



| Assessment |

Romania's Presidential Election Crisis

A-2025-05-02b

Classification: TLP:GREEN

May 2, 2025

Scope Note

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| Assessment | Romania's Presidential Election Crisis

| Executive Summary

Romania's 2024 presidential election was annulled after evidence of Russian hybrid interference came to light, exposing vulnerabilities in the country's democratic and cyber defenses. As Romania prepares for a re-run election on May 4, 2025, two distinct political strategies have emerged: the country will either reaffirm its Euro-Atlantic commitments by electing pro-Western candidates or weaken NATO-EU cohesion by voting in nationalist and sovereigntist leaders. The outcome will have immediate consequences for Black Sea security, European stability, and Russia's influence in Eastern Europe.

| Background

Romania's first-round presidential election on November 24, 2024, was politically consequential, underscoring rising anti-establishment sentiment and the country's growing vulnerability to external election interference.

- Călin Georgescu, an independent, far-right nationalist with little political experience, unexpectedly won first place with 23 percent of the votes.
- Elena Lasconi, the Save Romania Union candidate, came in second with 19.2 percent, narrowly ahead of Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu of the Social Democrats

(PSD) with 19.1 percent. This marked the first time since 1989 that PSD failed to advance to a presidential runoff, prompting Ciolacu's resignation as party leader.¹

- Other mainstream candidates performed poorly: Mircea Geoană, a former NATO official, received about 6 percent of the vote, while Nicolae Ciucă of the National Liberal Party won 8.7 percent and subsequently resigned from party leadership.²

Political Shifts

The result delivered a dual political shock: an unknown far-right outsider, Călin Georgescu, captured first place, while the dominant PSD failed to reach the runoff for the first time since the end of Communism. This upset solidified a broader electoral realignment, as more than 40 percent of voters supported nationalist candidates.

- Among them, George Simion, leader of the far-right Alliance for the Union of Romanians, secured approximately 14 percent of the vote—demonstrating the growing appeal of radical alternatives to Romania's traditional political class.³ Simion would then go on to replace Georgescu after his initial victory was annulled following findings of Russian-backed fraud.⁴
- The parliamentary elections held just one week later, on December 1, 2024, reinforced this nationalist surge. While the PSD remained the largest single party with 22.3 percent of the vote, far-right factions collectively won roughly one-third of the parliamentary seats. To block the ultranationalists from gaining executive influence, the PSD and the National Liberal Party (PNL) began urgent negotiations to form a pro-European coalition—a fragile alliance rooted more in defense against extremism than in ideological unity.⁵

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[hXXps://www.thetimes\[.\]com/world/europe/article/calin-georgescu-wins-first-round-romania-presidential-election-mcfh62f2n](https://www.thetimes.com/world/europe/article/calin-georgescu-wins-first-round-romania-presidential-election-mcfh62f2n)

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[hXXps://www.robert-schuman\[.\]eu/en/monitor/6511-two-candidates-in-a-tight-race-for-the-first-round-of-the-presidential-election-in-romania](https://www.robert-schuman[.]eu/en/monitor/6511-two-candidates-in-a-tight-race-for-the-first-round-of-the-presidential-election-in-romania)

³ [hXXps://www.romania-insider\[.\]com/calin-georgescu-george-simion-protest-election-annulment-2024](https://www.romania-insider[.]com/calin-georgescu-george-simion-protest-election-annulment-2024)

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[hXXps://www.intellinews\[.\]com/rival-candidates-seek-to-capture-romania-s-far-right-electorate-after-georgescu-banned-from-presidential-race-371459/](https://www.intellinews[.]com/rival-candidates-seek-to-capture-romania-s-far-right-electorate-after-georgescu-banned-from-presidential-race-371459/)

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[hXXps://www.robert-schuman\[.\]eu/en/monitor/6404-the-social-democratic-party-comes-out-ahead-in-romania-s-parliamentary-elections-but-far-right-forces-make-inroads](https://www.robert-schuman[.]eu/en/monitor/6404-the-social-democratic-party-comes-out-ahead-in-romania-s-parliamentary-elections-but-far-right-forces-make-inroads)

Election Integrity Concerns

Electoral irregularities quickly became a central concern. The shock of the first-round results prompted Romania's Constitutional Court to order a formal recount, delaying official confirmation of the runoff. On December 2, the court validated the outcome and confirmed that Călin Georgescu and Elena Lasconi would advance to a runoff scheduled for December 8. However, that runoff never took place.⁶

Just days before the vote, mounting evidence of foreign interference and serious procedural irregularities emerged. On December 6, the Constitutional Court annulled the entire presidential election, citing a compromised electoral process. Declassified intelligence released by outgoing President Klaus Iohannis confirmed the involvement of a foreign influence operation—widely interpreted as Russian-directed—that had penetrated Romania's democratic infrastructure. The Court ruled unanimously that the vote was no longer legitimate and ordered a full re-run of the presidential election.⁷

The immediate aftermath of the annulment created a power vacuum and deepened public polarization. President Iohannis announced he would remain in office in a caretaker capacity until the re-run could be completed.⁸ Public reaction fractured along ideological lines that remain today: pro-EU citizens rallied with Romanian and EU flags in support of Lasconi and the court's decision, while nationalist factions denounced the annulment as an elite betrayal of the popular will.

Romania's Strategic Alignment is Anchored in the West

Recognition of Romania's role in NATO and the EU is important to understand both the candidates and why Russian-backed threats actors want to intervene in the country's elections.

- Romania has been a NATO member since 2004, consistently advocating for deeper alliance integration and regional security initiatives. It hosts critical military

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[hXXps://www.ifes\[.\]org/publications/romanian-2024-election-annulment-addressing-emerging-threats-electoral-integrity](https://www.ifes.org/publications/romanian-2024-election-annulment-addressing-emerging-threats-electoral-integrity)

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[hXXps://www.euronews\[.\]com/my-europe/2024/12/04/declassified-romanian-intelligence-suggests-state-actor-behind-georgescus-campaign](https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/12/04/declassified-romanian-intelligence-suggests-state-actor-behind-georgescus-campaign)

⁸ [hXXps://www.romania-insider\[.\]com/klaus-iohannis-remain-office-new-president-february-2025](https://www.romania-insider.com/klaus-iohannis-remain-office-new-president-february-2025)

assets central to NATO's eastern defense posture, including the Aegis Ashore missile defense system at Deveselu and a NATO multinational battlegroup under French leadership that was deployed in response to Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.⁹

- Romania increased defense spending to 2.5 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) by 2024 and plans to raise it to 3 percent under current government proposals.¹⁰ Its military infrastructure—especially Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base—plays a pivotal role in NATO's Black Sea operations and logistics support to Ukraine, serving as a forward base for U.S. and allied deployments.

European Union Membership and Institutional Commitments

- Romania joined the European Union (EU) in 2007, and its public support for EU membership has remained among the highest in Eastern Europe.¹¹
- Political leadership across both the PSD and PNL has traditionally maintained strong alignment with the EU, particularly on issues such as sanctions against Russia, judicial independence, and energy diversification following the invasion of Ukraine.

| Emerging Fault Lines and Russian Influence Opportunities

Rising Nationalist and Eurosceptic Sentiments

- Electoral results from November–December 2024 showed that over 40 percent of first-round voters supported nationalist candidates.¹²
- George Simion's Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) party and other nationalist movements position themselves against EU green policies and military aid to Ukraine. While outright "Roexit" sentiment (leaving the EU) remains marginal, public fatigue with the EU directives on climate, agriculture, and judicial reform is growing, particularly in rural regions.¹³

⁹ <https://www.mae.ro/en/node/2066>

¹⁰ <https://www.erstegroup.com/en/research/report/en/SR436222>

¹¹ https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/eu-countries/romania_en

¹² <https://data.ipu.org/parliament/RO/RO-UC01/election/RO-UC01-E20241201/>

¹³ <https://www.yahoo.com/news/george-simion-romania-far-answer-132937881.html>

- This provides threat actors with narrative entry points, using Eurosceptic and nationalist grievances to erode Western solidarity from within.

Vulnerability to Economic and Social Stress

- Romania's economic fragility—exacerbated by inflation, wage stagnation, and agricultural pressures (e.g., competition from Ukrainian grain)—very likely fuels the disillusionment that nationalist candidates weaponize.
- Russia-linked disinformation campaigns repeatedly blamed EU policies and NATO entanglement for Romania's internal challenges, seeking to frame Western integration as economically detrimental.¹⁴
- Although mainstream parties attempt to counter these narratives, polling shows a gradual erosion of unconditional support for the EU, especially among lower-income and rural populations.¹⁵

Russia's Hybrid Strategy Toward Romania

- Russian state media and affiliated proxy information outlets have intensified efforts to undermine faith in Romania's democratic institutions, promote narratives portraying NATO's presence as a threat to national security, and amplify nationalist grievances along with culturally conservative messaging.
- The annulled 2024 presidential election—triggered by confirmed Russian hybrid interference—showcased Russia's ability and intent to exploit domestic instability as a means of reshaping Romania's strategic alignment.¹⁶
- Should a nationalist candidate win the presidency in May 2025, Russia's geopolitical position in the Black Sea region and southeastern Europe is likely to be significantly strengthened.

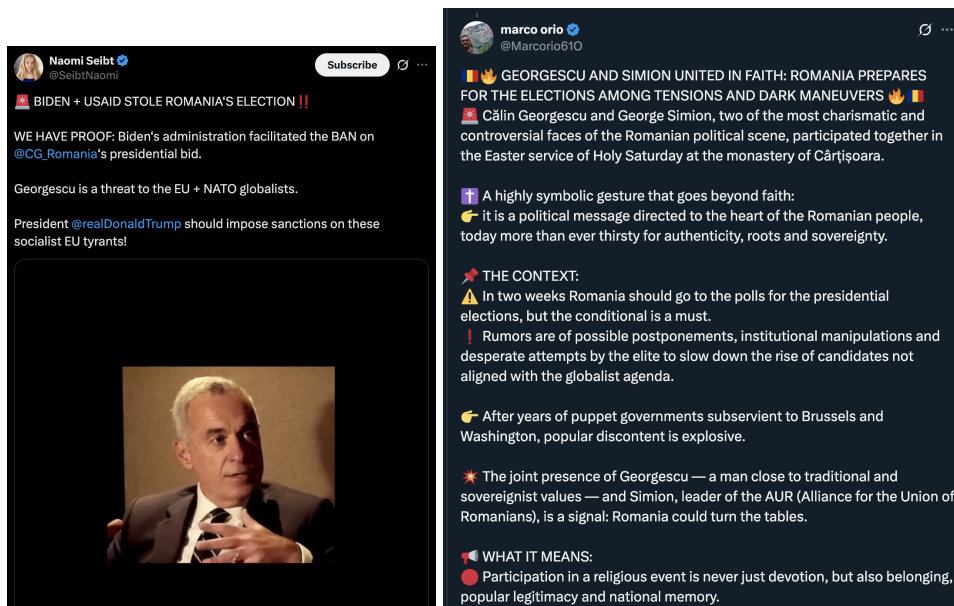
¹⁴

[hXXps://carnegieendowment\[.\]org/europe/strategic-europe/2024/12/taking-the-pulse-of-information-operations-against-russia](https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2024/12/taking-the-pulse-of-information-operations-against-russia)

¹⁵ [hXXps://www.globsec\[.\]org/sites/default/files/2024-10/Public%20Attitudes%20in%20Romania.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/Public%20Attitudes%20in%20Romania.pdf)

¹⁶

[hXXps://www.theparliamentmagazine\[.\]eu/news/article/hybrid-threats-russias-shadow-war-escalates-across-europe](https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/hybrid-threats-russias-shadow-war-escalates-across-europe)



Sample posts accusing Western governments of influencing recent Romanian elections. These users have hundreds of thousands of followers, and messaging habits indicate the account is either a bot or a part of a coordinated campaign.

Source:

[hXXps://x\[.\]com/seibtnaomi/status/1912183792443306034](https://x.com/seibtnaomi/status/1912183792443306034); [hXXps://x\[.\]com/Marcorio610/status/1914351134803890542](https://x.com/Marcorio610/status/1914351134803890542)

Re-run Election and Strategic Alignments

Following the annulment of the November–December 2024 election, Romania's political landscape reconfigured rapidly ahead of the rescheduled presidential election set for May 4, 2025. If no candidate secures more than 50 percent of the vote, a second round vote will take place on May 18 featuring the top two finishers. The contest now reflects a divide between candidates advocating strong Euro–Atlantic alignment and those espousing nationalist, sovereigntist, or Eurosceptic agendas.

Key Candidates and Political Alignments

Nicușor Dan is the current General Mayor of Bucharest running as an Independent supported by the Save Romania Union (USR) party.¹⁷

¹⁷

[hXXps://www.reuters.com/world/europe/romanian-centrist-presidency-candidate-wants-spend-more-defence-keep-backing-2025-04-24/](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/romanian-centrist-presidency-candidate-wants-spend-more-defence-keep-backing-2025-04-24/)

- Dan campaigns as a pro-EU, pro-NATO, anti-corruption reformist, emphasizing judicial independence, adherence to European democratic standards, and economic modernization aligned with EU policies. Dan is firmly aligned with the West and supports maintaining Romania's close partnerships with both the EU and the United States. He backs continued assistance to Ukraine and advocates for active participation in NATO missions and regional security efforts.¹⁸
- As of April 2025, polls placed Nicușor Dan at around 20 percent, giving him a roughly even chance of advancing to a runoff on May 18, 2025.¹⁹

Elena Lasconi, also of the USR party, is the current Mayor of Câmpulung and a former television journalist. Lasconi emerged in 2024 as a leading anti-corruption figure. Despite securing a place in the (cancelled) December 2024 runoff, her candidacy has been weakened by internal party rifts after USR leadership shifted support to Nicușor Dan.²⁰

- Like Dan, she is firmly pro-EU and pro-NATO. Lasconi advocates anti-corruption reforms, continued support for Ukraine, and increasing Romania's defense commitments under NATO frameworks. She is clearly positioned within the Euro-Atlantic bloc, strongly favoring Romania's further integration into European structures.
- Lasconi is currently polling between 7-10 percent; her chances are hampered by the USR's divided support base, and she is very unlikely to make it to the second round.²¹

George Simion is the leader of the AUR, a far-right, ultranationalist party. Simion's profile rose sharply after the November 2024 election, consolidating the nationalist electorate following Georgescu's disqualification.

- Simion is strongly Eurosceptic, opposes economic sanctions on Russia, and advocates for an isolationist "Romania First" foreign policy. He calls for ending Romanian military aid to Ukraine and rolling back EU environmental and migration

¹⁸ [https://www.politico\[.\]eu/article/bucharest-mayor-nicutor-dan-romanian-presidential-race-election/](https://www.politico.eu/article/bucharest-mayor-nicutor-dan-romanian-presidential-race-election/)

¹⁹ [https://www.romania-insider\[.\]com/poll-nicutor-dan-winner-presidential-elections-march-2025](https://www.romania-insider[.]com/poll-nicutor-dan-winner-presidential-elections-march-2025)

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[https://www.g4media\[.\]ro/nicutor-dan-replica-pentru-elena-lasconi-va-aduc-aminte-cand-ati-venit-si-ati-declarat-presei-ii-cer-lui-nicutor-dan-sa-medieze-lasconi-cuica-orban-astfel-incat-doar-unul-dintre-noi-sa-intr.html](https://www.g4media[.]ro/nicutor-dan-replica-pentru-elena-lasconi-va-aduc-aminte-cand-ati-venit-si-ati-declarat-presei-ii-cer-lui-nicutor-dan-sa-medieze-lasconi-cuica-orban-astfel-incat-doar-unul-dintre-noi-sa-intr.html)

²¹ [https://www.politico\[.\]eu/europe-poll-of-polls/romania/](https://www.politico[.]eu/europe-poll-of-polls/romania/)

policies. Although Simion denies being "pro-Russian," his policy proposals align with many Russian interests: notably, decreased support to Ukraine and a looser relationship with the EU. He has expressed admiration for U.S. President Donald Trump's nationalist approach.²²

- As of April 2025, Simion leads in several polls with approximately 30 percent support, positioning him as a very likely finalist in the run-off.²³ In a two-way contest, there is a roughly even chance Simion will win on May 18.

Victor Ponta of the Alliance for the Homeland (APP) party is a former prime minister (2012–2015) who has rebranded himself using nationalist-populist rhetoric. He leads APP, which seeks to capture moderate nationalist and rural voters disillusioned with mainstream parties.

- Ponta pushes a hybrid approach: he is strongly nationalist on economic sovereignty (e.g., protectionist policies against Ukrainian grain imports) while maintaining formal support for Romania's NATO and EU memberships. He also advocates for prioritizing Romania's domestic interests over EU solidarity on issues like trade. Ponta supports NATO military cooperation (including aiding Ukraine militarily) but demands a "Romania-first" renegotiation of EU obligations, drawing inspiration from Poland and Hungary's strategies. He has also expressed positive sentiment toward the Trump administration's foreign policy shifts.²⁴
- Estimates place Ponta's support between 15–18 percent,²⁵ making it unlikely he will advance to the next round but giving him a strong chance to become a kingmaker in a potential run-off scenario by advising his supporters to back Simion.

Crin Antonescu of the Romania Forward Alliance (PSD–PNL–UDMR) is a former senate president and interim head of state (2012). Antonescu returned from political retirement

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[hXXps://www.france24\[.\]com/fr/info-en-continu/20250430-george-simion-celui-qui-se-r%C3%A9veille-en-pr%C3%A9sident-maga-de-la-roumanie](https://www.france24.com/fr/info-en-continu/20250430-george-simion-celui-qui-se-r%C3%A9veille-en-pr%C3%A9sident-maga-de-la-roumanie)

²³ [hXXps://www.politico\[.\]eu/europe-poll-of-polls/romania/](https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/romania/)

²⁴ [hXXps://www.occrp\[.\]org/en/people/victor-ponta](https://www.occrp.org/en/people/victor-ponta)

²⁵ [hXXps://www.politico\[.\]eu/europe-poll-of-polls/romania/](https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/romania/)

as the unity candidate of Romania's pro-European coalition, and he is positioned as a moderate alternative to rising nationalist forces.²⁶

- Antonescu advocates for institutional reform, judicial independence, and depoliticizing the presidency and emphasizes political stability, economic resilience, and anti-extremism as key electoral pillars. He is strongly pro-EU and NATO, backing military aid to Ukraine and regional security cooperation. Antonescu is currently polling around 22 percent,²⁷ placing him second behind George Simion and ahead of Nicușor Dan. Backed by the ruling coalition, he is a leading contender for the run-off.

Romania's May 2025 presidential election is thus not only a domestic political contest but also a pivotal choice about Romania's geostrategic orientation between the Euro-Atlantic community and rising nationalist-populist pressures. Romania's May 2025 presidential candidates offer sharply contrasting visions for the country's foreign policy, security posture, European integration, and energy strategy. These differences have direct implications for Romania's role in the Euro-Atlantic alliance, its position toward Russia, and its internal stability.

Implications

The outcome of Romania's May 2025 presidential election will determine the country's geopolitical alignment, regional security posture, and internal democratic trajectory. Three major paths have now emerged.

A win by Nicușor Dan or Elena Lasconi of the USR would reinforce Romania's pro-Western reformist current; their administrations would likely be focused on transparency, judicial independence, expanded EU integration, and continued NATO engagement,—including unwavering support for Ukraine. This path signals continuity with Western norms and a rejection of Russian influence.

²⁶

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/romania-coalition-parties-unite-behind-antonescus-candidacy>

²⁷ <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/romania/>

- They both strongly support Romania's continued political, military, and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine; view Russia as the principal threat to Eastern Europe's security; and advocate for deeper collaboration with NATO and EU efforts to contain Russian aggression, positioning Romania as a key frontline state within the Euro-Atlantic alliance.
- Dan and Lasconi are both firmly committed to raising Romania's defense spending beyond the 2.5 percent of GDP threshold to match NATO's evolving post-invasion posture, particularly in response to Russian aggression in Ukraine. Importantly, Dan fully supports hosting U.S. and NATO forces on Romanian soil, including maintaining the Black Sea NATO battlegroup and the Aegis Ashore missile defense system based in Deveselu, which he considers critical to Romania's strategic deterrence.
- Both hold strong pro-European stances, supporting Romania's full integration into the EU, including eventual adoption of the Euro. Both emphasize adherence to EU rule-of-law mechanisms and positioning Romania as an active participant in European security, economic, and regulatory frameworks.

A win by Crin Antonescu, the joint candidate of the PSD-PNL-UDMR, would likely maintain Romania's Western alignment but with a more moderate, establishment approach. While not as reform-driven as Dan or Lasconi, Antonescu represents institutional stability, pro-EU/NATO consistency, and a broad coalition front against far-right disruption²⁸—potentially preserving the status quo without the polarization of the other two camps.

A win by George Simion of the AUR or Victor Ponta of the APP would mark a turn toward strategic ambiguity. While nominal NATO and EU affiliations may remain intact, both candidates advocate reduced cooperation with the EU, softer policies toward Russia, and nationalist redefinitions of sovereignty. Simion, in particular, proposes halting military aid to Ukraine and revisiting NATO's regional posture—which would likely strain Euro-Atlantic cohesion and embolden Kremlin ambitions in the Black Sea.

²⁸

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/who-are-main-contenders-romania-presidential-election-re-run-2025-04-30/>

- George Simion calls for an immediate end to Romanian military and financial support for Ukraine. He proposes a neutrality policy that would significantly shift Romania away from active engagement in Ukraine's defense—a position that, while framed as sovereignty-focused, would likely ultimately benefit Russian strategic interests by weakening Ukraine's regional support. Simion also expresses open Euroscepticism. While stopping short of advocating a full exit from the EU ("Roexit"), he proposes significant carve-outs from key EU policy areas, including climate regulations, migration quotas, and judicial oversight. He frames EU membership as an erosion of sovereignty, frequently characterizing the EU as a supranational force that imposes policy without regard for domestic priorities.
- Ponta maintains a number of hybrid positions. For example, he supports military and strategic assistance to Ukraine but only through NATO-coordinated channels, such as arms transit and military training. At the same time, he opposes economic policies that he argues harm Romanian farmers—particularly grain import liberalization—even if resisting those measures could disadvantage Ukraine economically. He is also supportive of continued EU membership and regional security cooperation but critical of perceived overreach. Ponta advocates for what he calls "selective sovereignty," maintaining Romania's place in the EU while pushing for national control over agricultural subsidies, border migration policies, and aspects of fiscal governance.

Romania's 2025 presidential election no longer reflects a binary choice; it is now a tripolar struggle between progressive reform, centrist consolidation, and nationalist retrenchment with critical implications for European unity, regional security, and the resilience of liberal democracy on NATO's eastern flank.

| How Călin Georgescu Became a Russian Influence Vector

Romania's 2024 presidential election—and the ongoing 2025 campaign—faced a coordinated cyber assault that blended infrastructure attacks, disinformation amplification, and digital ecosystem hijacking. These operations, primarily attributed to Russian state-linked actors, targeted not only Romania's democratic processes but also its broader Euro-Atlantic alignment. Intelligence reports confirmed that cyber tactics

went beyond disruption; they sought to reshape public perception, inflame societal divides, and delegitimize the electoral system itself.²⁹³⁰

In Romania's annulled 2024 election, the rise of far-right candidate Călin Georgescu revealed how internal vulnerabilities such as political disillusionment, economic anxiety, cultural conservatism, and digital ecosystem gaps can create a fertile environment for foreign interference.

- Public frustration with mainstream parties, fueled by inflation and scandals, likely allowed Georgescu to brand himself as the anti-establishment alternative, capitalizing on the anti-elite sentiment historically exploited by Russian hybrid operations. Georgescu's messaging warned against Western influence and linked economic hardships to Romania's Western alliances, a narrative firmly in line with Russian disinformation.



X post alleging the EU interfered in the Romanian elections. The account supports Romania's far-right candidates and wider far-right positions opposing migration or gay rights.

Source: https://x.com/daily_romania/status/1865809022005182621

Romanian intelligence revealed that a coordinated network of over 27,000 TikTok accounts, many tied to Russian influence clusters, artificially boosted Georgescu's profile.

²⁹ <https://bisi.org.uk/reports/invisible-influence-romania-presidential-election-crisis>

³⁰ <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2024-december-13/>

Russia's strategic objectives were clear: isolate Ukraine diplomatically by weakening Romania's support, fracture NATO and EU unity from within, and expand influence through Orthodox conservative narratives.³¹

- Investigators found the TikTok campaign systematically amplified Călin Georgescu's candidacy in the final weeks before the vote, displaying synchronized posting patterns typical of organized disinformation efforts. Romanian intelligence (SRI) linked these patterns to previously documented Russian influence models active across Eastern Europe. EU analysts placed Romania among the top three most-targeted elections in the EU space in 2024.³²
- While Georgescu's disqualification for the 2025 re-run mitigates the immediate threat, the structural weaknesses Russia exploited—discontent, distrust, and digital vulnerability—remain potent risks to Romania's democratic future.

ZeroFox researchers identified evidence that these same social media networks have shifted their support to Simion.³³ The Telegram channel Hrană Apă Energie (full channel name: Sustinatori Calin Georgescu - Hrană Apă Energie)—mentioned by the SRI as being part of Georgescu's influence "network"—is active with over 2,000 members sharing supportive messages for George Simion.³⁴ Below is a screenshot of the channel's subgroup, Sondaje, which shared a poll on April 22, 2025, about who will win the Romanian elections.

³¹

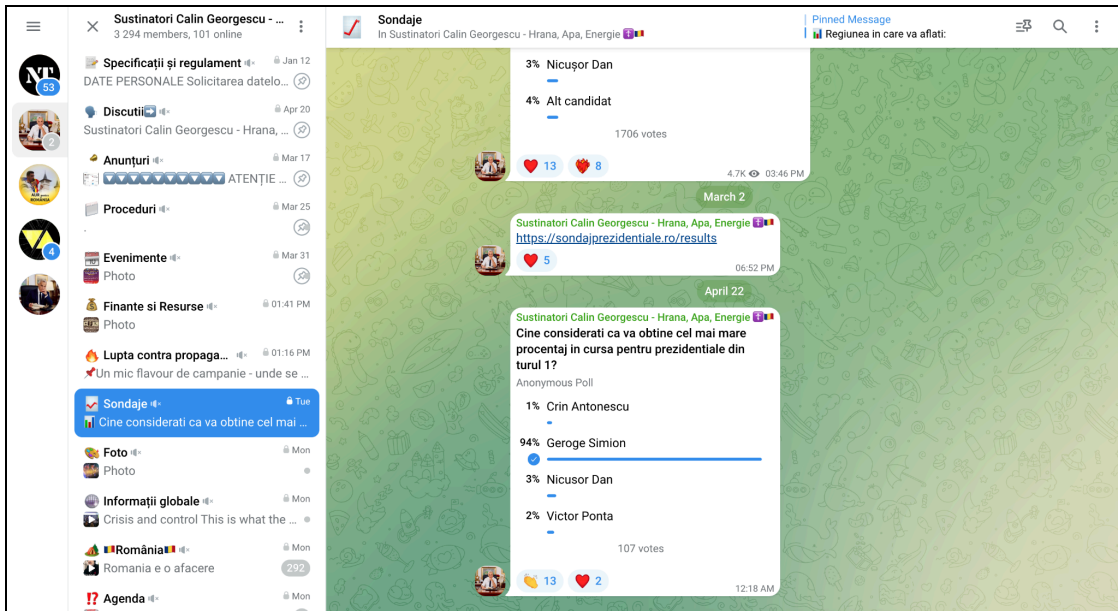
[hXXps://tvpworld\[.\]com/85951862/tiktok-says-romania-presidential-election-manipulated-by-27000-fake-accounts](https://tvpworld.com/85951862/tiktok-says-romania-presidential-election-manipulated-by-27000-fake-accounts)

³²

[hXXps://globalwitness\[.\]org/en/campaigns/digital-threats/what-happened-on-tiktok-around-the-annulled-romanian-presidential-election-an-investigation-and-poll/](https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/digital-threats/what-happened-on-tiktok-around-the-annulled-romanian-presidential-election-an-investigation-and-poll/)

³³ ZeroFox Intelligence

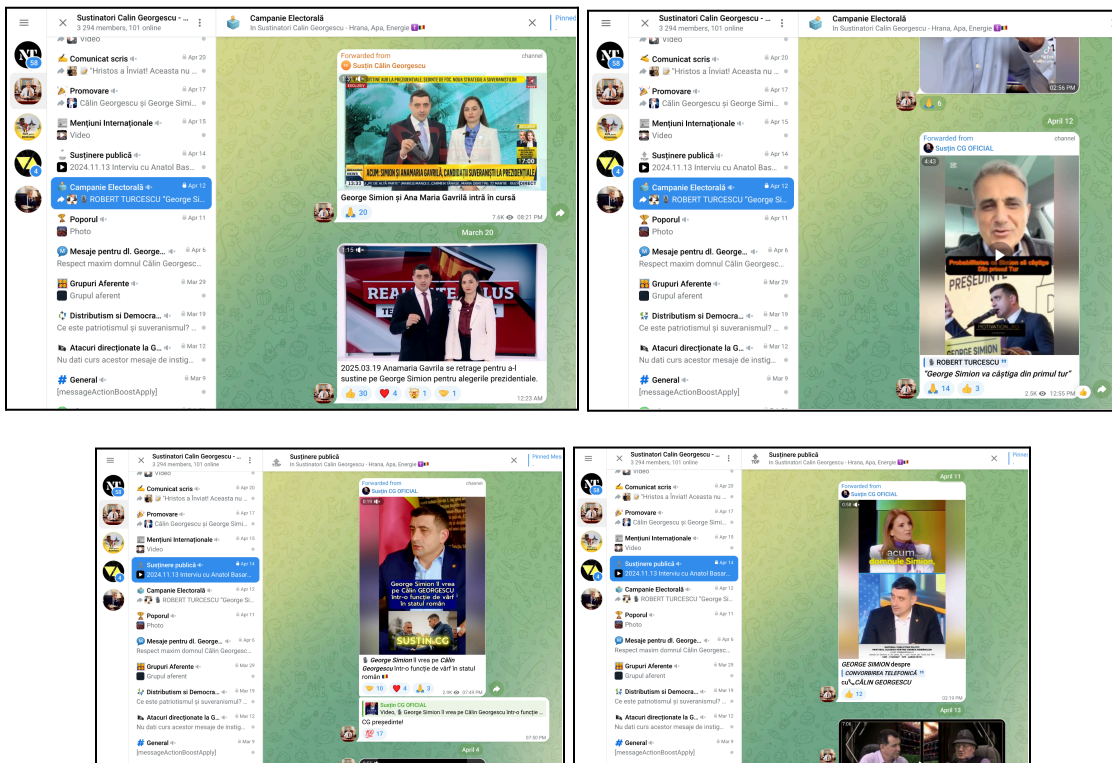
³⁴ [hXXps://t\[.\]me/CalinGeorgescuProiectDeTaraHAE](https://t.me/CalinGeorgescuProiectDeTaraHAE)

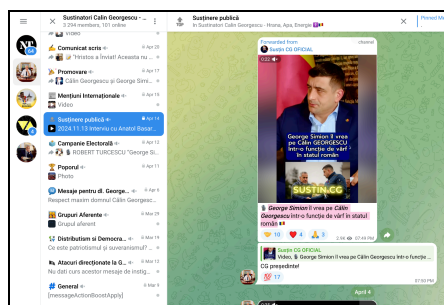


Hrană Apă Energie Telegram channel discussing candidates

Source: <https://t.me/CalinGeorgescuProiectDeTaraHAE>

- Several sub-groups within this Telegram channel shared George Simion's television appearances, all in a positive light.





Posts from Telegram channel Hrană Apă Energie, mentioned by the SRI as being part of Georgescu's influence "network"

Source: [hXXps://t\[.\]me/CalinGeorgescuProiectDeTaraHAE](https://t.me/CalinGeorgescuProiectDeTaraHAE)

Financial irregularities compounded the concerns that Georgescu's political support was not organic. Despite Georgescu's high visibility both online and offline, his official campaign filings reported zero advertising expenditures, pointing to likely foreign-funded dark money flows and prompting investigations into undeclared foreign financing through third-party promotional networks. There were similarities to prior Russian-backed campaigns elsewhere in Europe, where local proxies are used to funnel opaque financial support. Simultaneously, Romanian social media was flooded with disinformation narratives—from claims that Ukraine was exploiting Romania economically to rumors that NATO missile deployments made Romania a target—all reinforcing Kremlin strategic messaging.³⁵

Cyber Warfare: Foreign Interference in Romania's Elections

Cyberattacks on Electoral Infrastructure

Romanian cybersecurity authorities reported over 85,000 cyberattack attempts on electoral IT infrastructure during the campaign period, including distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, phishing, and breaches that exposed administrator credentials on Russian-speaking darknet forums.³⁶ Although no vote tallies were altered, the breaches fueled public distrust. Forensic analysis tied the operations to Russian GRU

³⁵ ZeroFox Intelligence

³⁶

[hXXps://www.bleepingcomputer\[.\]com/news/security/romania-election-systems-targeted-in-over-85-000-cyber-attacks/](https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/romania-election-systems-targeted-in-over-85-000-cyber-attacks/)

and FSB cyber units. Romania's Constitutional Court explicitly cited "state-sponsored hybrid actions" as grounds for annulling the election, while Russian outlets like *Sputnik* and *RT* immediately reinforced false narratives, framing the annulment as a "Western coup."³⁷³⁸ The Romania elections exposed how hybrid warfare—merging cyberattacks, disinformation, and covert financing—now constitutes a direct and ongoing threat to democratic sovereignty even within NATO and EU states.

- Credential stuffing and phishing campaigns were launched against voter registration databases and administrative accounts, attempting to gain unauthorized access to critical systems. Defacement attempts were also made on local electoral commission portals, undermining public-facing communications and raising broader concerns about system integrity.³⁹
- In a particularly troubling incident, election administrator login credentials were discovered for sale on Russian-speaking darknet forums, suggesting a successful breach or possible insider compromise. Although no votes were altered, the widespread exposure of vulnerabilities deeply eroded public confidence in the integrity of the electoral process.⁴⁰
- In July 2024, a BreachForums user claimed to leak data on Romania's population.⁴¹ The data allegedly included personal identifiable information (PII) on individuals that could be used in phishing attacks, intelligence-gathering on certain persons, and other data.

Weaponized Content: Social Platforms as Influence Tools

Romania faced a massive, coordinated social media influence campaign in the months surrounding the 2024 presidential election. Platforms like TikTok, Facebook, and Telegram were saturated with pro-Georgescu and anti-EU messaging, much of it disseminated by a network of over 27,000 TikTok accounts exhibiting bot-like behavior and synchronized posting patterns.⁴²

- The campaign relied heavily on tactics such as hashtag brigading to artificially boost content visibility, astroturfing to create the illusion of widespread grassroots

³⁷ [hXXps://pppescp\[.\]com/2025/01/19/romania-presidential-elections-annulled-and-alleged-russian-interference/](https://pppescp[.]com/2025/01/19/romania-presidential-elections-annulled-and-alleged-russian-interference/)

³⁸ [hXXps://euobserver\[.\]com/eu-political/ar7f89ccbe](https://euobserver[.]com/eu-political/ar7f89ccbe)

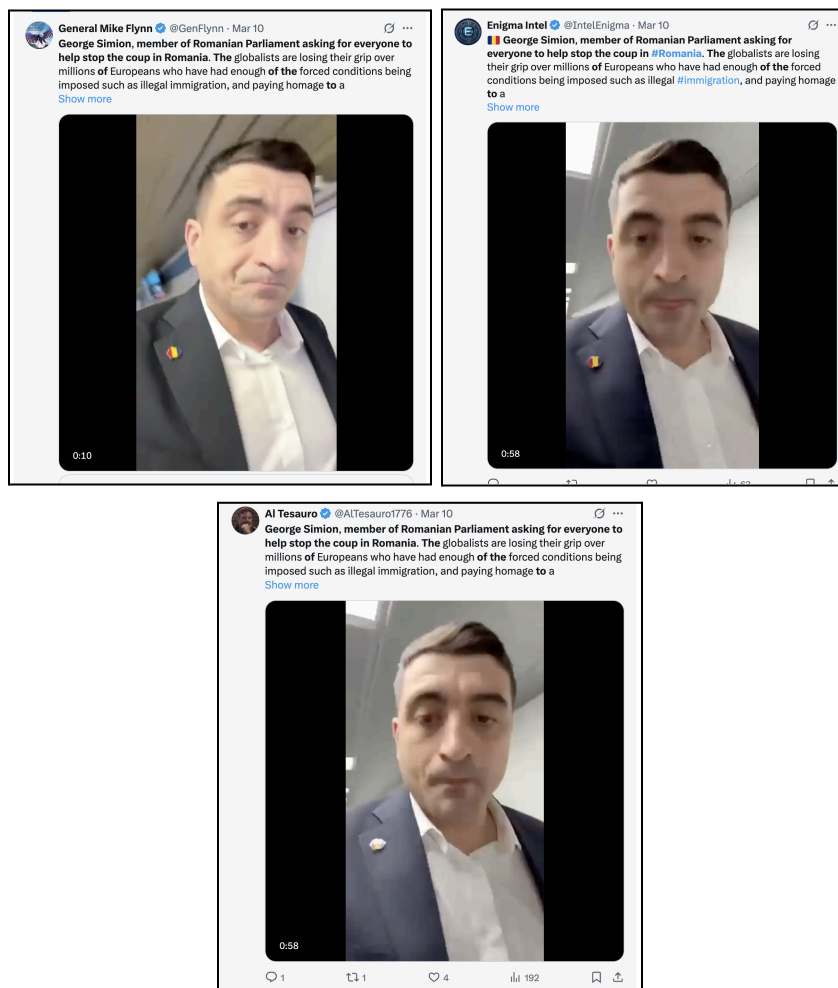
³⁹ [hXXps://bisi\[.\]org\[.\]uk/reports/invisible-influence-romania-presidential-election-crisis](https://bisi[.]org[.]uk/reports/invisible-influence-romania-presidential-election-crisis)

⁴⁰ [hXXps://edmo\[.\]eu/edmo-news/analysis-of-social-media-presence-of-romanian-presidential-candidates/](https://edmo[.]eu/edmo-news/analysis-of-social-media-presence-of-romanian-presidential-candidates/)

⁴¹ [hXXps://x\[.\]com/DailyDarkWeb/status/1811717389559472473](https://x[.]com/DailyDarkWeb/status/1811717389559472473)

⁴² [hXXps://dfrlab\[.\]org/2024/12/12/romania-candidate-telegram-tiktok/](https://dfrlab[.]org/2024/12/12/romania-candidate-telegram-tiktok/)

support, and micro-targeted disinformation ads aimed at rural communities, younger voters, and low-information demographics.⁴³ These efforts were designed to dominate the digital narrative and drown out legitimate political discourse.



Three copied/pasted X posts for George Simion , indicating a likely coordinated act to boost the online presence or narrative in favour of Simion

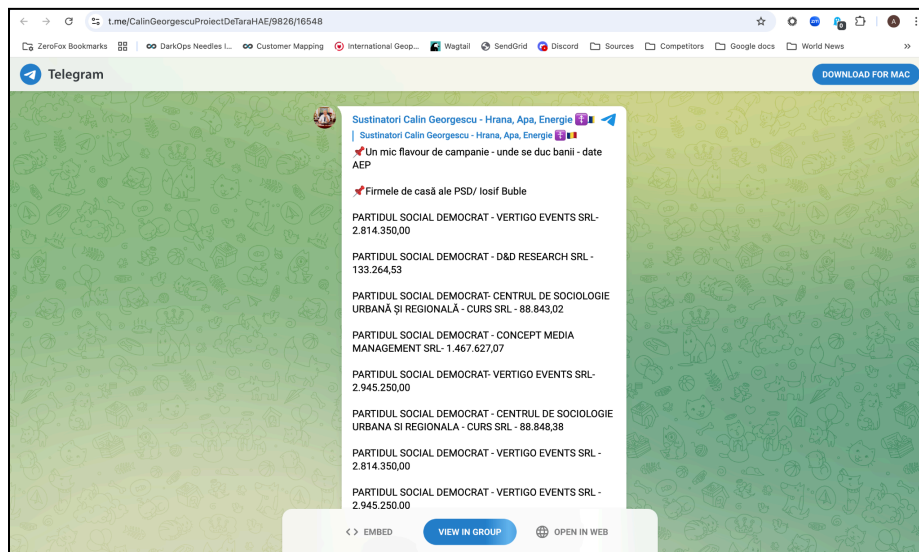
Sources: [hXXps://x\[.\]com/GenFlynn/status/1898907554173886918](https://x.com/GenFlynn/status/1898907554173886918)

[hXXps://x\[.\]com/IntelEnigma/status/1899063838902731124](https://x.com/IntelEnigma/status/1899063838902731124)

[hXXps://x\[.\]com/AITesauero1776/status/1898963212755730673](https://x.com/AITesauero1776/status/1898963212755730673)

⁴³ [hXXps://edmo\[.\]eu/edmo-news/analysis-of-social-media-presence-of-romanian-presidential-candidates/](https://edmo[.]eu/edmo-news/analysis-of-social-media-presence-of-romanian-presidential-candidates/)

- Encrypted Telegram groups also played a critical role, serving as coordination hubs for nationalist digital activists. Within these closed channels, fabricated polling data and conspiracy theories about electoral fraud were widely circulated, further distorting public perception and amplifying distrust in the election.⁴⁴



Message on one of the SRI- flagged Telegram channels listing non-AUR parties, the event companies managing their campaigns, and the money spent

Sources: [hXXps://t\[.\]me/CalinGeorgescuProiectDeTaraHAE/9826/16548](https://t.me/CalinGeorgescuProiectDeTaraHAE/9826/16548);
[hXXps://www.facebook\[.\]com/sorinaruxandra.matei/posts/un-mic-flavour-de-campanie-unde-se-duc-banii-date-aepfirmele-de-cas%C4%83-ale-psd-ios/4170502909941212/](https://www.facebook.com/sorinaruxandra.matei/posts/un-mic-flavour-de-campanie-unde-se-duc-banii-date-aepfirmele-de-cas%C4%83-ale-psd-ios/4170502909941212/)

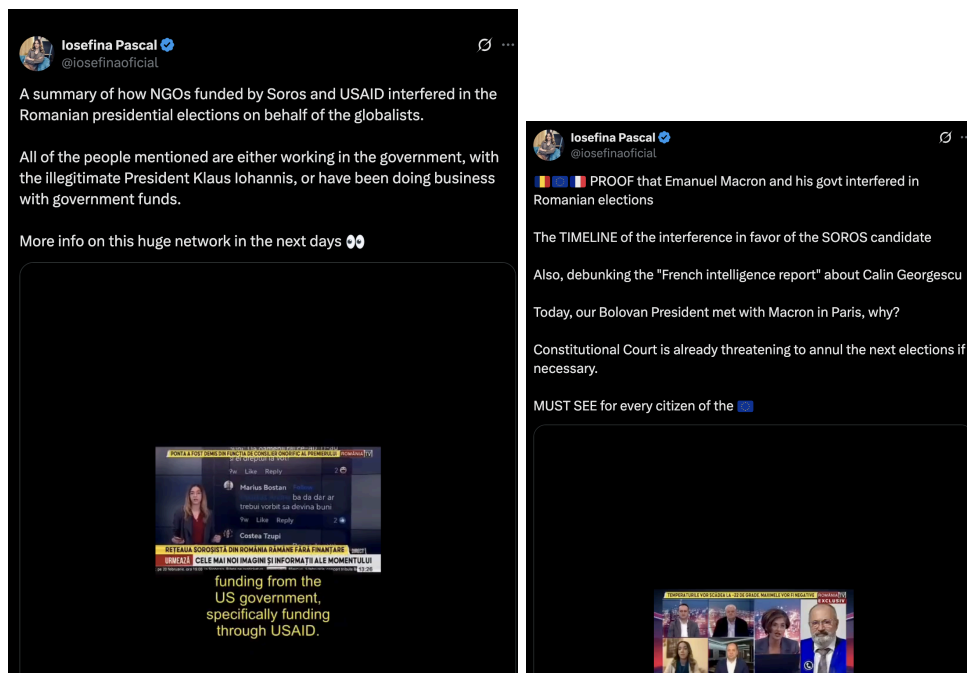
Disinformation Campaigns Reinforced by Cyber Operations

Romanian digital spaces were flooded with Russia-aligned disinformation narratives in the wake of the 2024 presidential election. Among the most prominent were claims that the EU was destroying Romanian agriculture, that NATO bases on Romanian territory had turned the country into a Russian target, and that continued support for Ukraine was directly harming Romanian citizens.⁴⁵ These messages were not isolated; they were part of a coordinated information campaign designed to erode confidence in Western institutions and sow internal division.

⁴⁴ [hXXps://dfrlab\[.\]org/2024/12/12/romania-candidate-telegram-tiktok/](https://dfrlab.org/2024/12/12/romania-candidate-telegram-tiktok/)

⁴⁵ [hXXps://en.ejo\[.\]ch/specialist-journalism/romania-how-a-disinformation-campaign-prevented-free-suffrage](https://en.ejo.ch/specialist-journalism/romania-how-a-disinformation-campaign-prevented-free-suffrage)

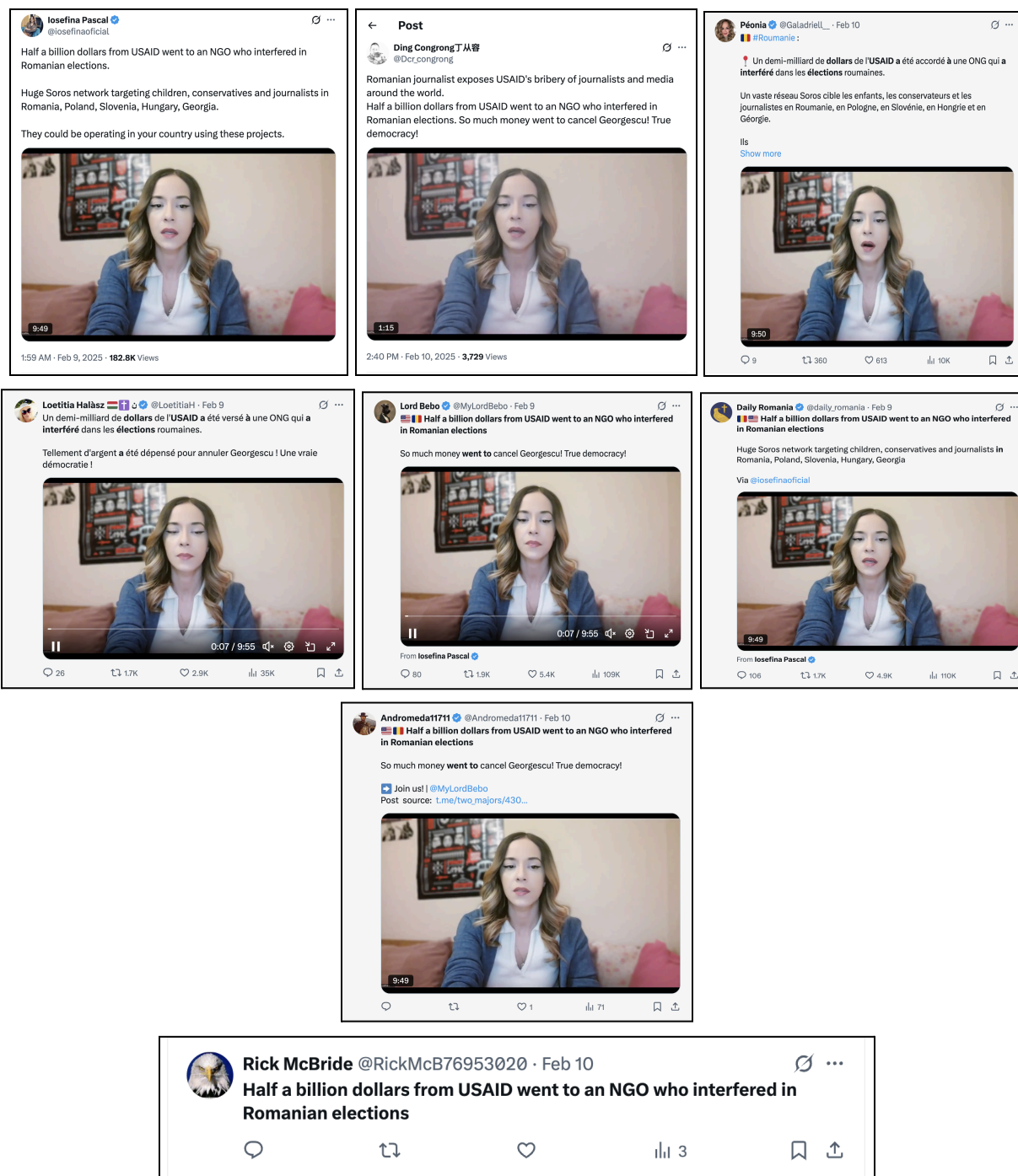
Following the announcement of the first-round results, disinformation about alleged electoral fraud was strategically amplified across multiple platforms.⁴⁶ The timing and scale of this content blitz were designed to maximize confusion and delegitimize the outcome before the runoff could occur. The speed, structure, and targeting of these campaigns closely mirrored earlier Russian hybrid operations documented during the French 2017 and German 2021 elections, further reinforcing attribution to a state-sponsored source.



Sample X user complaints of EU electoral interference in Romania's elections. The accounts' other posts indicate the user may be part of a coordinated campaign to push far-right positions in Romania regarding immigration and opposition to Ukraine.

Source: <https://x.com/iosefinaoficial/status/1886456517714665529>

⁴⁶ <https://news.risky.biz/risky-biz-news-declassified-documents-reveal-russias-election-info-ops-in-romania/>



X screenshots showing users duplicating content claiming false information on USAID interference into Romanian elections

Source: X

Attribution of Cyber Campaigns

Romania's SRI formally assessed that the cyberattacks and influence operations targeting the 2024 election originated from networks "coordinated by a state actor hostile to Romania's Euro-Atlantic commitments"—a diplomatic phrasing widely interpreted as a reference to the Russian Federation.⁴⁷ Independent cybersecurity researchers corroborated this attribution, identifying malware signatures, IP infrastructures, and bot coordination techniques consistent with prior operations attributed to APT28 (Fancy Bear), a well-documented cyber unit linked to Russia.⁴⁸

- The EU Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) reinforced these findings, listing Romania as one of the most heavily targeted EU states for hybrid election-related threats in 2024.⁴⁹

In response, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a preemptive denial, accusing Romanian authorities of fabricating the interference claims—a familiar rhetorical pattern following previous exposure of Kremlin-linked operations in European democracies.

| What Romania's 2025 Election Will Decide

Romania stands at a geopolitical and democratic crossroads. The May 4, 2025, presidential election is no longer a simple contest: it is a referendum on the country's role. In the wake of the annulled 2024 vote, this re-run carries heightened national and international scrutiny.

Three distinct strategic paths are possible:

- The reformist path is represented by Nicușor Dan and Elena Lasconi, which calls for deepening Romania's Euro-Atlantic integration. These candidates champion judicial reform, increased defense spending, and a strong Romanian role in

⁴⁷ [hXXps://news.risky\[.\]biz/risky-biz-news-declassified-documents-reveal-russias-election-info-ops-in-romania/](https://news.risky.biz/risky-biz-news-declassified-documents-reveal-russias-election-info-ops-in-romania/)

⁴⁸ [hXXps://platformraam\[.\]nl/artikelen/2730-sowing-chaos-the-strategy-behind-russias-interference-in-romania](https://platformraam[.]nl/artikelen/2730-sowing-chaos-the-strategy-behind-russias-interference-in-romania)

⁴⁹

[hXXps://www.nato\[.\]int/docu/review/articles/2025/02/07/algorithmic-invasions-how-information-warfare-threaten-s-nato-s-eastern-flank/index.html](https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2025/02/07/algorithmic-invasions-how-information-warfare-threaten-s-nato-s-eastern-flank/index.html)

supporting Ukraine and resisting Russian influence. Their leadership would signal democratic resilience and a commitment to values-driven governance.

- The centrist path, embodied by Crin Antonescu, offers institutional stability without disruptive change. Backed by Romania's traditional power parties (PSD–PNL–UDMR), Antonescu would likely maintain the country's pro-EU and NATO orientation while adopting some of the more conservative positions from other candidates.
- The nationalist path, advanced by George Simion and Victor Ponta, favors a reassertion of Romanian sovereignty through Eurosceptic policies, resistance to the EU, and rollback of support for Ukraine. This approach could erode collective Western coordination and embolden Russian influence along NATO's southeastern flank.

This election will determine more than just the occupant of the presidency—it will shape Romania's strategic posture, its internal democratic cohesion, and its credibility as a partner within NATO and the EU. As nationalist populism gains momentum across the continent, Romania's choice will send powerful signals about the direction of democracy and security along Europe's eastern frontier.

Romania remains, for now, a pillar of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture, deeply integrated into NATO defense structures and broadly committed to EU norms. However, the 2024 election crisis exposed critical vulnerabilities: a rising domestic appetite for sovereigntist, Eurosceptic narratives; economic pressures that make populist rhetoric more attractive; and a hybrid warfare environment actively exploited by Russia. The May 2025 presidential election will be pivotal. A pro-Western victory would reaffirm Romania's role as a frontline NATO state and key EU actor. A nationalist victory would introduce strategic ambiguity into Romania's future orientation—fracturing internal consensus, weakening EU cohesion, and emboldening Russia's destabilization efforts across Eastern Europe.

| Appendix A: Traffic Light Protocol for Information Dissemination

	Red	Amber
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:RED when information cannot be effectively acted upon by additional parties and could lead to impacts on a party's privacy, reputation, or operations if misused.	Sources may use TLP:AMBER when information requires support to be effectively acted upon but carries risks to privacy, reputation, or operations if shared outside of the organizations involved.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may NOT share TLP:RED with any parties outside of the specific exchange, meeting, or conversation in which it is originally disclosed.	Recipients may ONLY share TLP:AMBER information with members of their own organization and its clients, but only on a need-to-know basis to protect their organization and its clients and prevent further harm. Note that TLP:AMBER+STRICT restricts sharing to the organization only.
	Green	Clear
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:GREEN when information is useful for the awareness of all participating organizations, as well as with peers within the broader community or sector.	Sources may use TLP:CLEAR when information carries minimal or no risk of misuse in accordance with applicable rules and procedures for public release.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may share TLP:GREEN information with peers and partner organizations within their sector or community but not via publicly accessible channels.	Recipients may share TLP:CLEAR information without restriction, subject to copyright controls.

Appendix B: ZeroFox Intelligence Probability Scale

All ZeroFox intelligence products leverage probabilistic assessment language in analytic judgments. Qualitative statements used in these judgments refer to associated probability ranges, which state the likelihood of occurrence of an event or development. Ranges are used to avoid a false impression of accuracy. This scale is a standard that aligns with how readers should interpret such terms.

Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Roughly Even Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%