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IN PURSUIT OF ONE'S SELF-INTEREST: AYN RAND'S LITERATURE AND RIGHT-WING POPULIST DISCOURSES IN ROMANIAN MEDIA

Abstract

Coined by the American writer Ayn Rand, the so-called 'virtue of selfishness' may well be indicative of a certain literary legacy that shapes the populist discourses of the right. Such statements maintaining that self-interest is self-esteem – and particularly Rand's way of legitimizing egotism and greed – are very much alive in Romanian political communication, being loosely associated with notions of unregulated capitalism by center-right parties. As the literary muse of individualism, Rand proves that her fiction and philosophy of objectivism can be appropriated by right-wing populist discourses inasmuch as they validate capitalistic adventurers, arguing for profit maximization. Mainstream Romanian media elaborate on political opinions that expose and rationalize this pursuit of self-interest in politics: achieving one's own happiness at all costs, which is (intuitively) embraced by the local apostles of the free market idea, is politicized despite being an aversive experience for (most of) the people. The local elite's perceived command of English and insight into American culture could be construed as the reason *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) – Rand's two famous novels – are literary ambassadors of self-interested behavior framed as freeing the people from the oppressive weight of the state. Since the popular understandings of Rand's writing are especially understudied as a means to come to terms with notions of right-wing populism as cultural diffusion from the USA to Romania, the purpose of this paper is to contribute to a wider debate about the significance of American literary cultures in legitimating an emerging (post)capitalist culture of greed and social inequality across post-communist Romania.

Keywords: Ayn Rand, cultural diffusion, Romania, right-wing populism, discourse

Virtuous Selfishness: Literary Cultures and Right-wing Populist Ideas

The unlikely connection between the literature of the Russian-American writer Ayn Rand (1905-1982) and the rhetoric of East European right-wing populism only just surfaced in Romanian mainstream media¹, i.e., in the daily newspaper and online news website, *Libertatea* (Ernu, 2021). Vasile Ernu, a Soviet-born Romanian writer and journalist, points out the legacy passed on by Rand to 21st-century populist practice in local political communication.

Historically, ideas of selfishness have "generate[d] [...] various and often contradictory forms of capitalism" (Dascălu, 2014: 280) in post-communist Romania. They are operationalized in the

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¹ As "the radical-right media, and the radical-right populist discourses they disseminate, are generally ignored by [Romanian] mainstream media" (Szabó et al., 2018: 11), a corpus including online opinion pieces in mainstream news portals is particularly relevant for understanding the contexts that affect the current developments of right-wing populism in Romania.

political terms of “an anti-elite discourse in the name of the sovereign People” (Aslanidis, 2016: 9). In other words, it is always possible that “libertarian populism” would be “Ayn Rand in disguise” (Lind, 2013) beyond the English-speaking world as well, i.e., in Romanian contexts. The political elites of Romania seem eager to “fight against altruism” (Rand, 1971: 4) in the name of the very people who are being denied access to basic government-subsidized services such as health, education or housing. Educated in the USA, decision-makers seem to claim the legitimacy of the so-called “virtue of selfishness” (Rand, 1961) under the guise of liberal democracy. Their referencing of English-speaking right-wing politicians can reveal the philosophy of Ayn Rand as a contextualizing device for pro-business policies, meant to suggest that the local center-right and conservative parties share an all-American aura.

My qualitative content analysis suggests that the landscape of Romanian populism is changing to meet the demands of the “ideological cleavage between the right and the left” (Corbu et al., 2017: 326), absent before the Covid-19 pandemic. This is indicative of a likely fourth wave of Romanian (right-wing) populism that builds on the “the third wave [...] [which] is compliant to the politics of personality” (Soare et al., 2018: 6).

Rand can be the unacknowledged literary muse of the free market apostles in Romania, most of them keen on pointing out their knowledge of English and plenty of insight into American culture, while also claiming the credentials of pro-EU politics. For example, “the Western-educated banker” (Mutler, 2021) and president of the National Liberal Party (PNL), Florin Cîțu (a graduate of Grinnell College and Iowa State University), commonly uses English in his speeches or social media posts to stress the evils of the welfare state. There is a growing consensus, particularly in the left-leaning Romanian media, that his “political communication style” (Jagers et al, 2007) embraces populist tropes mainly “for the purpose of preserving power and enlarging support”, ultimately a case in point of “neo-populism from above” (Shafir, 2008: 425). One can speculate that living in a politically polarized state, Iowa, (Iastate, 2006) made Cîțu well-aware that political divisions can have positive consequences for individual politicians. This shows in his quoting Margaret Thatcher and paying tribute to American presidents like Ronald Reagan (Toma, 2021). He signals his own political position by constantly reminding audiences of the values (English-speaking) liberalism has bestowed on the Romanian people.

With English as the most taught foreign language in post-communist Romania, its appeal is owed, in part at least, to post-communist “social and political changes” (Grosu-Rădulescu, 2018: 8). Ultimately, the growing use of English collocations and vocabulary in public communication comes to show that the so-called “Romglish” (Vișan, 2016) is a language of educated middle-classes and a reality to be reckoned with as a factor of cultural diffusion documented by language researchers. Cîțu’s use of English aims to bring about intolerance towards the poor, deemed entirely responsible for their own fate. He also mistranslates English so that criticism of his government rings hollow (PSnews.ro, 2021). The worship of individualism and lack of political will to address social inequality in Romania are rendered self-evident once again by his pronouncements on “the heroic character of entrepreneurs” (Digi24, 2021). According to him, as businesses grow at the fastest rate possible, the post-communist society at large would benefit as well. As a matter of fact, his “concern with one’s own interests” (Rand, 1961: 7) ties in with Romanian liberalism, historically known for “trust [...] in self-help and personal improvement as devices of social advancement” (Barbu, 2005: 552). Traditionally, the Romanian Liberal Party made a name for itself campaigning for “extreme practices of capitalist self-sufficiency” (Jianu, 2011: 341).

The afterlives of Ayn Rand’s objectivism – and particularly of selfishness and greed – in Romanian politics are loosely associated to notions of full, unregulated capitalism. Her sway over local political opinion is on the rise because of probable cultural diffusion coming from the USA, with widespread use of English in Romanian-language contexts. Based on their strategic use of linguistic code-switching (Heller, 1992), bilingual politicians act as mediators between cultures, thus highlighting a paradigm shift in diffusion studies. It comes to show the move beyond the idea of “innovative centres and imitative peripheries” (Roig-Sanz and Meylaerts, 2018: 6) by looking into processes of cultural exchange while they develop. Rand’s variety of social Darwinism is mediated in Romania mostly by widespread working knowledge of English among educated middle classes, not to mention translating and commenting on her texts. What is more, the political elites seem to have internalized “the influence she’s had over major political figures who have shaped American society” (Levine, 2014), such as former presidents (Ronald Reagan), Federal Reserve Board chairmen (Alan Greenspan) or House

Speakers (Paul Ryan) (Gravitt, 2015). Puzzlingly, many of the Romanian working poor appear to have embraced laissez-faire capitalism as well; they look down on the very idea of poverty, not to mention their own lives (DeutscheWelle, 2020). There is a paradoxical self-congratulatory, profit-at-all-costs ideology that underpins public trust in Romanian conservative populism (with right and center-right parties winning the general election in 2020). It could always be construed as informed by the (alleged) morality of selfish behavior exemplified by Rand's most famous novels, *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957).

Among Romanian politicians and journalists, the aggrandizing of greed, both as political statement and personal challenge, is especially understudied in connection with literary culture "understood as a historically situated practice [revealing] how people have done things with texts" (Pollock, 2003: 18). The significance of literary cultures in legitimating a culture of social inequality can disclose the narrative means by which toxic individualism is refashioned as cool, possibly sexy, testimonials against notions of altruism. Self-sacrifice for the very idea of the greater good of the people would thus be wrong: it poses a threat to all overachievers who successfully cling to the political career ladder. Accordingly, removing such pressures is a moral imperative for all movers and shakers. As such, Rand's novels – widely considered instances if not "the culmination of the romantic novel" (Bernstein, 2009: 167) – bear uncanny resemblance to the rhetoric of Romanian right-wing populists. While claiming to revere the American way of life in order to indict progressive and left-wing policies with collectivism charges, the populists that claim the virtues of selfishness exemplify most strands of Romanian populism, i.e.:

a "thin"-centered ideology (Mudde, 2004) lacking conceptual substance (see Cinpoș, 2013; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2001, 2007; Shafir, 2008) [...] a communication style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), which is used successfully by leaders of both populist and mainstream parties (see Gherghina & Soare, 2013; Ieșcu-Fairclough, 2007). We found only one paper that explicitly views populism as "a mere political strategy that is based upon the bond with the people" (Koban & Danetiu, 2013: 280), which neo-populist elites exploit in order to acquire and maintain power. (Corbu et al., 2017: 326)

In this respect, the discourse of populist politicians that are likely literate in American literature and (political) culture ties in with notions of "recombinant populism", a "new feature of populism in Central and Eastern Europe, namely its ability to cope with varying demands by the logic of recombining useful elements and strategies" (Dragoman, 2021: 1).

The Philosophy of Objectivism and the Novels of Ayn Rand

My cross-disciplinary approach aims to address the key points of Ayn Rand's writing from the perspective of discursive intersections with the coverage of right-wing populism in Romanian news and opinion. More than anything, this is an attempt at a literature review, a "Randian roundup" (Ryan, 2003) that should help point out the consistencies between Romanian (center-) right populism and Randian ideas of virtuous social conduct. This reading is meant to highlight the use value of the most famous tropes in her moral theory for right-wing politicians plotting their future.

As a matter of principle, Rand's objectivism is steeped in a morality tale, one that comes complete with individualist heroes and collectivist societies. The moral is to be found only in the lives of characters that strike an exceptional note. They are the arch-individualists willing to advocate for "the requirement to act on their own rationality and to inhabit a social world in which self-interest, trade and private property are features if they are to realize their purpose" (Beadle, 2008: 226). Such objectives can only be achieved by agents that engage with "productive work [which] is the central purpose of a rational man's life, the central value that integrates and determines the hierarchy of all his other values" (Rand, 1964). It follows that those who fail to work hard and treat selfishness as inescapably virtuous are frowned upon by Rand's narrative voices and (non-) diegetic heroes.

In all her writing, she makes one and the same point: her novels and philosophy advance an argumentative purpose, championing one's own freedom and happiness, i.e.,

her philosophy of Objectivism, [...] summed up in the following terms: ‘(1) Metaphysics: Objective Reality; (2) Epistemology: Reason; (3) Ethics: Self-Interest; (4) Politics: Capitalism’ [...]. If Rand’s work is rejected by some because of its violence or absurdity, it is arguably the starkness of her worldview evidenced here that is the greatest contribution to the polarisation of critical responses. (Cocks, 2020: 2-3)

The kind of violence inherent in her romantic literature has everything to do with encouraging views about the individual always coming first; this is accomplished at the expense of society at large. However, Rand’s writing, be it fiction or non-fiction, is supposed to be an ethical contribution to social responsibility in the first place. According to her, individual lives stand to benefit from dramatizing self-worship, an overarching theme in her most well-known novels. Particularly, *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) and *The Fountainhead* (1943) have laid out the foundation of what was to become the philosophy of objectivism. The former is “is an apocalyptic vision of the last stages of a conflict between two classes of humanity - the looters and the non-looters. The looters are proponents of high taxation, big labor, government ownership, government spending, government planning, regulation, and redistribution” (Younkins, 2019: 10). Everyone embracing a progressive and/or socialist agenda takes advantage of socialist laws and abuse the capitalist institutions of the US. The latter novel was intended to “present an inspiring or heroic type of human being” (Podrisky et al., 2009: 11) that ultimately celebrates self-reliance. The story is a grand statement against mysticism and resignation which, for Rand, are the defining features of what she seems to fear most in society, i.e., collectivism. Additionally, “many [...] assumed that the novel [*The Fountainhead*] had been designed as a disquisition on Nietzsche’s Superman” (Walker, 1999: 277).

Rand’s storylines develop against the backdrop of the clash between conformity and independence. The clash between the establishment (or the state) and the heroic individual is, nevertheless, won by all her iconic characters – Howard Roark, John Galt and Dagny Taggart. All of them are rational beings, exquisitely independent, and guided by their overbearing self-esteem only. Both novels are commonly described as philosophical works of fiction, meant to stake out an implicitly political agenda, that of objectivism, which, according to her

is a philosophical movement; since politics is a branch of philosophy, Objectivism advocates certain political principles—specifically, those of laissez-faire capitalism—as the consequence and the ultimate practical application of its fundamental philosophical principles. (Rand, 1962)

Explicitly, her arch-individuals fight the rigged system – whatever that means. Somehow, all of them eventually prevail. They are the kind of romantic characters that, against all odds, get the job done (skyscrapers, innovative metal alloys or a motor that produces electricity out of the atmosphere). Everything happens mainly because Roark, Galt and Taggart stand their ground in the face of what Rand and her narrative voices eagerly brand ‘collectivism’ and ‘mysticism’. In all individualist cultures, they are the cardinal sins against rational behavior.

Her novels are emphatic statements. They envisage reason and individualism as instrumental to the idea of human agency embodied only by characters that, while remaining unwilling to compromise, realize personal redemption and reap material rewards. Just as Atlas himself, Rand’s ideal human beings are supposed to act in an admirably brave manner. To some extent, they are driven by self-awareness. Namely, by the knowledge that each of them has what it takes to win his/her battles. It follows that readers and characters alike are exhorted by the narrative voices to act with their best interest in mind:

Do not let the hero in your soul perish, in lonely frustration for the life you deserved, but never have been able to reach. Check your road and the nature of your battle. The world you desired can be won, it exists, it is real, it is possible.... (Rand, 1992: 983)

In the attempt to right the wrongs of a diegetic world (that most of her characters perceive as beset by ethical problems stemming from collectivist mentalities), her type of worthy individual sets out to overcome challenges by means of cynical actions. In both *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, her protagonists are self-interested arch-individuals that face difficulties framed as moral impositions on their wishes, i.e., some sort of resistance to their creative talents. Eventually, all obstacles fail to prevent

them from achieving success. John Galt even takes deadly risks to make sure he never strays from the core of his moral convictions that require him to fit the profile of the stereotypically rational and productive mind. For all intents and purposes, he is willing to punish his collectivist society by going on strike. Should all other geniuses of capitalism join him, the so-called ‘looters’ would finally be disciplined by worthy businessmen and scientists.

As virtuous behavior “is not an end in itself ... not its own reward” (Rand, 1992: 939), surviving and thriving – for those who pursue personal, egotistical happiness – boil down to living the life of a creative human being.

I have, let's say, sixty years to live. Most of that time will be spent working. I've chosen the work I want to do. If I find no joy in it, then I'm only condemning myself to sixty years of torture. And I can find the joy only if I do my work in the best way possible to me. But the best is a matter of standards--and I set my own standards. I inherit nothing. I stand at the end of no tradition. I may, perhaps, stand at the beginning of one. (Rand, 2007: 62)

The sense of fulfilment brought about by achievement means to experience “the feeling of one’s blessing upon the whole of the earth, the feeling of being in love with the fact that one exists and in this kind of world” (Rand, 1992: 105–6). Definitely, the social circumstances Rand’s overachievers find themselves in are puzzling inasmuch as their “love of rectitude” (Rand, 1992: 512) drives most of them towards choices that should secure their sublime human nature, at odds with traditional morality codes. Of relevance are some of Rand’s heterosexual sex scenes – at least one of them very similar to rape. Forcibly carried out, Roark’s intercourse with Dominique in *The Fountainhead* is described as ‘rape’ by the female character, despite not being acknowledged as such by other narrative voices and characters:

I’ve been raped. ...I’ve been raped by some redheaded hoodlum from a stone quarry....!, Dominique Francon. ...Through the fierce sense of humiliation, the words gave her the same kind of pleasure she had felt in his arms... (Rand, 2007: 298)

Consequently, staying true to one’s own standards is based on a sense of self-righteousness that can even result in rape. Rectitude in the management of self-entitlement is purposeful human agency, irrespective of anyone else’s views on whether one is right or wrong in their actions. However, rational self-interest seems not to rule out generosity and forgiveness, even if they should never amount to charity proper. Rand’s objectivist characters define and present the image of ideal human beings as if altruism were hypocrisy; occasionally, and only for reasons of their own, they happen to be kind to friend and foe alike. In *The Fountainhead*, Roark’s sense of integrity might cost him his architect job, yet he tries to give hope to the failed sculptor Steven Mallory; Hank Rearden (*Atlas Shrugged*) helps his own family members (for a while at least). Their defense of self-interest as rational performance of social practice ultimately means the dismissal of self-sacrifice. Conversely, sheer violence is at work in the plot of *Atlas Shrugged*: “force and mind are opposites; morality ends where a gun begins” (Rand, 1992: 1023).

Rand’s writing argues that ideas which reveal universal issues come across to her audiences as either freedom or truth; such universals can be defined in terms as real as the daily lives of her readers. As the objectivist story goes, it is in their best interest to understand that the ideal man is only made possible by stubborn characters, eager to call out irrational behavior whenever they see it. Howard Roark, John Galt or Dagny Taggart use this insight wisely: what they fear most is altruism at the expense of personal happiness. This kind of individualism re-enforces the view that all capitalists are morally right to pursue their self-interest only. Conclusively, they never fail to strike a selfish note; their hostility and condescension towards all who do not share their outlook (i.e., readers that find their behavior deplorable) are the reason for most of the opposition towards Rand’s work.

By claiming that only hard work pays off, a rhetoric that portrays the poor as benefit seekers gains momentum in Romania. This recalls of Rand’s moral high ground as the working poor are blamed for the circumstances they find themselves in. Her literature is conducive to entrenching socio-economic inequalities by assuming the kind of personal responsibility whereby those trapped in poverty are to blame not only for their own predicament but also for requesting welfare payments. According to Florin

Cîțu, paying social welfare benefits is wrong because this is what prevents Romania from fulfilling its economic potential (ProTV.ro, 2021).

Aversive Experiences for (Most of) The People: Media Coverage of Self-Interest as Virtue

Debates on language use and identity politics have gained more relevance in Romanian mainstream media during the Covid-19 pandemic. For the most part, they denote a sense of synchronicity between health policies and the interests of political parties and social groups. Particularly those that have a stake in challenging governmental practices of secrecy and power call on politicians to change coronavirus containment policies. Media disputes over the pandemic are crucial in foregrounding questions pertaining to identity narratives, with a focus on social inequality. Paradoxically, people's aversive experiences caused by wheeling and dealing to pass legislation against Covid-19 are sugarcoated successfully by populist politicians. Right-wing populists capitalize on buzzwords like 'freedom' and 'personal responsibility' in order to give the people what they want, or, better still, what they do not want: "nobody wants a lockdown"² (Ofițeru, 2021).

Controversial statements on identity and politics are commonly picked up by news outlets, while the Romanian authority in the field of discrimination, the National Council for Combating Discrimination, takes on mostly cases related to ethnic minorities and women rights. The council calls for political correctness and has repeatedly fined politicians found guilty of discriminatory offences (www.romaniajournal.ro). Usually, contentious issues that get media coverage lie with the actual wording of political statements. In the long run, this ties in with notions of self-interest and competition as means of achieving social mobility rather than the greater good of society (Sandel, 2020: 15). Various political stakeholders try to make sense discursively of theirs and others' pandemic experiences through narrative strategies meant to promote public engagement. Most of them are iterations of narrative approaches to "populist discourses on self-perceived political competence" (Rico et al., 2020: 801) that promise to keep the pandemic in check. Although his government has overseen the devastating decline in Covid-19 vaccination rates, Cîțu is known for bragging about beating the pandemic (Pîrv, 2021) and Romania winning "big time" (Traicu, 2021) with him in charge. As discursive and narrative forms, the proofs of his political competence are embodied in a series of social media posts that paint pictures of the Romanian people's lives filled with economic opportunity (Călin, 2021). In opposition to such statements, third person, omniscient voices from the government – speaking only for the benefit of those who worked their way to the top of the (political) pecking order – try to shake off the responsibility for the Covid-19 death toll (Tăpălagă, 2021).

Although difficult to pinpoint, right-wing populism in East-Central Europe (Shafir, 2008) can account for the way political meanings are communicated by Florin Cîțu. The "empty populism" (Jagers et al., 2007) of his politics only includes appeals to the people rather than calling on anti-elite sentiments. Whereas an exclusionary (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013) logic is inherent in his political reasoning, this is nevertheless played down so that the majority of the electorate would not see through the mantle of freedom assumed by the liberal Florin Cîțu who, for instance, trusted them entirely with their health decisions at the time of the pandemic. This productive capacity of populism as "thin centered ideology" (Mudde, 2004) is self-evident in his attempts to answer allegations over his management of the Covid-19 crisis: during his premiership, Romania was "the first in the EU to lift restrictions and relax other measures, but next-to-last in terms of vaccination rates" (Gherasim, 2021). Essentially, he tries to appropriate most of the features discursively underpinning Romanian liberalism in a manner that recalls why nationalist and/or socialist discourses could, falsely or not, come across as populist rhetoric in other national contexts (De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017; De Cleen et al., 2018: 653).

Distinctions between 'elite' and 'people' are co-produced by competing understandings of what is in the best interest of the nation. Accordingly, populism as the logic of the political (Laclau, 2005) is informed by functional language use in narrative settings, long associated with representing reality in literature and history. In this reading, "the underlying knowledge that allows people to make utterances in order to accomplish goals and to understand the utterances of others in terms of their goals" (Shuy,

² Romanian-language texts are translated by the author.

1977: 79) conveys the ways in which conflicting messages are passed onto Romanian audiences by populist decision makers.

This narrative knowledge can be understood as reinterpreting literary conventions in political communication. For example, media stories cast characters (this time political players) in adversarial roles only: whoever stands against “implementing liberalism in Romania” (Dumitrescu, 2021) stands against the liberal party. In most public narratives, these instances of self-fashioning are “identity-based political positions” (Gupta, 2007). Despite the glaring shortcomings of current policies in ensuring access to basic services for all “systemically under-represented [groups] in Romanian politics” (Stoiciu and Gherghina, 2020: 183), identity-related discourses, repurposed for political use, succeed in preventing social equity arguments from even surfacing in Romanian news and opinion. For example, “if a solidarity tax had been effective, it would already have been levied” (Pavel, 2021) according to Cîțu. It looks like dissent in politics and media can be suppressed by discourses on individualism that are not “allowing groups to articulate injuries and injustices in their own terms; [...] [moreover] that process is now being used by the right as a way of satirizing and sabotaging all discourses of social justice” (Davies, 2021).

Ideas of self-interest, from Thomas Hobbes to Adam Smith (Gordon, 1985), are constitutive for market economies in the English-speaking world. However, Rand’s narrative of virtuous self-interest can reveal how both populist communication and identities are being produced in Romanian political culture. For instance, the catchphrases “the Romanian people want” (Nicolae, 2021) and “#theRomaniansNeedtoKnow” (my translation of #RomaniiTrebuieSaStie) rank high among the political arguments of Florin Cîțu. He is adamant to equate the minimal state with his own abilities to make limited government actually happen in Romania. As such, this is a plot in the larger narrative of his own exceptional character:

“I bring substance,” he [Florin Cîțu] says. “Then you’re different from everybody else.” He also tells the truth. “I don’t compromise,” he says. “I can always be a banker.” (Regenold).

Unlike himself, who is a financier by profession, his political foes fail to deliver on such most basic promises. In other words, he stands in contrast to less substantial people that deal in compromise. Inadvertently, he makes the point that the posturing of populist politicians in Romanian media, much like everywhere else,

works through perceived analogues and equivalences between different identity-based political positions, and seeks thereby to extend its reach across and embrace different identity-based political positions. (Gupta, 2007: 2)

By assuming the self-perceived political competence of someone who saw fit to post on social media edited footage of his face superimposed over Superman’s body (Buciu, 2021), Florin Cîțu hints at his know-how in engaging a target audience via Instagram. The intent of focusing on the language used by Florin Cîțu is to capture its political significance for the media, with a view to highlighting its polarizing outcomes. On the one hand, there is widespread support for Cîțu, as proven by his win in the leadership race of the liberal party (DeutscheWelle.com, 2021). This suggests his rhetoric makes sense for a big chunk of the liberals. On the other hand, this has pitted party members who back the former president of the party, Ludovic Orban, against Cîțu’s followers and threatens to split the liberal party (G4Media.ro, 2021). One way or another, his individualistic sense of social responsibility, commonly associated with the libertarian right³, is what makes him representative of the “elective affinity between social media and populism” (Gerbaudo, 2018) in Romanian contexts:

[Cîțu] communicate[s] with people not as an expert, he says, but as a person. One way he does that is by not looking like a stereotypical politician with short, slicked-back hair and a tidy suit. Instead, he wears

³ On his blog, Florin Cîțu stated that he resonates with “the idea [...] of a libertarian working for a state to undermine it from the inside. I am not sure if this would work more than one electoral cycle but it is a thought.”. Furthermore, he seems to conflate the notions of libertarian and liberal: “to me conflict of interest does not arise only between a libertarian/liberal and the state” (Cîțu, 2011). This leads me to think that he often self-identifies as “libertarian/liberal”.

a sports coat and jeans and keeps his hair a little longer. He also communicates with people on Facebook — he has more than 14,000 followers — and his blog. (Regenold)

As a matter of principle, his discourses play on public anxieties. The prominent ones are coming under attack from the Russian Federation (I.H., 2021) and the communist past of the country (Leonte, 2021). His concern for identity-based political affiliation exposes political audiences to a narrative based on heroic characters and deeds. In the long run, this is a self-fashioning exercise that emphasizes his contribution to matters of national interest, even if they are conveyed in a rather crude way: “food is cheap, the Romanians are happy” (D.D., 2021). Disregard for the welfare state (Dela0.ro, 2021) seems to be at the heart of his plans for rebuilding economy and social infrastructure through liberal entrepreneurship only (Neagu, 2018). Positing the individual as fundamental to a competitive political system tends to promote opportunistic behavior suggesting that only individual wants and needs are socially real and politically significant.

However, the moral right to pursue self-interest repeatedly comes under scrutiny in his own party. For instance, even the liberal members of the Parliament urge the Romanian people to quit being selfish and take the Covid-19 vaccine (Pauliuc, 2021). In addition, the credibility of self-interested behavior and, particularly, of its political champion, Florin Cîțu, have been dwindling fast (Hurdea, 2021) over the last months of 2021: “nothing is of concern to mister Cîțu but himself. If it serves him well, he has no problem to get people killed” (Ene Dogioiu, 2021). This has everything to do with the row over his conduct (Pițigoi, 2021) in the office of the prime minister (2020-2021), which led to a political U-turn. To remain in power (Nicolae, R., 2021), his party, PNL, embarked on forming a new political coalition with the proponents of social-democracy in Romania (PSD). Namely, with the very same people whom they have reviled in order to win political office in the first place. Actually, their campaigns against the socialists hinged on the promise that they would save the country from the “social-democrat robbery” (Savin, 2020) and firmly place the country among the fastest growing economies in Europe.

Ultimately, Cîțu positions himself as a staunch supporter of the European Union and, particularly, of American involvement in Romania (agerpres.ro, 2021), much like the National Liberal Party itself (Popescu, 2019). In his words, “the very idea of negotiating with the social democrats is a betrayal of the Romanian people” (Negrea, 2021). The purpose is to make sure the public understand he is the sworn enemy of socialism. In other words, he still vouches for his liberal views and promises to fight against his newly found political allies, the social democrats, despite getting ready to work together in the government (Pecheanu, 2021). His seemingly erratic political conduct borders on opportunism and has prompted commentators to label him nothing short of “Florin Fucking Fantastic” (Munteanu, 2021) and his behavior as the “Cîțu syndrome” (Chiruță, 2021).

Conclusions

Ayn Rand’s influence on Romanian politics can prove once again that literature and philosophy work in the background of cultural diffusion processes. Romanian contexts suggest that proudly bilingual politicians act as “cultural mediators” (Roig-Sanz and Meylaerts, 2018: 6) in their strategic use of linguistic code-switching from Romanian to English. Literary plotlines and characters, augmented by popular culture narratives (such as films), circulate the imaginary of literate storytelling across cultural forms, with narrative practices that legitimate notions of self-interest in the background of political communication. Inasmuch as the tone of Romanian populist discourses on the (center-) right might be construed as having been influenced by Rand’s narrative praise of selfishness, American literary cultures are effective in conveying selfishness as an ethical stance both in policymaking and governance. Capitalist individualism personified in heroic leaders (now entrepreneurs that bring about progress and reap the benefits of their hard work) builds on Randian stereotypes embedded in moral judgments.

Against the best interest of the people, educated elites instrumentalize heroic thinking in narrative settings often appropriated by political communication. This can make right-wing populism rampant if endorsed by purportedly meritocratic state and government bodies. To cut a long story short, the elites contend that the people are given what they want: freedom. As this story goes, populist state-

related actors claim that (corrupt) politicians submit to the will of the people who sweep them away and take back control. It turns out though that some politicians and civil servants are only too eager to make their own lives easier by essentially leaving the people to their own devices: all are allowed the freedom to act as they wish at their own peril. The media coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic unfolding in Romania is reflecting the interest of the political elites to use the divisive rhetoric of freedom in order to rationalize and justify their performance in public office. Those in power have the cultural background to understand that marketing the so-called virtue of selfishness to the people can promote their own well-being as state bureaucrats.

Right-wing populism in Romanian mainstream media speaks more of cultural diffusion from abroad rather than of a home-grown, post-communist evolution in legitimating a culture of greed. Even if views on the heroic character of Romanian businessmen cannot be necessarily traced to Rand's ethical egoism, such political statements seem stuck in her worldview developed in the 1960s (if not earlier).

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