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CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE POPULIST DISCOURSE MANIFESTED THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract: Social media is a part of our everyday reality. Therefore, the ethical and legal tendency to identify a virtual space as a public space is not at all surprising. Social media represents the most accessible public space, with a democratic type of access, open to individuals coming from an infinite variety of cultural spaces, all connected to the space of global communication. It is natural that an appetence for the political game is developed throughout participants, aiming at the accession and the transmission of messages and at the formation of an ideological community, molded into groups of support and broadcast for the ideas promoted. Regarding this matter, the presence on social media of niche political movements, of populist groups, of everyone counting on the impact the virtual world has over the people these categories are targeting. Merging the ideological imaginary with the religious one is an ordinary practice when it comes to the leaders and supporters of populist networks. In this context, there are several elements emphasized in the paper, specific to the populist discourse found in the Romanian cultural space, discursively manifested through the communication happening in the virtual space. In a world of global communication, we have been interested in an analysis of populist discourse which proposes a rejection and a demonization of alterity, using means that are specific to religious ideologies, suggesting as possible antidote the use of cultural intelligence as an instrument of intervention in relation to the process of shaping the individual and collective mental state.

Key words: social media, ethical communication, populism, religious ideologies, diversity, demonization of alterity, cultural intelligence, digital era.

1. Virtual reality and objective reality in the digital era

With the arrival of the digital era, the global world is making us face a new reality: the one of global communication between members of communities and groups belonging to cultures reaching new levels of diversity. Members of these communities interact, work together and often have to contribute to a common economic, social or cultural ideal. Communication and information technologies make it possible to build new relational structures through the social networks that make up the virtual space, which is increasingly becoming part of everyday reality. The reality of life brings them into very complex construction situations, including the position of participating in the development of a common social and political model. They have to communicate and live together. The formation of new communities, fluid in their construction, functioning and deconstruction processes, is no longer based on a cultural tradition, a common mythical or symbolic background or a form of religious or spiritual practice. It is the usefulness and efficiency that create the contents that make it possible to find them under the sign of a common identity. At least at first glance, classic tools of identity construction such as Social Intelligence, Cultural Intelligence or Spiritual Intelligence are not involved. However, it is important to understand that „to build a unique identity for every human being, is politically accompanied by the idea of accepting religious tolerance as a supreme value because each individual builds, starting from the uniqueness of his personal life experience" (Dumitrescu 2022, 143).

The entry into the digital era increasingly reveals that, beyond the abstract nature of social networks, we cannot ignore their concreteness. It is perceived differently by each generation. It is felt to a lesser extent by the older and mature generation, as they still maintain the perspective of a qualitative difference between the real and the virtual space, even if, to varying degrees, they live in both without feeling that the world in which they operate is a dual one. Often, in the resistance to their merging into a single sphere of existence, mechanisms are used that are related to the religious, spiritual or cultural choices of the people involved. The issue of the difference between the virtual and the objective world appears to be a rather secondary one for young people, particularly together with the emergence of those we identify as 'digital born'. For them, the two worlds are one and the distinction is no longer an ontological one, but only one of representation of the environment in which they act.

This worldview is significant in terms of our discussion because it is imbued with the globalization of inter-human relations, which is about the very global way in which whatever is local functions by being inter-connected to a relational totality. Theoretically, social networks place

individuals one click away from any possible interaction. In practice, this means that at every step individual can feel the presence of alterity as a challenge, particularly when it comes to cultural and spiritual otherness, which people must integrate into their daily lives.

All of this is significant from the perspective of the observation, which we find increasingly articulated in the analysis of the virtual space, according to which debates about alterity in the digital era must take into account the fact that the discourse present on social networks cannot be separated from the discourse of those individuals in the actual situations of their action, especially when it comes to political discourse. Therefore, online discourse and behavior should not be separated from offline discourse and behavior, particularly when it comes to manifestations of violence and discrimination (Harmer, Lumsden 2019). It is to be expected that the online attitudes of those who relate violently and discriminatorily to otherness will be similar. Typically, both attitudes are marked by their way of situating themselves in the world, by their personality and mindset, by the way in which they relate to values, particularly to cultural and spiritual values. Sometimes, belonging to a specific religious community can predispose them to intolerant attitudes towards the community. This is particularly the case when people do not distinguish between religion and ideology, seeing them as identical formulas for building a philosophy of life that shapes the practical actions by which they relate to others.

2. Social networks and politics in Romania

Whether we look at it as a member of the European Union, or as an entity in its own right, Romania is connected to the global world. The processes of implementation of communication technologies are taking place at the same pace as their international development, and the trend of implementing digitalization in as many dimensions of life as possible is strongly affirmed and supported by political and administrative decision factors. The time spent by Romanians on social networks is broadly similar to the interval found in other Western societies. New generations are integrating communication technologies into their daily lives, and the appetite for technology and social networking is growing among all population groups. It is only natural that political communication should therefore be a presence in both the objective and the virtual space, whether within the periods of time dedicated to election campaigns or when sending general political messages.

A more frequent transmission of political messages can be noticed in niche political groups, minority groups and groups that mainly promote populist messages. Research shows that "Like many other countries, Romania has quite a rich history of populist political communication. Ever

since the fall of the communist regime, several parties have employed discursive techniques that pivoted the many at the bottom of the society against the few elites at the top. Championing this style of communication were, more or less successively, the Party for the Unity of the Romanian Nation (PUNR), Greater Romania Party (PRM), Dan Diaconescu People's Party (PPDD), and now the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR). Their communication was deeply personalized, and their leaders portrayed themselves as saviors - many times referring to religious symbols" (Stoica 2023, 4). The messianic spirit is present in Romanian political culture in its theological forms in the period between the two world wars of the 20th century, with a political theology that today we find in forms adapted to consumer society and to the world of global communication, emptied of the transcendence of the message and shaped by the persuasive force of ideological discourse. Political theologies have been replaced in the global era by religious ideologies, and the conflicts that can arise are linked to such a conflict of ideologies, built from the religious choices of a political leader and of a religious community (Frunză 2015). The ideal in these cases is no longer one of a spiritual or cultural nature, but one of a political nature.

If we analyze the construction of the online and offline discourse of AUR leader George Simion, we will notice from the beginning that the two dimensions of the discourse are similar, regardless of the medium in which it takes place. For example, the strategy of rejection of alterity in the discourse conducted in the public space is similar to the one materialized as a strategy of rejection of otherness visible in the materials posted on Facebook, instigating an assumed and violent rejection of alterity.

Research on online behavior shows that there is a pattern of merging the type of discourse and behavior we find online with the type of discourse and behavior the person promotes in public. It is the case of a mindset that becomes visible in behavior. Sometimes the tone may seem more moderate in offline discourse, but the pattern of thought, the imagery at play, the ritualized actions, the types of content conveyed are similar. What appears to be different is related to the extension displayed by communication on social networks. Digitalization opens up access to technology and to a great diversity of communication possibilities for very broad categories of the population. Those who are, in their real lives, followers of populist ideas, ideologies or strategies are likely to be consumers of this type of discourse in the virtual space as well. Moreover, they are likely to participate in stimulating and creating it through their own postings, their own content creation, or through simple forms of adhesion, recognition or appreciation of such discourse disseminated on social networks. In this way, a greater complexity of factors becomes relevant from a political communication perspective, including interactions, posting of comments, responses by the author of the post

and other participants in the discussion, positive or negative reactions, the response to these reactions, changes of content that the author of the post makes in subsequent posts based on current experience. Analyses can go further to reveal the types of motivation and the assumed patterns of justification, given that this is a very handy medium for the manifestation of stereotypes, discrimination and other forms of radicalism (Harmer, Lumsden 2019).

Romania is a cultural and spiritual space in which we have a population structure with a predominant majority group and several ethnic, cultural and religious minorities. It is an area characterized by cultural and religious diversity in which multiculturalism is not only an ideology but also a fact of life. If we look at the analysis coordinates related to the co-existence of ethnic and religious groups and communities, we will see that this is a cultural area where we have a high level of development of cultural intelligence and spiritual intelligence. However, populist discourse rejecting diversity finds its place in political communication and in the preferences of the electorate.

3. On a deconstruction of alterity in political discourse

Social networks are a very handy way to express choices, including political ones. It's not by chance that politicians resort to sending messages using them. Unethical practices in political communication and advertising have also revealed that social networks can be instrumentalized for the purposes of fake news transmission, distortion of reality or political manipulation. In the Romanian context, as we can also see in other political spaces of the European Union, social networks are used to promote discrimination, political violence and rejection of otherness. Despite the official discourse of the member states, despite the general policies of the European Union, in Romania, as in other countries, populist discourse brings to the forefront of political communication themes that facilitate the construction of a type of discourse that allows them to deny the value of diversity, highlight the negative influences that alterity can bring, distrust of foreigners, or the danger represented by individuals and groups that have other religious options than those of the mainstream.

We can notice that while in traditional media, journalists impose a trend to diminish these tendencies, on social networks, despite an effort to regulate the virtual space as a public space, attitudes of rejection, discrimination, symbolic hatred or violent reporting are much more common in the discourse concerning otherness. The access of every person with a computer or mobile phone to public discourse on social networks and the possibility for every individual to interact, comment and even create content is part of the game of democratic access to com-

munication technologies and to communication as a global phenomenon. However, this is a democratic game, so we must not forget that the game also has rules that all participants in the game must play by.

Paula Rațiu's research on the manifestations of Romanian ultra-nationalism on social networks revealed that the importance of social networks in transmitting messages is similar to the importance that Sandu Frunză noted when he studied religious fundamentalism and how it used global networks to transmit messages of symbolic violence. They are a tool without which the effectiveness of the messages conveyed would be greatly diminished. In the era of global communication, social networks offer users the possibility of interconnection that seems immediate, fast, efficient and transcends space and time. Therefore, the message can reach a very large number of people, a number that can be multiplied through sharing and reposting and through the ever-renewing connections that the network provides. The personal or organizational offer, as well as the emotionally charged message, constructed with words and images and other multimedia elements, can be brought to attention, discussed and debated, creating around it a community of people who share a common vision of the world. Just as information, debate and influence can penetrate to the most diverse and unexpected audiences, either to gain followers or to arouse interest or concern about particular ideas, representations or content. However, in terms of ideological communication, social networks are not only about socializing, but also about receiving support, gaining empathy and opening up to people facing similar problems and challenges and seeking a common enemy for all the unhappiness in their personal and community lives. Time spent on social networks seems to be rewarded with support from like-minded people to cope with those they identify with the foreigner, with the moral evil or the crisis of values, and even with the departure from the human condition.

In the Romanian context, studying the political behavior of AUR leader George Simion reveals that his Facebook page is a kind of centre around which the entire communication of the organization revolves. The AUR leader has managed very well to instrumentalize social networks to unite people with similar interests and visions, offering them a type of *echo chamber* for spending time, for sending messages, for debating ideas, but also for expressing discriminatory ideas and rejecting alterity. It seems that the AUR leader has understood that today you cannot do political communication effectively without the use of social networks. They provide not only a meeting place, but also a place for the manifestation and shared assumption of a hierarchy of values, as well as a way of constructing identity. Messages are sent to a specific target audience and, in the spirit of populism, are formulated in such a way as to meet their expectations (Damianenco 2021; Gheorghiu, Praisler 2022; Stoica, Krouwel, Cristea 2021). And the reaction of the target audience is not long-awaited.

It comes to meet the messages, expresses itself in relation to them, finds itself with its emotions and thoughts which it combines with those of the leader (who takes on overtones of the messianic imaginary), a public that is ready to allow itself to be shaped, manipulated and radicalized in the name of common social and political ideals built on a culture of rejection of otherness. Discourses function as a medium for transmitting magical formulas of communication and for setting in motion ritualistic behaviors sculpted and embellished by political discourse. They are instrumentalized to create a political culture of rejection of alterity.

It should be noted that a strong point of the populist discourse of the AUR leader is the presentation of Orthodox Christianity as superior to other religious options. The arguments used for this are historical and cultural in nature, they take into consideration the role of Orthodoxy in the construction of national identity, but at the same time they value Orthodox Christianity from the perspective of a higher ideal of humanity. It is obvious that all these elements, even if they interfere with the Christian vision or ecclesial teachings and fragmentary aspects of Orthodox theology, are only cuttings of a fragmentary Christian vision, lacking the totalizing aspects that give authenticity to Christian teaching. These fragments are used in the same way that elements of doctrine and religious experience are used in their own religions by fundamentalist movements. These movements are political movements that use religious motifs in their discourse for persuasive purposes. It is something that religious ideologies do when they want to communicate messages that do not have a final stage defined by religious or spiritual purposes, but a final stage that is defined by the effectiveness of political communication.

Related to this dimension is also the tendency to project a dualistic perspective on discourse that brings good and evil face to face. Social networks can bring together people from a wide range of social backgrounds and subcultures to construct and justify negative attitudes towards those imagined to represent a diffuse, hidden but perceived as particularly threatening, evil. Uniting against the threat posed by otherness can only be done in this situation by adopting radical attitudes fueled by increasingly radical discourses. Oana Celia Gheorghiu and Alexandru Praisler have emphasized in their analyses how AUR followers continuously feed themselves with a discourse that targets ethnic or sexual minorities, ideological or cultural minorities, immigrants or other categories of population that find refuge in the Western world and sometimes also in Romania. All of these are viewed from the perspective of what political analysts have called "Romanian exceptionalism", in constant comparison with those who are placed in an inferior position simply because they are not part of the majority group (Gușă 2021).

Manifesting itself as an "openly nationalist, Eurosceptic party with an ultra-conservative agenda" (Damianenco 2021), AUR sets its own standard for what it means to be a Romanian citizen and identifies the way of being

Romanian with the very human condition, with the idea of being human. Those who do not fit this human model cannot be considered human beings. All the resources of ideological discourse must be directed against them because they are considered to be entities that threaten Romanian culture, language and identity, including Orthodoxy as the bearer of Christian values in Romanian culture. This trend towards homogenization in the name of conservation is proposed as a saving solution, as an instrument used to get out of the crisis, as the promotion of a healthy hierarchy of values in a world that seems to be threatened by all kinds of diversity diseases. It is in this magical and healing discursive tone that the urge to reject all that is related to diversity in culture, gender, religion, tradition, lifestyle is formulated (Gușă 2021; Buti, Constantin 2021).

These are, in fact, the elements on which AUR builds its own identity, similar to the one it projects as the essence of the identity and spiritual profile of the Romanian people. The overlap of the organizational identity with the Romanian identity has been well illustrated by Stoica, Krouwel and Cristea by revealing four pillars of the construction of the AUR identity: the traditional family, the homeland, faith and freedom. The four elements are considered to be fundamental values meant to protect Romania from the danger coming from Western diversity, which aims to ruin the Romanian identity (Stoica, Krouwel, Cristea 2021). In order to ensure protection against the dangers that the Western world, but also the Eastern world, directs against the Romanian identity and culture, the AUR discourse resorts to an aggressive language, which brings to the foreground the par excellence negative character of the difference, that it portrays by resorting to stereotypes, denigration and demonization.

4. Exiting the ideology

Analyzing different perspectives on global communication, Nathan Rambukkana reveals that despite our expectations that the globalization of communication will resolve issues of dispute and conflict, despite our expectations that digital communication will lead to an elimination of international tensions, we observe rather the opposite. Communication actually reveals distortions, points of conflict, inclinations towards violence, and challenges us on the need for peace and harmony. The observation is that the natural inclination of individuals and communities is towards divergence rather than convergence and dialogue. His conclusion is that the political role of the media is more to dismantle existing systems than to fix them or make them work. Only in this way can we build better networks for dialogue between different cultural and subcultural structures. It is from here that the whole process of interconnection, which is constantly evolving, must be reconstructed (Rambukkana 2015).

One of the possible solutions for healing the global communication space, whether it is at the local, group level or as individual interaction within the network, is an ongoing effort to develop public policies to cultivate Cultural Intelligence and Spiritual Intelligence. These could also positively influence the political culture of those who tend to be influenced by populist discourse or any other forms of negative identification of alterity. It should be noted that "Cultural Intelligence is conceptualized as a specific form of intelligence focused on an individual's ability to grasp and reason correctly in situations characterized by cultural diversity" (Ang, Van Dyne 2008, 4). Such a tool can change mindsets and guide behaviors in both online and offline environments. At the same time, „cultural identity is formed by cultural and social aspects such as, different values related to pride, tradition, symbols, beliefs, and different ways of behaving within a social group" (Luque Suárez, Portillo Sánchez, Pascual Luque, Olmos-Gómez 2023, 8). Cultural intelligence is important for individuals, for groups, but also for countries. It is obvious that, in the absence of dialogue, „Countries can clash because they do not understand each other's values" (Sternberg, Siriner, Oh, Wong 2022).

If we take into account the relationship between religion and culture, between spirituality understood in a cultural sense and religion, we notice that the development of Cultural Intelligence implies, among other aspects, a moral reconstruction of the individual and his discourse. Just as the spiritual crisis of contemporary man is also associated with a crisis of morality, moral competence is an important component of spiritual development.

Christie Aschwanden emphasizes in political communication a fact captured by anthropologists and philosophers concerned with the analysis of religious and cultural communities and their relationship to otherness. The other is not only different, but also perceived as a stranger, as a source of danger. By the very fact of being a stranger, the other must be regarded with suspicion and with the idea in mind that he or she is hiding something bad. When he is not considered in himself to be evil, as an ontological given of the stranger's way of being, then he is considered to be morally evil. It is precisely this area of ethical projections that needs to be questioned in relation to the way of looking at alterity. It is useful here to recall that the manifestation of otherness in political discourse involves three phases for Aschwanden: one aimed at fixing individuals in ambiguous or difficult to understand categories because they represent a form of radical alterity; a second in which the idea is cultivated that the other does not deserve any kind of empathy because empathy is only for those we feel as similar to us; and a third one, suggesting that it is good that the other is hated because he is empty of morality or more precisely represents a manifestation of moral evil (Aschwanden 2020). From this perspective, it seems logical that what turns out to be morally evil par excellence should not be accepted and the otherness should receive no

other treatment than to be rejected. From a communication point of view, one way out of the deadlock may be to give greater importance to the role of cultural training in ethical and effective communication and to develop solutions that bring together ethical communication and the appropriation of Cultural Intelligence. Not only communication on social networks, but communication in general needs to be culturally shaped (Vlăduțescu 2019).

Analyzing the views of Frank Deaver and Andrei Pleșu (Deaver 2004, Pleșu 1994), Iulia Grad reveals that "In terms of the objectives and competencies addressed within the field of communication ethics education, there is a general consensus, despite variations in their formulation. The study of communication ethics primarily focuses on four key aspects. Firstly, it involves the ability to recognize the ethical issues, to identify the problematic areas, and to distinguish between the ethical and the legal aspects of a situation. Secondly, it aims to contribute to the development of analytical skills and to the ability to reason in a correct way. Then, there is the fostering of a tolerant attitude towards ambiguity and disagreements. These objective underlines one of the most significant aspects of ethics education, namely the stimulation of the moral imagination, of the ability to put oneself in the other person's shoes. Lastly, it strives to instill a sense of moral responsibility and the willingness to reflect meaningfully on one's personal moral compass, values, and behavior" (Grad 2024, 185). The communication ethics expert takes into consideration the fundamental role that education plays in shaping the individual's mentality. We should focus on the impact of education and the exercise of democratic debate from an age when politics has no special significance for children, until adulthood, when civic spirit must also function as a political option and action. Acquiring respect for the values of the community and the law, rational reflection on morality, cultivating tolerance and dialogue with others, assuming values on a personal level and placing them in an axiological system are elements that should be included in the formation of an ethic of communication from childhood and throughout an individual's life as a participant in the construction of the personal good and the public good. In this way, the sphere of political communication can be better integrated into a concern for understanding individual morality and community ethics as part of the effort to build Cultural Intelligence.

5. Instead of conclusions

We have particularly emphasized the negative instrumentalization of social networks in the case of populism, illustrated specifically with constitutive elements of the AUR leader's discourse. However, we cannot ignore the positive role of social networks beyond this context of radical

attitudes. Current debates with applications in contexts such as environmental protection, gender diversity, ethnic identity, cultural pluralism, technological creation, but also content and knowledge creation offered by social networks and digital entities are convincing in this respect (McLevey, Scott, Carrington 2024). The analysis of issues related to networks entails a great complexity. In scientific analyses, theorists relate on several dimensions and consider a plurality of aspects in researching the phenomenon. For example, Mario Diani points out that "Generally speaking, one can share a recent assessment of the field that pointed at six challenges: tackling the issue of endogeneity; dealing with missing data and sampling issues; understanding how to use big data; paying more attention to network evolution over time; strengthening the link between network analysis and social scientific theorizing on political processes; developing the analysis of multiplex networks" (Diani 2024, 139). If we were to analyze the communication aspects involved in social networks in concrete situations with a strong political impact, such as the Brexit campaigns, the electoral campaigns for the election of Presidents Barack Obama or Donald Trump, or even electoral campaigns such as the one run by George Simion in the parliamentary elections, we would have a more concrete picture of how social networks can be instrumentalized, depending on the political culture of different cultural spaces. We were only interested here in a general reflection on social media communication, with examples of content analysis elements extracted from the populist discourse carried by AUR leader George Simion on his Facebook page. We accompanied this approach with an introduction to the importance of cultivating Cultural Intelligence as a possible lever to counter populist discourse oriented towards denying the value of diversity and demonizing alterity. To this end, the necessary mechanisms must be found to explore cultural discourse at the level of the individual user of social networks. Particularly those who consider themselves vulnerable in their current state of life and see no way out of the crises they are experiencing seem to have a natural inclination towards tasting the ingredients of populist discourse. To this are added, in Romania, as in the European Union, spirits inflamed by the ideologies of moral crisis, demonization of otherness and exacerbation of nationalism. Their way of relating to alterity must be influenced by cultural intervention, by developing Cultural Intelligence.

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