Forging bonds beyond the national area. Exploring international interaction among radical right populist parties: the case of AUR

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The rise of radical right populism across Europe has been linked to broader societal shifts and individual susceptibility to populist narratives. While existing research has explored electoral dynamics, leadership, and organizational strategies, less attention has been given to how these parties gain legitimacy through international engagement. This paper introduces the concept of legitimation from abroad, a multilayered process through which radical right populist parties align with international actors to counter stigmatization and bolster their credibility. Using the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) as a case study, we analyze how transnational interactions, such as intellectual networking, participation in European political groups and symbolic international events, contribute to their political survival and institutional recognition. Drawing on party documents and secondary literature, this study provides new insights into how radical right populist parties strategically leverage the international arena to enhance their legitimacy and sustain their political influence.

1 Introduction

The rise of radical right populism across the European Union (EU) and beyond has been linked to a revival of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde, 2004). While some scholars attribute this extraordinary moment for radical right populism to broad societal developments such as the globalization of markets, increased EU integration, or the individualization of society, others have inquired into the susceptibility to populism at the individual level (Huber et al., 2023). An increasingly solid body of literature highlights the attractiveness of radical right populist parties due to their organizational capacity, communication strategies, and, last but not least, leadership (van Kessel and Albertazzi, 2021). In recent years, a growing strand of research has provided a new line of analysis and has examined how the reconfiguration of traditional articulations between citizenship (with the associated political rights) and the territory of the state has contributed to this extraordinary momentum. The starting point has been that the extension of voting rights to non-resident citizens in states with significant populations abroad has the potential to alter election outcomes (Wellman et al., 2023). Within the related discussion on electoral preferences among non-resident voters (Lafleur and Sánchez-Domínguez, 2015; Turcu and Urbatsch, 2023), case

studies have shown that, in certain countries, radical right populist parties have increased their electoral performance by mobilizing external voters (Jakobson et al., 2023; Soare and Tufis, 2023). These findings looked puzzling as migration studies often considered that emigrants are more open to cultural change and have a cosmopolitan worldview (Caraus, 2018). The perceived incompatibility between the communities abroad and the radical right populist agenda was further connected to the fact that such parties advocated for restricting overseas voting rights and/or invested limited resources in parties abroad (Turcu and Urbatsch, 2023; Waterbury, 2020).

All in all, an increasing number of scholars (de Reguero and Jakobson, 2023; Jakobson et al., 2020) have been documenting that communities abroad have become more open to a populist vote because the nativist rhetoric connects well with the nostalgia of the emigrant communities and/or as a protest against the political establishment's decisions that pushed them to emigration. In parallel, there is increased evidence that these parties view the international arena as appealing not only as a source of political power (votes, resources, and identity-building within the communities abroad) but also as vehicles for a wider symbolic empowerment (Abrahamsen et al., 2020). More specifically, they became active by joining networks that reinforce the credibility of their agendas (Mos, 2023). The literature shows that radical right populist parties increasingly cooperate across borders, whether within the supranational arena of the European Parliament (McDonnell and Werner, 2019) or through (in)formal international platforms that promote mutual autonomy and symbolic interdependence. An example can be the attendance of far-right politicians at high-profile events like the 2025 U.S. presidential inauguration (The Guardian, 2025).

Radical right populist parties increasingly engage in transnational interactions, driven by a shared commitment to preserving national culture, traditions, and civilizational values (Mos and Macedo Piovezan, 2024; Hale and Laruelle, 2021; Brubaker, 2017). While research has examined the triggers and outcomes of this mobilization, limited attention has been paid to the intermediate process through which these parties build international alliances and gain legitimacy.

This paper addresses a significant gap in the literature by introducing the concept of legitimation from abroad, a multilayered process through which parties deploy discursive and material set of activities aiming at producing an authorized discourse about themselves by aligning with international peers and launching a counter stigmatization. This process is pivotal in reframing the radical right populist agenda as appropriate and desirable, thereby ensuring organizational survival and enhancing political credibility.

The guiding research question for this study is: *How do radical right populist parties utilize international engagement to enhance their credibility as viable political actors?* To explore this, we focus on the Alliance for the Union of Romanians as an exceptionally revelatory case (Eisenhardt, 1989). Since its electoral breakthrough in 2020, AUR has experienced sustained political marginalization and discursive distancing, with rare exceptions, such as in 2021, when USR PLUS collaborated with AUR to submit a motion of no confidence against Prime Minister Florin Cîțu's government. In response to these domestic challenges manifested in persistent marginalization and widespread vilification in public discourse AUR has actively pursued both national and international strategies to strengthen its legitimacy. Notably, at the discursive level, elements of AUR's rhetoric have been adopted by factions and leaders from mainstream parties. In 2024, the

National Liberal Party's presidential campaign slogan *"With honor and faith in serving the country"*, echoed themes central to AUR's messaging. What is particularly relevant in our analysis is how international engagement functions as a strategic mechanism for overcoming the "liability of newness" (Stinchcombe, 1965). By mobilizing support and recognition beyond national borders, AUR has been able to challenge its domestic marginalization and lay the groundwork for long-term viability, illustrating how transnational engagement can serve as a powerful tool of political legitimation. By integrating insights from organizational theory with empirical evidence from AUR's cross-border mobilization, this research offers a nuanced understanding of how radical right populist parties navigate the complex process of building legitimacy across both national and international arenas. Methodologically, we draw on traditional desk research, including secondary literature and party documents.

In the remainder of the paper, we will first elaborate on the theoretical framework, clarifying the key assumptions underlying the concept of "legitimation from abroad" and its relevance for understanding the strategies of radical right populist parties. Next, we will focus on the specificities of the selected case, highlighting the contextual and organizational factors that make the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) an exceptionally revelatory example. We will then present the strategies pursued by AUR to build its legitimacy through both national and international alliances. Finally, the discussion section will synthesize the findings, address their broader implications for the study of radical right populism, and conclude with key insights and potential avenues for future research.

2 The search for legitimacy: the extraterritorial roads

Radical right populism is commonly characterized by a defining triad of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde, 2004). The literature broadly agrees that, despite contextual differences, these parties share a core ideological framework centered on a Manichean worldview in which society is divided into two opposing camps: the virtuous *us* and the threatening *them*. This dualistic narrative posits that the homogeneous community of *natives* is under siege by internal and external groups that jeopardize its cultural integrity, socio-economic well-being, and even its survival. The symbiotic relationship between nativism and populism (Betz, 2019) helps to explain why radical right populist parties frequently equate the pure people with our people, a cohesive cultural and ethnic majority. In direct connection, these parties typically position themselves in opposition to corrupt elites at both the national and international level (e.g., the EU, WTO), who are portrayed as working against the interests of ordinary native citizens by favoring various minorities and alien interests perceived disruptive to the national community (Svraka, 2024). For this extensive body of scholarship, the underlying assumption has consistently been that the radical right populist party family is inherently prone to conflict at the international level. Right-wing populist parties tend to advocate for a territorially restricted notion of sovereign community, opposing national and international elites and institutions that they perceive as being at odds with the interests of the national community and a geographically bounded sovereignty. Under the slogan "our community first," parties, movements, and leaders advance an agenda focused on reclaiming

control over national politics, implicitly defining themselves in opposition to the international dimension. The potential of conflict in the international arena is further accentuated by competing narratives about contested territories and communities, as in the case of the Romanian-Hungarian relationship (Euractiv, 2024). However, as Abrahamsen et al. (2020) astutely observe, there is a visible international dimension to contemporary radical right populism that manifests through both loose transnational networks and more formalized interactions, such as those within the European Parliament, or through bilateral and multilateral meetings aimed at fostering state-level, party-level, or intellectual-level cooperation around shared illiberal agendas. On this basis, Mos and Macedo Piovezan (2024) connect the emergence of this international dimension to a broader legitimation strategy, which is explored across three strands of literature. The first strand focuses on intellectual history, emphasizing shared ideological traditions and intellectual roots (Varga and Buzogány, 2022). The second examines how right-wing populists are increasingly engaging in cross-border cooperation (McDonnell and Werner, 2019), while the third explores a sectoral dimension, analyzing the relationship between foreign policy and nativism, often equating the latter with isolationism. What unites these strands is the pursuit of international (and implicitly national) legitimation by positioning these parties as like-minded actors committed to shared objectives and norms (Mos and Macedo Piovezan, 2024). Fundamentally, this process seeks to enhance their credibility in managing the democratic agenda, understood in its etymological sense as an agenda whose legitimacy derives from adherence to the will of the (homogeneously ethnic/cultural) people.

This necessitates a theoretical bridge to the literature on legitimacy and legitimation, fundamental topics in the social sciences, closely linked to Max Weber's reflections on the sources of authority. The underlying assumption is that legitimacy constitutes the basis of political obedience and compliance. More specifically, legitimacy has been described as the foundation upon which a party's discourses, actions, or policies are recognized as desirable, proper, or appropriate within the system of formal and informal norms, values, and beliefs that define a given (democratic) order (this definition elaborates on Suchman, 1995). While contemporary party politics has been shaped by processes such as increased individualization, rising levels of education, secularization, and higher interconnectedness, the question of how political actors maintain legitimacy remains central. This challenge is particularly acute for parties whose sources of authority are weakened by the novelty of their platforms, whether in terms of organizational structure, ideological content, or human resources. Moreover, their legitimacy is further strained by their propensity to disrupt established party dynamics, mobilizing new or niche contested issues, deploying harsh anti-establishment rhetoric to undermine the perceived competence of mainstream parties, and, more broadly, challenging (partially or entirely) the rules, informal codes, and policy priorities that structure the political system (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). To enhance their credibility, these parties may seek alignment with ideologically similar parties, movements, or leaders, engaging in formal or informal exchanges of ideas, organizational models, and strategic technologies (Bar-On, 2021). Such interactions provide them with a channel of ideational synchronization and arenas of (in)formal exchanges, and policy discussions (Stewart, 2020). Indeed, this process of legitimation operates on both a symbolic-discursive level, whereby parties frame themselves as part of a broader ideological movement

able to express alternative ideological assumptions (McAdams and Castrillon, 2022), and a pragmatic-utilitarian level, in which collaboration with like-minded actors yields concrete material and political advantages that enhance their social acceptability and institutional standing (Mammone, 2015; Bluhm and Varga, 2018).

While the complexity of these interactions is well-documented, the precise sequence of actions within remains unclear. Beyond mere description, mapping these steps and identifying recurring patterns can provide a more nuanced understanding of the process of legitimation, enabling stronger cross-case comparisons. This approach also clarifies the structure and stability of international cooperation among radical right parties, movements, and leaders, distinguishing between temporary tactical alignments and long-term strategic alliances.

3 Between domestic and transnational recognition: AUR's case

The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) was officially registered on September 19, 2019, and launched on December 1, 2019, Romania's National Day. The selection of this date, commemorating the 1918 unification of Transylvania, Bessarabia, and Bukovina with the Romanian Kingdom, underscores AUR's ideological commitment to the "Great Union" ideal and its vision of national identity as encompassing not only the people within Romania's borders but also co-ethnic communities residing abroad. By asserting claims for recognition beyond Romania's territorial boundaries, AUR strategically positions itself as a bridge between disparate Romanian communities shaped by the shifting borders of World War II or by the recent phenomenon of emigration. The party's logo, featuring a map of Greater Romania, further reflects its nationalist aspirations. AUR's inaugural congress, held in Iași on January 24, 2020, reinforced this identity by marking another foundational moment in Romanian statehood, the 1859 unification of Moldova and Wallachia. On this basis, AUR's ideological framework emphasizes national sovereignty as the cornerstone of its legitimacy, particularly in opposition to European Union norms perceived as detrimental to Romania's economic and cultural interests (Soare and Tufiș, 2023).

Since its inception, AUR's platform has consistently reflected the three core elements of radical right populism: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. Nativism is central to the party's identity, evident in Simion's repeated calls to defend Romania's national character against perceived external threats, particularly immigration. He often portrayed EU migration policies as dangers to Romanian sovereignty, intertwining national identity with traditional family values and Orthodox religious beliefs. This emphasis on family and religion suggests an organic ideological commitment, rather than a purely strategic adoption. Authoritarianism is also prominent, reflected in calls for stronger law enforcement and the restoration of "honor" and "discipline," especially regarding crime and immigration control. These positions align with a hierarchical view of society and the valorization of order, authority, and national discipline, again pointing to a deep-rooted ideological stance. Populism is manifested in AUR's framing of politics as a battle between the virtuous "ordinary people" and a corrupt elite. Simion's rhetoric of political "revolution" and his promotion of direct democracy through national referenda underscore this populist dimension. AUR proposed several referenda,

including a 2021 initiative to constitutionally define marriage as between a man and a woman, and a 2023 proposal to protect the right to cash payments in the Constitution. These initiatives reflect both an organic populist appeal and a strategic effort to mobilize broad public support on culturally resonant issues.

It is also worth noting that while values such as religion, the defense of traditions, and family appear as intrinsic elements of AUR's ideological core, other components of the platform, such as the party's strong emphasis on liberty, reflect an identity dimension that at times sits uneasily alongside AUR's authoritarian tendencies, suggesting a tension within the party's ideological construction. However, in our understanding, this emphasis on liberty is linked not only to the denunciation of the communist past, but also to a strategic alignment with elements of neo-conservatism that some of the party's representatives, such as C. Târziu, have championed from the very beginning. On this basis, a key element of AUR's public discourse has been its strong opposition to COVID-19 measures, including vaccine requirements and mask mandates. This stance symbolized the defense of individual liberties against a state framed as being controlled by corrupt elites and external forces, particularly the EU's calls for vaccination and health measures. This approach mirrors strategies adopted by other radical right populist parties, including France's National Rally and Italy's Lega, which similarly opposed vaccine mandates and lockdowns, presenting themselves as defenders of national sovereignty and personal freedom against both domestic elites and European pressures. In this respect, these parties all capitalized on the pandemic to reinforce their anti-elite and anti-globalist rhetoric.

More into depth, AUR's platform revolves around four interconnected dimensions: the promotion of the traditional family; the defense of the fatherland, with an emphasis on safeguarding Romanian cultural continuity; the elevation of the Christian faith as the essence of Romanian national identity; and the assertion of individual liberty against perceived state overreach.[1] The COVID-19 pandemic significantly influenced AUR's political trajectory, amplifying its anti-establishment appeal (Doiciar and Cretan, 2021). The party strongly opposed pandemic restrictions, mask mandates, and vaccination campaigns, framing these measures as threats to individual freedoms. This approach reinforced AUR's "liberty" pillar, portraying the party as a defender of personal rights against state and international intervention. The war in Ukraine further shaped AUR's positioning. Initially hesitant, the party aligned with mainstream criticisms of Russian aggression while simultaneously voicing concerns over the economic burdens of supporting Ukraine, including aid packages and assistance for Ukrainian refugees in Romania (Soare, 2023). AUR also expressed anxieties about the erosion of Romanian identity among kin-communities in Ukraine. This ambivalence illustrates the party's balancing act between aligning with nationalist concerns and maintaining broader political relevance.

AUR's emergence was not an isolated event but rather the result of pre-existing ideological and organizational structures. The party can be understood as having three roots, two of which predated its formal registration, and provided it with ideological and organizational stability.

The first root is the unionist movement and nationalist activism. AUR's leader, George Simion, has been central to this development. His political career became visible in 2018 when he ran as an independent candidate for the European Parliament, securing only 1.3% of the vote. Despite this, his campaign, marked by the slogan "Slap in the face to political parties, vote for a man!" (George Simion, 2019) provided a platform to amplify his nationalist, anti-elite rhetoric. Simion's activism dates back to the early 2000s, with initiatives such as the National Mourning Day (2011), Bălți Feels Romanian (2012), and the Centenary March (2018), all aimed at promoting Romanian-Moldovan unification. His leadership of the Platform Action 2012 helped build networks among Romanian communities in Moldova. This culminated in the placement of Boris Volosatîi, a Moldovan citizen with Romanian citizenship, at the top of AUR's diaspora list for the lower chamber of the Parliament in 2020 and the launching of a legally registered homonymous party in the Republic of Moldova in March 2021. Simion also expanded his activism to Romanian communities in Ukraine.

Beyond unionism, Simion cultivated additional mobilization channels that provided AUR with an expanded resource base. Simion also promoted an environmental protection agenda framed in nationalist terms, emphasizing the beauty and harmony of nature while opposing the exploitation of national patrimony by foreign companies (Mihai and Ungureanu, 2024). This advocacy gained prominence, particularly in opposition to the Roșia Montană Gold Corporation, which he framed as emblematic of global capitalist exploitation. Additionally, Simion's association with football supporter groups, particularly United Under the Tricolor, provided another mobilization avenue, blending sports with nationalist messaging.

The second root of AUR is the Orthodox and Conservative Cultural Movement, initially co-led by Claudiu Târziu. A journalist and conservative activist, Târziu played a prominent role in the Coalition for the Family, which sought to constitutionally define marriage as a union between a man and a woman. His opposition to abortion and advocacy for Orthodox Christian values anchored AUR within Romania's traditionalist electorate. Târziu's involvement with Rost Online, a publication linked to interwar nationalist movements, further reinforced AUR's ideological appeal. Figures like Sorin Lavric, AUR's Senate president, added intellectual nationalism to the party's ideological framework, often criticizing liberalism as a threat to Romania's cultural fabric. Despite controversies surrounding Lavric's statements on women, minorities, and intellectual elitism, his contributions solidified AUR's appeal among the conservative nationalist community.

The third root is resistance to state overreach. This theme, emphasizing the defense of individual freedoms, found a prominent advocate in Gheorghe Piperea, a lawyer and professor at the University of Bucharest. Piperea gained public recognition for spearheading class-action lawsuits against commercial banks over allegedly abusive fees. His popularity surged during the pandemic as he vocally criticized vaccines and restrictions, framing them as state abuses infringing on personal liberties. In 2023, Piperea joined AUR and took on the role of coordinating the campaign for the 2024 European Parliament elections, culminating in his election as an MEP.

AUR's mixed ideological origins and organizational structures have been complemented by its transnational expansion since 2019, with branches established in most EU member states, Moldova, the UK, and the US. Soare and Tufis (2023) document the party abroad's

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1 https://partidulaur.ro/

reliance on associational networks linked to its main ideological roots. The unionist and pro-religious factions appear to be the most active in mobilizing support abroad. Scholars such as Crăciun and Țăranu (2023) have linked this transnational mobilization to AUR's strong performance in the 2020 elections, where it secured over 23% of the diaspora vote, making it the second-largest party in overseas electoral constituencies. In the 2024 elections, AUR became the most voted party abroad, securing 25.7% of the external vote, primarily from West European countries.

Overall, AUR's political trajectory illustrates the complex interplay between nationalism, populism, and transnationalism in contemporary European politics. While its ideological foundations are deeply rooted in Romanian nationalist traditions (Mihai and Ungureanu, 2024), its legitimation strategies reflect broader trends in radical right populism across Europe. Romania presents a particularly compelling case for analyzing this under-theorized aspect of political legitimation. AUR constitutes an exceptionally revelatory case (Yin, 2009) for at least four reasons: the party's political ostracism and the imposition of a cordon sanitaire by other parties, its hybrid ideological foundations, its transnational organizational mobilization, and its pursuit of legitimacy beyond national borders.

Drawing on the above, we build on Lippi (2024) and assume that legitimation is inherently a political process linked to a political organization's need to justify its exercise of power and, implicitly, the content of its political agenda. This process is not merely about securing participation and compliance from below but also about activating broader recognition, both individual and collective, that serves as validation of its authority. Legitimation, therefore, consists of a sequence of actions designed to establish an organization's credibility and appropriateness, not only in the short term but, crucially, in the long run (Lippi, 2024). In direct connection with our research, on an increasingly globalized world and within the context of intensifying transnational politics, we argue that the process of legitimation extends beyond the national level to the international arena. For radical right populist parties, this transnational dimension is particularly strategic due to the widespread implementation of national and international *cordons sanitaires*, which act as catalysts for intensified efforts to seek recognition. This dynamic unfolds in two interconnected ways: first, through a proactive pursuit of validation from like-minded organizations and actors, and, second, through counter-narrative strategies aimed at contesting their exclusion from mainstream political spaces.

4 Intertwined strategies of legitimation

Considering the existence of a *cordon sanitaire* imposed since its electoral breakthrough in 2020, the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR) has actively invested in both national and international strategies of legitimation. Domestically, this effort has centered on the progressive construction of a functional territorial organization and the cultivation of a network of ideologically aligned individuals. This national dimension was particularly marked by statutory reforms in 2022 and 2023, which led to the consolidation of the party's leadership, from a provisional dual structure to a singular leadership figure, as well as to the strengthening of its organizational

network both within Romania and among diaspora communities (Soare and Tufis, 2023).

Concurrently, AUR mobilized a cohort of public intellectuals known for their conservative stances. These individuals are united by an emphasis on national sovereignty, Christianity, traditional values, and personal liberties. Symbolic references to iconic Romanian historical figures have played a crucial role in this narrative. For instance, during the promotion of AUR candidates for the 2024 European Parliament elections, Vlad Țepeș was presented as an emblematic figure of moral purification (Radio Europa Liberă, 2024). These references coexist with invocations of national conservative/orthodox thinkers such as Titu Maiorescu, Mihai Eminescu, Take Ionescu, Nicolae Iorga, Petru Tutea or Dumitru Staniloaie. International intellectual sources also figure prominently in AUR's ideological landscape. Senator Sorin Lavric, for example, mourned the death of Roger Scruton, whom he praised as a fearless defender of Christian Europe and an outspoken critic of political correctness and EU bureaucracy. Such ideological affinities have helped attract figures like Mihail Neamțu, a long-time political actor who authored the 2011 manifesto for a "New Republic" grounded in personal responsibility and the spiritual renewal of European civilization based on Judeo-Christian values. Neamțu joined AUR's ranks and has referred to the party as an "army of crusaders" fighting against both the "ticks of transition" and the "sharks of Brussels" (Scena9, 2024).

In this vein, AUR further institutionalized its ideological project through the launch of the *Mihai Eminescu Institute for Conservative Political Studies* in October 2022. The institute aims to promote conservative values through academic and cultural initiatives. Its inaugural event, the international conference *Sovereignty Today!*, held in the Romanian Parliament, featured Târziu's symbolic declaration that conservatives must act as "antibodies against the disease called neo-Marxism." He argued that only conservatives had preserved the "ancient values of their peoples." He framed the resurgence of conservative politics in countries like Poland, Hungary, Italy, as part of a broader "conservative revolution." The same month, the Institute sponsored another international event, *That Europe We Believe In!*, featuring representatives from European right-wing and conservative parties including PiS (Poland), Likud (Israel), Reconquête! (France), True Finns (Finland), Vlaams Belang (Belgium), Chega (Portugal), Dveri (Serbia), and Brothers of Italy, alongside journalists and think tanks from Italy and Poland (AUR, 2024a).

Beyond high-profile international conferences, the Institute has also engaged in intensive cultural outreach at a national level, organizing a national caravan across seven counties beginning in Suceava. Key speakers, including Târziu, Lavric, and sociologist Radu Baltasiu, emphasized, among others, the role of the traditional family as a bulwark against the "avalanche of neo-Marxist madness" and more in general the danger of globalization (Amos News, 2023). While George Simion continued investing in public discourse through a populist, nativist, and authoritarian style, AUR crafted a strategy of intellectual legitimation aimed at both increasing AUR's domestic credibility and forging international alliances. In this vein, Târziu took the stage as the party intellectual and regularly frames AUR as a conservative party, explicitly distancing it from simplistic nationalist, populist, or patriotic labels, emphasizing instead the belonging to a specific and long-established ideological tradition (Ziua News, 2023). This conservative legitimation is further reinforced through initiatives like the "Gabriel Constantinescu" Political Academy, which offered bimonthly training

courses open to a widely defined public through teaching modules on conservative doctrine, the relationship between politics and religion, political conduct and communication, legal foundations, and modern Romanian history (Mihai Eminescu Institute, 2023). The apex of this ideological legitimation came in April 2024, when AUR hosted the international conference *Make Europe Great Again* (MEGA) in the lead-up to the European Parliament elections. The conference, described on its official webpage as a response to the "globalist left" intent on corrupting "people's minds and souls," was portrayed as the largest conservative gathering ever held in Romania (MEGA, 2024). According to Târziu himself, the event aimed to "complete the Conservative Revolution," positioning AUR firmly within a global conservative movement and outlining its strategic alignment ahead of the forthcoming European Parliament elections. International coverage of the event confirmed its ambitious scope, together with the participation of relevant political from the ECR community, such as Carlo Fidanza and Ryszard Czarnecki (del Patriota, 2024).

These initiatives can be interpreted as part of a broader strategy of identity legitimation, articulated through a sequence of actions aimed not only at establishing AUR's credibility as a national political actor, a consistent objective for a newly established party seeking survival and increased electoral performance (Bolleyer and Bytzek, 2013), but, more significantly, at aligning the party with a consolidated, ideologically affiliated international/supranational network. This network is structured through personal linkages and ideological affinities among parties, movements, and activists from diverse political and geographical contexts, and provides AUR with both enhanced credibility and strategic specificity. More specifically, beyond the symbolic dimension of belonging, this alignment pursues a pragmatic goal: to secure tangible support from ideologically similar parties, movements, and activists through formal and informal exchanges. In this framework, identity legitimation implies an ideological dimension that functions as a source of symbolic power, constructing a meaningful connection between AUR's political agenda and a broader *Weltanschauung* that transcends national policy agendas and programmatic proposals. This legitimation is built around the need to voice how AUR interprets and addresses the needs of the Romanian community, reawakened and re-engaged through a multilayered network of contacts, including prominent conservative American influencers, Israeli and Latin American politicians and activists, and different MEPs. The underlying activities unfold across three interrelated dimensions: national, international, and supranational. On the national level, AUR aims to consolidate a coalition of Romanian intellectuals, activists, and politicians who not only reinforce the credibility of its programmatic portfolio but also contribute to the articulation of an alternative (and more visible) narrative to dominant neoliberal, progressive, and European values. Simultaneously, the party seeks to position itself within a broader ideological constellation of actors that challenges mainstream paradigms and offers a pragmatic-utilitarian platform. Through these targeted collaborations, AUR secures concrete political benefits, most notably, its integration into a European Parliament group, but also to claim to be part of a cohesive and recognizable ideological family, beyond simple labels like patriots, populist, or sovereigntist. This strategic positioning facilitated AUR's accession to the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group following the 2024 European elections.

These cumulative efforts, ranging from institutional initiatives to the cultivation of personal networks, have shaped a coherent legitimation strategy grounded in intellectual acknowledgement,

ideological alignment, and the systematic development of strategic contacts. Taken together, these actions and discourses represent a deliberate strategy of identity legitimation. While this strategy contributes to the party's organizational consolidation through targeted processes of socialization and recruitment, it also enables AUR to gain broader recognition beyond the national frontiers. The ideological core of this legitimation strategy does not abandon the standard populist repertoire; rather, it builds upon it by elaborating themes such as the defense of individual and national freedom, the promotion of Christian values, the centrality of the traditional family, the protection of natural resources, and the preservation of national sovereignty. Keywords such as "family," "life," "freedom," "patriotism," "nationalism," "national reunification," and "national interest" constitute the symbolic architecture upon which this narrative rests.

In parallel, AUR invested in more party-like networking. Following what appears to be a functional specialization, party leader George Simion emerged as the chief architect of these legitimation efforts. This has been part of AUR's broader strategy to forge alliances within the European conservative landscape in order to boost its international profile and influence. In public statements and interviews, Simion clearly expressed his party's strong intent to cooperate with like-minded conservative forces in the European Parliament.[2] While AUR's initial attempts at international outreach were portrayed in the media as failures, the party's actions gradually gained stability. Within a few years, AUR became a regular participant in bilateral and international meetings with other parties. In 2022, then co-president Simion was portrayed in the media as an impostor: although not officially invited to a VOX-led meeting in Spain, he posted on Twitter claiming to represent Romania at the event, alongside PNȚCD. The episode made headlines, with reports stating that Simion had been expelled from the hotel by the very European sovereigntists he claimed to be joining (Ziaristii.com, 2022). Despite this initial setback, in December 2023 Simion participated in a debate organized by the ECR group in Pistoia, Italy, focused on the role of farmers, breeders, and fishers in sustainable development. The event featured notable participants, including Nicola Procaccini, co-chair of the ECR Group, and Francesco Lollobrigida, Italy's Minister of Agriculture. During the event, Simion expressed AUR's opposition to EU policies such as the Green Deal, Fit for 55, and RePowerEU, offering the support of his party's MEPs to oppose these initiatives and defend national economies.[3] Among other international meetings backed by communities of activists from abroad,[4] this intervention signaled AUR's commitment to advancing conservative values within the ECR framework and to strengthening ties with key ECR leaders. These intensified diplomatic efforts, which demonstrated AUR's alignment with the objectives of European conservatives, began to yield results. Notable among these was the party's participation in *Atreju*, the highly symbolic festival organized by Brothers of Italy, where AUR was welcomed as part of an emerging ideological alliance (Etruria News, 2023).

On this basis, AUR was formally accepted into the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group in June 2024. In January 2025,

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2 https://deliberatio.eu/en/opinions/the-political-force-that-will-stop-the-neo-marxist-madness-comes-from-bucharest-an-interview-with-george-simion

3 https://aurnews.ro/2023/12/02/george-simion-invitat-special-la-dezbaterea-organizata-de-grupul-ecr-in-italia/

4 https://partidulaur.ro/tag/diaspora/

Simion was elected Vice-President of the ECR, further enhancing his international visibility. Since then, he has attended high-profile events, including President Donald Trump's inauguration and the CPAC conference in the United States (G4Media.ro, 2025). In parallel, dynamic party figures such as MEP Georgiana Teodorescu have maintained an active presence on blogs and podcasts with conservative leanings, contributing to the symbolic legitimation of the party through informal media channels.[5] A pivotal component of this transnational networking strategy was the temporary co-optation of Cristian Terheş, a Romanian MEP elected in 2019 on the Social Democratic Party (PSD) ticket, who later joined the National Peasant Christian Democratic Party and affiliated with the ECR group. His integration into ECR helped pave the way for AUR's accession, as Terheş ran on AUR's list in the 2024 European Parliament elections. The party's entry into the ECR was celebrated as a major success, as it marked a significant step in AUR's international legitimation, while implicitly symbolizing The ECR's break with Orbán's Fidesz party (EU News, 2024). While it is still too early to offer a comprehensive assessment of the organizational, intra-party, or behavioral consequences of this affiliation, preliminary observations suggest that ECR membership has allowed AUR to access the group's institutional platforms and significantly increased the party's international visibility. Moreover, this affiliation has incentivized AUR to adjust its political messaging, making its program appear more compatible with dominant discourses within the EU. This includes a shift away from a hard Euroscepticism toward a narrative that acknowledges the existing EU and NATO treaties, while simultaneously emphasizing Romania's equal rights and strategic role as a member state. This recalibration is reflected in official party documents, such as the most recent party platform (AUR, 2024b), which increasingly align AUR's discourse with major European fellow partners such as Brothers of Italy and Poland's Law and Justice party.

Both the international and supranational arenas of legitimation have also benefited from the active role played by AUR's extraterritorial organizational branches spread across Europe and beyond. As documented in earlier research (Soare and Tufiş, 2023), communities of Romanian migrants in countries like Italy and Spain, who became AUR sympathizers, militants, or even formal members, have acted as critical bridging agents between AUR and ideologically aligned parties in their countries of residence, including Brothers of Italy and VOX. These connections created opportunities for regular cross-national interaction and institutional interconnectedness. Drawing on the transnationalism literature (Schiller et al., 1992), these exchanges can be interpreted as part of broader transnational political fields constructed by migrants, linking their country of origin and country of residence through affiliation with ideologically similar parties. In this framework, AUR's diaspora presence not only bolstered its electoral performance abroad but also enhanced the party's capacity for sustained transnational engagement. This has enabled both central party officials and parliamentary representatives to conduct regular visits abroad, meeting with members of the Romanian diaspora as well as with representatives of parties such as the Alternative für Deutschland, Vox in Spain, and Brothers of Italy. This ongoing process of transnational relationship-building has contributed not only to electoral mobilization, but also to the deepening of ideational exchanges and strategic cooperation across party networks.

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5 Conclusion and future research agenda

This paper highlights the analytical value of bridging the literature on legitimacy and legitimation, particularly in the context of emerging political parties navigating multiple arenas of political interaction. Specifically, it explores the concept of legitimation from abroad that we unwrap as a dynamic, multilayered process through which a party, in this case, AUR, strategically engaged in diverse activities to craft an authorized discourse about itself. By forging alliances with international political parties, intellectuals, and activists, the party aimed to counter stigmatization and refine its radical right populist agenda. This process involved incorporating increasingly conservative elements to enhance their ideological coherence and broader appeal. At the same time, these international engagements helped the party cultivate an image of legitimacy and desirability, strengthening its political credibility. As a result, it attracted greater human resources and expanded its organizational capacity, ultimately reinforcing its long-term survival.

By tracing the discursive and strategic evolution of AUR, this analysis has provided evidence of a multilayered process through which the party sought recognition as a legitimate political actor. This process has not relied solely on mobilizing domestic consensus or consolidating organizational structures, but has also involved sustained engagement at international, supranational, and transnational levels. In our reconstruction, this latter dimension is particularly significant for a new party that has faced persistent marginalization and vilification within national politics. It emerges as a crucial mechanism for addressing the organizational challenge known as the "liability of newness" (Stinchcombe, 1965), offering an alternative pathway to legitimacy and long-term viability. Existing research has overlooked these external dimensions, focusing predominantly on national-level dynamics. In this paper, we broaden the concept of the liability of newness by empirically demonstrating the importance of international and transnational conditions under which new parties are more likely to survive. We argue that beyond borders engagement represents a meaningful repertoire of strategic actions aimed at political survival and, ultimately, the pursuit of political relevance. While recent controversies, such as AUR's role in supporting Călin Georgescu's presidential bid, ultimately blocked by the Constitutional Court for its incompatibility with the constitutional order, have intensified internal tensions between party leaders George Simion and Claudiu Târziu (Digi24.ro, 2025), these developments do not invalidate the longer-term constellation of activities geared toward a multilayered legitimation. In line with the empirical aim of this paper, we have traced how AUR has succeeded in establishing alignments with ideologically similar parties, movements, and political entrepreneurs through both formal and informal exchanges. These exchanges have enabled the party to cultivate what we have conceptualized as identity-based legitimation, a mode of legitimation that draws symbolic power from a community of like-minded actors and counter-hegemonic narratives. At the same time, based on the above reconstruction, identity-based legitimation is not purely symbolic or expressive. AUR has embedded this symbolic capital into a utilitarian logic, allowing it to secure tangible political benefits, most notably its integration into the ECR group in the European Parliament. This affiliation has not only amplified the party's visibility and access to supranational resources but has also opened up new channels for lobbying and agenda-setting,

including appeals to foreign governments on nationally sensitive issues during the 2024–2025 political crisis.

The findings suggest several promising avenues for further research. First, there is a need to better understand the interplay between symbolic alignment and pragmatic outcomes in the context of new parties' strategies of legitimation beyond national frontiers. Future studies could explore how discursive proximity to a broader ideological family, particularly across borders, can be strategically mobilized to influence both domestic and supranational political processes. Second, additional inquiry could investigate the consequences of this international/supranational/transnational socialization on party organization, leadership dynamics, and voting behavior, especially in settings such as the European Parliament, where national and supranational interests often intersect. Finally, comparative research might consider how similar identity-based legitimation strategies are employed by other new parties and whether such strategies signal a broader transformation in how legitimacy is constructed and operationalized in contemporary party politics.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

MB: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. MC: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. OL: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. SS: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The authors declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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