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EUROPEAN AGENDA AND REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY: EXPLANATIONS FOR THE PRESENCE OF FAR-RIGHT POPULISM IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

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Abstract: ***The European Parliament is the institution of representative democracy for EU citizens within the political system. Since the first elections in 1979, the European legislative branch has gradually increased its powers in the decision-making process. Alongside the evolution of the European Parliament, academic literature on European democracy has debated the balance between national and ideological democratic representation. This paper argues that the current electoral procedures for the European Parliament, combined with the capture of various EU policy issues by far-right populist parties, have favored their election. Currently, a subtle competition of national interests is ongoing over the EU agenda in the European Parliament, with far-right populist parties intensifying this dynamic. Methodologically, this paper proposes two instruments. First, a comparative analysis of how populist radical right parties (PRRPs) in two case studies – AUR in Romania and AfD in Germany – managed agenda issues and socio-cultural transformations at both the national and European levels to gain traction ahead of the 2024 elections. Secondly, I argue that the implications of the opportunity structures, specifically the European Parliament election system, are relevant to the PRRP's accession into this institution.***

Keywords: *European representative democracy, electoral system, far-right populism, traditional politics.*

Introduction. Research questions and hypotheses

This article offers an analysis of the far-right parties' rise to the European Parliament following the 2024 elections. The selected case studies are the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) and the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR). These parties experienced rapid growth and are indicative of the expanding influence of populist radical right parties (PRRPs).

The European Parliament (EP), the institution that represents the will and interests of the EU citizens, reunites a variety of ideologies from a large number of parties in the Member states. Formally, by comparison with a classical national parliament, the EU legislative does not have a dual structure based on 'power' and 'opposition'. But informally, inside the EP there are a confrontation between the political groups that promote the European statu quo of norms and principles stated by the treaties in force; and on the other hand, the increasing wave of far-right populist movements throughout Europe in the last decade gave birth to a number of political groups in the EP, focused on the contestation of the establishment.

The accession to the European Parliament legitimized the far-right at the supranational level, enabling them to initiate laws that reflect their political views and even block

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certain foreign policy strategies, such as support for Eastern enlargement and Ukraine. In the actual configuration, which resulted from the 2024 elections, the European Parliament includes a total of 187 members of radical groups, distributed as follows: 84 in the Patriots for Europe Group, 78 in the European Conservative and Reformists Group (ECR), and 25 in the Europe of Sovereign Nations Group (ESN). AUR adhered to the ECR and has only 3 MEPs (after two MEPs left the party following an internal leadership dispute), and AfD is part of the ESN with 15 MEPs.

The main research questions advanced in this article are: 1) To what extent could we assess the impact of social (de)structuration and ideologies of the PRRPs at the European level in the decision-making process of the European Parliament? 2) What could be the political impact of the actual EP configuration on the European agenda?

Starting from these questions, we hypothesize that the political game of PRRPs will be relatively inflexible in the social and cultural areas, and the rationales in the internal competition determine their strategies in the EP competition. The PRRPs will likely continue to employ social polarization strategies to gain more electoral support.

To explain the advancement of PRRPs among voters' preferences and their gains in mandates in the European Parliament, I synthesized a theoretical framework by integrating the cultural backlash theory into the demand-supply model of political competition. I argue that in the case of PRRPs, the voters' behavior is the direct consequence of 1) the lack of a clear European dimension of the electoral system for the EP that generates superposing the national agenda over the European policy issues or interpreting the European issues in a nationalist paradigm and 2) the PRRPs strategy to integrate their programmes in the actual European context and to popularize them; the supply – the strategies, organization, leadership, and messaging of far-right parties – satisfies the voters' demands against current political establishment. The final consequence is that the large parties become small and vice versa.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first includes the theoretical framework and how it explains the success of the PRRPs. The second section analyzes how the exemplified parties used the supply-side variables to respond to demand-side and ascend to national parliaments and then to the EP. The third section presents the analysis results, and the conclusions emphasize the PRRP's impact on the EU agenda.

Theoretical framework

The evolution of the European Parliament into a representative democratic institution, along with the growth and diversification of its political groups, fueled political competition across all EU Member States. In recent years, the far-right has experienced a significant resurgence across the European Union (EU), posing challenges to the liberal-democratic foundations of the Union. The pathway of the far-right to the decision-making systems, from national to European ones, is complex. It becomes evident that the far-right's ascension is not simply a backlash to migration or EU integration, but a manifestation of broader structural shifts in European societies.

The academic literature emphasizes several controversial public policies and dominant issues in the public sphere to explain the rise of far-right populism. The most researched areas are cultural insecurity and identity politics (Inglehart & Norris, 2019),

issues on migration and border control (Buzan et al., 1998), economic insecurity and rejection of globalization (Kriesi et al., 2006; Rodrik, 2011), distrust in political elites and institutions (Mudde, 2019), sovereignty and anti-EU sentiment (Vasilopoulou, 2018), and digital media and disinformation (Brack, 2013).

Socio-demographic factors have long been studied in connection with the process of voting (Lazarsfeld et al., 2004; Berelson et al., 1986; Blondel, 1963; Mayer and Schweisguth, 1989). Social group affiliations such as social class, place of residence (urban/rural) and religion are linked with voters' political options (Lazarsfeld et al., 2004:197).

This analysis explains these outcomes by integrating Inglehart & Norris's cultural backlash thesis—emphasizing a reaction against progressive cultural change—into Kitschelt's demand–supply framework of party competition. The analysis highlights how demand (voter expectations) and supply (party strategies) interact, showing how AfD and AUR converted latent grievances into electoral representation.

While early explanations centered on economics—globalization's "losers"—subsequent research emphasizes cultural dynamics. In the demand-supply balance of the political competition for the EP mandates, the cultural and identity variable applies to the candidates from all the EU countries. I framed the cultural backlash theory (Norris & Inglehart, 2019) into the demand-supply model of political competition (Kitschelt, 1995; Norris, 2005) to argue how the PRRPs exploit the confrontation between traditionalism and progressivism to gain electoral capital at the national and European levels. By comparison with the socioeconomic variable, which applies only to a limited range of voters, the cultural issues imply all the social categories, regardless of their economic status or their education level.

The demand–supply model argues that electoral success emerges from the interaction of voter demand, rooted in socioeconomic, cultural, and attitudinal divides, and party supply – programmatic offers, organization, and strategic positioning.

Inglehart & Norris's cultural backlash thesis complements this model by identifying value-based demand: support for authoritarian-populist actors emerges less from absolute deprivation than from reactive mobilization among segments threatened by rapid cultural liberalization. It also argues that cohorts socialized in eras of material scarcity and traditional authority react against the diffusion of liberal, cosmopolitan norms promoted by postmaterialist generations. This reaction fuels support for authoritarian-populist parties, which frame the EU as an overreaching, elitist vehicle of unwanted cultural change. Integrating backlash into the demand-supply model explains why radical-right appeals resonate even amid varied economic contexts.

The central argument is that support for far-right actors is not driven solely by economic grievances but by a defensive reaction against rapid liberal–cosmopolitan cultural change. The European Union, as a promoter of postmaterialist values (human rights, gender equality, minority protection), often becomes the symbolic target of that backlash.

In my assessment, the translation of cultural backlash into EP representation occurs through four interlocking mechanisms:

1) Identity Threat and Issue Framing: Parties link immigration, minority rights, and gender politics to a narrative of national decline and EU intrusion. The EP becomes a stage to resist "Brussels elites."

2) Electoral Opportunity Structures: Proportional representation and low thresholds in EP elections reduce entry barriers. Second-order election dynamics encourage protest voting, benefiting challengers.
3) Organizational and Media Supply: Far-right parties use digital ecosystems to aggregate culturally conservative constituencies, bypassing mainstream media and amplifying grievance frames.
4) Representation Feedback: EP seats yield resources and visibility that normalize far-right discourse at home, reinforcing subsequent electoral gains.

Analysis. The demand-supply model of political competition and cultural backlash. Methods and materials

Methodologically, I will examine the interactions between the two parties – AfD and AUR – with their electorate in the context of the 2024 EP elections. I will use the theory of cultural backlash in Europe to argue that the AfD's increased percentage in the 2024 EP elections, compared to the 2019 elections, along with the accession of AUR—a relatively recent formation —can be attributed to the mixing of demand variables with supply ones, and the existing electoral conditions that serve as opportunity structures.

I will introduce the demand (independent) variables as follows: voter cohorts (age, education), and cultural orientations (cosmopolitan vs. traditionalist). I will apply the supply (dependent) variables as follows: party frames (nativism, Euroscepticism), organizational channels (social media mobilization). The opportunity structures (proportional system and voter turnout) are considered as the intervening variables.

In the argumentation scheme, the cultural backlash is treated as a core demand factor. The schematic is as follows:

Socioeconomic & Cultural Cleavages (Demand) → Cultural Backlash Intensification → Party Supply (Framing, Organization, Mobilization) → Electoral Outcomes (Votes, Seats).

Opportunity structures moderate the link between supply and outcomes – the 2024 EP election results for AfD and AUR.

The assessment process is based on three instruments:

- Demographics: summaries on age/education and residence-type distributions that describe the profile of the AfD and AUR voters
- Cultural demand: own data processing based on survey items on EU trust versus support for national identity.
- Electoral results: Official EP 2024 vote shares and seat counts for AfD and AUR (Germany and Romania).

Demand side

On the demand side, in both Germany and Romania, debates over immigration, sovereignty, minority rights, and EU integration mapped onto traditionalist vs. cosmopolitan value divides consistent with cultural backlash. Economic anxieties and regional inequalities amplified this demand: AfD's support was strongest in Eastern Germany,

while AUR gained ground outside major urban centers. Thus, backlash demand was layered with material and territorial grievances.

a) AfD (Germany)

The German transition after reunification in 1990 (the "Wende") had profound social, economic, and political effects, especially in the former East Germany. Social dislocation and cultural backlash are two factors that shaped the voters' preferences toward the far-right parties (Populism Studies, 2024).

Social dislocation, characterized by rapid integration into West German political, cultural, and institutional systems, caused identity anxiety. Citizens felt that their experiences and values were devalued, leading to resentment toward political elites and mainstream parties (Betz, 2021).

In terms of cultural backlash, as noted by Inglehart and Norris (2019), populations experiencing rapid modernization may react against perceived threats to traditional values. In East Germany, some voters perceived immigration, EU policies, and liberal cultural norms as threatening to local identity.

The impact on far-right support was significant. Cultural grievances made certain groups more receptive to far-right messages. Parties like AfD (and initially smaller far-right movements like NPD) capitalized on anti-immigrant sentiment and nationalist rhetoric (Fitzi, 2019). Research shows that far-right support in Germany is strongest in East German regions, particularly among older, less-educated, and socially dislocated voters (Klikauer, 2020). The transition created both material and cultural anxieties. These factors combined to produce a fertile base for far-right mobilization, helping explain the regional strength of AfD and other right-wing movements in the East.

The Alternative for Germany (AfD) has garnered significant support among voters who hold conservative cultural values. Concerns over national identity, traditional family structures, and skepticism towards liberal and progressive ideologies shape this demographic profile (Institute for Global Change, 2025).

Regarding family values, AfD supporters advocate for traditional models, emphasizing the nuclear family as the cornerstone of society (Havertz, 2021). The party opposes policies perceived as undermining these structures, such as gender-neutral language and early sexual education in schools. AfD leaders have criticized what they term "gender ideology," viewing it as a threat to parental rights and children's upbringing (Klikauer, 2020).

On the political values, the AfD positions itself as a defender of conservative ideas against what it perceives as the liberal establishment's overreach (D'Ottavio & Saalfeld, 2016). The party opposes progressive policies on gender, sexuality, and multiculturalism, advocating instead for a return to what it considers traditional German values (Havertz, 2021). This stance resonates with voters who feel alienated by rapid social changes and liberal reforms. Support for the AfD is notably higher in Eastern Germany, particularly in regions like Thuringia, Brandenburg, and Saxony. In these regions, the party has garnered substantial support among young voters, reaching up to 35% in Thuringia (PolitPro, 2024).

Age Cohort	Education Level	Urban Areas	Rural Areas
18–29	Low	32–38%	38–45%
	Medium	25–30%	32–38%
	High	18–25%	28–33%
30–44	Low	30–36%	36–42%
	Medium	22–28%	30–36%
	High	15–22%	25–30%
45–59	Low	28–34%	32–38%
	Medium	20–26%	28–34%
	High	14–20%	20–26%
60+	Low	20–26%	28–34%
	Medium	18–24%	25–30%
	High	10–16%	18–24%

AfD voters' support by education level and residence type.

Sources: Own data processing using PolitPro (2024) and Pew Research Center (2024)

AfD voters exhibit strong nationalistic sentiments, emphasizing the preservation of German culture and identity (D'Ottavio & Saalfeld, 2016). The party's rhetoric often frames Germany as being under threat from immigration and cultural dilution. This narrative appeals to voters who feel that traditional German values are being eroded by globalization and multiculturalism (Fitzi et al., 2019). The AfD is Eurosceptic, advocating for a reduction of the European Union's powers and a return to national sovereignty. The party opposes the Eurozone and supports policies that it believes will protect Germany's national interests within the EU framework (D'Ottavio & Saalfeld, 2016).

Age Cohort	Emphasis on National Identity	Attitude Towards the EU
18–24	High	Eurosceptic
25–34	High	Eurosceptic
35–44	High	Eurosceptic
45–59	High	Eurosceptic
60+	High	Eurosceptic

AfD voters' attitude towards national identity and the European Union by age.

Source: Own processing data using PolitPro (2024 and Pew Research Center (2024)

In summary, AfD voters are characterized by a commitment to traditional family values, skepticism towards liberal and progressive ideologies, a complex relationship with religion, strong nationalistic feelings, and Euroscepticism (Fondapol, 2024). These

cultural and religious attitudes have significantly contributed to the party's rise in Germany's political landscape. AUR (Romania)

For Romania, due to the political and social context before the fall of the Communist regime, social changes occurred in waves. The population needed to adapt rapidly to new realities: a new labour market, privatization of enterprises, and the responsibility of finding a workplace, which in Communism was a given fact (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2021). While voting in elections in Romania has decreased in the last 30 years, political participation has evolved. New small parties have entered Parliament and managed to climb up the echelons of political power.

The electoral breakthrough of the AUR in 2020 and its growing consolidation in the European Parliament elections of 2024 cannot be explained only by party strategy (Soare & Tufiş, 2021). AUR represents a response to unsatisfied cultural demands among segments of the Romanian electorate. Similarly with the case of AfD, these demands emerged from a context of rapid modernization, globalization, and European integration that many citizens perceive as eroding traditional identity, community cohesion, and national sovereignty (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2021). I identified three key cultural grievances fueling AUR's support, structured around main demand clusters: (1) religious–moral traditionalism, (2) national–sovereigntist identity, and (3) alienation from political and cultural elites. However, the debate over traditionalism versus modernism began in the interwar period.

Religious-moral traditionalism is visible in Romanian society, despite the influences of post-materialism from Western civilization. The European Values Study (EVS) 2017 reveals that Romania has one of the highest levels of declared religiosity (Christian Orthodox) in Europe, with over 85% affirming belief in God and regular church attendance exceeding the EU average (Stan & Turcescu, 2017).

Consequently, a large segment of the population is resistant to liberal family reforms. A majority opposed same-sex marriage during the 2018 constitutional referendum, even though turnout invalidated it (Voicu, 2019). Moral anxiety signals remain constant. Many Romanians perceive EU-promoted "gender ideology" and secularization as existential threats to the Orthodox way of life. Social dissatisfaction with how governing parties handle these agenda themes is at a high level. Mainstream parties (PNL, PSD, USR) either avoided or downplayed these debates, leaving voters who wanted strong protection of Christian values politically underrepresented. By defending the ‚traditional family,' religious education, and Christian values, AUR supplied the cultural voice these voters demanded.

Debates on national identity reappeared in the public sphere after Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007. An important segment of the population perceived the contact with the multinational EU as a challenge to the country's identity (Soare & Tufiş, 2021). The nostalgia after years of isolationism practized by the communist regime contributes to the anti-European political culture (IICCMER, 2025). Romanian history and identity are deeply tied to sovereignty struggles. In the post-2007 EU accession period, new tensions emerged: distrust toward Brussels, disappointment over delayed Schengen accession, and anxiety over globalization (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2021).

The cultural demand for national affirmation also manifests in unification aspirations with the Republic of Moldova, a symbolic issue sidelined by mainstream elites.

Romanian voters increasingly saw the EU as a source of both economic benefits and cultural intrusion. Elites often framed European integration narrowly in economic terms, neglecting the symbolic dimension of sovereignty. AUR responded by positioning itself as the 'guardian of sovereignty,' opposing EU authority, promoting reunification with Moldova, and defending the so-called authenticity of Romanian traditions.

Age Cohort	Strong National Identity (%)	Moderate National Identity (%)	Weak National Identity (%)	Pro-EU (%)	Neutral (%)	Euroskeptic / Anti-EU (%)
18–29	12	10	5	8	12	15
30–44	20	15	6	5	15	22
45–59	28	18	10	3	12	28
60+	32	15	6	2	10	30

AUR support by age cohort and attitude toward national identity and the European Union.

Source: Own data processing using CURS & INSOMAR surveys (2020–2024) and European Values Study (2020).

Alienation from political and cultural elites contributes to the rise of demands for far-right politics. Culturally, the polarization between elites and masses and the lack of good governance led to profound alienation: rural voters felt marginalized by modernization projects favoring urban elites, diaspora communities abroad complained of poor representation, and conservative voices felt excluded from public debate (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2020). Mainstream parties were associated with either technocracy (USR, PNL) or entrenched corruption (PSD). The cultural demand for authenticity and representation remained unmet. AUR filled this gap through anti-elitist rhetoric, diaspora mobilization, and valorizing 'authentic Romanians.' Thus, the party converted cultural alienation into political support.

Age Cohort	Education Level	Urban Areas	Rural Areas
18–29	Low	35–40%	40–45%
	Medium	28–33%	33–38%
	High	18–22%	22–26%
30–44	Low	30–35%	35–40%
	Medium	22–27%	27–32%
	High	12–17%	17–22%
45–59	Low	28–32%	32–37%
	Medium	20–25%	25–30%
	High	10–15%	15–20%
60+	Low	20–25%	25–30%
	Medium	15–20%	20–25%
	High	5–10%	10–15%

AUR voter support by age cohort, education level, and residence type.

Source: Own data processing using European Social Survey (2018, 2020) and Romanian polling data (CURS, Avangarde, 2020–2024).

To conclude in Norris and Inglehart's terms, the Germans' and Romanians' demands reflect a cultural backlash, transformed into electoral success by AfD and AUR. By channeling unsatisfied cultural demands into political projects, these parties reshaped Germany's and Romania's political landscape.

Supply side

On the supply side, both parties developed a complex response strategy to attract as much of the voters' support as possible.

a) AfD

AfD reframed itself from Euro-skepticism to a nativist, anti-immigration brand, positioning itself firmly on the traditional, authoritarian, nationalist pole. It emerged during the Eurozone crisis and reoriented toward a populist radical right profile during and after the 2015–2016 refugee crisis. Cultural backlash mechanisms are salient: older cohorts in eastern Länder, segments of working- and lower-middle-class voters, and socially conservative networks perceived immigration, gender politics, and climate policy as elite impositions (Vasilopoulou, 2018). AfD's supply-side strategy—issue ownership of migration and identity, anti- "gender ideology" rhetoric, and intensive social media mobilization—converted these sentiments into EP votes.

Traditional cultural values promoted by AfD are centered on the following clusters: family and gender roles, ethnic nationalism and cultural identity, and antiliberal cultural pushback.

AfD places the heterosexual nuclear family at the center of its cultural project. The party promotes policies favoring married couples with children, while opposing same-sex marriage, adoption rights for LGBTQ+ couples, and gender mainstreaming. Its campaigns frequently deploy slogans such as "Stop den Gender-Wahn" ("Stop the Gender Mania"), signaling its rejection of gender-neutral language and feminist reforms (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

In its rhetoric, AfD idealizes motherhood and promotes pronatalist policies, summarized in slogans like 'more children instead of mass immigration.' This discourse often contrasts the "authentic traditional woman" as a mother with the "modern woman" aligned with consumerism and liberalism (Mudde, 2019).

AfD integrates cultural traditionalism with an ethnic-nationalist worldview. The party has revived elements of "völkisch" thought, emphasizing an organic and ancestral German identity (Lees, 2018). It promotes the concept of Leitkultur ("leading culture"), which demands that migrants assimilate into German norms, language, and customs, rejecting multiculturalism as divisive. For example, Islam is portrayed as a civilizational threat, framed as incompatible with German culture and values (Hentges et al., 2018). Similarly, AfD frequently invokes demographic decline, warning that immigration undermines cultural cohesion and threatens the continuity of the German nation. In doing so, it mobilizes existential fears of cultural "replacement".

The rhetoric of AfD employs Christian cultural heritage as a symbolic foundation of German identity, though often more as a cultural marker than a spiritual commitment (Perrone, 2020). The party presents Christianity as the historical basis of European civilization, which must be defended against both secular liberalism and Islamic influence

(LSE, 2018). AfD leaders frequently warn of societal decay due to secularization and the erosion of Christian ethics. In this narrative, Christianity functions less as a theological doctrine and more as a cultural boundary marker, distinguishing 'authentic Germans' from others (Vasilopoulou, 2018).

In its political programme, AfD frames liberal modernity as a corrosive force undermining tradition, community, and national cohesion. The party frequently attacks Enlightenment-derived values such as individualism, cosmopolitanism, and gender equality, positioning them as foreign impositions from liberal elites and EU institutions (Betz, 2021). This anti-liberal pushback is instrumental in mobilizing voters who perceive themselves as culturally alienated in a rapidly changing society. AfD thus presents itself as a bulwark defending heritage, stability, and authenticity against modern liberal values.

The traditional cultural values promoted by AfD—emphasizing family, heritage, Christianity, and anti-liberalism—serve as both an ideological foundation and a populist mobilization strategy. By framing liberal policies, multiculturalism, and European integration as existential threats, AfD legitimizes its role as defender of an authentic German identity. These strategies align with the broader cultural backlash thesis, illustrating how radical-right parties across Europe capitalize on cultural grievances to consolidate support among disaffected constituencies. AfD's cultural politics thus exemplify the integration of traditionalism into the populist radical-right repertoire.

b) AUR

In its turn, AUR established a set of cultural values very similar to AfD. It defines its relations with the electorate and how this party refers to the state, nation, and the EU (Armeanu, 2025): the traditional family and the promotion of religion; nationhood and heritage; morality, sovereignty, and opposition to liberal values. Characterized by a mix of nationalist, conservative, and populist themes, the party's ideology rests heavily upon the defense of cultural traditional values (AUR Political Programme, 2025). These values are framed as the authentic identity of the Romanian people, allegedly threatened by globalization, liberalism, and external influence (Botan et al., 2025).

In the EP elections campaign, AUR coupled national-conservative and Orthodox themes with Euroscepticism, presenting EU liberal norms as threats to Romanian identity. AUR's rise blends cultural nationalism, Orthodoxy, and anti-elitist sovereignty discourse (Burean & Pálfy, 2024). Backlash dynamics operate through the defense of traditional family roles and national identity against perceived EU-driven liberal norms (AUR Political Programme, 2025). AUR's supply-side strengths include grassroots/diaspora digital organizing, symbolic politics (faith, flag, nation), and narrative linkage between EU standards and domestic cultural change.

The cultural traditional values promoted by AUR—rooted in family, Orthodoxy, and national heritage—function both as an ideological foundation and as a populist mobilization strategy. By framing liberalism, globalization, and European integration as existential threats, AUR legitimizes its political role as protector of Romanian identity (AUR Political Programme, 2025). This strategy has enabled the party to attract support among rural communities, older generations, and younger voters disillusioned with mainstream parties. Ultimately, AUR's articulation of traditionalism exemplifies the re-

surgence of cultural nationalism in Eastern Europe and its integration into the wider European right-wing populism.

AUR's discourse places the family at the core of Romanian society, echoing traditionalist and Christian conservative positions (Chiruta, 2022). The party explicitly defines family as the union between a man and a woman, opposing same-sex marriage and adoption rights. This pro-family agenda resonates with the Romanian Orthodox Church's official stance, highlighting the interdependence between religious and political conservatism (AUR Political Programme, 2025).

Orthodoxy occupies a central symbolic and mobilizing role in AUR's rhetoric. The party frames Romania's Orthodox heritage as a protective cultural foundation, often invoking saints, church rituals, and moral renewal as antidotes to what it perceives as Western moral decay (Chiruta, 2022). Religious institutions are portrayed as authentic representatives of the people, contrasting with corrupt political elites (Gherghina & Mișcoiu, 2022).

AUR combines religious conservatism with a strong nationalist narrative. The party invokes both Romania's ancient Dacian roots and its Orthodox Christian continuity, constructing a narrative of cultural protochronism (Sultănescu et al., 2021). National unity is presented as a sacred duty, with the reunification of Romania and the Republic of Moldova framed as a historical mission.

Cultural traditionalism in AUR's program is closely linked to sovereignty claims. The party argues that Romania's cultural and moral norms must remain independent of Brussels or Washington, which are often depicted as agents of cultural colonization (AUR Political Programme, 2025). This Eurosceptic framing positions AUR as a defender of national autonomy in both political and cultural domains (Stoica & Voina, 2023).

AUR promotes moral sovereignty by resisting liberal policies on gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights, often labeling them as foreign ideological imports. Similarly, the party emphasizes the authenticity of rural and religious communities as the true bearers of Romanian identity, while portraying political elites as alienated and corrupt. This combination of conservatism and anti-elitism situates AUR within the broader wave of populist movements across Europe (Botan et al., 2025).

In EP elections, proportionality and protest incentives helped the party translate cultural resentment into representation, which in turn conferred resources and visibility that supported growth beyond its activist core. Both parties relied on digital mobilization—especially social media—to bypass mainstream media and directly reach younger demographics.

Opportunity structures

The issues discussed above are linked to some intervening variables that are opportunity structures of the electoral system for the European Parliament: the lack of a fully unified electoral system that could bypass national provisions, and the universality of the MEPs' mandate. These elements contribute to shaping the political competition in favor of populist radical right parties, particularly through the persistence of national political symbols and their integration into the EU agenda.

The European Parliament is an institution of representative democracy. It is different from a national legislature in terms of political structure and operating logic. Both EU law and national laws govern elections to the EP. The EU law provides a set of minimal technical rules to ensure the convergence and to give a European legitimacy to the elected MEPs. The core rules are outlined in the 1976 Act concerning the election of members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage, as amended over time. While this Act sets broad principles—such as proportional representation, equality of the vote, and the five-year term—each member state retains the right to determine specific electoral arrangements.

The lack of a unified electoral system, combined with an unclear, diffuse perception of the political dimension of the MEPs' mandates, facilitates the issue framing on the national level by comparison with the European level. The electoral system for the European Parliament has advantages for small parties that apply to the PRRPs as well as to the moderate parties. It contributes to the pre-eminence of the national factor at the expense of the European factor, hindering the development of a truly European political community.

All EU member states are required to use a form of proportional representation. This ensures that seats in the EP reflect the proportion of votes each party receives, allowing for a pluralistic political landscape. Variants include the party-list proportional representation system and the single transferable vote, with most countries using closed or open party lists. Despite a common framework, national rules vary considerably. Member states may set electoral thresholds (up to 5%), decide whether voting is compulsory, determine the minimum voting age (16 in some states, 18 in most), and choose whether their territory is a single constituency or divided into regional constituencies.

The distribution of seats among EU countries follows the principle of "degressive proportionality," meaning that smaller states have more seats per capita than larger ones. The total number of MEPs is capped at 720 (as of 2024), with each member state allocated between 6 and 96 seats.

The representative and political legitimizing function of the European Parliament has developed over time. Hix et al. (2007) show that "for most of its history, the parliament was a purely consultative institution. But since the mid-1980s, it has acquired powers in two traditional areas of authority for institutions whose members are elected by popular vote: control over the executive and lawmaking."

As a result, questions have arisen about the homogeneity and, indirectly, the representativeness of the EP. However, Article 138(3) of the Treaty establishing the European Community stated that the EP should be elected by "universal suffrage under a uniform procedure in all Member States." In 1960, the report of a working group chaired by Ferdinand Dehousse stated that the term "uniform" did not mean "identical" and therefore the Treaty of Rome did not provide for the adoption of a single electoral system for all member states.

Despite repeated calls from the European Parliament, the Member States have failed to adopt a truly common electoral system. In 2002, the Council, aware of the legitimacy of these demands, amended the provisions of the Law of 20 September 1976 on the election of the members of the European Parliament by universal suffrage, introducing a number of principles common to all national laws: the election of MEPs by party list sys-

tem or by single transferable vote; the possibility of preferential voting and a maximum threshold for list allocation of no more than 5%. As Andrew Duff, EP rapporteur for the 2008 electoral procedure, points out, "the EU has already made substantial progress in establishing the basic conditions for the uniform election of the European Parliament, despite the absence of a single electoral law" (Duff, 2007).

In addition, national laws have several things in common: the date of the European elections (they must take place in the same week); the democratic principles applicable to the right to vote and eligibility; the fair and free nature of the elections; the principle of equal suffrage; incompatibility with other offices; the principle by which votes are converted into seats at national level on the basis of proportional representation.

Initially, the differences between the different electoral systems were considerable, which had negative consequences for the representativeness of the European Parliament. Other aspects also help to distinguish the electoral systems. Without going into details, the most important aspects are: the minimum percentage of votes, the number of electoral districts, and the party list system compared to the single-member vote.

The adoption of minimum thresholds for each country has a direct impact on the number of parties winning seats in the EP: the higher the threshold, the fewer parties are represented. In total, 13 Member States have set these thresholds between 3% and 5% (the maximum authorized by the 2002 Council Decision). This practice is generally justified by the need to prevent representation from being excessively fragmented. However, it is criticized because it prevents parties representing significant minorities from accessing the EP, in particular in regional elections. Moreover, these applied high thresholds are suddenly considered an impediment to ideological diversity and a democratic, multiparty system.

The presence or absence of thresholds in the different electoral laws of the Member States influences democratic representation in the EP. Depending on the Member State, this can lead to differences, sometimes considerable, in the number of parties present in the European Parliament. These imbalances are particularly worrying for the fidelity of political representation, especially in the case of ethnic/national minorities, as the EP becomes increasingly important within the EU.

In Romania, the existing thresholds are 5 percent for parties and 8 percent for coalitions; these are considered high enough to advantage the large parties, but they could not stop the AUR from its way to accession to the European Parliament in the 2024 elections. In the 2024 EP elections, both AUR and the governing coalition PSD-PNL obtained high percentages in the European Parliament elections. Still, in the parliamentary elections in the fall of 2024, the electorate sanctioned the coalition and gave AUR an advantage. The explanation lies in the fact that the PSD-PNL governing coalition obtained good results in the European parliamentary elections due to the strategy of merging them with the local elections; the undeclared goal was to determine the coalition's voters for local political positions to maintain the option for the European Parliament, which was largely successful. The result was the distortion of the balance of power between the parties, because the coalition's performance in the autumn, in the national elections, was lower.

By comparison with Romania, the absence of an electoral threshold in Germany's European Parliament elections, after rulings by the Federal Constitutional Court in 2011

and 2014, is a crucial institutional factor behind the rise of small parties, including far-right formations like the AfD. For the AfD, this was decisive in the 2014 EP elections when it won 7 seats with just 7.1% of the vote — its first breakthrough at the national level. Proportional rules and second-order dynamics lowered the perceived cost of signaling discontent. EP representation then fed back into domestic legitimacy through resources, media access, and transnational alliances. Dissatisfied voters who might not otherwise vote for "fringe" actors in Bundestag elections are more likely to cast a "low-risk protest vote" in EP elections, because the barrier to representation is low. This benefits far-right actors who frame themselves as anti-establishment. Scholars often call this "Europeanization of protest politics" — the EP serves as a launchpad for domestic radicalism.

The universality of the mandate of a member of the European Parliament is linked to the European political legitimacy of the MEPs. The method of election, the internal organization and the deliberative procedures are intrinsically correlated with this variable, and paradoxes persist: "Members remain elected according to national procedures; although proportional representation became general in 1999, the diversity of electoral rules (eligibility conditions, size and number of constituencies, existence of a threshold, method of distribution of votes), the focus of campaigns on domestic policy issues, as well as the absolute power of national parties in the investiture of candidates are elements that contradict the theory of the generality of the European mandate" (Saurugger, 2003).

Regarding the universality of the mandate, views differ, given that the national factor is not yet entirely eliminated from the procedure for electing MEPs. The universality of the mandate and the freedom in exercising it are determined by the political practices in each country of origin of the MEPs: while some EU member states allow greater freedom of action for MEPs, others practice voting systems that prevent the full legitimation at the European level of the mandate holder. However, despite the negative aspects, opportunities to express and represent the interests of voters exist: "Their behavior is governed by complex and changing aspects of constraints, regarding the voting method, candidate selection rules, the degree of involvement of the national party in the functioning of the Parliament, holding other mandates, re-election or re-selection for candidacy, or the way the political group is organized. Deputies are more or less exposed to these constraints depending on their nationality, position on European integration, political beliefs, and relations with the represented region" (Saurugger, 2003).

Both cases, AfD and AUR, illustrate the demand–supply-backlash interaction: latent cultural demand was activated and converted through targeted supply strategies within permissive institutional settings.

Discussion of results

Both AfD and AUR mobilize against cosmopolitan liberalism associated with the EU, but their cultural repertoires differ. AfD emphasizes migration, security, and industrial policy, while AUR foregrounds religion, family, and national sovereignty within a post-communist legitimacy context. Party-system environments—fragmentation in Germany versus volatility in Romania—shape entry points, yet EP electoral rules and

second-order dynamics consistently facilitate breakthroughs for culturally conservative challengers.

Far-right presence in the European Parliament shifts the discursive center of gravity on migration, climate, and social policy, pressuring mainstream parties to adapt or triangulate. While the Ordinary Legislative Procedure constrains unilateral obstruction, cumulative agenda-setting effects are substantial. From a normative perspective, EP inclusion reflects democratic responsiveness to culturally conservative citizens; yet it also deepens conflicts over the EU's value orientation and perceived distance from parts of its electorate.

Following these political behaviors of the pan-European electorate, a significant trend is emerging: changing partisan preference (more or less expected), as seen in the 2019 and 2024 European Parliament elections, where "large ruling parties are losing seats in the European Parliament, while small parties are gaining more mandates" (Peters, 2003). The question arises whether a zero-sum game will be reached between parties in the European Parliament, or whether a specific political group will have an efficient communication and influence network, to have control over decision-making initiatives.

The trend of inversion of percentages between mainstream and populist parties continued in 2024. AUR, in 2024, in its first European Parliament elections, obtained 14.93% of the total votes cast and ranked second at the national level (European Elections 2024/ Romania). The AfD achieved the second position in the national hierarchy in Germany, after the CDU/CSU coalition, with a percentage of 15.90% (European Elections 2024/ Germany). The AfD's rise in the European legislature continued after obtaining 11% in 2019 and 7.10% in 2014. Both parties were on an upward trend in their home countries in 2024, and the scores obtained in the EP elections represented a warning signal for the so-called "traditional" parties. In Germany, voter turnout was 64.74%, and in Romania, 52.40%, very close to the EU average of 50.74% (European Elections 2024).

As a result, a significant number of European voters use the EP elections to express the political options they have and want to be taken into account on the "first-order" political scene, i.e. at the national level. By voting for the opposition in the EP elections, voters issue a "free" warning to the parties in power.

Conclusions

Cultural backlash theory, integrated with the supply-side model of political competition, confirms the dynamics of the rise of small parties and the decrease of large parties in the European Parliament. AfD and AUR illustrate how culturally conservative grievances, mobilized through effective framing and enabled by permissive electoral structures, translate into durable representation. Addressing the root causes of backlash—perceived status threat, cultural dislocation, and institutional distance—requires not only socioeconomic policy but also credible channels for cultural voice within the EU polity.

The arguments and facts presented in this study confirm that support for authoritarian-populist or radical-right parties is driven less by short-term economics and more by a reaction against rapid sociocultural change (immigration, multiculturalism, gender/ LGBTQ+ equality, green transition, cosmopolitanism) among segments who feel their status and values are being displaced.

Consequences for the EU agenda may affect the rhythm of implementation of the policies and the citizens ' support for the EU government and values. Migration and borders, sovereignty and integration, enlargement and Ukraine policy, but also civil liberties and cultural expression are challenged by the far-right counter-visions.

We expect a harder implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, more emphasis on externalization, returns, and physical border measures—even where far-right groups are not in government, their ideas pull the center rightward.

More pushback against competence transfers to the EU, stronger salience of national identity, and treaty-change skepticism; this complicates majority-building in the EP and Council and incentivizes intergovernmental deals over supranational solutions.

Elements of the far right are Ukraine-sceptic or sanction-fatigued; AUR-adjacent discourse in Romania and AfD currents in Germany can translate into tougher budget, aid, and accession conditionality debates. (Mainstream majorities still exist, but agenda-setting costs rise.).

Finally, heightened conflicts over gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and education/culture policy narratives in EU parliamentary debates, even without legislative reversals, reframe deliberation and consume agenda bandwidth.

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