

The Nationalism Studies Undergraduate Essay Competition

**NATIONALISM VERSUS GLOBALIZATION IN TIMES OF
CORONAVIRUS**

**On cultural intimacy and long distance Coronationalism. Or why Romanian
diaspora voted for the extreme right**

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11 January 2021**

The rapid spread of the Coronavirus in 2020 generated fear and insecurity. Echoing Anthony Giddens' idea that nationalism rises when routines are disrupted¹, this essay argues that, in times of crisis, people from Central-Eastern Europe let go of the Western identity that they have been trying to create for themselves and revive the nationalist values, that offer them a sense of comfort and familiarity. The case of the Romanian migrants, who found themselves abandoned between West and East and projected all these feelings in the latest election by voting for an ultranationalist party, constitutes a good example that supports my claims and signals the expansion of nationalism in the region.

In Central and Eastern Europe, local variations of nationalism are a form of cultural intimacy that these states attempted to leave behind following their Europeanization project. After 1989, Francis Fukuyama's claim that that the only future step is "the universalization of Western Liberal democracy"², turned into a widely-shared belief. Moving under the scrutiny of the Western powers, former communist states like Romania had no other choice but to imitate and assimilate the models from the West, with the aim of getting integrated into Europe³. In this democratization process, nationalist sentiments, contained under the concept of cultural intimacy, were left behind, being regarded as "a part of the cultural identity which is considered a source of external embarrassment, but which still provides insiders with a sense of national comfort and ontological security"⁴.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these nationalist feelings in a region already affected by the larger process of democratic backsliding that has been expanding since the 2008 crisis. The cases of Hungary and Poland are the most appropriate examples for depicting how democratically-elected populist parties abuse their power once in the office and dismantle liberal institutions.⁵ Some groups in ECE regard liberalism as an anti-national project undermining their interests and placing their countries under yet another foreign influence.⁶ The COVID-19

¹ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage, 1995), 44.

² Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, no. 16 (1989): 3–18.

³ Stephen Holmes and Ivan Krastev, *The Light That Failed: Why the West Is Losing the Fight for Democracy*, 2020, 7, <http://www.vlebooks.com/vleweb/product/openreader?id=none&isbn=9781643133805>

⁴ Jelena Subotic and Ayşe Zarakol, 'Cultural Intimacy in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 4 (December 2013): 915, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066112437771> .

⁵ Licia Cianetti and Hanley, Seán, 'We Must Go beyond the "Backsliding Paradigm" to Understand What's Happening to Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe', *London School Of Economics* (blog), n.d., <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2020/04/17/we-must-go-beyond-the-backsliding-paradigm-to-understand-whats-happening-to-democracy-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>.

⁶ Rogers Brubaker, 'Between Nationalism and Civilizationism: The European Populist Moment in Comparative Perspective', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 8 (21 June 2017): 18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1294700>. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1294700>.

pandemic induced more panic among people, who found comfort in blaming the outsiders and who realized how dependent they are on their home countries when it comes to health security, social protection and financial support⁷, creating the perfect context for a new *Coronationalism*⁸ to emerge.

In the case of Romania, the resurgence of nationalism was supported by the Romanian diaspora, the fifth largest group of emigrants residing in countries that are members of the OECD⁹. Until 2020, Romania had been an exceptional case in the region, not having a prominent far-right party in the parliament, but this situation changed when the ultranationalist Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR), secured almost 9% of the votes in the latest election, only one year after its creation.¹⁰ It is true that voter turnout was at a historical low, with only 31,84% of the electorate casting their vote¹¹, but even more surprising was the electoral behavior of the Romanians living abroad, who shifted their usual preference from right-wing parties with strong liberal attitudes to a radical one who displays a nationalist, homophobic and pro-orthodox agenda.

Even though the results of the elections were startling, the nationalist sentiments did not suddenly emerge among the groups of Romanians who constitute the diaspora. Instead, just like any other component of cultural intimacy, these feelings have been staying in the back of their minds. Habits such as cooking traditional food, keeping up with the Romanian news or video calling the family members represent what Michael Billings refers to as „banal nationalism”. On the same note, more modern practices such as using social media for creating networks of all the Romanians living in a certain area, proved extremely useful for political mobilization in times of need.

The COVID-19 pandemic generated disruptions, but, among the most affected were the low-skilled workers who had left their homes looking for a job to sustain their families. Living in a foreign country without knowing much about their rights and obligations, working between 12 and 14 hours without being paid properly for their extra time and having little to no education,

⁷ Zhongyuan Wang, ‘From Crisis to Nationalism?: The Conditioned Effects of the COVID-19 Crisis on Neo-Nationalism in Europe’, *Chinese Political Science Review*, 4 January 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-020-00169-8>

⁸ Ko Colijn, ‘CORONATIONALISM’, *Clingendael Institute*, 18 March 2020, <https://spectator.clingendael.org/en/node/5140>.

⁹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Talent Abroad: A Review of Romanian Emigrants.*, 2019, <http://ezproxy.canterbury.ac.nz/login?url=https://doi.org/10.1787/bac53150-en>.

¹⁰ Valerie Hopkins, ‘Far-Right Party Changes Political Landscape in Romania’, 14 December 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/040ab76c-cbef-4f2d-9b88-9f2d9ae7acfd>.

¹¹ ‘Voter Turnout - Parliamentary Elections December 2020’, n.d., <https://prezenta.roaep.ro>.

these Romanians are stranded between two different cultures, unable neither to fully integrate in their host country nor come back home because they are too ashamed to admit that the West was nothing like they imagined.¹² This stigma reached new proportions right from the beginning of this pandemic. Disappointed by the mainstream political figures, the Romanian communities living abroad sought comfort in a new party, whose agenda reflected their cultural intimacy and convinced them that there is no shame in displaying the sentiments that they have been trying to contain for such a long time.

To conclude, in the case of the Romanian diaspora, the virus accentuated the feelings of resentment and prompted them to act against all the abuses and the shame that they had to put up with in the only way possible, by voting. Having now a nationalist party in both chambers of the Parliament, Romania announces an augmentation of nationalism in the region.

¹² Elena Stancu and Bumbuț, Cosmin, 'Why Did Diaspora Vote with AUR', *Teleleu*, n.d., <https://teleleu.eu/de-ce-a-votat-diaspora-cu-aur/>.

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