Populism in Eastern Europe. New Types of Populism - the Romanian Case

The focus of our research was understanding the propensity for populism among the Romanian public, with the aim of discerning the potential long-term impact populist movements could have on political and electoral outcomes.

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1 Introduction

A young democracy with an intriguing setting of traditionalist values and strong pro-Western stance, Romania is a unique laboratory for studying populism evolution and implications, especially in the context of escalating anti-Western propaganda, intensified during the Covid and Ukraine crises. The country witnessed a recent resurgence of populist rhetoric, mirrored by electoral success for populist parties and leaders. Starting from the two fundamental principles of populism - the concept of 'the people' as the supreme foundation of political legitimacy, and the perceived opposition between 'ordinary citizens' and a seemingly corrupt political elite - as formulated by established theories of populism (Mudde, 2004, 2007; Moffitt, 2016; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019 etc.), we studied voter attitudes to understand populist inclinations (Stanley, 2011; Spruyt et al., 2016; Schulz et al., 2017) in an underexplored area for populist studies (Scheiring et al., 2024).

2 Objective

Understanding populist orientations among the Romanian public, by:
- **devising a method of measurement** capable of capturing the nuances and specificities of this phenomenon in Romania
- validating this method by **repeated survey measurement** (**13 waves/6 years**), including periods of upheaval like the pandemic, the beginning of the Ukraine war and several rounds of elections

3 Methodology

A. Testing an established method of measuring populist inclinations - the Pew Research method (Mitchell et al., 2018)
- MEASUREMENT: Two variables measured on a 4-point scale:
  - 1. "Most elected officials don't care what people like me think"
  - 2. "Ordinary people would do a better job solving the country's problems than elected officials"
- INDICES:
  - POPULIST VIEWS = agreement with both statements
  - NON-POPULIST VIEWS = disagreement with both statements
  - MIXED VIEWS = the rest
- COMPARISONS with Europe levels

B. Creating a new method, using **3 variables:**
- MEASUREMENT: 3 variables measured on a 4-point scale:
  - Added variable: 3. "All politicians are corrupt and should be punished by jail"
  INDICES:
  - STRONG POPULISM = "totally agree" with 3 statements
  - MODERATE POPULISM = total/partial agreement with 3 statements
  - POPULIST INCLINATION = total/partial agreement with with at least 2 statements.
  - NO POPULISM = support for one statement or none.

C. Validating the method through repeated measurements and:
- correlations with **voting patterns** (preferences of populist-leaning groups for established Romanian populist parties)
- comparing the evolution of populist orientation strength with **impactful political events**

The **reliability** of our measures for populist attitudes is substantiated by high internal consistency across both sets of indices (Cronbach's α= 0.85).

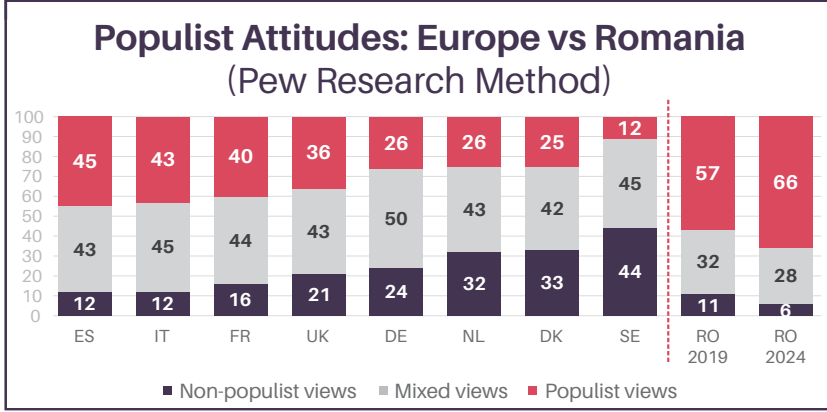### COMPATIBILITY OF THE 2 SEGMENTATION METHODS

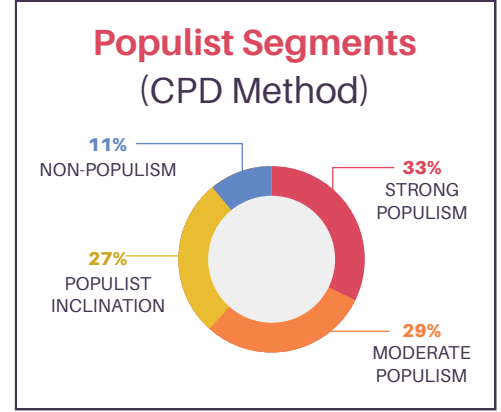|	POPULIST VIEWS	MIXED VIEWS	NON-POPULIST VIEWS
STRONG POPULISM	39%	0%	0%
MODERATE POPULISM	49%	0%	0%
POPULIST INCLINATION	11%	83%	0%
NO POPULISM	0%	17%	100%

4 | Analysis/Findings

A | Applying the Pew Research method
- Compared to Western democracies, the percentage of populists is much higher in Romania.

Populist Attitudes: Europe vs Romania
(Pew Research Method)

	ES	IT	FR	UK	DE	NL	DK	SE	RO 2019	RO 2024
Populist views	45	43	40	36	26	26	25	12	57	66
Mixed views	43	45	44	43	50	43	42	45	32	28
Non-populist views	12	12	16	21	24	32	33	44	11	6

■ Non-populist views ■ Mixed views ■ Populist views

DATA SOURCES. For European data: Pew Research. For Romanian data: CPD SNSPA, March 2024

B | Devising and using an original method.

Populist Segments
(CPD Method)

- 11% NON-POPULISM
- 33% STRONG POPULISM
- 27% POPULIST INCLINATION
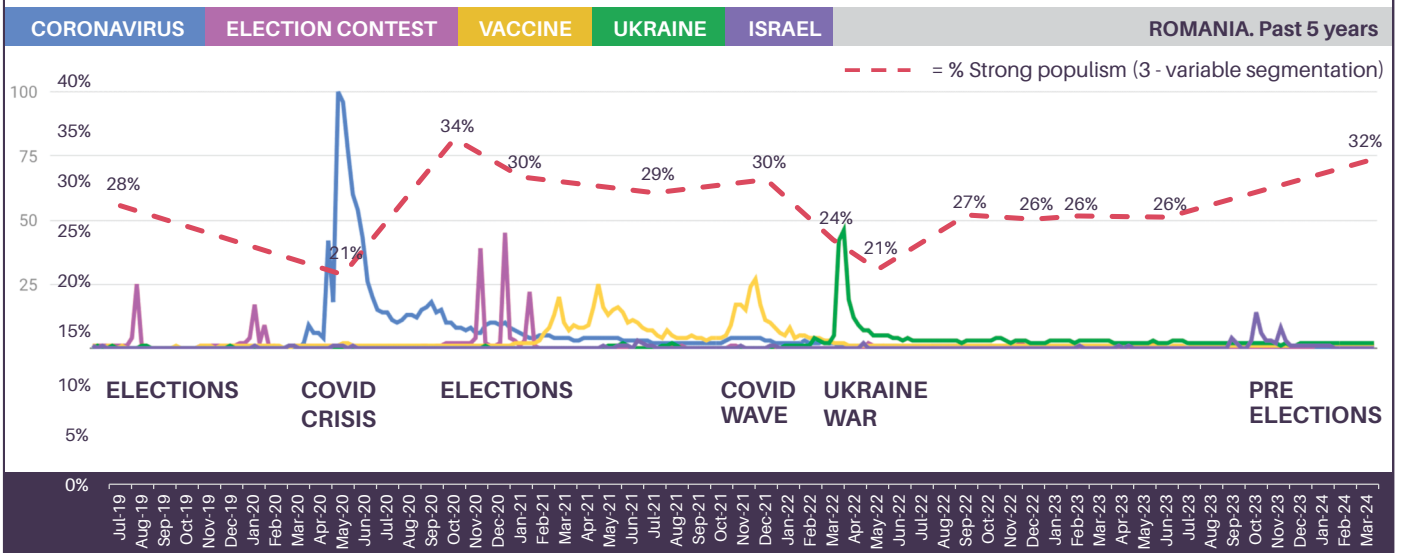- 29% MODERATE POPULISM

DATA SOURCE: CPD SNSPA, March 2024

From OPPOSITION VS. POWER to EXTREMIST VS. MAINSTREAM dynamics:
- Pre-pandemic, mainstream opposition parties with populist rhetoric had the support of the populist public.
- Post-pandemic, there's been a pivot towards a new, extremist party with a stark anti-European and ultra-nationalist agenda.

Evolution of Populist Orientations vs. Real-Time Events

CORONAVIRUS | ELECTION CONTEST | VACCINE | UKRAINE | ISRAEL   ROMANIA. Past 5 years

- - - = % Strong populism (3 - variable segmentation)

Data points: 28%, 21%, 34%, 30%, 29%, 30%, 24%, 21%, 27%, 26%, 26%, 26%, 32%

ELECTIONS   COVID CRISIS   ELECTIONS   COVID WAVE   UKRAINE WAR   PRE ELECTIONS

(Timeline: Jul-19 to Mar-24)

DATA SOURCES. Event timeline: Google Trends. Survey data: CPD SNSPA, 2019-2024

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5 | Conclusions

- By developing a new method to assess populist inclinations through the incorporation of a third variable, we achieve more precise estimates and a more nuanced segmentation.

- Analyzing how populist inclinations evolve over time, through repeated measurements, reveals the factors that might contribute to their rise.

- There are significant correlations among the composing variables, affirming their accuracy in measuring populist dimensions. These results validate our methods as effective tools for populism research, showcasing their reliability and conceptual coherence.

Factors diminishing populist attitudes:
- Post-election periods
- Crisis situations, such as the Ukraine war

Factors favoring populist attitudes:
- Populist attitudes increase with voting intentions for opposition parties and with conspiracy beliefs.
- Electoral events significantly amplify populist sentiments.
- The approach of elections and diminishing interest in the Ukraine war are currently fueling a resurgence in populist attitudes.