

How progressive is 'progressive'? Sexual orientation debates in the 2024 Romanian parliamentary elections

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Romanian election
Same-sex marriage
Anti-LGBTQ+ politics
Inter-imperiality
Centre – (semi-)periphery relations

ABSTRACT

The 2024 parliamentary elections in Romania reconfigured the party system, expanding the number of right-wing populist and extremist actors, and consolidating support for their main representative, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR). In this context, the purpose of this article is to look at where political voices advocating rights based in sexual orientation might come from, how strong they are and how they articulate the issue in terms of their electoral offer. The key argument advanced here is that – despite the prominence of public debates on the issue of LGBTQ+ rights, which highlighted a cleavage between those regarded as progressive on the one hand and socially conservative and traditionalist actors on the other – a pro-LGBTQ+ agenda was not very salient as reflected by party positionings on the issue. Moreover, those progressive parties who promoted such an agenda were unsuccessful, failing to come anywhere close to obtaining parliamentary representation. By contrast, mainstream and radical rights retrogressive parties, who now share an overwhelmingly large number of seats in the parliament, managed to undermine, weaponize, and de-legitimise the term 'progressive' and pushed even further back the chances for any meaningful reform relating to LGBTQ+ rights in Romania. While exploratory in nature, the article uses the Romanian case as an illustration for further potential research of the mutually reinforcing nature of current retrogressive mobilisation, drawing on inter-imperiality as a conceptual key.

Introduction

The 2018 'Referendum for the Family' in Romania aimed to provide a de facto ban on the legalisation of same-sex marriage, by introducing into the Constitution an amendment defining the family as explicitly predicated on the union between a man and a woman. The constitutional amendment did not pass due to a failure of the referendum to reach the minimum required threshold. At that point, Romania appeared as an outlier, unable to join the ever-growing list of countries in Central and Eastern Europe with such constitutional provisions (Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovakia). On the other hand, unlike some of the countries listed above, Romania failed to introduce provisions that recognise and protect the rights of same-sex civil partnerships (Cinpoes, 2023; Mărgărit, 2020; Norocel & Băluță, 2023). However, far from settling the sexual orientation rights issue, the failure of 2018 referendum kicked the protection of the rights of people based on sexual orientation in the long grass. At the time of writing, there is still no recognition of civil partnerships, despite a 2023 decision by the European Court of Human Rights stating the failure of the

Romanian state to protect the right to family life (ECHR, 2023). Moreover, the referendum has entrenched the debates about same sex marriage into the political and public agenda in Romania. Six years on, the 2024 parliamentary elections brought about a slightly reconfigured party system, with an expansion in the number of right-wing populist and extremist actors, and a consolidation in the support for their main representative, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR). Moreover, it is fair to suggest in this context that the 2024 parliamentary elections were contested – at least to some extent – on the basis of how political parties positioned themselves in relation to same-sex partnerships and marriage, and LGBTQ+ rights more broadly. The LGBTQ+ acronym is preferred here and will be used throughout (unless quoting other actors), as it is the most commonly used shortened version (see Wilder, 2024).

The political landscape ahead of the parliamentary elections looked slightly different than at the same point in 2020. At the time, AUR entered the elections as an outsider, in the context in which Romania had not had any radical-right parliamentary representation for more than a decade. The surprise result that propelled AUR into the

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2026.103327>

Received 30 September 2025; Received in revised form 5 March 2026; Accepted 5 March 2026

Available online 17 March 2026

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Parliament with around 10 % of the votes solidified their position. In 2024, the populist and far right end of the spectrum looked significantly stronger despite splinters in the AUR, which led to the formation of the S.O.S Romania Party and of the Party of Young People – POT. These three contenders entered the elections, and they all managed to gain parliamentary representation: AUR managed to double its 2020 result, and S.O.S. Romanian and POT gaining over 7 % and over 6 % of the votes respectively (Matei, 2024).

What has been regarded in the public debates (see Dumitrescu, 2024) as the more progressive end of the spectrum did not fare as well. Only USR managed to enter the parliament, with over 14 % of the votes. Renewing Romania's European Project (REPER) – formed in 2022 by a faction splintering from the USR, and Health Education Nature Sustainability Party (SENS) – founded in 2023, failed to secure seats in the Parliament (Matei, 2024). Eventually, seven parties gained parliamentary representation (see Table 1.). Drawing on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey and focusing on the socio-cultural dimension that distinguishes between GAL (green, alternative, libertarianism) and TAN (traditionalism, authoritarianism, and nationalism), we can observe a significant clustering of the parliamentary parties in the TAN part of the spectrum. The mainstream parties occupy more moderate TAN positions: PNL (5.50), UDMR (6.00), PSD (6.63), while the radical right parties are firmly positioned at the extreme end of the TAN, with AUR (9.40), S.O.S. RO (9.66) and POT (9.85). In this context, the USR stood as an outlier with a GAL-TAN score of 2.90 (Rovny et al., 2025).

Thus, anti-LGBTQ+ retrogressive mobilisation (Norocel & Băluță, 2023; Norocel & Pettersson, 2025) has become a salient aspect in the discourse of both right-wing populist and extremist parties and mainstream parties. Retrogressive mobilisation is used here to refer to anti-gender politics that is mobilised for retrogressive aims which may include opposition to same-sex marriage rights, reproductive rights for women, hostility toward sex education and gender studies, etc. This form of anti-gender mobilisation can draw together a 'complicated assemblage' of mainstream conservative and radical rights national and transnational actors, religious institutions, and civil society organisations (Bouvar et al., 2019, p. 5; Norocel & Băluță, 2023, p. 155).

This is articulated into narratives against what is regarded as progressive politics, a trend that has gathered momentum in the Romanian political arena, and can be traced equally to more moderate conservative and traditionalist actors such as the PSD and the PNL as well as to ultra-conservatives and traditionalists in the radical right camp, such as AUR, POT and S.O.S. Romania (as shown in the GAL-TAN scores earlier).

This is by far not a unique phenomenon with scholars documenting growing and consolidated attacks against what is often inter-changeably labelled progressive ideology (Fraser, 2017), gender identity (Case,

2011; Kuhar & Zobeč, 2017; Paternotte, 2023) or 'woke' politics, in the United States and Europe, as well as Russia (Asen, 2024; Samaras, 2025). Two interrelated phenomena are visible in the context of this global consolidation of retrogressive mobilisation. On the one hand, the fuzziness of the concept of progressivism enables complex positionings by political parties in relation to it. On the other hand, this global phenomenon exposes complex regional dynamics of collaboration, imitation and mutual exchanges.

With this in mind, this article uses the Romanian parliamentary elections of 2024 as a backdrop for pursuing two broad aims. First, it draws on the concept of inter-imperiality to analyse the mutually reinforcing relationship between the European (and more broadly Western) centre and its semi-peripheries in shaping anti-progressive narratives. In doing so, it exposes the flexibility and vagueness of the concept of progressive politics which operates as an 'empty signifier' and gives way to dynamics that ultimately undermine any positive outcomes that defenders of social justice and equality might envision. Referring to progressivism as an empty signifier is understood here in the way Ernesto Laclau (2005) develops the concept: as a signifier without a fixed signified, one that lacks a fixed content. Despite different meaning and interpretations, the semantic openness of an empty signifier enables it to provide unity or coherence 'a radically heterogeneous social terrain' and to act as a strong tool for political mobilisation.

Second, it looks at the electoral offer of political parties labelled as progressive in Romania in order to assess the extent to which they advocate rights based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Based on these aims, the article is divided into three sections. The first one engages with the discussions about progressivism and inter-imperiality to provide a conceptual background for understanding how debates on LGBTQ+ rights in Romania are articulated. The second section maps out different interconnecting and opposing ideological, cultural and discursive forces shape the Romanian political landscape. The final section looks at how the progressive label is used discursively in public debates to inform electoral competition and party positions. It argues that, in terms of public discourse, the term progressive is used both pejoratively and positively to refer to the political actors who do not actually display a progressive agenda. As a result, opposition to progressivism when directed toward parties that are not progressive, ultimately encroaches and narrows down the progressive agenda and limits the chances for progressive policies, manifestos, and politics to be manifested and exercised. The article contributes to exiting debates concerning gender identity and justice by suggesting that centre and (semi-) periphery relations are reaching a moment mutually reinforcing alignment in their pursuit of a retrogressive agenda. This suggests the need for a shift in approach by truly progressive movements to escape the empty signifier nature of the label progressivism by assuming its values explicitly and recovering its meaning.

Methodologically, the article takes an exploratory approach to assessing the extent to which the idea of progressive politics has a clear social meaning. It uses the 2024 Romanian parliamentary elections as a reference point based on the fact that one of the key cleavages informing political competition had the issue of progressiveness (specifically articulated around LGBTQ+ rights) at its core. In order to evaluate the positions of so-called progressive parties, the article draws on discourse-historical tools developed within critical discourse analysis. This provides opportunities for detecting inconsistencies in discourse structures, through a 'socio-diagnostic critique' that unpicks manifest or latent percussive character of discursive practices, drawing on the researcher's 'background and contextual knowledge' and considering 'the communicative or interactional structures of a discursive event in a wider frame of social and political relations, processes and circumstances' (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). The article looks at the concept of progressive politics in relation to its macro-context in order to explore historical and political transformations. The focus on the Romanian public debates and party positionings provides a necessary micro-context of immediate communication that offers a clear picture of the lack of salience of an LGBTQ+

Table 1

The 2024 parliamentary elections: Parliamentary parties, party families and results (data drawn from BEC, 2024).

Party	Party family	Chamber of deputies (votes/seats)	Senate (votes/seats)
Social Democratic Party (PSD)	Radical right	21.96%/86	22.30%/36
Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR)	Far-right, nationalist, right-wing populist, anti-EU	18.01%/63	18.30%/28
National Liberal Party (PNL)	Liberal	13.20%/49	14.28%/22
Save Romania Union (USR)	Liberal	12.40%/40	12.26%/19
S.O.S. Romania Party	Radical right	7.36%/28	7.76%/12
Party of Young People (POT)	Radical right	6.46%/24	6.39%/7
UDMR – Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR)	Regionalist	6.33%/22	6.38%/10

agenda in Romanian politics. Drawing on limited public discourse data and on small number of party manifestoes (while absence of engagement with LGBTQ+ issues by other parties, is in itself relevant) are limitations that prevent a broader generalisation regarding the state of the progressive agenda in Romania. Nonetheless, the article provides an important glance over the character and direction of the debate on LGBTQ+ rights in the country.

Conceptual clarifications

Progressivism as an 'empty signifier'

The terms *progressivism* and *progressive politics* are used widely and diversely in contemporary social and political analyses. Despite their currency, these concepts suffer from a visible lack of clarity in terms of their meaning and scope. This ambiguity can be traced back to their emergence in the context of the late nineteenth – early twentieth century in the Western World, and in the United States in particular, when *progressivism* established itself as an intellectual movement concerned with the social challenges produced by capitalist modernisation. Grounded in the idea of progress against reactionary or static forces, the movement aimed at addressing the combined effects of fast industrialisation and urbanisation, immigration, and political corruption leading to poor working conditions, poverty, and growing socio-economic inequality between the few wealthy people exercising monopolistic control on industry and resources and the majority of the population (Halpin & Williams, 2010; Mattoni, 2025; Nugent, 2010). However, as Nugent (2010, pp. 2–5) observes, the movement is difficult to pin down in terms of its core themes, given the wide variety of progressivism and progressives. While progressives (key figures including Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and John Dewey) focused primarily on political and economic reforms their areas of concern were varied including women suffrage, an enhanced participation of citizens in the democratic process, regulation and counterbalances to corporate monopolies, workers' rights, public education, and measures aimed at combatting inequality. The common denominator for the movement, however, was the belief in notions such as freedom, democracy, common good, public interest and social justice (Halpin & Williams, 2010; Nugent, 2010).

Despite its principled ideals and the fact that it cut across constituencies such as political party, class and gender (the movement benefitted from the support of large numbers of women activists) the movement was far from inclusive. Among other things, critics point to the fact that progressivism in the United States suffered from a tendency to force conformism to a white, Protestant, middle-class ideal, ultimately supportive of capitalism (Stein, 2018), from 'moral authoritarianism' resulting in the prohibition of alcohol, strict legislation on abortion and divorce and regulation of sexuality (Nugent, 2010), and from racial inequality manifested in segregation, preoccupation with racist science and eugenics, the Jim Crow laws and immigrant exclusion (Gilmore & Gilmore, 2016; Leonard, 2003). Ultimately, what characterises the movement of the 1890–1920 which straddles a social liberal and social democrat continuum is the fact that – as Nugent (2010) states – 'Progressivism was reformist, not radical'. This reformist type of progressivism has endured and is still being embraced either explicitly or implicitly mostly by mainstream left-leaning political parties and co-exists with more radical manifestations of progressivism. In Europe, for instance, the Party of European Socialists explicitly states its goal to 'fight for a better and more progressive Europe' (PES, 2026), while providing an umbrella for a very diverse groups (from the more left-leaning Danish Social Democrats, to the more centrist UK Labour Party and the socially conservative Romanian Social Democratic Party) of parties resulting in an often contradictory and diluted social and economic agenda (March, 2020). What may be regarded as more radical progressive parties such as Syriza in Greece or Podemos in Spain are part of the European Left Party and the European Left Alliance, respectively.

More recently, the concept underwent a revival, and it broadly

expanded on the early usage to refer to various categories of people that are marginalised in different ways, on criteria to do with not just class, but also with gender, race, sexual orientation, and so on and so forth. However, while manifesting in a very different historical circumstances, this new wave of progressivism maintains the vagueness of its precursor. Mattoni (2025), for instance, points to the potentially conflicting meanings attached to the concept, depending on who defines it and the context in which it is being defined. Despite such differences, there is a growing consensus among critics that progressivism seeks to reduce inequality, and to pursue social justice (Mattoni, 2025). Unlike its earlier iteration, though, new progressivism is radical rather than reformist, in as much as it advocates for the emancipation of marginalised groups and calls for a systemic change to the distribution of power and resources, and 'is inherently anti-patriarchal and anti-racist as well as being anti-capitalist' (Pattenden, 2023). As such a progressive politics is generally located among left-leaning collective forms of organisation emerging in periods of often overlapping crises that are political, social or economic in nature (Mikucka-Wójtowicz, 2024, p. 60).

Thus, progressive politics have become the vehicle for social contestation and for the articulation of transformative social agenda. The rise of new social movements in the second half of the twentieth century, marked by what Inglehart (1997) identified as a post-material turn signalled this shift to a space where contentious politics aggregate a diversity of issues and goals, types of participants, globalising capacities, with mobilisation and interests cutting across several identities. The beginning of the twenty-first century brought about an explosion of such movements: from the Arab Spring revolutions to the post-financial crisis movements challenging the neoliberal order, to the anti-racism Black Lives Matter movement, etc. These movements challenge deeply embedded structures and institutions and that are increasingly transnational in their visibility and/or in their nature (Cinpoes, 2022). The social movement-political party nexus is filled through the radical transformative demands articulated by progressive 'agents of social change' (Castells, 2015, p. 220), who institutionalise their concerns into movement parties (della Porta et al., 2017). However, despite the increased pressures generated by current crises and the scale of contestation and institutionalisation of progressive demands for social change, some critics are maintaining a degree of pessimism about the level of success achieved by progressive political projects. Thus, 'the alienating nature of contemporary global capitalist society' only allows for "a form of 'weak' progressivism" to emerge (Bailey, 2024, p. 17). According to Bailey, important barriers to progressive politics include: the low and declining level of mobilised support, the backlash generated by reactionary opposition, alongside structural requirements linked to capital accumulation (Bailey, 2024, pp. 32–33).

The broad and varied areas covered by progressive politics, which became more encompassing of concerns with all types of social injustice makes the concept difficult to pin down and at the same time an easier target for criticism. Critics such as Pattenden (2023, p. 11) point out that radical progressive politics differs fundamentally from identity politics. Unlike identity politics that imply a 'fragmentation of relations of oppression', progressivism highlights the need to consider race, gender and class in an intersectional context. Despite this analytical difference, a conservative reaction against progressivism banks on the elusiveness of the concept and glosses over nuances, targets progressive politics, social justice, identity politics and more recently 'woke' politics interchangeably. These transnational trends have been variously conceptualised as 'retrogressive mobilisation' (Norocel & Băluță, 2023), as 'insurgent conservatism' (Mărgărit, 2020) or more broadly as part of an 'illiberal swerve' (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017) or 'illiberal turn' (Jenne & Mudde, 2012). In short, the compounded effect of its conceptual vagueness coupled with its high jacking and turning into an all-encompassing label assigned to opponents by retrogressive movements has rendered the term an empty signifier that can be manipulated and used in any context. Moreover, the fact that the early, reformist phase of progressivism also suffered from ambiguity and internal contradictions,

being at the same time a vehicle for expanding rights and participations (e.g. for women, workers, etc.), and for restricting liberties and choice (e.g. in relation to sexuality, marriage, sexuality and race), entrenches further fuzziness to the concept.

In the Romanian context, the criticism of and mobilisation against progressivism was imported and adapted alongside these lines: categories such as social justice, progressivism, identity politics and in a more focused way gender politics constitute important battlegrounds for reactionary actors (see, for instance, [Norocel & Paternotte, 2023](#) on the translation of anti-gender narrative into the Romanian case). Thus, progressivism, gender politics and LGBTQ+ have quickly and interchangeably gathered a strong pejorative dimension, not unlike trends in the wider transnational context that included both Eastern and Western Europe, and the US. The focus of the article on assessing the level of progressivism based on the LGBTQ+ agenda of political parties stems precisely from the conflation of progressivism and LGBTQ+ rights issues in the public discourse of the mainstream and radical right conservative parties. This new perceived cleavage between so-called progressives and 'traditionalists' has been a powerful engine in the 2024 elections, requiring further attention. Moreover, the Romanian context shows that the malleability of the concept of progressive politics makes it possible for it to be used loosely by both those positioning themselves within a so-called progressive camp and by those opposing since it could be made to signify just about anything and everything.

Inter-imperiality and (semi-)periphery in the shaping of the retrogressive discourse in Romania

The way the concept of progressivism is used and misused both in the West and in Romania requires more careful attention and unpacking. To do this, it is useful to look at how Western retrogressive movements and narratives interact with Romanian ones. This relationship is complex and entails influences flowing simultaneously in multiple directions.

The concept of inter-imperiality provides useful insights into understanding where these intersections meet and how they influence and mutually constitute one another. Central to inter-imperiality is the notion of relationality, showing how different kinds of power and identity intersect within empires, between empires and in resistance to them. It highlights the many overlapping forces at play. Unlike world-

system analysis and its reductive binary division between post-colonised and non-colonised, inter-imperiality accounts for both the macro-level transnational political co-constitution and the micro-level everyday cultural production and exchanges between hegemonic powers, semi-peripheries and peripheries ([Boatcă & Parvulescu, 2020](#); [Doyle, 2020](#)).

Romania has been shaped by its (semi-)peripheral positionality both historically in terms of its formation at the cross-roads between three vying imperial powers and in terms of its post-socialist phase in terms of competing nationalist, conservative and authoritarian forces on the one hand and liberal-democratic forces leading to the accession into the European Union (for details of these conflicting dynamics, see [Boatcă & Parvulescu, 2020](#) and the contribution of Băluță and Tufiș to this issue). Patterns of these conflicting inter-imperial interactions are visible in the contradictory way in which debates on LGBTQ+ rights and same-sex marriage more specifically (aligned positively or negatively under the umbrella of progressivism) have been articulated in the Romanian public and political arena. These patterns are visible across Central and Eastern Europe, and in the case of Romania, they can be mapped out in terms of three vectors of power and influence: centre – (semi-)periphery influence in shaping the gender identity and LGBTQ+ rights agenda, centre – (semi-)periphery influence in advancing retrogressive values, and (semi-)periphery – (semi-)periphery exchange and reinforcement of retrogressive values (see [Fig. 1](#)).

The positive influence on the development of an agenda, and of mechanisms for ensuring gender equality and respect for the LGBTQ+ rights in Romania is aligned to a centre to semi-periphery relationship, and is represented by explicit structural pressures exerted through European Union accession and subsequently membership responsibilities, as well as membership in other intergovernmental agreements (e.g. the European Convention on Human Rights). Romania has aligned with the legislative requirements of such institutions. However, it is important not to overestimate the low degree of internalisation, and therefore compliance with such provisions, resulting in discrepancies between legal frameworks and practice. Even during the pre-accession phase, Romania's approach to implementing reforms to align with the *aquis communautaire* has been one of 'simulated change', characterised by a preference to adopt recommendations, but not carry them out if they run counter to the interests of political elites ([Gallagher, 2005, pp. 14–15](#)).

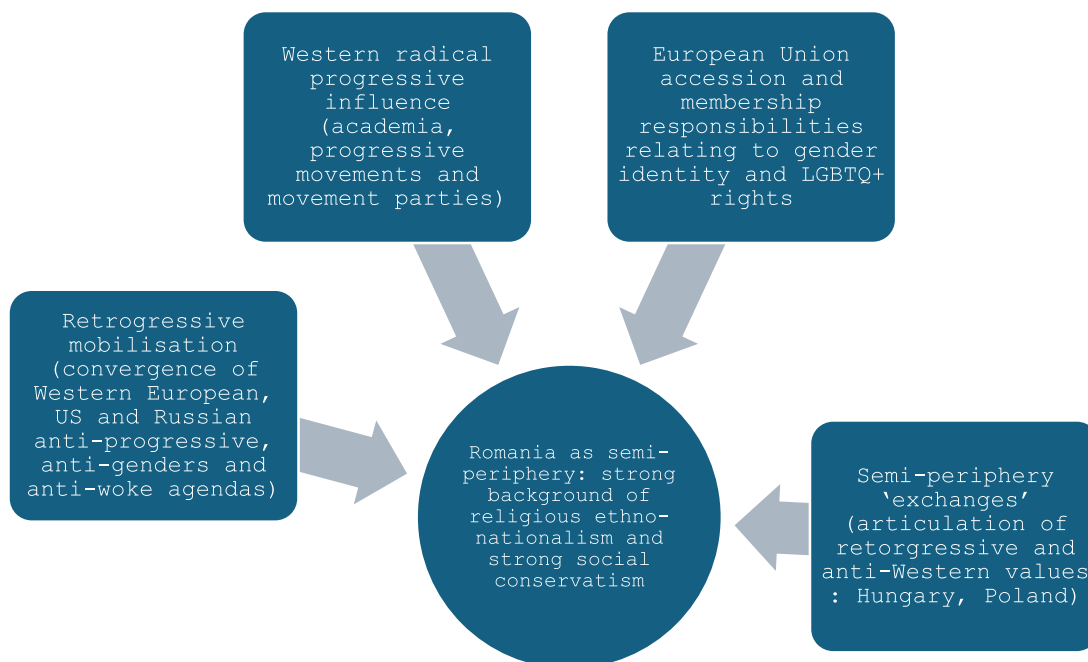


Fig. 1. Competing vectors of influence shaping Romania's retrogressive mobilisation.

This tendency has continued to the present times, resulting in a situation where more three and a half decades from the collapse of communism, corruption, clientelism and informal practices and norms still undermine institutional consolidation, transparency and accountability. Moreover, compliance with conditionalities emerging from the Europeanisation process has remained largely perfunctory exercise (Volintiru & Zgut-Przybylska, 2024). This is evidenced by the fact that with regard to gender equality, Romania still lags behind other EU member states, in areas such as intimate partner violence against women, gender employment gap, or participation in early childhood education and care (which has actually suffered a decline in the last few years) (European Commission, 2025). In a similar vein, the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) Europe reports that while there is some improvement in the level of acceptance of LGBTQI+ and same-sex families, there is still public controversy and disinformation around what is regarded as 'hidden agendas to advance gender theory and LGBTI rights', while public persons engage in discriminatory and hate speech with little consequences. Also, there is still not legal recognition of same sex families or plans for legislative changes, despite pre-infringement procedures launched by the European Commission in 2020 and ECtHR and CJEU judgements on LEGHTQ+ rights (ILGA-Europe, 2024).

Thus, an enduring culture that rests on strongly nationalist, discriminatory and intolerant values co-exists with simulated conformism with equality and human rights regulations (Cinpoș, 2015). Additionally, the long emancipatory struggle by feminist and gender studies scholars, by activists, social movements and other civil society actors for gender-based equality has led to important achievements in the West. In the area of equal marriage rights, for instance, the last two-and-a-half decades have led to the legalisation of same-sex marriage across Western and Northern Europe, and the United States (starting with the Netherlands in 2001, Belgium in 2003, Norway and Sweden in 2009, to more recently Lichtenstein in 2025). These milestones shaped positive developments in the European Eastern (semi-)periphery. Countries like Estonia and Slovenia joined the list of countries legalising same-sex marriage in 2024, and 2022 respectively. However, diverse inter-imperial positionalities have also generated anti-imperial struggles and resistance to the soft-power influence from the centre. The institutionalisation of gender studies in the post-socialist Romania, for instance, has been at best fraught with difficulties if not undermined and resisted by reactionary political forces, with scholars occupying a position of 'outsiders within', marginalised and targeted anti-gender campaigns aimed and both gender studies programmes and scholars (Băluță & Băluță, 2025).

In counterbalance to the emancipatory influences, anti-gender mobilisation from the centre assembles together a varied assortment of mainstream, right-wing populist and radical political parties, international religious institutions, conservative civil society organisations that aim to dismantle emancipatory policies concerning gender and sexuality, and to undermine the liberal-democratic order (Norocel & Pettersson, 2025; Paternotte, 2023). Anti-gender mobilisation from different centres of power, which generates significant influence on the (semi-)periphery has been thoroughly documented. Ultra-conservative and religious organisations in the United States, in Europe and in Russia have spent enormous amounts of money supporting and advancing campaigns against the rights of women and LGBTQ+ people across the world (Archer & Provost, 2020; Datta, 2021). These influences are compounded with similar exchanges between (semi-)periphery actors. In counter-distinction with the introduction of equal marriage rights legislation in Western Europe, several countries in Central and Eastern Europe introduces de facto constitutional bans on same-sex marriage: Slovakia in 2014, Croatia in 2013, Hungary in 2012, Latvia in 2006, Poland in 1997, Lithuania in 1992 and Bulgaria in 1991. Actions such as Hungary's increasingly restrictive legislation aimed at the LGBTQ+ community or local initiatives such as the LGBTQ+-free towns in Poland reinforce the relevance of the contagion and

dissemination of anti-progressive values among the (semi-)periphery.

In terms of the retrogressive political mobilisation in Romania, all these external vectors of influence operate against the background of an existing strong undercurrent of a cultural register that is highly accommodating of anti-LGBTQ+ actors and narratives. The Coalition for the Family – the initiators of the Referendum for the Family – benefitted from strong support both internally (from civil society and religious institutions) as well as externally from international lobby and legal advice organisations (Cinpoș, 2023; Mărgărit, 2019). Internally, the Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR) has consistently played an instrumental role in the social and political life in Romania. Historically, it has been at the centre of entrenching the notion that Christian Orthodoxy constitutes a fundamental component of Romanian nation, and has emphasised the need to preserve national identity and traditional values, reinforcing the legitimacy of socially and culturally conservative attitudes in public and political life, especially in relation to gender identity and sexual orientation issues (Soare & Tufiş, 2023, pp. 115–116). Beyond its influence in shaping public discourse on national identity, BOR has exerted significant power over the policy agenda issues ranging from religious education in schools to abortion, reproductive rights, and same-sex marriage, often playing an active role in influencing electoral outcomes through political campaigning and tactical mobilisation of the electorate (Andreescu, 2005; Cinpoș, 2021). BOR has worked at consolidating this position of influence from the beginning of the transition from communism in the early 1990s. Despite suffering some setbacks such as the failure to regain – through the 1991 Constitution – the privileged status it had before World War Two, or the repeal in June 2001 of Article 200 which criminalised homosexual relationship, BOR has capitalised on public support and became instrumental in the articulation of a narrative that links Christian Orthodoxy with Romanianness and opposes what are deemed as negative forces of modernisation, globalisation and secularism (see Stan & Turcescu, 2000, 2007; Turcescu & Stan, 2019).

The 'progressive' agenda in the 2024 parliamentary elections in relation to same-sex marriage

The conceptual ambiguity of the term progressive politics coupled with the complex multi-relational dimension of centre – (semi-)periphery dynamics with reference to consolidation and expansion of retrogressive mobilisation in Romania sets the ground for an exploration of current articulations of progressive politics in the context of the 2024 parliamentary elections.

Thus, progressive politics has become a point of contestation in Romanian politics in terms of various cleavages. It pits 'anti-system progressives' such as the Save Romania Union (USR) against mainstream parties such as the Social Democrat Party (PSD) and the National Liberal Party (PNL) who are viewed as corrupt representatives of an establishment linked to former communist elites (described as 'the red plague' – 'ciuma roșie'). It pits parties such as the USR against the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (the far-right newcomer in the Romanian Parliament). It enables the PSD and PNL to side with the USR as pro-European parties against the sovereigntist threat posed by AUR. Finally, it enables the PSD and the PNL to position (alongside AUR) to campaign against the gender politics threat posed by the USR and other progressive parties.

The limited electoral success of what are regarded as progressive parties in Romania is not necessarily surprising. In general, the progressive agenda, especially in terms of issues to do with same-sex relationships and LGBTQ+ rights more broadly has been driven by a handful of non-governmental organisations (Accept and MozaiQ among the most representative) (Mărgărit, 2019). This is why it is important to examine whether progressive parties advocate explicitly for the protection of rights based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

The largest of the three parties – the USR – proposed a lengthy electoral programme entitled 'Romania for everyone, not just for some',

emphasising political, economic and social inclusion. Divided into nine different areas (fiscal contributors, citizens, parents, patients, persons with disabilities, diaspora, youth, elderly and women) the programme unpacks each section into detail (USR, 2024). A glaring absence in the programme, though, was any reference to LGBTQ+ rights, sexual orientation, same-sex marriage or civil partnerships. This position largely signifies a 'business as usual' approach for a party that resorted to an internal referendum in order to determine a formal position on the 2018 'Referendum for the Family'. Moreover, the decision not to support the referendum was largely justified on grounds that it was used as a populist distraction. The party decision resulted in the resignation of the then leader Nicușor Dan, the President of Romania, following the May 2025 elections (Cinpoes, 2023; Digi24, 2017; Pancu, 2018). In a broader sense of the term progressive, it is also interesting to note that the economic programme is largely organised alongside neo-liberal lines, with an emphasis on lowering taxation, deregulation, cuts in public spending, etc. Moreover, the section dedicated to women is mainly focused on maternity health and provision of support for childcare, reinforcing heteronormative structures (USR, 2024).

By contrast, the REPER party focused explicitly in their electoral offer on LGBTQ+ issues. Their programme entitled 'People before anything else: prosperity and social progress' included the promise to legalise civil partnerships, alongside other measures supporting the LGBTQ+ community: inclusive education in schools, public support for LGBTQ+ cultural activities, added protection against hate crimes, etc. (REPER, 2024).

Finally, the most comprehensive electoral programme with regards to LGBTQ+ rights was proposed by SENS. Their 'Political Programme of the Health, Education, Nature, Sustainability Party' included manifesto promises that covered: the introduction of civil partnership and recognition of all relationships irrespective of sex or gender identity, expanding hate crime legislation to include gender identity among the protected characteristics, inclusion of gender diversity issues in continuous professional development training for public employees, and the right to adoption for civil partnership couples (SENS, 2024). SENS also provided the most comprehensive illustration of progressive politics, with a significant focus on social justice and social inclusion, protection or marginalised and vulnerable groups, progressive taxation and sustainable development (SENS, 2024).

The electoral programmes of the three parties show quite different levels of commitment to the addressing the issue of same-sex marriage and of LGBTQ+ rights more broadly. USR, the only party with real chances for parliamentary representation avoided a direct acknowledgement of the issue in their electoral offer. This could be perceived as political pragmatism: avoiding a controversial position that has the potential to alienate a more conservative electorate. Not engaging with the issue had the aim to allow the USR on the one hand to pit itself against AUR as a viable, pro-European, as an anti-system alternative to the PSD and PNL establishment, and on the other hand to position itself against the PSD and the PNL as a solution to the threat coming from the extreme right parties (AUR, S.O.S. Romania and POT). However, the consistency of the non-committal position of the USR position on same-sex marriage visible from the 'Referendum for the Family' onward suggests rather, that the radical progressive values are not a core component of the party's political agenda.

REPER and SENS remain the main agents of progressivism in the landscape of Romanian party politics. Here, though, there are also some nuances to be observed. REPER opted for a more moderate approach prioritising civil partnership, suggesting a gradual reform approach to LGBTQ+ issues. On the other hand, SENS adopted an overtly radical, disruptive approach to articulating a progressive politics. Given that SENS managed to obtain more than double the number of votes compared to REPER suggests that the pragmatic approach to gradual progress adopted by the latter did not yield results. The radical approach taken by SENS has the merit that it forced progressive issues on the radar of electoral politics, albeit without much success. Ultimately, the fact

that together the two parties did not manage to even reach 5 % of the votes shows that the Romania electoral landscape is dominated by conservative and reactionary forces and is yet far away from accommodating even – in Bailey's (2024) terms – weak progressivist values.

Progressivism in public discourse

The examination of party manifestos ahead of the 2024 parliamentary elections revealed that progressivist values – in particular relating to sexual orientation and LGBTQ+ rights – are at best marginal in the agenda of competing parties. The low electoral performance of the two parties that presented a progressive offer further shows that lack of purchase these issues have with the electorate. Paradoxically though, public debates concerning progressivism are much more prominent. This is expected from conservative and radical right circles that use progressivism, gender ideology, woke politics, etc. as the scarecrow meant to consolidate their support. Nonetheless, progressive self-positionings are also used discursively as a counterbalance to anti-European, retrograde, sovereigntist narratives. This interaction creates a public perception that the conflict between progressivists on the one hand and traditionalists and sovereigntists is a salient cleavage than aligns electoral support.

The most relevant case in this respect is the USR. During various iterations, members of the party have often self-identified as progressive or embraced what were regarded as progressive alliances. The fusion between the USR and the Freedom, Unity and Solidarity Party (PLUS) in 2021 resulted in the appointment of Dacian Cioloș as the leader of the party. On that occasion, Cioloș defined himself (confusingly) as 'both progressive and traditionalist' (Agerpres., 2021). Even earlier on, in the context of Dan's resignation from the leadership of the USR following its positioning regarding the 'Referendum for the Family', Clotilde Armand – a prominent USR – emphasised the USR's progressive credentials suggesting the party's anti-systemic and post-ideological position. She stated in an interview at the time that: 'We can say that the USR is a progressive party, because all its members wish for the progress of Romanian society[...] Classical ideologies are obsolete, and in Romania, ideological labels are false labels' (Epurescu, 2017). As recently as May 2025, in the context of his presidential candidacy, Nicușor Dan emphasised the progressive label for the USR (as a justification for his leaving the party in 2017): 'I think that things are very, very clear[...] I left the USR, I founded the USR in 2016 and I left the USR exactly when the party decided to turn into a progressive party' (Popa, 2025).

The progressive label, quasi-assumed by the USR has gained salience in the public opinion. As a result, it has often been used by critics to attack the party on these grounds. These attacks come both from members of other parties, and from public commentators (generally from conservative and sovereigntist circles). In terms of accusations from political rivals, the USR was criticised by the then leader of the PSD parliamentary group, Alfred Simonis, for its alleged progressive contribution to the government (between December 2020 and August 2021). This attack was also linked to the context of the PSD proposal to establish a Ministry for the Family: 'I heard you say that a progressive government was removed[...] You said that it is not good that a ministry portfolio was established for Mrs. Firea. You were referring to the Ministry for the Family. You progressives are bothered by this; you – those with 'parent number 1' (Ghiorghie, 2021).

The pejorative usage of the label progressive from conservative and sovereigntist camps reinforces the public perception of a clash between dangerous progressive values and traditionalist religious values that are more attune to the Romanian people. This perceived cleavage has informed both the public debates ahead of the parliamentary elections and – in a more personalised way – the presidential elections that followed. Ironically, in the context of the May 2025 presidential elections, Nicușor Dan has been labelled by one commentator as an exponent of progressivism, counterbalanced by a representative of Romanian traditional values that is marginalised and oppressed by foreign powers.

Thus, the elections were an illustration of 'the progressive ideology and the crime of being a sovereigntist' (Rămniceanu, 2025).

The analysis of the engagement with the same-sex marriage issue in the electoral manifestos by parties that are perceived as progressive in Romania and of the representation of progressivism in the public discourse reveals three aspects. First, there is a very weak presence of parties that embrace a true emancipatory agenda in the area of LGBTQ+ rights. Second, parties that are perceived as 'progressive' and that embrace this label do it on the basis of unclear and often contradicting grounds. Finally, there is a strong presence of retrogressive political actors that employ the term 'progressive' pejoratively as an umbrella term used to mobilise support against political adversaries and to undermine the promotions of gender equality. Cumulatively, these factors point to a further erosion of emancipatory initiatives and of LGBTQ+ rights and marginalisation and exclusion these communities.

Conclusions

This article engaged with the concept of progressive politics in the context of the 2024 Romanian parliamentary elections, with a particular focus on how parties advance an agenda that is protective of LGBTQ+ rights and on how progressivism is articulated in the public discourse. The argument revealed three inter-related aspects about so-called progressive politics in Romania. First, the examination of party electoral manifestos showed a scarcity of radical positions advocating LGBTQ+ rights and recognition. Second, when such positions exist, they are often pragmatically-reformist rather than radical and – more importantly – they are marginal to the electoral competitions. Third, in public debates self-representations and representations of political parties as 'progressive' are much more abundant, creating a perception that the progressivist versus conservative and reactionary politics continuum represents an important cleavage in the electoral competition. The combination of these contrasting dynamics produces the unfortunate effect of a double marginalisation of progressive values: they are not represented in the public debates and at the same time are further obstructed and resented.

More broadly, the ambiguity of the concept of progressivism in terms of its history and usage facilitates its hijacking and usage as a tool for retrogressive mobilisation. In this context, the focus on the 2024 parliamentary elections in Romania, and on how the term 'progressive' was used and abused in this context provided a useful illustration for a broader conceptual consideration. Examining Romania's (semi-)peripheral positionality in an inter-imperial context allows for a nuanced understanding of intricate interactions that shape anti-gender politics today. The centre – (semi-)periphery relationship reveals the emergence of a point of intersection, where current retrogressive actors in the centre (West) that aim to completely shift away from achievements in terms of emancipatory policies intersect with (semi-)periphery retrogressive actors (in Central and Eastern Europe) that have consistently represented exclusionary views to form a mutually-reinforcing downward spiral.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Radu Cinpoș: Writing – original draft.

Declaration of competing interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editor for their comments and suggestions, which have helped improve the article.

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