findings of previous GlobalFocus Center research[1]) is occupied by romaniatv.net, which lags significantly behind higher quality portals: its score of 19.8 thousand in the visibility indicator makes it nine times less influential than the digi24 website, the most impactful communicator according to Pulsar calculations (left picture, visibility indicator: light-blue romaniatv.net tag is pictured significantly smaller than the dark-blue digi24 one).
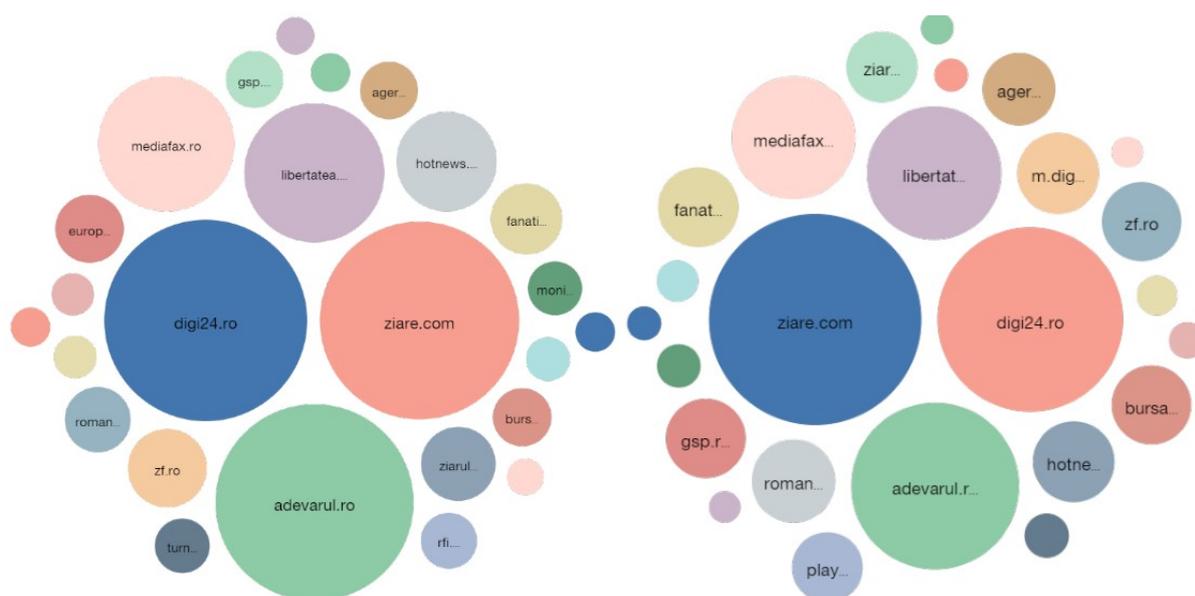

The "visibility" (pictured left) and "impressions" (pictured right) scores of the most-read 20 news websites.

- All of the most viewed articles in the sample analysed were written by outlets conducting fact-based reporting.
- **The surprising success of the far-right AUR in the parliamentary elections has generated a remarkable wave of interest in the press whose political platform, as well as many of the figures behind it, were virtually unknown to the majority of the Romanian public.** Thus, eight out of 10 of the widest-read articles in the three days after the elections concerned

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[1] https://www.global-focus.eu/2020/10/monitoring-covid-19-related-disinformation-a-series-of-reports/

AUR's nationalist political vision, as well as the background of some of its most important members. **The articles promoted by mainstream outlets tended to be critical, and extensively presented the extremist discourse of AUR members: ranging from the sexist and racist declarations of regional AUR leader [Sorin Lavric](#), to the homophobic remarks of AUR co-chair [Claudiu Târziu](#), former leader of the anti-LGBT organisation "The Coalition for Family".**
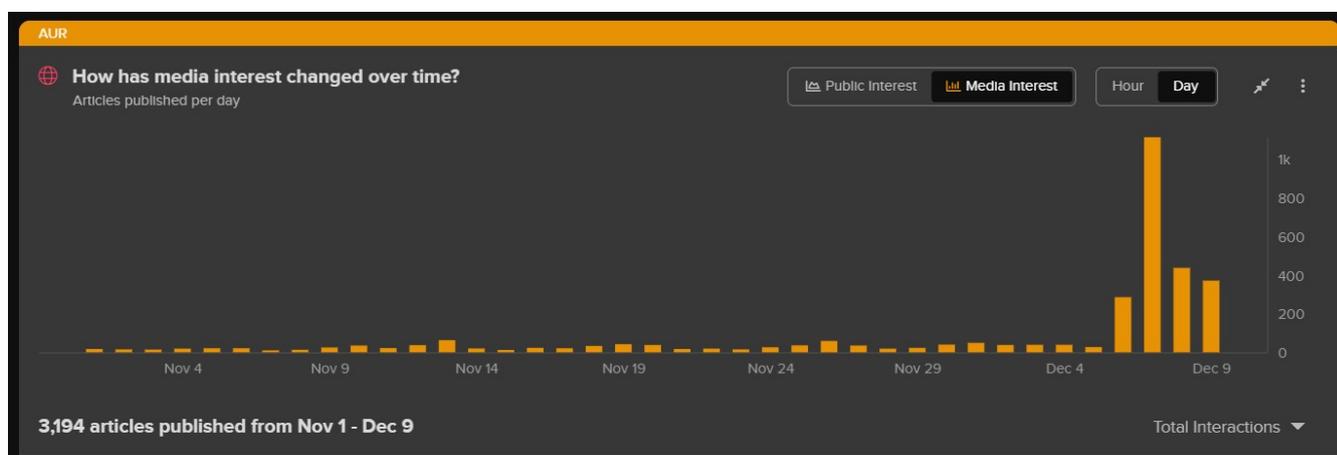

As seen in the NewsWhip screen capture above, the interest of mainstream media in AUR and its leader George Simion remained high during the period of this report (1,1K on December 7th, 438 on December 8th and 372 on 9 December).

- Overall, the surprise success of AUR was the most covered topic by news outlets. Over 8% of the 2,600 news articles analysed in the three-day sample scraped using Pulsar, contain the name of the AUR leader "George Simion".
- Other notable topics covered by mainstream media were the [negotiations](#) between PNL and USR-PLUS for the formation of a new government, as well as the [resignation](#) of the PNL Prime Minister, Ludovic Orban.

2. <u>SOCIAL MEDIA – PARTY ACCOUNTS</u>

<u>General Observations</u>

- The number of Facebook posts created by the 11 political parties analysed was only a fraction of those created on the election weekend. Only 56 posts were published between 7 and 9 December, just 21.3% of the 263 posts between 5 and 6 December.
- **AUR performed slightly lower with respect to the relative impact of Facebook posts as traditional media coverage spiked after the election. It fell to third position of relative influence** (score of 228), **behind both PNL** (score 298) **and PSD** (a score of 268).
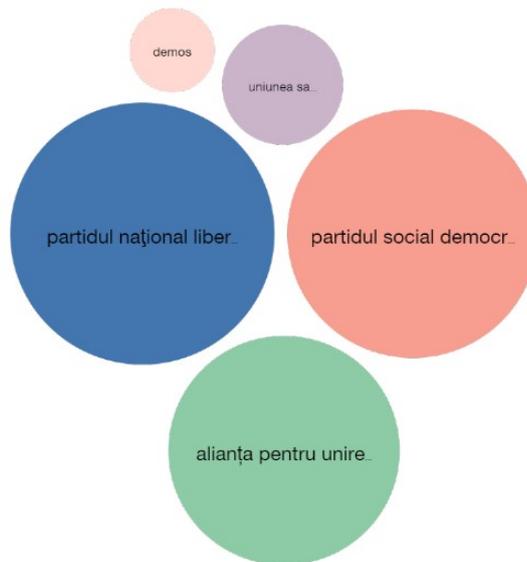
- **AUR remained the second most visible party in terms of Facebook communication (its posts appeared on 72.2 thousand timelines)**, behind PNL (85.5 thousand) and PSD, which was a close third place (with 62.4 thousand).
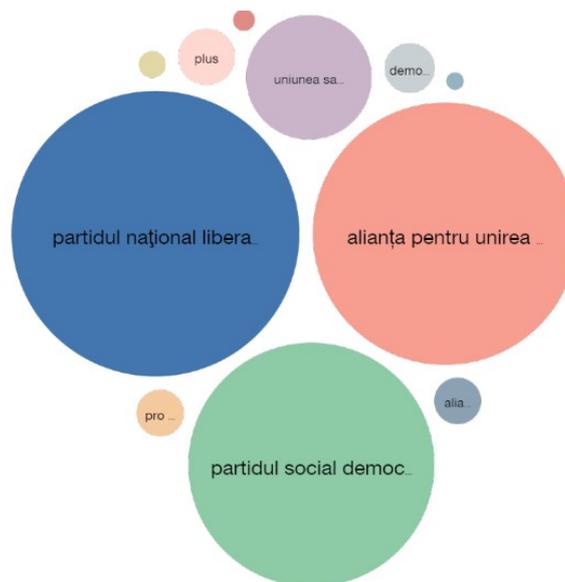
Discussion overview:

- Both in terms of engagements and visibility, only posts coming from PNL and AUR feature among the most shared messages. The most shared PSD post, lauding its victory in these elections, comes in just tenth position. The message claims that "Romanians have expressed their trust in a PSD government" and that "any governing coalition led by the PNL is hereby illegitimate".
- The post with the highest visibility score belongs to the PNL, and it represented a livestream of President Klaus Iohannis[2] stating that centre-right parties had won

[2] Formally and legally, President Iohannis is not part of PNL. Romanian law requires the president to refrain from partisan statements once in office. Despite this, President

the election, and that despite winning the most votes, the loss in support for the PSD showed that the party had been discredited in the eyes of the electorate.

- Posts with the second and third highest visibility score were both generated by AUR. According to Pulsar's calculation of the "visibility" metric, AUR's most impactful post was written to thank voters for their support and declare that the party would never join any of the "establishment parties" in forming a coalition government. AUR's second most impactful post was an extensive message responding to the numerous voices pointing to the danger of having an extremist party in parliament. The post contains several nationalistic narratives, such as the notion that post-communist Romania has essentially been a Western "colony" or the allegation that Hungary is systematically buying Transylvania "piece by piece".

- The party-generated posts were centred on the elections outcome, commenting on the parties' results, on next steps in forming the government and just repeating the same campaign claims made in the days leading up to the election. On multiple occasions, party posts relayed the messages of the leaders of the respective political groups.

- The main disinformation disseminator remains AUR, which continued to promote a number of misleading narratives. Responding to the critical and pessimistic coverage of the AUR in mainstream media, labelled "the first extremist party to enter parliament since 2004", the party promoted on its page a narrative stating that all media in Romania was directly controlled by a deep-state politics-intelligence nexus, which had ordered a systematic smear campaign.

- There were no posts discussing the **public health situation** in Romania or the government's response to the COVID-19 epidemic in Romania. The only mentions of this topic were made fleetingly, such as PSD's post relaying the declarations of its president, Marcel Ciolacu, that "a government that has failed to manage the pandemic cannot continue".

- Articles related to the **economy** were consistent with those observed prior to and during the election. PSD continued to distribute misleading narratives on the alleged economic disaster that it blames exclusively on the PNL government, stating that Romania "has become in 2020 the European state with the most historically negative records". Thus, poor performance in indicators such as GDP growth and the rate of unemployment are presented as exclusively the result of the government's incompetence, with no reference to the economic challenges created by the pandemic. PNL and USR on the other hand continued to promote their initiative to raise taxes on special pensions, which they claim to be unjust and wasteful. The two parties have directly criticised the Constitutional Court (whose members would benefit from the special pensions) for delaying a decision on the matter.

- The topic of **education** was not addressed in political party posts monitored in the three days after election day.

- There were no misleading narratives on the topic of **corruption and rule of law** identified in the sample analysed. Only one post from PNL, celebrating the "Day of the Romanian Constitution" was written on the topic.

- Continuing the trend set during the electoral campaign, there were no narratives on potential instances of **electoral fraud** in the 2020 parliamentary elections amongst the political parties' Facebook posts analysed in this sample.

3. <u>SOCIAL MEDIA – PARTY COMMUNICATORS ACCOUNTS</u>

<u>General Observations</u>

Iohannis communicated in favour of PNL during the entire electoral campaign.

- The sample of Facebook posts created by party communicators in the three days after elections weekend was smaller, with only 267 messages being distributed (among the monitored accounts) during the monitored three days after the elections. This represents 63% of the number of posts published by political communicators in the election weekend.
- According to Pulsar metrics, AUR leader George Simion continued to strengthen his position as the foremost political influencer.


The Crowdtangle score of 55% of the share of voice in the Romanian Facebook sphere analysed* in the last 7 days (7 – 14 December) confirms the reported data. According to the Crowdtangle metrics, George Simion's 16 posts were over 27 times more influential than the 16 posts Marcel Ciolacu, the leader of winning party PSD posted over the same period of time.

* political communicators and political party accounts in the sample

- **According to the visibility indicator, George Simion has overtaken Rareș Bogdan as the most impactful communicator,** with a score of 514. T**he PNL influencer has fallen to a distant fourth** with a score of only 121, **with PSD leader Marcel Ciolacu now occupying second position** with 253 visibility points, and PLUS leader Dacian Cioloș in third with a score of 143.
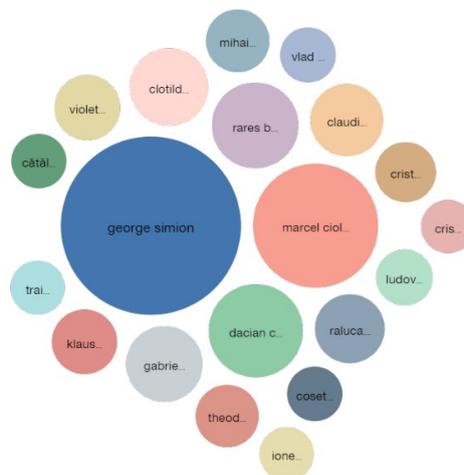
- **Perhaps even more remarkable is the outstanding position of George Simion as the most shared political influencer**, **with an enormous gap in the number of shares between him and any other competing political communicator**. It appears that in the three days following the election day and as a result of AUR's surprisingly good performance, his audience has continued to grow at a fast pace.
- **With 716 thousand impressions AUR leader George Simion has an estimated Facebook reach that is about 11 times larger than that of the next political communicator, PSD leader Marcel Ciolacu.** According to Pulsar's "impressions" metric, President Klaus Iohannis comes in fifth, with an impressions score of 26.2 thousand, a mere 3.65% of Simion's Facebook reach. I**t would take the combined impressions scores of all the other 19 influencers** presented in the infographic below **to tie half of George Simion's reach on the social network.**
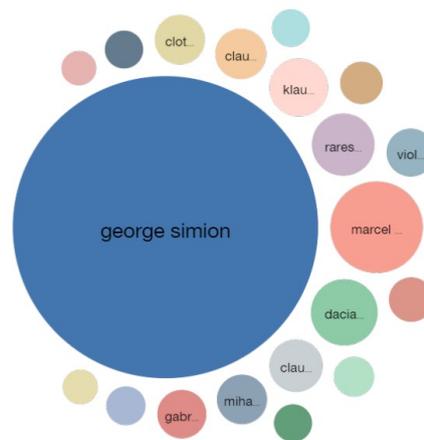
Discussion overview:

- Among the top five posts by political communicators with the highest visibility, the first four are all by George Simion, the fifth being a post by Klaus Iohannis drawing attention to the issue of voter absenteeism, likely caused by a combination of the pandemic and disappointment with the current political elite and claiming victory for a potential coalition of centre-right parties.
- It is very telling for AUR's Facebook-fuelled meteoric rise that the most popular post made by a political communicator in the days after the election is a livestream in which Simion called on AUR sympathisers across the country to formally join the party. The post had a whopping 60 thousand reactions and over 40 thousand shares. Similarly, the second most popular post was also made by Simion the preceding day, in which he made the initial call for potential new members to join. Both posts had over 1 million views. The claims of AUR leaders suggest that George Simion's message worked: allegedly, over 15,000 people completed forms to join the party in the 24 hours following the release of the initial message. These claims could not however be independently verified.
- Most posts made by notable political communicators from the main parties were reactions to the election results. Thus, PSD leader Marcel Ciolacu thanked voters for their support, arguing that any future PNL-led government would be illegitimate, since the party finished second in terms of votes, while PLUS leader Dacian Cioloș stated that the results were "not the expected ones" and called for a period of reflection about the causes of the extremely reduced voter turnout, as well as for a reformist coalition government aimed at rebuilding the trust of the population. One notable post is Ludovic Orban's announcement of his resignation

as prime minister, following what was widely perceived as a below expected results from the PNL. Mr. Orban stated that his resignation was to facilitate the formation of a stable governing coalition.

- There were no posts exclusively on the topic of the **public health situation**. A handful of messages contain references to the pandemic, such as the former PSD mayor of Bucharest Gabriela Firea's post [arguing](#) that the failure of PNL to win the elections represents an overwhelming condemnation of the government's and president's failure to handle the public health crisis. Similarly to the PSD president's declarations, she declared that her party was the only political entity that has the legitimacy to propose the prime minister.

- Only five posts in the monitored sample contain narratives related to the **economy**, four of which are posts of USR influencers that continue to promote one of the main party lines, by [criticising](#) the Constitutional Court repeatedly delaying a ruling on the issue of special pensions and therefore prolonging a status quo that is viewed as unfair and biased in favour of a small elite enjoying disproportionate benefits. In one post, MP Marius Constantin Budăi promoted one of the main [misleading](#) economic narratives of the PSD. He presented an otherwise questionable account of economic deterioration in Romania as exclusively the consequence of the PNL's bad governance, without mention of the effect of the pandemic.

- Regarding **education** and **electoral fraud**, there have been no observed posts made by political communicators advancing narratives on this topic.

- On **corruption or rule of law**, the only post made by a political influencer was published by PPUSL MEP Maria Grapini, well-known for her strong stance in favour of some policies weakening judicial independence in Romania. Her [message](#) was written to mark the "Day of the Romanian Constitution" arguing that Romania's fundamental law needs to be revised, alleging that the country "is not truly democratic" and promoting a clearer definition of "the President's attributions, the separation of powers, the rule of law and treason".