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Memos as satire in Romanian political culture

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to define political memes as belonging to the genre of political satire and part of Romanian political culture, to outline their characteristics and functionality, and to indicate that the phenomenon of political meme-sharing is a cultural phenomenon with growing significance based on the highly affective usage of memes that allow for the recontextualization of past political events in accordance with the new realities of the Romanian political and cultural space. Using the case study that is included, which takes into account how the awareness of the political context is the basis of the memes and the features of the memes themselves, the author shows that memes can be considered a type of informal, non-conventional form of political participation and considers this in relation to the political landscape of a post-communist country, thus determining that memes are a novel element that should be considered when dealing with civic culture at large, and digital civic culture specifically.

Keywords: memes; political satire; Romanian political culture; hypotext; intertextuality

1 Introduction

During the past fifteen years, the Romanian activist scene has been reborn in response to various political and social events (Rosia Montana, Black Tuesday, health-system reforming legislation, Colectiv, and August 10, 2019), while the use of social networks has increased in this timespan. Consequently, memes have become a part of the online conversation and a way to express dissent or satirise the political establishment and developments, which often seem to surpass the absurd, thus playing a part in 'affective publics' (Papacharissi, 2015).

While online activism has become a fruitful and rather extensive avenue of political science and sociological research, especially since the Arab Spring, Tea Party, and Gezi Park movements, approaches dealing with specific events or personalities have been dis-

paraged. With the exception of several studies which give a cultural assessment of memes in the digital culture or activist repertoires, substantial research on memes' impact on political culture is still developing; more recent Romanian-authored studies on memes have employed a variety of approaches, from underlining gender-focused archetypes to establishing a relationship between memes and mainstream media, displaying the differences between memes and political cartoons, or laying the theoretical foundations for understanding political meme-sharing as a form of political participation (Shifman, 2013; Mina, 2019; Metaheaven, 2013; Philips & Milner, 2017; Coscia, 2013; Marino, 2015; Buraga & Pavelea, 2021; Mohor-Ivan & Mohor-Ivan, 2021; Țăran, 2020; Soare, 2019; Soare, 2020; Denisova, 2019).

These studies have emerged within a longstanding broader attempt to understand the uses, functions, meanings and outcomes of political humour and political satire at large or to enable, by applying cultural-sociology methods, a better understanding of political humour and satire as autonomous cultural forms (Tsakona & Popa, 2011; Tesnohlidkova, 2021). In geographical or political spaces other than Romania, memes have been established as a legitimate avenue of political participation or even an instrument for manipulation (Moreno-Almeida, 2021). They can be employed by various polity actors with very varied aims, given their affective potential and their effectiveness at influencing political agendas: memes can be – and have been – instrumentalised for promoting grassroots movements, amplifying the messages of extremist factions, perpetrating demeaning or abusive tropes or stereotypes about minorities, and in misinformation and disinformation (Ross & Rivers, 2017; Makhortykh & González Aguilar, 2020; Chagas, 2023). Recent experimental designs have attempted to determine the variables that influence the effectiveness of a meme (Bülow & Johann, 2023).

The Romanian tradition of political satire has a long history. After the 1990s, it emerged forcefully in the public space as censorship was abolished after the fall of the communist regime. Political humour was already well-established, although it had circulated only in closed, trusted circles, as a means of counterculture, producing a type of in-group allegiance not to be publicised outside of the trusted circle, becoming a mechanism of resistance revolving around informal settings and 'small things' (Goldfarb, 2006; 2012; Tesnohlidkova, 2021). During the 1990s, political jokes started to pop up loudly in various contexts, from political cartoons to satirical editorials, popular live parodies, and TV shows of the 1990s. The author argues in this article that Romanian political satire has morphed into a new genre, that of political memes, and that the democratisation of the digital means of creating and sharing political humour has provided some citizens with new avenues of expressing political dissent, somewhat broadening participation to include the creation of these types of satire.

This paper aims to define memes that reference political events, personalities, parties, or ideologies as belonging to the genre of political satire and to reveal their meanings and shared contexts through the selected pairings explored in the case study, irrespective of the social networks on which they have circulated (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, etc) before being recirculated in mass-media, or the specific network topology that has contributed to their success.

2 Defining memes in a political context

Memes as a form of digital expression have attracted much interest in diverse avenues of research, from biology and mathematics to social sciences. The term *meme* was first employed in this sense by the biologist Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene*, first published in 1976, as a way to define cultural transmission via imitation in a gene-like manner:

Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catchphrases, clothes, fashions, ways of making pots, or building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. (Dawkins, 2006, p. 192)

While it is important to pinpoint the origin of the term, Dawkins' manner of defining memes is controversial, as the gene analogy is not necessarily accurate with respect to how memes function: while gene mutation is a time-consuming process spanning hundreds of thousands of years and is accompanied by the gene selection process (which in the political arena is a delicate subject due to the connection with eugenics), meme mutation is often what drives it forward, as the meme is adapted to a new context, thus prolonging its life and multiplying its meanings and associations.

Dawkins himself revisited his original definition after receiving criticism, and he acknowledged the fact that biological laws do not apply to memes, as initially stated. In fact, any cultural transmission implies some sort of transformation, recreation, or modification. Researchers in the social sciences have departed from this initial definition by including not only 'units of cultural production' but also broader modes such as relationship patterns or principles of society, which has led to a failure to pinpoint the exact boundaries of memes (Denisova, 2016, pp. 59–60).

One of the first – and most impactful – works to define memes in digital culture is that of Limor Shifman, who pointed out that Dawkins' definition was somewhat ambiguous and defined memes as follows:

- (a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which
- (b) were created with awareness of each other, and
- (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users. (Shifman, 2013, pp. 37–42)

To investigate memes and their satirical usage in Romanian political culture, a fourth criterion must be included: a *meme must make a political reference or have a political origin* to be classified as such. Moreover, political memes have an affective use (Makhortykh & González Aguilar, 2020), as they are charged with a specific context that requires being knowledgeable about a particular event, memories of that specific event and the feelings associated with it. Inherently, sharing content over the internet has a social role, and researchers have argued about this role and its effects, noting that it may well lead to political value-reshaping in the long run (Tufekci, 2014). The key aspect to take into account

when talking about creating or sharing memes online, irrespective of the type or context of the meme under discussion, is that sharing them online has a meaning that goes beyond clicking a button – it often reveals the beliefs, thoughts, preconceptions, or values of the sharer, it can start discussions and debates, and it can add to the original context through peer-to-peer socialisation in a semi-public or public setting (Benoit, 2019).

Departing from Shifman's criteria, memes can also transgress real-life settings: the 2017 protests against OUG 13 (Emergency Ordinance 13) also featured memes printed on cardboard and displayed in Victoriei Square – where they were photographed and recirculated back in the online space (Emergency Ordinance no. 13 of 31 January 2017 for modifying and complementing Law 286/2009 regarding the Criminal Code and Law 135/2010 regarding the Code of Criminal Procedure).¹ Audio-type memes also have a strong history of transgression: *Yakety Sax*, now also known as *The Benny Hill Show* theme, has been strongly associated with humorous moments (Shane, 2022), being parodied and transformed through countless other pop shows, films and comic video edits including *The Simpsons* and *V for Vendetta*. Such a moment of comic relief was provided by activists outside Westminster Palace when then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced his resignation (Kreps, 2022). This moment went viral via video excerpts of reporters' live broadcasts that day.

Shifman's definition is broad enough to cover many forms of digital expression, from GIFs (name taken from the file type, Graphics Interchange Format, first released in 1987, the internet's 'silent films') to audio snippets and static imagery. However, it also involves necessary methodological criteria; namely, memes must be created in a context in which (1) there is an awareness of the starting point, (2) of the current context, and (3) of other memes that must simultaneously exist at any point in time. We must also mention that in the contemporary understanding of the term, *memes* and their evolution can be almost confused with that of the internet – but one of the key traits back when internet boards and forums were mainstream was that a meme could be understood only by the insiders of a community through coded language and references (McLoughlin & Southern, 2021).

While in particular online communities, memes continue to be inward-oriented even today, this is in stark opposition to how mainstream political memes are used nowadays on social media: the broader the references, the bigger the chance of a meme going viral, i.e., shared quickly by a significant number of users – therefore political memes are much more outward-oriented. While anecdotal evidence shows that people can learn of political events by seeing first a meme and only second the news, this specific switch in the information flow can also work in the context of the meme alone, such as when one comes across a new meme on a familiar political event that reveals the meme's initial context and meaning (Leskovec et al., 2009; Scanlon, 2020). Therefore, we can identify a circular model in which memes can be either vehicles that transport new meanings or a manner of ascribing new meanings to existing information that manifests informally, connecting the formal political space and its mechanisms to individual-level-based political socialisation.

¹ The *Dragnea – Connecting people* meme, featuring the logo of Nokia, a well-known phone manufacturing company, very popular at the advent of mobile telecommunications in Romania.

This new mode of information transmission becomes relevant not only when looking at the younger generations' manner of retrieving information on news and current affairs. While the first impulse might be to try to establish a correlation with the declining audience for news programmes of any type in the younger demographic, one must also take into account the ease of access and affordability (that is, lack of upfront costs) associated with social media (a novelty in the media consumption environment), combined with diminishing trust in news and media measured in the United States, Europe, and especially in the Romanian space (Brenan, 2021; Newman, 2021; Newman et al., 2023, p. 94).

In this context, memes can become a form of digital, objectified cultural capital: shared experiences and solidarity goods, not reaching the status of a national holiday, for example, but being defined in a semi-public or public space, with the understanding that sharing certain content can ascribe to the sharer a specific identity, or the assumption of a particular political opinion or view, in the sense in which Cass Sunstein (2018) defines shared experiences and solidarity goods (Bourdieu, 1986; Park, 2017). In an environment where the demarcation between hard-core political debates and entertainment has become harder and harder to discern, memes about politics – typically satirising current political events or public political figures – are easy to dismiss as a frivolous concern (Baym, 2005).

However, ever since William Shakespeare and Dante Alighieri, political satire, in all its forms and genres (such as verse, rhyme, epigrams, cartoons, theatre plays, street art, camp, double-entendre, etc.), has been employed to contextualise and recontextualise political events or figures, reinforcing them in the collective memory of a society, and helping to understand and express opinions about them, without the political decorum versed analysts or journalists might employ. Memes – and political satire in its entirety – can be regarded as a form of metabolization – to draw on Dawkins' original reasoning in devising the concept of memes – of political events and leaders, thus having a strong social function (Nilsen, 1990; Tsakona & Popa, 2011; Vicensová & Trottier, 2020). Political satire and political humour have been distributed through conventional and non-conventional methods and have emerged simultaneously in relation to anything remotely resembling organised government or social classes – and their history in Romania is a long one, as documented by Cristian Preda (2020).

Notwithstanding, one of memes' key and paradoxical characteristics – adding an additional layer of complexity when analysing them – is their long-lived ephemerality, that is, the memetic symbols tend to persist longer than specific iterations of the memes. While researching the topic, one of the first observations was that the life of an internet meme does not seem to be long, as they can become obsolete or unfashionable rather quickly. The causes for this may be multiple: (1) the lack of author attribution (they often emerge from personal social media connections or popular pages dedicated to memes rather than from a more-or-less well-trusted source, like news theoretically does), (2) the specificities of their circulation patterns (some memes become very popular and are broadcast by media either in online articles or television shows, while most memes get buried under other content), (3) the lack of systematic political meme archival endeavours, aside from overarching internet archival efforts like the *Wayback Machine*, *KnowYourMeme*, or the Library of Congress' *Digital Collection*, (4) the transformations that a meme undergoes throughout its circulation, (5) the technical difficulties associated with the current internet architecture related to the measurement of views, shares and discussions about

memes, and last but not least, (6) the research efforts that, at this stage, tend to focus more on specific instances of meme usage in political activism rather than on their impact in society at large, in spite of disparaged efforts to integrate their use and impact.

Another aspect that needs attention is the multiple levels upon which political memes work: while they need to be coded and decoded through visual and written elements, they also intertwine elements of subjectivity, popular culture, aesthetics, and current affairs, which are reinforced by the environment in which they circulate. While a non-political meme can be ascribed new meanings at each occurrence, the opportunities for the contextualisation of a political meme are much more reduced, thus contributing to their greater potential for resistance (that is, memes being used to communicate hidden meanings in plain sight, as occurs with other types of layered texts or plays), with political memes having specific semiotic stability and less polysemy (Miltner & Highfield, 2017). This, in turn, contributes to the paradoxically shorter lifespan of each political meme iteration but prolongs the time when a political meme can be further inter-subjectivised, re-imagined, recontextualised, and reshuffled with new contexts (Dancygier & Vandelanotte, 2017; Kirner-Ludwig, 2020).

Essentially, the anonymous character of political memes and their short lifespan indicate a type of perennialism resembling that of folklore. The novelty brought about by memes is their medium of transmission. As with any kind of cultural transmission, the meme language traits, the political events referred to, and the elements of focus preserved in popular culture that survive this form of digital translation convey meaning and have a purpose in themselves, and they can account for word-by-mouth transmission.

Fundamentally, memes rely on language, which has the core function of providing meaning. The language usually employed in memes is not complex unless the *memeable* characteristic is the complexity of the language itself. Memes, with their format of static imagery or image macros (photographic background and a script superimposed over the image, or photographic manipulation without a superimposed script), have been claimed to have key potential as political rhetoric, given their association within a given context between the sender, the receiver, the message upheld, and the overall context depicted (Shifman, 2014; Huntington, 2015).

While the form of a political meme can take many shapes, its content-related characteristics remain surprisingly stable. From a visual point of view, political memes tend to rely on potent symbols, general contexts, or well-known personalities (generally but not limited to politicians). As the majority of the memes in Romanian political contexts also include a small text applied over the image, the written perspective is where the analysis expands: memes can either maintain the original oral or written expression on which they build (*‘Am găsit la Peneteu’* – the phrasal template, *‘pepsiglas’* – malapropism) or they can exaggerate it to achieve a satirical or ironic effect. The language employed is easy to read and understand, usually imitating the characteristics of oral language originally employed (hypotext).

It might seem surprising how the audio component of memes arises, given that the political meme’s origin is usually verbal communication (political or press statement, interview, etc.). This should not lead to the statement that there is no such thing as an audio-only meme. However, audio-only, online-originated, user-generated memes have only very recently started becoming widely circulated, especially with the rise in the use of social

media avenues that easily allow for sound snippets to be laid over a different video than the original; moreover, the inclination to include videographic content in popular social media platforms, especially TikTok, makes it mandatory for the audio-meme to be joined by a visual element, thus apparently confining the re-circulation of an audio meme to a specific format.

As an American journalist remarked during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, memes, irrespective of their format, have morphed into what journalists call *soundbites*, i.e., exhaustive, concise statements:

What GIFs offer (as with radio and television before [them]) is another window into the candidate's persona that is somehow more human and authentic than conventional stump speeches and sit-down television interviews. (Bolton, 2016)

It is quite obvious that a meme cannot transmit information of a complex nature, such as a policy or the ideological positions of politicians unless the position in itself is rather vague, plainly common sense, or elicits an intensely emotional issue (the Romanian local elections in 2020 unleashed a fury of memes about public utilities, including the provision of hot tap water; an international example would be the 'Make America Great Again' 2016 meme series, which started as the Republican nominee Donald Trump's campaign slogan) (Mina, 2019). However, memes and GIFs employed as memes offer a very specific type of political insight – they are usually related to a specific reaction, a personality trait, a facial expression, or a phrase, which can be inter-contextualised using online transmission.

The written expression on a static imagery meme using a superimposed script is typically short (ten words maximum), and the text is often placed on the upper and lower margins of the image rather than centrally. This setup leads to a propensity for simple, snappy, easy-to-understand language – which is characteristic of many types of communication employed in the digital environment but also in folklore. New language is not necessarily created through a meme; the meme acts as a medium for the political language of the day, becoming a tool for dissemination or recontextualisation, or, in other words, an opportunity for political socialisation and participation.

3 Are political memes a form of political participation?

Seen from the outside, political memes can seem light-hearted, facetious, pointless, and even childish. However, given that (1) political memes can be shared both online and offline, which involves informal interaction between two or more individuals or groups of people, (2) memes are created and keep circulating on the basis of a common shared context or (3) a common shared identity, and (4) they can foster political debate, and (5) can arise out of a political conflict originating from a perceived situation of inadequacy, incompetence, incapacity, or unfairness, the phenomenon of political memes shares the characteristics of a social movement, without being one (Dina, 1992).

All these characteristics also imply that memes represent more than an opportunity for amusement. As new expressions of humour and satire, they can be meaningful mechanisms for delivering criticism or reflecting on current political personalities and events,

thus accounting for a certain level of political socialisation (Tesnohlikova, 2021). Due to their specific networked circulation, they can also reach internet users who have become disengaged citizens in the sense of formal means of political participation, thus contributing to an increase in political literacy (Tesnohlikova, 2021). While there is no sign of the institutionalisation of political memes at this point, the sense of collective identity that they forge in and by themselves is what keeps them alive – and the events or personalities they refer to – in the memory of internet users (Melucci, 1985).

In their own way, however, political memes reveal the spirit of the age by means of user-powered cultural transmission. However, unlike social movements, political memes often lack a specific political objective other than satire unless satire and satirical means are instrumentalised by social activists, political factions, electoral campaign strategists, or politicians. With memes' propensity to be circulated not only online but also in real life, it is important to note that in more recent studies, mobile communications have been demonstrated as a vehicle for social interaction and cohesion, with a ritualistic value (Neumayer & Sicart, 2023); whether a meme's purpose is to either confirm or contest the political establishment (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021) depends on the specific meme – this aspect is discussed in the case studies in the second section of the paper.

Using Gabriel Almond and Sydney Verba's understanding of civic culture (1963), memes may represent proof of the existence of such a culture, as the emergence and circulation of political memes in the Romanian space demonstrates several relevant features: a collective interest in the political system, emotional, affective, responses to the issues portrayed via memes, cooperation between citizens (or internet users), and the ability to talk freely about politics. Whether political memes – understood as an expression of political humour and/or political satire – are a social fact in the Durkheimian understanding remains up for debate; it can be argued that, due to their intrinsically anonymous nature, memes generally and political memes can be considered external to the individual. However, their language and circulation rely on societal characteristics translated into the digital realm (Durkheim, 1982).

Of course, simply sharing an online meme cannot have the impact and the degree of engagement with the political process that established practices of political participation, conventional or unconventional, have, such as casting a vote, participating in a protest, or going to town hall meetings or public consultations – all of which are institutionalised to a certain degree. Memes tend to work at a lower level than formal politics and political debate mechanisms. A point to be made here is that, especially in the area of the former Soviet bloc, the totalitarian context required citizens to resort to creative means of dissent, which was not the case in established democracies. Researchers have responded to this by reconsidering the concept of political participation, noting that culture can manifest itself outside the public spectre in a non-ideological manner. It can lead to a political type of culture rather detached from the mechanisms of power (Goldfarb, 2006; 2016), underlining that the concept of political culture would benefit from being approached from a non-Western perspective.

However, no generalisations must be made regarding forms of political participation in the former Soviet bloc, as the degree to which alternative culture and, more specifically, political dissent manifested and became institutionalised as an alternative to the respective regimes varied from country to country. Romania historically stands in stark contrast

to other central European communist countries, as openly anti-regime counter-culture manifestations were (at best) disparaged due to factors specific to this case: the nature of communist suppression exerted by the state apparatus and the disconnect between the élite and the working classes (Petrescu & Petrescu, 2007). More broadly, a history of the disconnection in Romanian modernization levels as opposed to the Western countries (Alexandrescu, 2021; Boatcă, 2007) has been attributed as the reason why the Romanian society has been out of synchronisation with the Western ideal assumed by the political élites since the nineteenth century, influencing civic and participatory culture. The reasons for this are numerous, and their examination is not within the scope of this article (Glenny, 2017), but suffice it to say that applying Western-political-thought-based ‘political participation’ or ‘political culture’ concepts would not meet the requirements for assessing the impact of memes as a form of participation in the Romanian political context.

This obvious contradiction between culture in its popular sense, and politics and political culture has been examined by researchers in two main directions: either in assessing that popular culture and entertainment essentially lead to disengaged democratic citizens (Putnam, 2000) or the counter-claim that entertainment serves the democratic processes in a positive manner (Van Zoonen, 2004). One of the questions arising from this conflict is whether memes can ‘entertain the citizen’ and contribute to increasing political awareness and knowledge, commonly regarded as important factors in the establishment of a ‘good citizen’, or if they distract the citizen from conventionally participating in the political process. While this study does not aim to answer this question, it shows that memes can be integrated into the satirical context, and their creation and circulation suggest a pre-existing awareness or knowledge of their originating political context as viewers integrate the framing of the political event that the memes propose.

In this article, memes are regarded not as something stemming from inside the political establishment per se, but politics provides the ‘content’ of the political meme. However, the actual meme, its online sharing, and the discussions arising based on the said meme essentially occur outside the established formal political space. Whether political memes can be employed as a type of celebrity politics (Street, 2004) would require a separate research endeavour. However, we may ask ourselves whether political memes can be considered a form of citizen entertainment in the sense used by Liesbet Van Zoonen (2004). The answer is that, as long as the criteria for defining memes listed in this paper’s prior section are met, political memes can serve the purpose of entertainment, just as with other types of politically charged fictional artistic endeavours.

It is in the context of post-communist Romania in which we are trying to assess political memes. Regarding Goldfarb’s point about political culture being detached from the mechanisms of power, for the most part, political culture and conventional political participation seemed to account for the lack of interest of Romanian citizens – the last general elections in 2020 yielded 31.84 per cent turnout at the national level, while the only types of elections in which more than fifty per cent of voters have constantly expressed their opinion since the 1989 Revolution are presidential ones.² The two historical waves of street

² Code4Romania (2020).

protesting, in the 1990s and the 2010s, may be interpreted as outliers in the framework of Western-style political participation. However, in their own micro contexts, both have been regarded as a revival of the average citizen's Romanian civic spirit and political involvement (Volintiru & Buzaşu, 2020; Soare & Tufiş, 2020). These aspects are important for underlining the very specific context in which we should assess if memes account for political participation in the Romanian context and for adding some clarity to the political context of the case studies detailed in the second part of this article.

4 Methodological considerations

Data collection proved to be one of the most difficult parts of this research paper, as memes are often deleted or made private if not archived on the spot. In order to collect memes related to Romanian politics, a snowball-type search was first initiated, hopping from shared meme to shared meme, collecting in real-time the images or GIFs which surfaced via Facebook, Twitter, or Reddit at times when relevant political events were occurring in Romania – an approach which quickly started to resemble the ‘exploratory serendipity’ which Chris Messina, an open-source advocate, has promoted when arguing that hashtags are a useful manner of organising internet-based content (Messina, 2007).

Most of the time, new events are simply translated into new memes rather than pre-existing ones being used – the event thus becoming a meme in and through itself. Nonetheless, the lack of predictability in this approach and the dynamics of the Romanian political scene made this a somewhat unpredictable and inefficient method of data collection. A more efficient manner of gathering memes to assess their relevance to Romanian political culture would be to focus on a specific meme and its iterations, e.g., the miner, or on a specific politician and the memes sparked by this person, and to try to gather as many of its versions over time as possible. Using this approach, the focus shifts to the political event first and only then to the actual memes. However, the initial anecdotal observation that for a heavy user of social media, the meme might come first and the news second also suggests that memes rarely emerge out of the blue, instead seeming to be the result of external factors; after all, for new cultural transformations, new factors must come into play.

Based on some anecdotal evidence – namely, that in certain cases, one is informed about the latest news by seeing a meme and not understanding its context, which triggers a search for the origin of the meme and leads to finding out its full context (e.g., the political personality/statement/event/news which triggered the creation of the meme) –, we can imply that the inter-textualization factor is a significant one in meme sharing or creation from a political standpoint, as experimental designs in other geographical spaces have shown (Bülow & Johann, 2023). Initially, the author set out to check whether this inter-textualization factor is sufficient for new meme iterations to appear, as this was the spark that triggered this study. In contrast, this intertextualization would not be complete without knowing the full context of how a meme-viewer first received the meme; one's subsequent awareness of the whole context would account for the meme's complete understanding.

Because, at this stage, the author's primary aim was to determine the intertextuality level of online-shared political memes and their re-usage in other contexts, discourse analysis was employed. More specifically, the seeds for this type of sampling were sown using a parallel approach which would maximise the number of memes retrieved and included in the sample: the first step was to select the political event/news triggering the creation or use of the political meme, and then search by means of Google, Facebook and Reddit using keywords specific to the event/meme (e.g. 'am gasit la peneteu,' 'contributia mea este ca am venit aici,' 'Iohannis meme'), which yielded few but important results. The second seeding approach was constituted by searching for communities dedicated to meme creation and/or sharing with a significant and steady output of memes, which further enriched the sample. A third seed was monitoring some Romanian media outlets that would typically synthesise the creative memes or jokes circulated online in response to the day's events. This resulted in several threads to be followed, and several intermediate points of interest could be identified as a result of this endeavour.

A number of Facebook pages stood out for their constant output of memes, given the current context of the day (e.g., *Ana are meme* [Ana has memes], *Junimea* [reference to a writers' club active during the nineteenth century, which several of the most important Romanian writers were members of], *Am gasit la peneteu* [We found at the penetséu], *Jandarmemerie* [The Gendermemerie]). However, the practice of gathering a pool of memes on a given topic and re-publicizing them outside social networks on the news or creative websites was also highlighted during this stage; these endeavours may represent an archival effort but have only been started more recently and depend to a great extent on the editorial decisions taken by every outlet.

This type of dynamics can also suggest a certain instrumentalisation of memes in the Romanian political landscape, namely memes being created not by internet users who have thought of a good joke in the form of a meme and have enough digital acumen to create and share it, but by electoral campaigners, political opponents, or civic activists who have an interest in portraying their meme subject in a specific manner. Especially in the cases of news outlets re-publicizing memes, we noticed a propensity towards selecting memes in accordance with the political orientation of the outlet; if the outlet were more pro-establishment leaning, then the memes would be more positive in tone, and vice versa. This tendency was not so evident in social network-based groups or pages. This type of instrumentalisation is also suggested in the literature (Chagas et al., 2019), especially in a competitive setting such as an electoral campaign. However, we believe this competitive environment tends to be heavily influenced by particular memes reacting to or countering other specific memes (ergo, politicians, statements, or events), not necessarily taking into account politico-cultural symbols or stereotypes that require more time to be built into and be reproducible as memes.

After collecting the memes, the sample had to be selected – and several criteria came into play: the actual content of the meme (eliminating the many instances in which scurrilous or unprintable allusions were made), meme tone type (positive, neutral, negative), meme subtext (ironic, sympathetic, humorous, satirical). For this article, only memes in photographic format were selected to be discussed in the case studies due to the limits of the text format.

Another criterion to be considered was the origin of the meme – it could either (1) be generated in response to a specific Romanian political event – autogenous, (2) be borrowed from the pre-existing global pool of memes unrelated to politics, (3) originate in a different political culture and later be adapted for native use, or (4) be employed globally in response to a global political event – endogenous types of memes.

While every category deserves an analysis of its own, this paper will use a case study to illustrate three of the four characteristics mentioned above through content analysis of memes' visual and written elements. In this framework, memes may feature several types of text: written – i.e., text-only, iconic – using portraits of various personalities, transcriptions of oral text, or supra-text – a piece of text added above or below the static imagery. Some memetic transgressions were also explored, such as cartoons or protest placards. By distinguishing these components, more clarity would be hopefully achieved in the analysis.

5 Case study

This section of the article showcases a two-part case study of Romanian political memes. Each case study is prefaced by a context-providing section that unveils both the original context and the re-contextualization offered by the political meme.

The first part of the case study deals with the miner, one of the most well-recognised figures from the Romanian Mineriad of 1990. It shows that the political meme that originated then has a very high degree of stability regarding the situations framed and satirised with its help.

The second part of the case study deals with the current Romanian President, Klaus Iohannis, and aims to illustrate that the Romanian political contexts satirised in memes can also borrow and reinterpret elements from international pop culture and juxtapose them with local political contexts. It demonstrates that the diversity of such memes has increased over time due to several factors such as access to the internet and media, exposure to pop culture, and the heightened popularity of memes as a form of satire, but also due to political figures' propensity to use Western-like tricks of political communication.

While the first part of the case study allows for memes to be considered as part of the remembrance and re-contextualization of past events, the second shows that the cultural synchronisation of memes to the internet and pop culture via the memes' subtext or intent supports the argument that memes are likely to be a type of informal political participation.

Breaking apart the pool of selected memes into two groups within the case study helps underline the distinctness of the types (autogenous or self-referential, and endogenous or borrowing from another type of context than Romanian politics), thus increasing the granularity of the analysis.

5.1 The miner³

This case study illustrates the recontextualisation potential of satirical memetic approaches with an appeal to memory in Romanian political culture. This case study has been selected to demonstrate how a political meme can be made such via constant reinterpretation, generated in one Romanian political context and re-textualized in another, thus classifiable into the first category of meme origins (autogenous). It did not lose its original meaning and emotional charge but only added to it via popular reinterpretation and inter-subjectivity, reinforcing itself with every iteration, featuring a long lifespan, and helping with re-disseminating the original context. Also, this case study can serve as an example of the affective potential of a meme.

One of the defining events of the Romanian political scene after the 1989 Revolution was the series of *Mineriads*, violent altercations between the miners of Jiu Valley and residents of Bucharest, which started in 1990 in response to the National Salvation Front (Frontul Salvării Naționale, FSN) to the *Piata Universității* movement and continued until 1999. During the 1989 Revolution (December 1989), the National Salvation Front was constituted as the temporary legislative and executive power that would ensure the organisation of the first free and fair elections in post-communist Romania. Immediately after abolishing the single-party system, the National Liberal Party (Partidul Național Liberal, PNL) and the National Peasant Party (Partidul Național Țărănesc, PNT) – the most important historical parties of the interwar period – would be registered. Despite the initial promises that FSN leaders made that the formation would not be registered as a political party and would not participate in the 1990 elections, in February 1990, the National Salvation Front was registered as an official party to enable it to be able to take part in the April 1990 elections. In response, PNL and PNT organised a series of anti-FSN mass rallies in Bucharest, resulting in these violent altercations now referred to as *Mineriads*.

Further explaining the current context of this case study and the Romanian post-communist political history, it is necessary to mention that FSN went through important transformations over the years; the current Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat, PSD), centre-left leaning, originates from a faction of FSN, with Ion Iliescu having served as the Social Democratic Party president between 1997 and 2000 – when he was elected President of Romania for his second term. Iliescu joined the communist ranks in 1944 and held his first official position within the Union of the Communist Youth in 1956, advancing until 1972 when he was sidelined from the Central Committee and the position of Minister of Youth and finally relegated to the head of the Technical Publishing House (*Editura Tehnică*).

The most violent episode of the *Mineriade* was the first one, on June 13–15, 1990, when the miners first came to Bucharest in an attempt to ‘clean up’ *Piata Universității* from ‘disturbing elements’, in the words of the then-leader of FSN, Iliescu, who had also become the President by that time. While an official account of the events has not surfaced yet, it is well-established by now in Romanian political culture (while not from a le-

³ The miner was interviewed by a crew of Rai Uno journalists, who used an interpreter, to identify what the situation was in 1990 in Bucharest during the *Mineriade* (Nastaila, 2020).

gal point of view, as the legal case of the Mineriads is yet to involve a final settlement) that this was one of the defining moments of Romanian post-communist society, as the incredibly violent action of the miners (beatings, rape, arson, killing) were to leave a permanent mark on Romanian collective memory.

It was during this episode that a crew of Italian journalists interviewed a miner, thus giving birth to probably the first Romanian post-communist political meme: the miner talking about what they had found at the headquarters of the National Peasants' Party (Partidul Național Țărănesc, PNT) and the National Liberal Party (Partidul Național Liberal, PNL), the two historical parties reestablished immediately after the 1989 Revolution that were opposing FSN's involvement as a political party in the elections. The recording of this interview has been widely used and recirculated not only at each commemoration of the June 1990 Mineriad in documentaries and TV accounts of the events but also in informal contexts, and it is easily accessible by searching YouTube.

This interview was conducted by a journalist with the help of a translator, as the questions were asked in Italian. However, watching the recording, it is obvious that the translator also whispers some answers to the miner. Despite this, the obvious confusion displayed by the interviewee gives us a clue about how accurate his assertions were. This interview became one of the symbols of the Mineriads (Figure 1). Although it is not possible to provide a one-hundred per cent accurate translation of this interview, one of the most prominent features of the oral expression here was the usage of popular abbreviated forms of the historical parties to which the miner referred: National Peasants' Party, Partidul Național Țărănesc – [*penetséu*], and National Liberal Party, Partidul Național Liberal – [*peneléu*], thus transforming into substantives the party names' abbreviations. This form of expression greatly contributed to the popularity of this interview despite the fact that it is a series of anacolutha. It is also worth noting that all the things mentioned by the miner as having been found at the Liberals' headquarters were illegal or strictly regulated under communist rule: drugs were virtually unheard of, the possession of foreign currency constituted a crime, armaments and ammunition were strictly regulated, while typewriters had to be registered with the police, and private citizens could only have one if they obtained special authorisation from the police (Decret nr. 98 din 28/03/83).

Reporter: Ciao!..

[The miner kisses the reporter's hand]

Reporter: Perque sei venuti qui?

The miner: Because of the hooligans... and because the molestation of the Army... and the Police... if they want it like this... We found at the *penetséu* drugs, armament, ammunition, a typewriter, and printed money at the *peneléu*; it's in the *Adevarul* paper, and... these repressions...⁴

⁴ Original:

“Reporter: Ciao!..

[Minerul sărută mâna doamnei reporter]

Reporter: Perque sei venuti qui?

Minerul: Am găsit la Pe-ne-țeu droguri, armament, muniție, mașină de scris automată, tipărit bani la Pe-ne-leu, este în ziarul *Adevarul*, și ... represuniile astea cu....” – translation provided by the author.



Figure 1 Screen-capture of the miner interview recording.

Source: Mediafax.ro

While this video frame alone might trigger painful memories of the events for those who witnessed them or the satire that emerged after that, the episode has certainly incited tragicomedy for the past thirty years. This is the meme that constantly emerges whenever a significant political event occurs. Text-only references to this meme abound on the Romanian-speaking internet, with the author having even retrieved some Reddit threads entitled ‘Am gasit la... [Pesedeu]’, thus pointing to its existence as a phrasal template. For the purposes of this paper, only static imagery with supra-text has been taken into analysis.⁵ Events that spur the usage of the meme seem to have been relatively frequent, like the block migration of mayors who had run initially under the Social Democratic Party’s colours but switched party affiliation after the general elections of 2020 (Figure 2). Although the winner of the elections was the Social Democratic Party, the parties which went on to form a governing cabinet were the second-placed National Liberal Party, and the third-placed Save Romania Union (Uniunea Salvați România, USR). This specific meme cannot be found on KnowYourMeme.com, a popular website for meme tracking, although the latter heavily leans towards US-circulated memes, and several keywords were employed to search for it. However, the meme is available as a template on imgflip, a popular meme-creating web-based service, and most of the memes referenced below were created with the help of this tool.⁶

⁵ https://www.reddit.com/r/Romania/comments/8tb0aw/am_g%C4%83sit_la_pesedeu/

⁶ Imgflip, Am gasit arme droguri la penetséu meme template. <https://imgflip.com/memetemplate/187169667/Am-gasit-arme-droguri-la-peneteu>

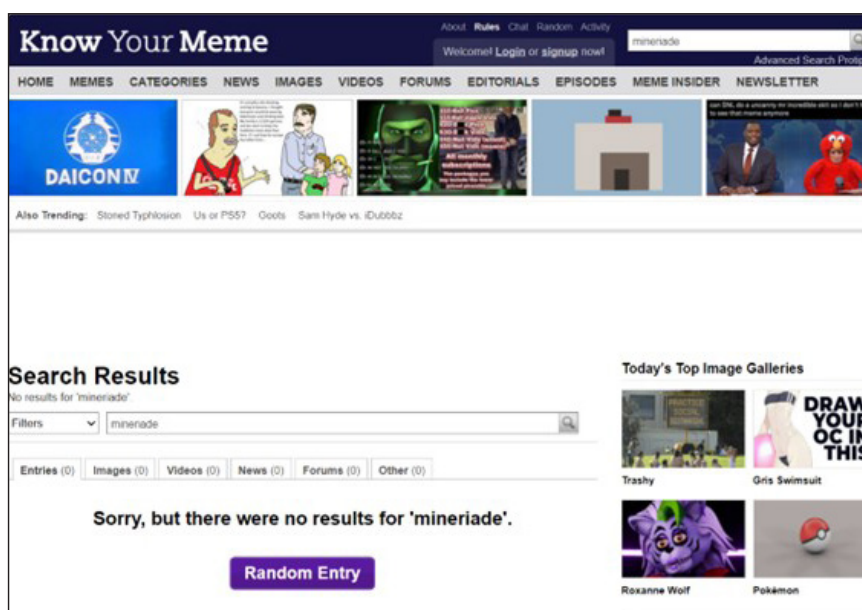


Figure 2 KnowYourMeme.com search result for “mineriade” and similar. “No results” was returned whenever searching for other variants like “mineriads.” “Miner” returned a few results, none having any connection to the Romanian context.

Source: Screen capture by the author.

Over time, this meme has kept a few of the original characteristics of the initial context: first, the image of the miner; second, the oral expression is maintained by tweaking the written abbreviations of the parties’ names and the name of the party from whose headquarters certain subversive elements were presumably retrieved; the original meme is also added to by putting it into a new political context – that of mayors migrating to another political party in order to keep their access to financial resources intact (Figure 3).

The same meme emerged when Florin Cîțu, the president of the National Liberal Party, publicly declared that:

I believe we found many things that can unite us [the Liberals and the Social Democrats], for example, the situation we are witnessing today in Romania. We have a health crisis, an energy crisis, and for this we need a Cabinet, a stable governing. If we will be able to manage this together with those at PSD, it’s OK. (Agerpres, 2021, translation provided by the author).

This declaration was made because the former governing alliance with the USR had collapsed through a censorship motion, and the Liberals were looking to form a new government with either PSD or USR (Figure 4).



Figure 3 “We found at the PNLeu/Half of PSDeu”

Source: Am gasit la peneteu [We found at the penetéu]. Facebook page.



Figure 4 “We found at the Peneleu and Pesedeu/Many things that can unite them”

Source: Am gasit la peneteu [We found at the penetéu]. Facebook page.

While the meme maintains its specificity by employing the same folk abbreviations of the parties' names, it also adds to it by adding the exact oral expression used by the interim prime minister. It satirised the historical context in which the Liberals were antagonists of the Social Democrats, thus stressing the fact that after the demise of communism, despite the regime change, the élite had managed to preserve political power.

Using this meme, other Romanian politicians were ironised, such as Liviu Dragnea, another former president of the Social Democrats between 2015 and 2019 (Figures 4 and 5). This occurred during the *TeleormanLeaks* scandal, in which a suitcase full of official documents seeming to incriminate Dragnea, the then-president of the Social Democratic Party, was retrieved by the journalists at Rise Project, resulting in a journalistic investigation and a public scandal entitled *TeleormanLeaks* by journalists, the name of the county where Dragnea was born and started his political career (Figure 5) (Dumitru & Munteanu, 2018).

The creation and usage of this meme also point to its instrumentalisation by political activists, as this scandal emerged amid accusations of corruption against Dragnea; he had already been convicted with a suspended sentence for coordinating a network of people to cast their vote through illegal means in the 2012 presidential impeachment referendum of Traian Basescu. In 2018, he was again convicted for instigating the abuse of office, and this time, he was imprisoned.



Figure 5 "We found in Teleorman a suitcase with Dragnea's documents"

Source: Adevarul.ro

Another meme in the same series (Figure 6) dedicated to one of Dragnea's statements emerged when, during the 2019 European elections campaign, a debate was started by members of Alianța USR PLUS regarding private property rights, a sensitive subject in Romania after 1989. Dragnea answered that,

They want to abolish the right to property. People can vote for them, it's a free country. If you don't want any more houses, land, cars, fridges, cooking stoves, it's alright. But you must knowingly vote. (Ghiciov, 2019, translation provided by the author)



Figure 6 “[We] found at PNȚ drugs, foreign currency, a typewriter. / I also found an automatic washing machine”

Source: Vasile (2017).

Throughout these iterations of the meme, we notice that the initial context was preserved yet re-contextualised with current affairs; the static imagery remains identical (the snippet of the miner taken from the video interview) while the added text maintains the oral features of the original vernacular language; however, the transformations that occur within the subtext heavily satirise the absurdity of the political statements and lack of actual reform within the political establishment, without explicitly pointing to the original source of either of the statements, which implies a good knowledge of both current affairs and of Romanian post-communist history.

The miner meme has nonetheless transgressed its original visual form, the portrait of the miner taken during his declaration in 1990, and it was also satirised by a Romanian illustrator, Sergiu V. Vasile (2017) in the form of a cartoon depicting the dialogue between two miners. The first miner (on the left of the illustration) states the initial line: ‘We found at the penetséu drugs, foreign currency, an automated writing machine’, while the second miner replies, ‘I also found an automatic washing machine’ (translation provided by the author).

This specific iteration of the meme suggests highly affective, highly mnemonic usage, with a clear reference to the historical context and a deep satirical take using synecdoche. This is an interesting example in the case study, as it balances between a political cartoon and a political meme. We have included it in the analysis as its origin and its memetic potential point towards a memetically-used trope of Romanian political culture. While the re-contextualization process remains the same as in the case of other memes, it uses the specific pseudo-dialogue usually observed in cartoons to add a punchline. This occurrence might suggest that, depending on the illustrators' choices, cartoons can use the same rhetorical and framing techniques as memes (Soare, 2019). However, it also demonstrates that the empirical boundaries of memes can be blurred (Denisova, 2016).



Figure 7 "We found at the Usereu washing machines, cooking stoves, gas bottles and a vintage radio set"

Source: Am gasit la peneteu [We found at the penet u]. Facebook page.

Another transgressive example of this meme was found in a hand-made protest placard, photographed during the OUG 13 protests and retrieved online. The text reads, 'We found at the PeSeDeu always-on-the-takers, thugs, an automated stealing machine', – with evidently affective use during a protest, satirising the political  lite, thus the meme is in tune with its other circulations. While it respects the orality of the party names, thus pointing clearly to the original context, it also uses a pun on the second part of the phrase, changing the 'automated writing machine' (typewriter) to an 'automated stealing machine' – another obvious allusion to the corruptness of the  lites, and specifically, the Social

Democrats. Notably, the meme was employed in an unconventional context of political participation in an openly public setting, with a scope rather in tune with the formal mechanisms of power.



Figure 8 Protester holding a hand-made placard stating ‘We have found at the PeSeDeu/always-on-the-takers, thugs, / an automated stealing machine.’

Source: <http://casazicasa.ro/colectie-pancarte-protest/img/Am%20gasit%20la%20PeSeDeu%20spagari%20borfasi%20si%20masina%20de%20furat%20automata.jpg>

Borrowing from Phillippe Soler’s concept of *intertextualité* (1968), if we decode the actual sequence of meme iterations featuring the miner, we can clearly see the intertextuality of the content, as well as the original occurrence of the meme as a hypotext, acting as the anchor on which later reinterpretations were built (Genette, 1989). This political meme features a high degree of semiotic stability, especially with regard to the visual and oral expression reproduced in text form, while simultaneously allowing for an array of recontextualisations.

However, it is interesting to note that these intertextualities of the meme appear within a very specific range, that of the history of Romanian post-communist politics, and always with strong reference to the original political context of the Minerriads and the lack of significant changes at the political élite level in spite of the political events of the day (corruption, political coalitions between seemingly incompatible political parties, debates about private property rights). We also note that there are far fewer iterations of this meme associated with the general political context than those connected to more recent political events, thus sustaining the claim that this particular meme can be ascribed to a

very specific political context, explaining its restricted circulation. The miner meme, as such, adopts a deeply negative tone about the Mineriads that is sustained throughout its re-contextualizations with the added weight of satire aimed at the political élite and the latter's lack of intellectual refinement. All these arguments suggest that this meme can be considered endogenous – born in the local political environment and used self-referentially within the same local environment, with the important note that it clearly shows how transgressions from the real-life environment to the online and back can occur. We must mention here that versions of the meme that use scurrilous language were removed from the analysed sample.

Just as with protest movements, the cultural influences forged by political memes have effects beyond the initial context through reinterpreting the original context and drawing from various mainstream symbols, such as political public discourse, personalities, and policy changes; simultaneously, on the internal online space political memes have the ability to forge new meanings (Meyer, 2006, pp. 164–172), but in this particular case study, we find that the new meanings are always integrated with the initial context, as an overarching satire of Romanian political evolution post-1990, and by extension, a critique of the political establishment at large. The affective use (Makhortykh & González Aguilar, 2020) of the miner meme becomes very apparent when the initial context and the subsequent iterations of the meme are compared, thus confirming the fact that memes are charged with a specific visual and memory potential brought forth both by the initial context and its subsequent iterations. Knowledge of the initial context of the Mineriads is absolutely necessary for correctly decoding the subsequent iterations of the meme. This series of memes suggests that the viewer at least knows the original context and the political developments of 1990s Romania. At the same time, remembering these events is the inherent pre-condition for the recirculation of the miner meme. This fact also explains why this meme has not circulated outside the Romanian cultural space (Figure 2).

5.2 President Klaus Iohannis

Klaus Iohannis, the current President of Romania and a former physics professor, started his political career in 1990 as a member of the Democratic Forum of Germans in Romania. In 2000, he won the local elections and became the mayor of Sibiu, his hometown and the historical centre of the German minority in Romania. In 2009, he was nominated as a candidate for the position of Prime Minister by a coalition formed by the Liberals, the Social Democrats, and the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR). However, he was not appointed by Traian Basescu, then-President. In 2013, Iohannis formally joined the National Liberal Party (PNL) and won the presidential elections in 2014, thus starting his first term, marked by a powerful anti-corruption stance aimed at improving education standards. He won his second term in 2019 in a political landscape that featured significantly less political competition; overall, under his presidency, there has been democratic backsliding – in the Economist's Democracy Index 2022, Romania is categorised as a 'Flawed democracy.'

Informally, he has been satirised for his sober stance, rarely showing his emotion, for his manner of speech (very slow, playing to the cultural trope of Transylvanians gen-

erally being very slow to act), for a property scandal (the number of properties he owns suggests more sources of income than just a professor's salary), and for his passion for sports – an avid skier and tennis player who likes taking bike rides, enjoys golf, and is considered to be in good physical shape. His sartorial choices have been reminiscent of those of other Western political figures, such as Barack Obama or Justin Trudeau, including the preference for wearing sunglasses, and he counters the local cultural trope that politicians are out of physical shape. These details are relevant, as political memes with him as a subject have used these characteristics, displaying him in a variety of instances.

This sub-section aims to reflect on how political memes in Romania can also be ascribed to international cultural tropes, not just local ones and that they can also be used in more positive contexts, although the satirical undertone remains at the forefront. Another aspect that is revealed is that in this case study, the tendency to borrow from international contexts is much more evident than in the case of the miner meme, and various factors justify this: (1) the level of international pop-culture consumption in Romania, and its synchronisation with Western levels after the demise of communism; (2) the increasing popularity of memes as a satirical or humorous tool, (3) the specificity of the memeable context, that is, because these memes focus on a Romanian politician who belongs to a newer generation, more akin to the Western political leaders.

One of the first instances when Iohannis became the subject of memes was during his first term in 2017 when he visited Romanian Air Force Base 57 near Constanța for an official meeting with the NATO Military Commander. His sartorial choice of the day and the photographs taken on the tarmac prompted a series of memes we can ascribe as either negative or positive; despite being involved in a scandal regarding his properties in Sibiu, general perceptions of him were still positive, being dedicated to his aim of eradicating anti-corruption. Figure 9 shows the original photograph based on which the subsequent memes were created.



Figure 9 Original photograph depicting President Klaus Iohannis next to the Chief of General Staff, Nicolae Ciucă.

Source: *presidency.ro*, as reproduced by the Romanian Public Radio, *Radiojurnal* (2017, July 13).



Figure 10a (left). Figure 10b (right).

Source: Digi24.ro (2017).

Figure 9a generally indicates the positive approach towards Iohannis employing various internationally borrowed contexts: borrowing from a very popular movie, *Top Gun*, and juxtaposing Iohannis' preference for wearing sunglasses and his stance to that of a movie hero, Lieutenant Pete Maverick. These features associate with his personality an internationally acclaimed actor and cultural symbol (Tom Cruise) and a movie character, creating a telecinematic reference point (Kirner-Ludwig, 2020). Figure 10b features a widely popular internet meme ('you vs. the guy she told you not to worry about') that summarises the then-political context: on the left, we see a portrait of a smiling Liviu Dragnea, then-leader of the Social Democrats, juxtaposed against the portrait of Iohannis on the tarmac. These memes create a context completely outside the Romanian political milieu. However, they manage to make sense of it in the national context, therefore involving a degree of intertextuality far superior to the situation of the miner meme, explainable by the very specific origin of the latter and by Iohannis aping the image of other Western leaders. At the same time, the meme essentially displays the primary political cleavage at that moment.

Another iteration of Iohannis' portrait on the tarmac (Figure 9c) features a local context juxtaposed with a popular movie trope, the blockbuster movie hero calmly walking away unscathed from a big explosion that is occurring in the background. The metaphorical layers to be uncovered here are multiple: while we can still see a pop-culture context outside the Romanian cultural space, the reference to the property scandal associated with Iohannis is obvious as the supra-text is provided in Romanian ['When the renters have not paid their rent...'], translation provided by the author], thus limiting the circulation of this meme to Romanian speakers, who would presumably be aware of this news.

Iohannis was featured in memes on other occasions as well, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, as his public appearances were highly frequent, and the meme featured in Figure 10b is based on a photograph taken of him while he was being vaccinated against Covid-19, playing to multiple tropes simultaneously: that of the slowness typical of both Transylvanians and the Windows operating system, to conspiracy theories around vaccines containing microchips, and to his seemingly robotic stance, as he was likened multiple times to an inanimate object. The hypertext provided here suggests a harmful type of meme, deeply satirical, regarding multiple issues and layers.



Figure 9c 'When the renters haven't paid their rent...'

Source: Florea, A. (2017).



Figure 11a Original image of President Iohannis immediately after being vaccinated against Covid-19.

Source: Pauleanu R. (2021).

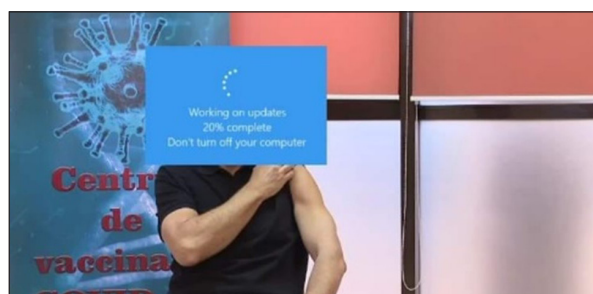


Figure 11b (right).

Source: IQAds. (2021).

Figures 12b, 12c, 12d, and 12e also display Iohannis and various graphical manipulations based on the original photograph (Figure 12a) of him during a bike ride to Cotroceni Palace in 2021 as part of a public campaign in which high-ranked officials vouched for alternative means of transportation (*Digi24.ro*, 2021).



Figure 12a Klaus Iohannis riding his bike on his way to Cotroceni Palace.

Source: Klaus Iohannis (Facebook).

The specificity of this meme is that no supra-text is employed, except for a single iteration, and the memes uses collages ascribing to various tropes: the properties scandal (Figure 12b, where Iohannis seems to be dragging along a big house behind the bike), chasing Liviu Dragnea (Figure 12d), and a very intricate collage showing him on a snow-bike on a ski-trail (Figure 12e). We suggest this series of memes could be ascribed to the iconic category. Figure 12c is the only meme in this series which features a supra-text – ‘When your shaorma from Doner is late’, showcasing Iohannis with a delivery backpack, once again re-contextualizing the original photo with the slowness trope, but also drawing on the rising popularity of home-delivery services provided by alternative means of transportation.

The single neutral or fairly positive meme in this series is Figure 12d, where the president seemingly chases Liviu Dragnea – an allusion to his proclaimed fight against corruption and the Social Democrats; all the other ones feature a negative undertone. Underlying all the memes, we can identify a high level of awareness of the political context and specific history of Iohannis, the subsequent political language employed, and the cultural space in which these memes are created and shared.

The tropes that each series of memes employs remain constant throughout time, and the memes rely on known facts or personality traits of Iohannis. However, the content of the memes is varied, suggesting an apparently different process of memeization than of the miner meme; we believe this process is only apparently different, as, in essence, the memetic traits remain a constant throughout the memes, satirising the same characteristics or facts from Iohannis’ political career or personality traits, just as in the case of the miner meme, where the constant feature is a stance satirising absurd political statements or contexts and a powerful anti-corruption message – characteristics by no means unique to the Romanian space (Chagas, 2020).



Figure 12b Klaus Iohannis on his bike, seemingly dragging along a (Photoshopped) house.

Source: Stan (2021).



Figure 12c Klaus Iohannis on his bike, but also wearing a bag bearing the logo of a popular home-delivery service in Romania.

Source: Paranteze.md (2021).



Figure 12d Klaus Iohannis on his bike, with a runner seemingly running away from him. The head of Liviu Dragnea is Photoshopped over the runner.

Source: Paranteze.md (2021).



Figure 12e Iohannis on a snow-bike, over a stock image of Poiana Brasov, the most popular ski resort in Romania.

Source: 'Ana are meme' [Ana has memes]. Facebook group.

Whether we can discuss a 'right to satirize' (Chagas et al., 2019) remains up for debate. Had we considered only the competitive political environment and the memes circulated exclusively during a high-stakes electoral campaign, we would have more clearly identified the instrumentalisation of memes as political discourse; however, these approaches should be more clearly connected to the means of assessing the actual effect of a meme on users, as one important aspect is how they are essentially perceived by the public – thus accounting for the 'user-generated frame' (Ross & Rivers, 2019).

Taking into account memes which have persisted in time (either by means of clearly tracking their originating point and then following them across mediums and re-contextualizations, as in the case of 'the miner' meme, or focusing on a single political figure and the variety of contexts and allusions in which the memes subject the respective figures) allows for a more finely-grained assessment of memes' persistence, contextualisation, and transgression potential, which are important components of satire through memes, as they contribute to their shared meaning. In the case of 'the miner' meme, the persistence in time and the stability of the image macro and the oral language point to how the meme can be considered a transformation of a political event into memetic form, thus confirming the initial observation that political memes do not create language, but only re-contextualize it. In the case of a political-personality-based meme, the variety of contexts that is employed does not necessarily point to the same degree of memetic stability nor to the same degree of persistence as a political/cultural symbol; it is the intersecting contexts (local and pop-culture) that power the meme, as well as the inherent visibility of the public personality.

This section has focused primarily on how the meaning, the memory, and the knowledge of the original context or the political personality are necessary for demonstrating that political memes circulate in a space which is informal (usually social networks, later on retrieved and re-popularised by news or creative outlets), but where knowledge about current and past affairs is definitely present. The second aim of the section has been to

strengthen the argument that memes are now an integral part of the Romanian political culture and one of the main tools employed online to satirise various political contexts, statements, or personalities.

The two subdivisions of the case study are differentiated by specifying the purpose of the meme: the miner meme features a high degree of stability over time, as the initial events unfolded in 1990, and memetic recontextualisations have usually been employed to satirise the lack of change within the Romanian political context by means of triggering an emotionally charged, memory-based response. It also suggests that the transgression potential of memes is an important factor that prolongs their life – autogenous political memes have a higher chance of becoming political-cultural symbols outside the memetic universe. The second part of the case study shows, however, that memes in the Romanian political context can also circle back to reference international pop-culture symbols, with a high degree of adaptability and precision as to the referenced context, thus confirming the circularity of the memetic environment, but also suggesting that current events can be re-contextualised using an array of references. Thus, this set of memes is markedly more endogenous than autogenous – although the two types are not exclusive as they may exist simultaneously or with a meme showing characteristics of both types (Figure 9). The second part of the case study also shows a multitude of static-image meme formats, either using supra-text or employing a variety of Photoshop-based manipulated imagery, thus suggesting that adaptations of meme formats can occur based not only on the originating context but on other societal features or trends – but the memes' discourse stability remains yet to be determined.

Ultimately, since the time the miner stated that he had found seemingly 'illegal' possessions at the Liberals' headquarters to Iohannis' movie-hero-like appearances in memes, approximately thirty years have passed, in which Romania has undergone a rapid transformation from multiple points of view – but the freedom of speech and that of association are probably two of the most cherished ones. Creating and distributing these memes in a semi-public or public setting remains a testament to these freedoms.

6 Conclusions

The aim of this paper has been to define political memes in the Romanian political culture and historical political context, to outline their characteristics and specificities of their functioning, and to indicate that the phenomenon of political meme-sharing is not just a frivolous thing to do while browsing the internet, but a significant phenomenon that, while it does not have the same weight as conventional or unconventional political participation (voting or protesting), can be considered a type of informal political participation, an addition to how political socialisation functions, and a novel element to be considered when dealing with civic culture at large, and digital civic culture more specifically. Notably, this research shows that a meme can move from an offline setting to an online setting and back to offline, thus making memes a potent vehicle for cultural transmission. The memes showcased in this research play to specific cultural tropes or feature a heavily charged and complex event, such as that of the Mineriads, essentialised through a phrasal

template. The popularity and the informality of this type of political participation can be explained in the Romanian post-communist context, as it is a type of involvement with no apparent ties to the structures of power, with no other significant aim but political satire (with either positive or downgrading subtexts) of current affairs or personalities.

Political memes share many features with political folklore (anonymous character, peer-to-peer sharing, and the semi-public online setting in which they are mainly circulated). However, the medium drastically changes their reach, transforming them into a noteworthy public and political phenomenon that is covered by the media, being in some cases relevant to Romanian society through the lens of political culture.

The two parts of the case study show the interesting differences between older and newer political memes from the standpoint of their original memetic characteristics: (1) the variety of contexts that are employed regarding a political personality or event across time varies significantly and might suggest some synchronisation with the levels of popularity of the said personality or event, (2) the tendency to referencing pop-culture tropes or symbols in memes tends to increase when the memes reference a very recent political event, but not in cases in which the political event or personality being referenced has a high emotional charge or concerns a particular political context. This effect, however, may be identified due to the sheer availability of the memes if the memetic originating point is more recent, as most of the time, the respective memes are not archived, and the snowball sampling method applied to identify the memes analysed in this research endeavour does not account for this variable. These dimensions can constitute an avenue for further research into Romanian digital participatory culture.

As per their definition, an awareness of the original context and other emerging iterations of memes leads to their being recognised as memes, keeping specific events alive in collective memory. They cannot transmit complex messages only through text or static imagery, but the subtexts and their reinterpretation can accurately represent how collective memory is metabolised. As a recent digitally translated genre of political humour or political satire, memes have some pregnant digital characteristics, such as a propensity for using imagery and less written language – and when written language is employed, it is in a brief form. They do not necessarily transmit complex messages, but they do emerge in contexts which have sometimes been decades-long in the making (but other times overnight), reshuffling and re-contextualizing themselves and transmitting powerful popular symbols through the ephemerality of internet bytes as an everyday occurrence – digitally translated folklore (Iloh, 2021; Denisova, 2019).

Finally, memes can be ascribed to a more private or individual type of political culture, somewhat detached from the mechanisms of power (Goldfarb 2006; 2012), especially in the Romanian political space as a post-communist country. They usually aim to satirise a political event, personality or statement, and they are circulated in a context in which there is often an awareness of both the original starting point and of other iterations; they do not have a (quasi-)institutionalised aim in the sense of regular protests, for example, but they can be instrumentalised in other more public types of political participation. Memes add to the metabolisation of political contexts, past and present, and can be a tool for revealing attitudes concerning politics at large.

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