

An Analysis of Romanian President Klaus Werner Iohannis's Political Communication Attributions to Gain Populist Support (a Case Study of Romania's Membership in the European Union)

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ABSTRACT

Romanian President Klaus Werner Iohannis (KWI) served his first term from 2014 to 2019 and his second term from 2019 until resigning in February 2025. During his presidency, certain populist groups in Romania claimed that EU membership caused economic issues, cultural imposition, government dissatisfaction, loss of rights, anti-EU sentiment, and fears of national sovereignty erosion. This populism emerged not only in Romania but also across other EU member states. The objective of this study is to examine the meaning of populism, public perceptions of it, and how President KWI employed political communication strategies to garner support from these groups amid Romania's EU membership. It integrates Heider's attribution theory with Dan Nimmo's political communication framework. The hypothesis posits that despite Eurosceptic opposition, KWI's communication strategies mitigated these challenges and sustained Romania's EU commitment. Findings indicate that populist groups persistently promoted anti-EU, anti-elite, anti-establishment, and anti-pluralist rhetoric to attract public backing. Public responses to these campaigns were divided. By the conclusion of KWI's tenure, rising government distrust—stemming from weak anti-corruption efforts—boosted populist support. Nevertheless, through effective political communication, Romania maintained its EU membership and achieved full Schengen Area accession on January 1, 2025, enabling KWI to complete two terms.

Keywords: European Union; Euroscepticism; Political Communication Attribution; Populism; Romanian President Klaus Werner Iohannis.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary political landscape of the European Union has been significantly shaped by the rise of populism and Euroscepticism, phenomena that represent critical challenges to European integration and democratic governance across member states. Populism, characterized by anti-elite rhetoric, appeals to "the people" against perceived corrupt establishments and nationalist sentiments, has gained substantial traction throughout Europe, particularly after the 2008 financial crisis, the 2015 migration crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Taggart, 2000). Euroscepticism, defined as criticism of or opposition to European integration and EU institutions, manifests in both soft forms (criticism of specific EU policies while supporting the general integration project) and hard forms (fundamental opposition to EU membership itself) (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008). These interrelated phenomena constitute the dependent variable in this study, representing the target of President Klaus Werner Iohannis's political communication strategies.

In Romania, populist support and Eurosceptic attitudes have been influenced by multiple factors including economic insecurity stemming from unequal distribution of EU benefits, cultural anxiety regarding the erosion of traditional values and national identity, political dissatisfaction with perceived ineffective governance and persistent corruption, and

a sense of democratic deficit where citizens feel disconnected from both national and EU decision-making processes (Botan et al., 2025; Grapă & Mogoș, 2023). The rise of populist parties such as the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR), which combines nationalist, religious conservative, and Eurosceptic rhetoric, demonstrates the electoral viability of anti-establishment narratives in Romanian politics (Soare, 2023). Understanding populist support as a dependent variable requires examining its multidimensional nature: it encompasses not merely voting behavior but also attitudinal orientations toward political elites, national sovereignty, European integration, and democratic norms. This complexity necessitates a nuanced analytical approach that considers both the supply side (how political actors communicate and frame issues) and the demand side (how citizens receive, interpret, and respond to these messages based on their experiences, values, and contextual factors). The global nature of populism's resurgence, affecting established democracies from the United States to Western Europe, underscores that Romania's experience reflects broader transnational trends, yet it is also shaped by the country's specific post-communist transition, EU accession process, and ongoing struggles with corruption and institutional reform.

Presidential candidate Klaus Werner Iohannis (KWI), who was also the former Mayor of Sibiu, Transylvania, was inaugurated as President of Romania on December 21, 2014, for the 2014-2019 period. Furthermore, KWI was inaugurated for a second term from 2019-2024. These inaugurations represented a series of victories in the KWI presidential elections. In the presidential election on November 17, 2014, KWI ran against Victor Viorel Ponta, a populist, nationalist, and strong Orthodox Christian believer. Ponta campaigned under the motto "good Romanian." He was the presidential candidate from the left-leaning PSD (Social Democratic Party), the majority of whose members come from the Romanian Communist Party led by President Nicolae Ceaușescu. Indirectly, PSD is a Communist Party that has renamed itself PSD (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2018). Meanwhile, KWI, a Protestant minority of German descent who served four terms as mayor of Sibiu, used the campaign motto "job well done." KWI added that his presidential run aimed to build a new political model focused on reducing performance noise and delivering more concrete solutions for Romanians (Schwartz, 2014).

After inauguration, in his speech (Deutsch Welle, 2014: "New Romania President Iohannis sworn into office"), KWI stated that his government would focus on eradicating corruption (Ristei, 2010; Silva, 2017; Balaban et al., 2022), strengthening Romanian institutions (Jipa-Mușat, 2020), and ensuring the independence of the judiciary, as reported by the Associated Press Bucharest in *The Guardian* (2014). Public support for KWI in the 2019 Romanian presidential election reflected Romanians' backing of a pro-EU presidential candidate, namely KWI (Drăgulin and Rotaru, 2020; Chiciudean and Corbu, 2015; Micu, 2007).

A systematic review of previous research reveals four primary scholarly contributions providing the foundation for this study while also highlighting critical gaps addressed here. First, Mungiu-Pippidi (2018) analyzed the persistence of communist-era political networks in Romania's post-transition democracy, demonstrating how PSD maintained structural continuities with the former Communist Party despite nominal democratic reforms. This established the historical-institutional context within which President KWI's political communication operated, illustrating the enduring influence of pre-1989 power structures and the public's ambivalence toward political elites with communist pedigrees. However, Mungiu-

Pippidi's analysis focused mainly on institutional continuity and did not examine active political communication strategies by leaders. Second, Drăgulin and Rotaru (2020) and Chiciudean and Corbu (2015) investigated public opinion dynamics in Romanian presidential elections, identifying pro-EU sentiment as significant for KWI's electoral success. These quantitative surveys mapped voter preferences, showing consistent support for European integration despite economic hardships but treated political communication mainly as a background variable. Third, Botan et al. (2025) and Grapă and Mogoș (2023) documented the rise of populism and Euroscepticism, highlighting grievances like economic insecurity, cultural anxiety, and institutional distrust fueling populist mobilization. This research addressed demand-side factors but lacked analysis of supply-side dynamics—how incumbent leaders respond to populist challenges communicatively.

The critical gap across all these studies is the absence of integrated analysis combining attribution theory with political communication theory to explain how a pro-EU leader like President KWI navigated populist pressures through strategic communication. None of the existing literature systematically examined attributional dimensions—how KWI framed causality, responsibility, and solutions regarding Romania's EU membership—nor how these attributions functioned within Nimmo's political communication model (communicator, message, channel, audience, effect). This study addresses the gap by providing the first comprehensive analysis of KWI's political communication attributions as a strategic response to populist Euroscepticism, contributing both theoretically (through novel integration of two frameworks) and empirically (through detailed case analysis of an understudied but important EU member state).

In foreign relations, President KWI aims to strengthen ties with the United States, NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) (Obretenova, 2024), and the European Union (Micu, 2007; Tartacuta-Lawrence, 2017). Earlier, in his victory speech after the first presidential election, KWI articulated his vision of a strong and prosperous Romania where everyone fulfills their roles, projects meet standards, laws apply equally, and politicians and institutions serve the people. The Romanian nation, he stated, can build the Romania that its people expect. The KWI President campaigned on 11 agenda topics requiring social and political consensus.

The urgency of this research is underscored by three critical contemporary developments demanding scholarly attention. First, the EU's stability and cohesion face unprecedented challenges from rising Eurosceptic populism across member states, threatening the foundation of European integration. Romania, a relatively recent EU member since 2007 and geopolitically situated between Western Europe and Russia's sphere of influence, is a crucial test case for understanding how pro-EU governments maintain public support amid populist opposition. Potential fragmentation of the EU due to member state departures or non-compliance with regulations would have profound regional security, economic stability, and liberal democratic order implications. Second, Romanian political dynamics during the KWI era (2014-2025) provide a time-sensitive window, encompassing the peak of European populism (2015-2020) and its evolution affected by COVID-19, economic pressures, and Russia-Ukraine conflict. The 2024 electoral crisis in Romania, where populist candidates gained significant support before a controversial annulment of presidential election results, underscores the immediacy and volatility of these dynamics. Third, existing political

communication scholarship has inadequately addressed how leaders use attributional framing to counter populist challenges, especially in post-communist contexts shaped by authoritarian historical memories. This research gap holds practical significance for democratic governance, as understanding communication strategies against populism is essential for policymakers, political actors, and civil society defending liberal democratic values.

The novelty of this study lies in its pioneering integration of Heider's attribution theory with Dan Nimmo's political communication framework to analyze presidential strategic communication. While attribution theory has been extensively used in psychology to explain how individuals assign causality (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967), and Nimmo's model is widely applied in political communication studies (Nimmo, 2011), no prior research has combined these frameworks systematically to analyze how a national leader attributes causes, responsibilities, and solutions regarding controversial policy issues like EU membership. This theoretical integration allows a sophisticated analysis: attribution theory explains cognitive mechanisms through which KWI framed EU membership issues (internal vs. external causality, controllability, stability), while Nimmo's model structures the analysis of how these attributions were communicated (channels, audiences, effects). The empirical contribution applies this integrated framework to the understudied case of Romania under KWI, offering insights for Romanian politics and a methodological template for other EU member states facing populist challenges. This research enriches both theoretical advancement in political communication and practical knowledge for democratic governance amid rising populism and Euroscepticism.

The eleven main agendas and programs of President KWI include enhancing strategic partnerships with the US; allocating portions of GDP to defense, health, and education (2%, 6%, 6%, respectively); restructuring EU funds management; developing the capital market; maintaining the tax system; establishing a liberal economy focused on competitiveness and prosperity; promoting agricultural products; improving Romania's relations with Western countries through infrastructure and decentralization; and advocating for the unification of Moldova with Romania. The unification is based on the decisions of the people of both countries and supports pro-European cooperation toward Moldova (Iohannis, 2014; Wikipedia, 2025).

Among these, KWI envisions a large public system encompassing health, education, pensions, and the economy (Pitu, 2014). Romanian voters desire change toward a strong, corruption-free, prosperous country with employment opportunities. The government and community together strive to meet EU membership requirements, including stable institutions, a market economy, and other EU rules (Parau, 2006). During KWI's tenure, Romanian populist groups (McDonnell & Werner, 2020; Mudde 2019 in Steven, 2025) argue that EU membership has triggered economic insecurity such as poverty and social inequality (Botan et al., 2025; Crulli, 2024; Bretter, 2022); cultural anxiety about erosion of Romanian traditions (Stefanita, 2017; Mudde in Botan et al., 2025); dissatisfaction with institutions; perceptions of disenfranchisement, disappointment, and fear; and a sense of insecurity (Enyedi, 2016; Scoones, 2017; Nowicka, 2018; Müller and Gebauer, 2021; Arta et al., 2023; Grapă and Mogoș, 2023; Soare, 2023). According to the constitution, President KWI stated Romania's EU membership is officially enshrined in Article 148 of the Romanian Constitution (1991, amended 2003).

Romania's EU accession treaty confers certain powers on EU institutions jointly exercised with member states, decided by Romanian Parliament and Senate legislation passed by a two-thirds majority (Article 148:1). Furthermore, EU treaties and community rules take precedence over conflicting national laws according to the Accession Act (Article 148:2). The 1991 Constitution (amended 2003) mandates that Parliament, the President, Government, and judiciary guarantee implementation of obligations deriving from the Accession Act and constitutional provisions (Article 148:4).

On January 1, 2007, Romania officially joined the EU, and Sibiu, where Klaus Werner Iohannis was mayor, was named European Capital of Culture. Romania participates in the European Union Council, Commission, and Parliament, engaging in EU policymaking. Romanian citizens benefit from the freedom to live, work, and do business across EU member states in sectors like industry, health, and education (Todorescu, 2016). Public support for EU membership increased from about 35% in 2013 to 65.5% in 2015 (Florin, 2015).

KWI has declared Romania's cooperation with the EU a government policy priority (Örmeci, 2025). His leadership, rooted partly in his communist-era experience (Lawrence, 2017), emphasizes continuing constitutional commitments to EU membership since January 1, 2007, aiming for political, defensive, economic, and socio-cultural strengthening. The membership process involved negotiations and reforms meeting EU criteria (European Commission, 2007). As an EU member, Romania implemented policies in economy, agriculture, environment, and gained easier movement of goods, services, capital, and people (Maastricht Treaty, 1992). Benefits include foreign investment, market access, increased exports and trade, and enhanced cooperation opportunities in research, education, and security (European Commission, 2025; Efstathiou, 2011).

Challenges remain, including a relatively high unemployment rate, infrastructure deficits, corruption, and bureaucratic hurdles that can impede investment and growth (European Commission, 2025). KWI recognizes EU membership's economic and political defense benefits for Romania (Gherghina and Miscoiu, 2022). European experts like Swiss historian Jean Rudolf von Salis suggested the EU risks losing global hegemony if member states fail to cooperate, despite intra-EU conflicts (Lipgens, 1981). Post-World War II liberal idealism in global politics motivated European unity efforts, reinforced by historical experiences and events shaping European leaders' desire for union (Najimdeen, 2016).

Romania's EU membership is mutually beneficial geopolitically and politically. Romania serves as a buffer bordering Russia's sphere and a contested territory between the EU and Russia. KWI believes Romania's EU membership must be strengthened to ensure stability politically, economically, legally, and nationally. This commitment is grounded in strategic interests and democratic, liberal European values contrasting the communist era. KWI emphasized during his campaign that European integration offers tangible benefits like development funding, education access, and improved democracy and rule of law. To succeed, he strategically applied political communication attribution to gain support from populist groups often critical of the EU.

KWI's success in winning two presidential terms and ensuring Romania joined Schengen evidences his communication effectiveness. He actively engaged Romanian urban, rural, and diaspora communities during campaigns, highlighting anti-corruption—a sensitive political topic. KWI used causal attribution to claim EU membership promises a better future

than the authoritarian, corrupt communist era. However, after taking office, communication efforts waned, especially toward rural and diaspora populations—key electoral supporters. This communication gap reduced trust and opened space for populist narratives to shift public support from pro-EU to populist groups.

Initially highly pro-EU, liberal, and anti-corruption, the diaspora shifted to populist candidates in 2024 elections, disappointed by slow legal reforms and corruption eradication. Similarly, PNL and PSD voters have moved support to new populists like USR, AUR, and SOS.RO. These groups exploited government communication weaknesses by raising issues like corruption, pandemic handling, coalition politics, Ukrainian refugees, and election annulment. This populist strategy damaged KWI's political image, leading to his early resignation. The political shift from KWI supporters to populist Călin Georgescu, then pro-EU Nicușor Dan, cannot be fully explained by Nimmo's political communication theory.

Limitations of Nimmo's theory in explaining political motivation shifts, coalition dynamics, and populist behavior justify using Heider's attribution theory to fill analytical gaps. Attribution theory, including internal factors (motivation, ability, emotions) and external factors (environmental pressures, social norms, political situations), clarifies rationales behind KWI's actions. Policy changes, pro-EU stances, coalition with PSD (a perceived ideological adversary), responses to populist pressure, and strategic decisions reflect causal attributions influenced by communist-era experience and balancing domestic and international relations. Integrating attribution theory with Nimmo's political communication model enables analysis of message crafting, media use, audience dynamics, and communication effects amid populism, Eastern European geopolitics, and Romania-EU relations.

In debates over Romania's EU membership, populist groups campaign anti-elite, anti-globalization, economic injustice, corruption, and national sovereignty narratives, viewing the EU as threatening Romanian culture and independence. These attitudes are categorized as Euroscepticism. Given EU membership's parliamentary ratification and constitutional enshrinement, KWI's government employed political communication attribution to counter criticism, emphasizing Romania's EU and Schengen membership and trajectory toward Eurozone integration. Considering Romania's historical, cultural, and geopolitical context, this attribution approach comprehensively explains KWI's political actions and public responses. The study concludes political communication attribution serves as an effective strategic tool for KWI to sustain Romania's pro-EU orientation amid populist pressures and complex domestic political dynamics.

METHOD

This research employed a qualitative content analysis approach based on Dan Nimmo's political communication model, supplemented by Heider's attribution theory to examine President Klaus Werner Iohannis's strategic communication. The design integrated systematic analysis of communication elements (communicator, message, channel, audience, effect) with attributional interpretations of causal framing amid populist challenges, historical legacies, and geopolitical pressures.

Data sources included primary materials such as presidential speeches, press releases, policy documents, constitutional texts, and official statements from government websites and social media; secondary sources like scholarly articles, books, and reports on Romanian

politics, EU relations, populism, and communication; and media coverage from Romanian and international outlets on KWI's tenure and EU debates.

The study analyzed KWI's political communication materials from his full term (2014-2025) through a multi-stage process: initial coding by Nimmo's elements, followed by attribution categorization (internal/external, stable/unstable, controllable/uncontrollable), theme synthesis, and critical discourse analysis of rhetorical strategies. Triangulation across sources ensured validity in assessing strategies on EU membership and populism.

Methodological limitations involved reliance on public texts, which overlooked private deliberations; the interpretive subjectivity of qualitative analysis; and difficulties proving causal links amid multifaceted influences on public opinion. Despite these, the approach offered a rigorous framework for KWI's communication attributions, with insights for Romanian studies and populist-era democracies.

This study combined causal attribution and political communication theories to explain shifts in KWI's strategies unaddressed by communication theory alone. KWI's policies reflected internal factors (personality, attitudes, motivations) and external ones (communist-era socio-cultural conditions, social pressures), driving his democratic reforms aligned with EU policies. These attributions targeted populist groups opposing Romania's EU membership since January 1, 2007, categorized as Eurosceptic, with KWI and relevant ministries (e.g., Foreign Affairs) as communicators promoting EU benefits.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the Application of Elements of Political Communication and Nimmo by the President of KWI

Instant messenger

The KWI president is the main communicator for Romania's foreign policy and EU integration. KWI reaffirmed its and the Romanian people's belief in "united and solid European action". KWI places Romania as a "promoter in campaigning for European values" and "helping the security of the Eastern European region". KWI's credibility is reflected in its consistent pro-EU stance in support of Ukraine and Moldova. KWI also emphasized the need for EU unity and the application of EU values. This can be seen in KWI's support for Moldovan President Maia Sandu. Almost all political communications are aimed at reinforcing Romania's identity with EU values. Despite criticism of domestic communication, KWI's external message about the EU has been very consistent. The consistency of pro-EU support is seen in the emergence of Romania's domestic political challenges and the rise of populist groups or Euroscepticism. KWI's strategic decisions are projected on Romania's stability and commitment to the EU. The element of "who" is to show not only about his personality, but his role as Romania's pro-active symbol of European unity.

Message

President KWI's political message emphasizes unity, solidarity, cohesion, and the rule of law of the EU. The KWI often highlights the "transformative power of the EU" through tangible benefits such as infrastructure projects from the EU and the Erasmus programme for

youth. The KWI frames the EU as a "space of security, protection, prosperity and diversity" and stresses the need to "strengthen internal resilience" to hybrid threats, climate change and economic hardship. Strategic priorities in the KWI message include:

- a. The expansion as a "geostrategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity", in particular supports the EU, Moldova and Ukraine lines.
- b. Fight disinformation and manipulation, as well as fight Euroscepticism through "better communication about benefits" and "honest communication with Europeans".
- c. Rationalise EU decision-making, including the abolition of the veto system.
- d. Strengthening Europe's security and defense as a complement to NATO.

The KWI communication frames EU membership as beneficial and as "Romania's strategic part of the geopolitical development of the region". It said that such strategic investments are the key to realizing peace, stability, and democracy. Romania's role regarding EU integration is not only economically beneficial but also nationally security, survival and peace, especially in the face of Russian aggression. KWI has always associated EU membership with peace, security, stability, and prosperity. Romania is trying to consolidate public support for EU integration. The support for EU integration is KWI's strategic political message.

Channels

The KWI uses a high-level and formal platform for pro-EU communication, during speeches at the EU Parliament (the "This is Europe" debate) and the Congress of the European People's Party in Bucharest. This path provides authority and message reach among the EU's political elite and international audiences. The official presidential website and press conference of the KWI serve as the official policy communication channels of the Romanian Government.

The use of formal channels on the (European Parliament) shows a strategic choice to influence the EU's political elite and international partners. On the other hand, the President of KWI does not conduct domestic political communication within Romania. The way the KWI President communicates reflects efforts to control messages and project a consistent image on the international stage. However, such communication has an impact on the lack of communication for the Romanian people.

Public. Iohannis' main audience includes:

- a. European Leaders & Institutions: Delivered in the editorial "Dear Delegates, Dear European Friends" and "Madam President of the European Parliament, Honourable Members". The goal is to encourage unity, support expansion, and streamline decision-making in the EU.
- b. Romanian citizens: Addressed directly and indirectly, especially regarding the benefits of EU membership, security assurances, and countering disinformation. The KWI president acknowledged the need to "win the trust of young people" and "honest communication with Europeans".
- c. Youth: The KWI President specifically mentioned that youth also want to participate in Romania's membership in the EU.
- d. International Partners: Romania supports the efforts of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia to join the EU. The KWI President also emphasized Romania's role as a "security provider

in the Eastern European Region" and the importance of Romania's strategic partnership with the United States.

President KWI's political communication shows a different understanding of the audience. This approach suggests that political communication in the EU context requires a strategy tailored to each audience group. For example, the message to EU leaders emphasizes policies and reforms and the message to citizens should focus on real benefits and security. Diverse audiences need different communication strategies to achieve the desired effect. A deep understanding of "To whom" allows communicators to tailor "Say What" and "Through What Channels". Failure to tailor the message to a domestic audience may reduce the desired effect.

Intended Effects:

1. Increasing Public Trust: The KWI President aims to address the "crisis of public trust in Romanian institutions" and counter Euroscepticism by communicating the benefits of Romania's membership in the EU.
2. Strengthening Romania's Role: The KWI President wants Romania to become a "security provider in the Eastern European Region" and strengthen Romania's role in NATO and the EU. Romania's membership in the EU has brought "concrete benefits".
3. Promoting European Union & EU Expansion: The KWI President's speech always called for EU unity and supported enlargement as a geostrategic investment.
4. Fighting Disinformation: The KWI President asserted that "better communication about the benefits of EU membership is to counter disinformation and information manipulation".

Observed Effects and Challenges:

- 1) Despite the continued promotion of the EU, the overall level of public trust declined in his second term. Observers state that the lack of communication outside the official context contributes to a divided and radical society.
- 2) The emergence of right-wing candidates critical of NATO and EU membership, as well as alleged Russian interference in the elections, suggest that President KWI's pro-EU message is facing significant resistance at home.
- 3) Nevertheless, at international forums, the KWI President succeeded in strengthening Romania's role in the EU and NATO, as well as developing strategic partnerships with the United States. Romania has also joined the Schengen area during the term of President KWI.

Measuring the effects of political communication, especially in the context of EU membership, is a significant challenge. The intended effect may not always be realized due to a variety of factors, including domestic and geopolitical contexts. Effects analysis requires a careful assessment of changes in public opinion, policy support, and geopolitical positions. Effects analysis needs to consider unintended effects, such as potential domestic polarization if elite communications do not effectively reach or convince a wider audience segment.

Effect measurement in political communication is a complex process because the intended effects interact with, or even be drowned out by, contextual factors. For example, although the KWI President explicitly aims to increase public trust and counter Euroscepticism, the decline in the level of public trust and the emergence of foreign-backed anti-EU sentiment suggest that the desired effect is not fully achieved domestically. This

suggests that the "effects" in Dan Nimmo's model should not be seen as direct and linear results, but as the result of interactions between messages, channels, audiences, and broader contexts.

Political Communication Attributions of the President of KWI

KWI President Supports Romania's Membership in the EU

Presiden KWI menyatakan "But there are situations in which political parties also worked in consensus; I would mention two big projects at country level, two successes after the Revolution: entry into the European Union and NATO membership, which were possible precisely because all parties have wanted to support this approach" (Iohannis, 2014: p.31).

Text Dimension: But there are situations where political parties agree to reach a consensus. The President of KWI stated that two of the Romanian Government's programs after the December 1989 Revolus were Romania's incorporation into the EU and into NATO. All parties support Romania-EU Cooperation and Romania's NATO. Social Cognition Dimension: The President of KWI assessed that all parties have the same view regarding maintaining Romania's economic and political security, namely cooperation with the EU and NATO. KWI also realizes that there must be groups that disagree, namely after Romania joins the group is economically marginalized.

Social Context Dimension: The statement of the KWI President is a form of communication between the KWI Government and the public that the course of the Romanian revolution which was led in a totalitarian manner and reformed has changed to be democratically led. Romania's success in joining the EU and NATO can be categorized as an external (causal) attribution, i.e. the influence of the EU and NATO. In addition, the statement can be categorized as an internal attribution, an element of the Romanian Government's ability to embrace all parties to agree to join the EU and NATO. In addition, the statement can also be categorized as a positive internal attribution (element of ability), the President of the KWI who maintains the unity of the party and the people so that Romania still likes to join the EU and NATO.

President of KWI Supports PNL Party Coalition with PSD Party (before the 2024 Presidential Election)

Text Dimension: Researcher O'Keefe stated: To ensure that the PNL Party does not lose its seats in Parliament as the ultranationalist AUR party grows in support, the PNL forms a coalition with the PSD Party, the PNL's main competitor. The PNL Party and the PSD Party agreed to change their respective prime ministers for 18 months and share cabinet positions, until the 2024 general election" (Crowcroft). Rumors spread that the coalition could last up to the next seven years. With the coalition of mainstream parties, there are concerns that the PNL and PSD could change constitutional law from a presidential republic to a parliamentary republic. The transition will make the position of president appointed by parliament instead of elected by the people.

Social cognition dimension: Researcher O'Keefe understands that there is a tendency to increase the vote of the AUR National Party because people are tired of mainstream parties that are less firm in eradicating corruption, the economic impact of COVID-19 and the Russia-Ukraine war. On the other hand, PNL and PSD also assessed that the AUR populist group was

increasing. Social Context Dimension: O'Keefe's observation is that in the context before November 2021, the PNL Party was in coalition with the USR Plus Party and the UDMR. In November 2021, the USR Plus Party quit the coalition due to differences in the interests of the program and the government. Furthermore, the position of the USR Plus Party will be replaced by the PSD Party until the end of 2024. The coalition of the major parties PNL and PSD was approved by the President of KWI who was of the view that the PNL party (the KWI party before serving as president of Romania) would not be able to govern if it did not form a coalition with the PSD Party which has the largest seats in Parliament. The change in the view that the PSD is the main competitor of the PNL to the coalition is a form of causal attribution, namely there is no other way for the KWI President to approve the collusion or the KWI President cannot appoint the Prime Minister because it will be rejected by the PSD Party.

KWI Resigns as President of Romania

KWI's statement on Facebook on February 10, 2025

Text Dimension: In order to save Romania and its people from the crisis of political crisis, the development of the worsening political situation, KWI resigned as President of Romania. KWI resigned on February 12, 2025. May God bless Romania!

Social Cognition Dimension: KWI realizes that the cancellation of the elections won by populist groups has caused the political situation in Romania and the EU to become increasingly polarized. In that regard, KWI was also aware of the protest demanding the President of KWI. For this reason, the political situation in Romania has populist groups and groups that support the Government or large coalitions, namely the PSD, PNL and UDMR. However, the tendency of pro-campaign populist groups that the annulment of the election results leads to demands for the president's resignation.

Social Context Dimension: The event of the statement of the President of KWI began with the decision of the Romanian KPU to annul the results of the presidential election won by the campaign of the Utranational Presidential candidate Calin Georgescu. The KPU stated that Calin Georgescu received bribes from Russia, manipulated social media, did not obey election rules, namely campaigns using TikTok, non-transparent funding, and violations and criminal investigations as a member of a fascist organization. The cancellation of the election triggered populist groups to hold demonstrations and call for the President of the KWI to resign as president of Romania. The resignation of the KWI President can be included as a causal attribution (external or situational elements) due to pressure from populist groups. In addition, KWI's resignation can also be categorized in internal attribution (elements of personal influence). KWI has evaluated that the protests and demands of populist groups for KWI to be replaced are getting stronger. To alleviate the crisis, KWI resigned to save Romania from the crisis.

CONCLUSION

President Klaus Werner Iohannis (KWI) initially garnered strong public support through his political communication, securing two presidential terms and Romania's Schengen accession, but this waned after his coalition with the previously criticized PSD, prompting shifts toward AUR's populist narratives. Questionnaire and interview findings revealed public endorsement of EU and Schengen membership alongside demands to safeguard national

sovereignty, traditions, and culture. Attribution analysis indicated KWI employed populist-style elements—such as framing "corrupt elites" as a common enemy, anti-populist rhetoric, and self-positioning as an integrity symbol—not to embrace populism but to sway vulnerable societal segments, attributing causes and solutions to himself versus opponents amid domestic politics, foreign policy, and cross-border media influences. Future research could quantitatively test these attribution strategies' long-term impact on voter behavior in other post-communist EU states facing similar populist surges.

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