

Fascists in the House: What Can We Make of Far Right Success and Low Turn Out in Romania's Latest Elections?

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Romania's recent parliamentary elections had two spectacular, seemingly surprising results. On the one hand, the advance of the Romanian far-right (9% of the votes for AUR, the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians); on the other hand, the very low voter turnout (31% of registered voters). Here are some conclusions that can be drawn from this.

The advancement of the far-right has obvious class implications: the precariat and the guest workers (basically the classes below the middle class) have revolted against the way the ruling liberal-right has managed the crisis and against the arrogance of the middle class who has been laughing at them. No doubt about it: this result is an expression of popular outrage against politics that serves solely the interests of the middle class, both ideologically and materially.

This highlights a serious anomaly in the current political structure, namely that the current (Romanian) parliamentary structure and party logic are too narrow to exercise democracy based on actual social needs. In short: the system is closed to the left and open to the far right.

AUR follows the well-proven fascistoid recipe insofar as it deceives the exploited with the most harmful ideologies (a combination of the traditions of the Iron Guard and a new type of alt-right: *Coaliția pentru Familie* [Coalition for Family] squared) and pushes them to betray their own class interests. The rage of the poor, of those treated with contempt, of people living in existential insecurity, the people commanded to work in slaughterhouses in Germany, the ones banned from visiting their families, women sold as prostitutes to Western brothels, and the rage of those who couldn't "stay at home" during the epidemic because their existential situation simply didn't allow it – well, this new and yet old fascism "embraced" and "channeled" their voices and indignation, as the humiliatingly objectifying political rhetoric puts it. These groups were the most active segment of voters whose real interests were not represented by anyone. It is true that neither are they represented by fascism, but this will be more difficult to explain now. Our poor Nazi neighbors, relatives, family members!

Fascist deception is spectacular and obvious. Since there is currently no politics capable of highlighting and politically articulating the real, structural causes of the grievances, the far right pushes in: it replaces class oppression as well as countless other grievances and vulnerabilities caused by the hegemony of transnational monopolizing capital with the problematics of race, ethnos, patriarchal family, and religious fundamentalism. But this is just the first degree of deception.

The dissatisfaction with the system to which fascism responds, from a class perspective, is indisputable, just, and real. At the same time, the conceptual and ideological structure by which fascism captures and introduces these grievances on the political scene is fundamentally wrong.

Because of this contradiction, the political path that it follows and reclaims is devastatingly misleading: instead of finding remedies for shortcomings, it further erases the real causes of the problems. In doing so, it helps the system survive the current crisis without actual systemic change. Fascism is thus the cruelest way to maintain the capitalist status quo, and it is precisely this status quo that threatens to collapse our societies in the context of the current crisis.

As in all such situations, it is not enough to be horrified by the advancement of the far-right. It is not enough to say “no” to fascism from the perspective of morality. Active anti-fascism in practice means creating alternatives to the current social conditions that substantiate fascism, alternatives that we can say “yes” to. It is an approach to politics and a vision of society that addresses and puts on the political agenda correctly, or at least more correctly, the numerous grievances caused by alienation, wage labor, exploitation, the commodification of the body, industrial prostitution, class and gender oppression, social injustice and inequity, the global exploitation chain, the ecological crisis, the devastation of public goods, privatization, etc. Because fascism is not the project of a few illiterate idiots, as the intellectuals would like to believe, but the consequence and culmination of existing socio-political relations.

Of course, fascism is a tragedy in itself, at the level of the values it promotes. But to this is added the fact that there is currently no viable alternative, except for the right-wing-neoliberal policies of the middle-class. They offer no real alternative, and are also the indirect causes for the spread of fascism – although the promoters of these policies now tend to express surprise at the product in the making of which they were accomplices to some extent.

Let’s take the USR-PLUS Alliance for example. After the party merger [of the Save Romania Union (USR) and the Freedom, Unity, and Solidary Party (PLUS)], they kissed goodbye to the last few traces of leftist ideas, and eventually openly sided with capital, demanding the privatization of healthcare and education. This is hardcore class politics, a clear declaration of war against the losers of capitalist “crisis management,” who no longer have access to basic healthcare and public education; they are left with little more than Covid-denial and fake news. Meanwhile, the pandemic inactivated the party’s voter base more than it should have: the message to “stay at home” – a privilege of the urban middle class – had a boomerang effect.

As long as the structural logic of party politics and the ideological taboos of the current ruling political class forbid, render impossible, demonize, restrict, and mock the left-leaning criticism of the system and the left-wing attempts at correction, we can’t be so surprised that only right-wing parties get into parliament (this also applies to PSD’s [the Social Democratic Party’s] religious nationalism with traces of social democracy). It should also come as no surprise that not only the large parties’ ethnicists on duty get more say, but also the increasingly institutionalized far-right.

It is tragicomic that these right-wing parties call each other names such as “left-wing extremists,” “communists,” or “red-plague.” Of course, the “ghost of communism” and other stories... Everyone accuses the other of communism, and everyone accused tries to prove, in word and in deed, that they are in no way communists.

The second spectacular result of the election is the low turnout. This shows how illegitimate is the existing parliamentary framework. Currently, political representation is provided by cliques of “political entrepreneurs” who, in close association with various national and international factions of capital, define themselves exclusively according to the existing power relations of the political field, playing endless games of ping-pong with each other. They have no real social base, just as there is no real political community behind them. Calculating averages based on data obtained from polls (on which the political “communication” of the parties is built) can’t create political communities.

Theoretically, a political community is not built on tribal principles or economic interests, nor on the interests of a particular social group, but through the joint participation of equal citizens at achieving the common good. Political community would mean that the problems of the individual become, at least to a certain extent, the problems of the whole community; that what happens, happens to us all, and not just to one or another. But the common good is an unknown concept.

Although “community” is a central notion in its vocabulary, the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (Hun. RMDSZ; Ro. UDMR) is a spectacular example of the lack of a real political community. According to a recent sociological survey, Hungarians in Romania form the subcommunity with the most pronounced right-wing orientation in the postsocialist region; at 16%, even support for the far-right among them is approximately 5% higher than the average in both Romania and Hungary. There’s no need to complain about the lack of racism, xenophobia, misogyny, and some fascism (suppressed for the time being). The notions of common good and political community are replaced by ethnos and tribal-ethnic interest, which may be partly necessary in the case of an ethnic minority. But only partly.

The almost exclusively ethnic-based electoral mobilization is striking in the case of RMDSZ, which has advanced to become a client party of Fidesz. This indicates one thing: RMDSZ is unable to include on the agenda of political discussions the specific situation of Hungarians in Transylvania; it is unable to turn the Hungarian community into part of the common good. Being Hungarian in Romania today is exclusively an issue of the Hungarian community; like religious belonging, something that exists but it is not talked about: a vague feeling that cannot be shared with outsiders, and thus a matter that exists outside of politics. How do we expect anyone to understand the series of structural disadvantages that Hungarians encounter when the very definition of what “Hungarian” means is overly mystified? Over the last thirty years, the communication between Hungarians and Romanians has turned the “Hungarian question” into a taboo, and if it does reappear from time to time on the agenda, it quickly dissolves into liberal-nihilistic shrugging. And that’s about it.

By now, it seems that RMDSZ has definitely lost their role as the party addressing relevant socio-political issues: in big cities and in the diaspora, political issues are put forward by Romanian parties; in Székelyföld, which has become a mini-Hungary, the political campaign topics are dictated by NER (the System of National Cooperation). All this without formulating messages that fit the specific needs of the Hungarians in Transylvania – the situation of the Hungarians in Transylvania is no longer a factor that generates policies. RMDSZ’s ethnic turn successfully depoliticized this minority. The intellectual elite holds their nose and stays away; those who rose to the middle class in the last 30 years and their children are voting USR – making some noise. As a consequence, following the integrationist demands of the middle class, RMDSZ avoids PSD, the only ally on whose side they have obtained additional rights for Hungarians in Transylvania. Those who remain silent are non-middle-class Hungarians living in interethnic environments and big cities, who ask “What did UDMR do for us?” Well, the truth is, not much.

The middle class and the local parties and local government clerks who side with RMDSZ look at the Hungarian precariat, workers, peasants, Hungarian asparagus-picking guest workers, women doing cheap or unpaid care work, not to mention the Hungarian Roma community, as incomprehensibly and contemptuously as does the Romanian middle class. In Székelyföld, UDMR is a party of “farmers” (agricultural and other entrepreneurs) – that is, a group with relative high capital in the local context – and not a party for those who earn their living from wage labor, especially not from part-time labor. And they still don’t understand, or pretend not to understand, why people are not overly enthusiastic about the opportunity to rush and vote RMDSZ.

The Hungarian middle class, like the Romanian one, considers the lower classes ignorant, primitive,

and irresponsible. The lower classes notice very correctly that RMDSZ does not represent their interests, does not address their vulnerable situation when endlessly repeating “We, Hungarians...,” a dull and empty slogan of Fidesz. And they also understand that their interests can’t be limited to ethnic interests. But for the representation of economic, social, cultural interests, which go beyond ethnic interests, they currently have no alternative political framework at their disposal. Moreover, the ethno-political ideology charges any deviation from the ethnicist framework with the accusation of, or at least presumption of treason.

This is what is common, though to a different extent, to Fidesz, AUR, and RMDSZ: replacing the political community with an emotional and physical community that is non-political, from which one can no longer claim inclusion or exclusion. Which, after all, is not a political community. All this becomes a matter of production and reproduction.

So here we are. If ever, now, when the path of fascism has opened up, it should become clear to us that the time has come to reveal the fundamental fault line between the political systems of capitalism and the real losers, their real losses – trusting that the truth of this could lead to the idea of a political and societal alternative to fascism. An alternative in which everything that is common truly belongs to those who can manage it, and not to those who inherit or (re)populate it.

And the fight against the far-right could immediately begin by suppressing our own minority far-right. And that won’t go easy either.

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A szem [‘the eye’] is a decentralized and non-hierarchical online cultural journal of social criticism that was launched in 2015, initiated by former students of literature from Cluj/Kolozsvár (Romania). As a result of the voluntary work of its founders and editors, the page has remained active without interruption for the past five years. During this time, we have maintained a high quality social-critical and cultural site without any institutional funding. This has allowed us to work independently of the increasingly centralized Hungarian funding programs and mechanisms and other (Romanian) institutional constraints. As a Transylvanian journal we are in a unique position to act as a link between the Hungarian and Romanian critical culture, between the cross-border Hungarian language space and other European literary and critical initiatives, publications or politically active groups. As a critical, cultural and literary journal, we try to provide an experimental publication space for new and emerging authors and activists.

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