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The Prince and the Bear – a fairy tale about nationalism in Romania

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By Ionut Chiruta Posted June 25, 2021 In Analysis, Eastern Europe, Politics

In early May, Romanian media broke the news that a Liechtenstein prince had, in March, killed Romania's largest brown bear. The scandal surrounding the killing of Arthur, the bear who activists allege may even be the largest brown bear in Europe, captured the public's imagination. Yet a month later, no investigation has been launched. In a well-crafted display of damage control, the public discourse was hijacked; instead of the enemy inside–corruption–the focus was placed upon the enemy outside–foreigners.

Despite Romania banning trophy hunting back in 2016, Emanuel von und zu Liechtenstein, the prince and antagonist of our story, used feeble wildlife legislation to bribe his way into securing a special license to hunt for a female bear that was wreaking havoc in Covasna county. But chance had it that the largest brown bear in Romania crossed paths with our prince, who, with a single shot, ended the life of the beast.

And this is how our story ends – or how it should have ended if this was about chivalry, knights, and fair maidens. But there's no happy ending when the antagonists are allowed to get away with it. Corruption, instead of going unpunished, is masked by the populist-nationalist rhetoric of politicians. The guilty escape unpunished, and the enemy is conveniently framed solely as the foreigner who fired the fatal shot. The prince's castle was first to come under siege, facing bombardment from the media, who highlighted the story's 'foreign' element. The people seethed with anger and delivered digital retribution on the Google page of the prince's castle via comments and one-star reviews. As more people added to the growing outrage over the shooting of the bear, the echoes of one voice, in particular, reached the four corners of Romania.

The new contender in right-wing politics

Nationalist rhetoric is not uncommon in Romania, but one party stands above others: The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR). Translated from Romanian into English as GOLD, AUR is a party of homophobic rhetoric, anti-COVID-19 measures and conspiracy theories, ardent supporters of the Orthodox Church, and promoters of Romanian sovereignty. Though barely uttered publicly because of Romania's high trust in the European Union system (51.6% in March 2021), AUR's anti-European ideology became more prominent in the weeks following Arthur's death, advancing a narrative about foreigners mocking and taking advantage of Romania. But the seeds of anti-European rhetoric were sown long before this incident. Romania's brain-drain, rising inequality, poverty, and high levels of corruption make it dependent on help from European institutions. Naturally, these phenomena create a sense of inferiority that is then exploited by right-wing parties who want to instil a nationalist vision of Romania that stands proud and strong. In the tale of the prince and the bear, AUR utilized the bear as a metaphor to explain how, over the past 30 years, the independence of Romania has been 'stolen by foreigners'.

On his Facebook page, George Simion, one of AUR's leaders, wrote the following:

"In Arthur are all Romanian industries, banks, and minds stolen by foreigners. Like Arthur, some were unique in Europe; they were beautiful. But they stood in their way. (...) It has a much greater significance than it seems. (...) It is a perfect parable for the way things have happened in our country, in the last 30 years".

Such inflammatory language was not previously uttered publicly by AUR, but one could argue that the shooting of Arthur the bear marked AUR's shift to a Eurosceptic party—one of a growing club in Central and Eastern Europe. Such a change in AUR's rhetoric makes sense, as its previous strategy to amplify anti-COVID-19 measures and anti-vaccine rhetoric lost its salience, as Romania reached eight million people vaccinated, and the infection rate decreased.

Populism 101: Nurturing the inferiority complex

A cornerstone in the rhetoric of emerging populist actors and parties is their framing of the inferiority complex. Always uttered to replace the better angels of our nature with our darkest fears and rash impulses, the complex of inferiority is promoted in opposition to a much stronger outsider. Using the slain bear as a metaphor, AUR's leader Simion frames the trajectory of Romania since 1989. On his Facebook account, Simion goes on to say that:

"In 30 years, an inferiority complex has led, together with a criminal media, which has invented holidays celebrated by no one, which has made heroes from criminals, and which has silenced the voices warning of the demolition of the resistance structure of the economy and the Romanian state ... privatization – the only solution ..., IMF inspectors ... and so on."

Like any emerging right-wing populist, Simion is framing the effects of the inferiority complex to reveal the 'damage' done by the 'foreigners' within the last thirty years. In one paragraph alone, AUR is framing the 'usual suspects,' ranging from 'criminal media' to the IMF inspectors. The language used by Simion is giving hints towards the transition of AUR towards a crystallized ideological framework: right-wing national populism.

If this story has a moral, it is that not all fairy tales have happy endings. Injustice continues to lurk behind the curtain when the spotlight moves from corruption to the outsider. And as with any good story nowadays, a sequel about AUR's political evolution is in the making.

Featured image: Brown bear / Los Angeles Public Library Photograph Collection

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